

Book 6

Prologue

"And so Dread Emperor Heinous thus addressed his court: 'Are we not rulers of devils and dead, princes among usurpers? Why then should we suffer another to call himself king of our demesne?' All agreed in this, and so war was declared upon Keter."

– Extract from the Scroll of Vainglory, thirty-ninth of the Secret Histories of Praes (destroyed by order of Dread Empress Maleficent II, only partial texts remain)

They'd had three months of reprieve, to the day.

Prince Otto Reitzenberg, who his people yet called Redcrown, had prepared for the hour the truce would end without pause or rest. He'd slept as little as he could, and when he did he'd found himself plagued by nightmares. Unable to meet the solemn and silent faces of his sisters, of his father, of the all the Reitzenbergs that'd died keeping dawn from failing for one more night as they stared at him unblinking. All the shades he had come so close to failing. The Morgentor, the last fortress still in the hands of the living in Twilight's Pass, had been mere weeks away from falling when the Black Queen had tricked a truce out of the Enemy. Otto Redcrown, last of his line, had done all he could to keep the Dead penned up in the pass but the doom of his people had been writ in the stars. Yet for this inadequacy he had somehow been rewarded with three more months to prepare, and knowing the end was coming the Prince of Bremen had worked himself *raw*.

Frederic at his side, they'd squeezed the full worth out of every heartbeat. Soldiers allowed to rest, yes, but some put to work other than war. Supply lines were opened anew and refurbished, wagons filled with the necessities of war. First Prince Cordelia herself secured gold and foodstuffs and steel, striking deals with half the continent to secure supplies and reinforcements. She had not forgot, Otto had been moved to see. Rhenia's favourite daughter had not come home when Keter marched, but never once had she forgot her kin. She'd stayed south to make sure the south would come to their aid, that famously unbending Hasenbach backbone lent to all Procer. Just as importantly, the young and the old of Lycaonese lands had been sent south to safety under the protection of Frederic's cousin and heiress in Lyonis when the dead ceased their raiding into the lowlands. The future of his people was now safeguarded under the kin of his friend. Then a hard choice had been posed to Otto, as was so often the way in these times.

Should he send all soldiers save those holding the Morgentor into northern Lyonis, to ready the fight there for when Twilight's Pass fell and the Lycaonese lowlands followed, or should every sword in the land be brought to Morning's Gate to spit one last defiance in the Enemy's eye? It had burned him to even consider it, but he must see to the future of his people beyond the cast of pride. Yet he'd been a fool, Otto realized the first time a warband of haggard souls bearing ill-fitting mail and hard eyes marched into the sprawling camp at the bottom of the Morgentor. They had come. Alone and in pairs, in bands of twenty or a hundred. Through wind and snow and treacherous mountain paths. Farmers and miners and shepherds, innkeepers and drapers, scribes and carpenters and a hundred other things. Yet Lycaonese all, so they came wearing the steel handed down families since the days of the Iron Kings and there would be no talk of *retreat*.

Twilight's Pass was the last lock on the door that might keep the Dead King from devouring the world, and so it would hold until there were none left to hold it. Their numbers had swelled with every band of volunteers, to almost one hundred thousand, and though the Enemy's might was without question, the Morgentor was no less mighty a fortress. It would hold, Otto Redcrown had sworn. It would hold whatever might come. They had prepared, sharpened their steel, and they stood atop perhaps the second finest fortifications in all Calernia – only the cliff-city of Rhenia or Keter itself might claim to surpass Morning's Gate, now that Hannover had fallen. Odds were never good, against the Dead King, but this was perhaps the finest they'd been in Otto's lifetime.

Then of the three tower-fortresses of the Morgentor, the Three Peaks, they lost two on the first day.

If Frederic had not come into his Choosing they might have lost the third tower as well, the central one, and that would have been a disaster there'd be no recovering from. The Kingfisher Prince had held a buckling line by sheer dint of *refusing to die* and reclaimed the top of the walls from the Enemy long enough to set everything aflame with pitch. It'd cut off the dead within the fallen towers from steady reinforcements long enough to take them back as well, though it'd meant twelve hours of bloody uphill fighting. Otto Redcrown had scraped together an army of one hundred thousand, his people assembled from every corner of Lycaonese lands, and on the first day of the Dead's resumed offensive he had lost near twenty thousand of them. The Reitzenberg would have wept at that, if there were any tears in him left to shed, but there were none. All there was left was duty, and so he let duty devour him whole.

The Dead came and Otto Redcrown met them with steel and fire unrelenting. When half an army of ghouls crawled up icy walls like they were treading open road, massive iron scythes were

freed to swing through the lot of them. When flocks of winged abominations dropped down like a flood of locusts, they were dragged down with nets and kept there for the mages to scour in flame. Plague-seeding rats, clouds of poison, even a rain of fire: every night the Enemy tried a fresh devilry and the last of the Reitzenberg grit his teeth before standing his ground. The days belonged to Frederic but the nights were his, though as the siege continued time became meaningless. There was only the sea of death lapping at the walls, the relentless assaults through every hour of every day. And though the cracks were spreading through the army, the fault lines of terror and sleeplessness and a fight that could not truly be won, still every dusk and dawn soldiers climbed up the stairs to fight for the ramparts of the Morgentor.

It was an honourable way to die, the Prince of Bremen had decided. If the days of the Lycaonese were fated to end, Otto thought, let them end with the last of them standing straight-backed in the Enemy's way. He'd been sleeping for barely three hours when he was brought out of a forming nightmare, shaken awake in his cot at the bottom of the Herzhaupt, and though bone-tired and bleary-eyed the Prince of Bremen rose without protest. The captain that had come for him, one of Frederic's men, awaited outside and bowed low when Otto emerged with his armour already being strapped tight.

"Which peak is falling?" Otto Redcrown bluntly asked.

There were not many reasons why he'd be woken now, and so soon after going to rest besides.

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but it is quite the opposite," the captain replied, bowing again. "We have reinforcements."

The dark-haired prince blinked in surprise. It could not have been another warband of his people drifting in: it still happened every few days, though the gap was spreading as time passed, and was not so unusual as to require him being awoken.

"Who?" he asked, then added, "and where's Prince Frederic?"

"Awaiting you at the Prinztopf so that you might greet them together, Your Grace," the captain replied. "And the simple answer would be that they are... from the Grand Alliance."

Clapping the man on the back, Otto wasted no more time on quibbling. He trusted Frederic Goethal not to have ordered him roused without good reason, though it had taken some convincing before the Alamans prince was sold on 'obtaining a rare bottle of wine and wanting to share it' not being one of these. An escort of sworn swords followed him without a word as he headed towards the massive camp raised in the shadow of the Three Peaks, as they did everywhere since a Revenant had been sent to claim his head

as he slept. Frederic was not difficult to find, as the man surrounded by the usual swarm of courtiers. Otto could not muster even a speck of contempt for these, however, for though their silks and *bon mots* were trying they belonged to men and women he'd once seen savagely fight their way through two beorns and a crippled Revenant merely to snatch the banner carried by the latter. It'd emerged three days later as a dishwashing rag in the Ostenhaupt kitchens, for the Alamans were making a game of finding the most insulting use possible for the Dead King's banners.

They were mad one and all, which was undoubtedly why the rest of the host had grown so fond of them.

"Otto, my friend!" Prince Frederic Goethal of Brus greeted them. "It has been too long since we shared daylight."

The clasped arms, though Frederic's insistence on cheek-kissing as they did remained just as unsettling as it'd been the first time the Prince of Bremen was subjected to it.

"Your man was vague when I asked who's come," Otto said.

"I can understand why," the Prince of Brus replied, sounding amused. "None of the etiquette we've been taught applies here."

They left the large iron-reinforced tent soldiers called the Prinztopf – the prince pot, it meant, for it was where they held councils in camp and the odd shape of the tent was evocative – behind them and Otto allowed himself to be led, enjoying the warmth of the spring sun on his skin. When they found their guests, the reason why the Alamans were at such loss was made evident. Of the five people in the tent they'd entered, only three were human and only one was Proceran. The gold and white robes of the Holies were not unknown ever this far north.

"His Grace, Prince Otto Reitzenberg of Bremen, styled the Redcrown," Frederic introduced him in Chantant.

"Prince Frederic of Brus," Otto said, returning the favour in the same. "Chosen. The Kingfisher Prince. We share command here."

"I am-" the priest began, but was immediately interrupted.

"One of the idiots who figured overthrowing Hasenbach was a good idea," the old woman with painted face said. "You've been sent here to die by Keter instead of noose, Proceran, no one cares about your name. I am Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei. My Blood is that of the Vengeful Brigand and I bring ten thousand warriors. I am told your people have been struggling with raids on your supply lines, coming down from Hocheben Heights."

She grinned, and it was not a pleasant sight.

"I have come to lend my expertise in such matters, Procerans," Lady Itima said.

The stunning redhead in good armour that was standing by the pair of goblins looked faintly amused but passed no comment before introducing herself.

"Special Tribune Kilian of the Green Stretch, Army of Callow," she said, her Chantant strangely accented. "By the order of my queen I bring twenty mage lines, including some of our foremost warding and scrying specialists. I've been tasked with ensuring the Morgentor is both warded up to Callowan standard and brought into the Grand Alliance scrying relay system."

She was in the Black Queen's service? He would not have guessed at a look.

"We are most thankful for your assistance," Prince Frederic said. "Though it appears introductions are not yet complete?"

One of the goblins, Otto saw, was scribbling with a charcoal pen on parchment. The other one spoke for it, voice narrowly revealing it was male even though it was the smaller of the two.

"Special Tribune Robber," the goblin introduced himself, malevolently grinning. "I'm told you folk could benefit from a little sabotage of the opposition. As it happens, I'm not unfamiliar with-

"Sapper-General Pickler," the other goblin interrupted, revealing herself female. "I'm told some cretin talked you lot in using dwarven engines for the defence of your fortresses."

"We make some defences of our own," Prince Otto replied, unmoved by the rudeness. "Though few proper engines."

"Good, that'll make useful hands to borrow," Sapper-General Pickler said, sounding approving. "I've been tasked with raising your siege capacity to something that wouldn't make a goblin simpleton weep as well as crafting apparatuses specifically to deal with the creatures you've named 'wyrms' and 'beorns'."

Frederic looked uncomfortable, though he was too polite to grimace. His people, especially the highborn, were taught that even subtly referring to coin in conversation was quite crude.

"Even with our current loans, we don't have the coin to afford this," Otto frankly told the goblin general.

"Congratulations," the goblin replied, "as per arrangements struck with the First Prince of Procer, you've been granted conditional loans by the crown of Callow over this matter."

The Prince of Bremen blinked.

"And what conditions would these be?" he asked.

"*Is this going to be useful?*" Sapper-General Pickler grinned, revealing rows and rows of needle-like teeth.

Otto Redcrown, last of the House of Reitzenberg, grinned back. Oh, this would do. This would do nicely indeed.

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Rozala would never grow to like Gaspard Langevin, she mused as she watched the growing shape of the man's capital in the distance.

The Prince of Cleves was prickly, of resentful temper yet swift to offer insult himself, and seemingly convinced that the ancient beginnings of his line meant that he belonged to a sort of nobility within nobility. The Princess of Aequitan knew well her histories and had even, as a youth, snuck in a reading of Princess Eliza Alaguer's ever contentious *The Labyrinth Empire* so she'd been darkly amused to learn of this. After all, most of the ancient Alamans tribes would have been appalled at the very notion of nobility: tribes elected their chieftains, whose authority was even then shared with the tribe's high priest or priestess of the Hallowed. It was her own Arlesite forbears who'd brought princely rule to the Principate, as before the founding of Procer the greatest of the fortress-holding *reales* had already come to exact oaths of fealty from their lesser kindred – and so arguably become the first princes and princesses as the word was understood in modern parlance.

Yet these days it was the Alamans that orated of ancient blood, while Arlesites had been taught the virtues of bringing in the fresh sort onto thrones by the constant warfare on the southern and eastern borders. Rozala's own line, the Malanzas, had not always been royalty. It'd been great victories in Levant and a ruthless streak at home that saw them rise to bear a crown when the previous ruling line of Aequitan grew weak. That 'lowly' origin was no secret, and so part of the reason that as far as the Prince of Cleves was concerned Rozala Malanza was still more a general than princess. It was no surprise that during the Great War his principality had supported the bid of Princess Constance of Aisne instead of Rozala's own mother. Still, for all the disdain they shared for each other – only sharpened by Prince Gaspard's personal and political antipathy to the faction Prince Amadis had formed in the Highest Assembly, of which Rozala had openly been part before rising to command it – they were well-bred enough to remain cordial.

To his honour, Prince Gaspard had never once been sparing nor stingy in supporting the armies that had come to fight in the defence of Cleves. Though the man rarely took the field himself, he'd charged his eldest son and heir with command of his army as

well as bought the service of every fantassin company north of Cantal not already under contract. Between this and the supplies being brought into Cleves the prince had gone deeply into debt, though he was keeping up appearances with admirable Alamans aplomb. He should be able to dig himself out of the pit, after the war. Cordelia Hasenbach had wrought some sort of financial wizardry that'd greatly lessen the debt burdens incurred defending Procer. Something about bundling together the debts of many principalities and slicing that mixed greater debt apart before selling the slices to the Merchant Lords and banks of Mercantis, and promised yet more aid to come. Her mind was drifting once again, the Princess of Aequitan realized.

Perhaps it was only to be expected. The Twilight Ways invited deep reflections, she felt, the eternal starry night sky somehow giving an impression of solitude even when one was surrounded by thousands. Even two days out of those eldritch paths Rozala's mood and that of the forces under her command remained rather restrained. For some, like the princess herself, the disposition had lingered at the thought that after witnessing fresh horrors south they were now returning to the familiar ones of Cleves. The dark-haired princess had not been able to sleep on a cot since leaving the Ways, unwilling to let herself be unconscious without being *certain* that digging beneath would wake her. For others, though, it would be the first fresh taste of what war against the Dead King looked like. Rozala was pleased to have gotten Lord Yannu Marave when the Levantines armies were split between fronts, and not only for the heavy infantry the Lord of Alava brought with him: his cool, calculating manner would serve him well when the terror began. The other allies she was bringing to Cleves were harder to read, not that the Princess of Aequitan was all that inclined to try: sometimes she was almost as wary of them as the Dead.

Forcing herself to attend to the present instead of sinking into her thoughts again – anything to avoid remembering the sound of digging, *digging* beneath her feet, which she sometimes still heard even though she was hearing nothing of the sort – the Princess of Aequitan spurred on her horse forward and her mounted escorts followed. Clevans called the sparsely paved road beneath the hooves of her horse *la route aux chandelles*, the candle road, because of the stone markers on the side of it: each had been set down at the length it would take for a candle to melt from the last marker, allowing travellers and merchants to gauge how long they had left before reaching the capital. It linked the city to the southern walled town of Jurivan, itself a destination for roads coming out of Brabant and Lyonis, and so was rightfully seen as the trade artery of the principality. It was also the largest road in Cleves, made so that three wagons at once could use it, one of the reasons Rozala had chosen it for the path of her armies.

The last stretch of the candle road was nearly flat ground until the foot of the capital itself was reached, if flanked by a low plateau to the east, and so the Princess of Aquitan was not surprised when ahead she saw tall banners and a company of riders heading towards her. Prince Gaspard had been warned of her coming by scrying ritual, and by the looks of the tallest banner had come out to greet her himself. The pale unicorn on azure, crowned by a six-petalled flower – one petal for every crusade in which a ruling Langevin had personally fought – was the Prince of Cleves' personal banner, which meant he was of the approaching company. Reining in her horse, the dark-haired Arlesite slowed until she could easily turn back. It would be impolitic of her to meet with the Prince of Cleves without bringing along the other two generals of this grand coalition of theirs. Lord Yannu was not difficult to find, for the Levantine lord was himself riding out to meet her, and so was the natural beginning.

"Princess Rozala," the Lord of Alava greeted her, reining in his horse.

"Lord Yannu," the Princess of Aquitan replied with a nod. "Our host rides out to meet us."

"Armies have a way of commanding courtesy," the large man bluntly said.

It was true enough, though rather uncouth to voice it.

"My outriders on the left flank have lost sight of our friends," Rozala admitted. "I don't suppose yours had sharper eyes?"

"Somewhere in the hills to the west is the most I can give you," Yannu Marave said. "They've proved arduous to follow."

Then the two of them would proceed without their third peer, the dark-haired woman decided. Lapses in etiquette were unlikely to matter much to that lot regardless. The two aristocrats waited for their honour guards to gather before riding out together, going down the road at a brisk trot. They were met by the sound of drums and flutes playing the stirring tune of the Roving Minstrel's famous *Marching on Keter*, the banner of the Langevins of Cleves flying high with those of the lesser highborn beneath. Prince Gaspard himself brought his horse out ahead and took the initiative to greet them.

"Your Grace," Gaspard Langevin said, meeting Rozala's eyes and bowing. "It is a pleasure to see you returned to Cleves."

"Our work here is not yet finished," Rozala Malanza said. "I look forward to keeping your council once more, Your Grace."

And even though she held no love for the man that courtesy had not been entirely untrue. For all his pettier traits, Gaspard

Langevin was an able man. Rozala would rather take council from a man she disliked but respected than the opposite.

"It has been one hundred and twelve years since one of the Champion's Blood has last honoured Cleves by being a guest, Lord Marave," Prince Gaspard continued. "I am pleased to end this unfortunate course today."

"The Dominion honours its oaths," Lord Yannu replied in his very good Chantant. "War on Keter, war to the knife."

The Prince of Cleves inclined his head in further thanks, not having been given much to work with. Rozala was dimly amused, for once she had also found it necessary to adapt to the bluntness of the Levantines in such matters.

"I was given to understand," the Prince of Cleves delicately continued, "that there would be a third."

"It is so," Princess Rozala agreed. "Though General Rumena-"

"Can speak for itself."

Rumena the Tomb-Maker – and oh, that even the Black Queen named it this has been enough to make Rozala very wary – was the sole visibly old drow the dark-eyed princess had ever seen. Though tall it had grown stooped and its skin deeply creased, disdaining weapons and attired in a long belted tunic of obsidian rings not unlike chain mail. Its long hair was pure white and its eyes a shade of silver that seemed almost blue in some lights. At the Graveyard, that drow had scored a draw against the Regicide without even using a blade. Now none of the startled riders, many of which now reached for their blades, had even noticed it approaching. It was as if it had been spat out by the rocks, without warning.

"You have corpses wandering your lands, Unicorn Prince," General Rumena continued, its Chantant eerily good.

Given how the drow were rumoured to learn such things, the fact that the old monster had a distinct Bayeux accent was distressing.

"Well met, General Rumena of the Empire Ever Dark," Prince Gaspard said with what she deemed to be remarkable poise. "You speak truly. Keter has found unseen paths from the coast and warbands now wander the land."

"Rest easy, Unicorn Prince," General Rumena grinned. "Now so do we."

Lord Yannu let out a bark of appreciative laughter. Princess Rozala Malanza met the eyes of the ruler of Cleves when he

hesitantly turned to her and inclined her head. *Monsters, Gaspard, make no mistake, she tried to silently convey. They are monsters. And Gods forgive us all, but Keter will rue the day they lent their fangs to the cause of our survival.*

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Prince Klaus Papenheim spat into the melting snow, abandoning the reins of his mount to wipe the wetness from his lips after. Ratbiter was placid horse for a Bremen *stampfen*, to his old rider at least, and so he'd not taken to misbehaving even after the arm Klaus lost in the fall of Hainaut had made him a clumsier horseman. Leaning against his stirrups to remain straight-backed, the Prince of Hannover – prince of ruins, ghosts and exiles these days – unclasped his helmet and ripped it off before wedging it into the crook of his arm. Sweats-soaked hair slipped down onto his brow and the old man let out an exhausted breath before mastering himself.

The day was coming to an end, but that would bring no relief: in the darkness his soldiers would slow and stumble, exhausted and blind. The dead would not share those weaknesses, and relentlessly pursue so that dawn would find half his host had been slaughtered whimpering in the dark. It was a favoured tactic of the Enemy, the reason his ancestors had taken to raising walls and fortresses instead of meeting the Dead on the field. Unlike the ratlings, who were best met and broken on prepared killing grounds before they could cross the rivers and slip into the Hannover lowlands, the Dead King's legions were always risky to confront in open battle.

All it took was for the living to lose once and the Enemy would turn setback into disaster before hounding even that all the way to annihilation. One of his own guard rode to his side, as exhausted as he but hiding it better for her lesser burden of years.

"My prince," Captain Karolina Leisberg said, "I would ask for your permission to reinforce the rearguard."

Dirty blonde hair peeked under the rim of her helm as the other soldier forced her words to come out steady though she'd just volunteered for a duty that was likely to see her and everyone she brought with her dead before night fell. Klaus spat again into the snow, though the taste of blood and grime could not seem to leave the roof of his mouth.

"No," the Iron Prince replied. "I'm not throwing horse into that hungry maw, captain. It'd be raised and sent back to hound us after dark: I'll not hand Old Bones riders to bleed us."

One of the few saving graces of fighting the Dead was the thrift of horsemen, not that Keter had not tried to make up that lack by

killing and raising any cavalry it could get its hands on. Klaus Papenheim had no intention of tossing a good company of four hundred Lycaonese horse into the embrace of the Enemy, even to save twice that in foot. Not when the cost in foot ridden down afterwards might easily dwarf what had been saved, for none had known true pursuit until they'd been chased by riders whose horses did not *tire*. Not that the retreat from the Hainaut lowlands hadn't been bound to be a messy affair regardless, as abandoning the defences of the southern castles of the principality for the sloping plains leading into Brabant had been as good as a written invitation for Keter to strike at them.

There'd been no choice, though, Klaus and Princess Beatrice had agreed. They were losing too many soldiers trying to keep the lines of defence standing, it was only a matter of time until Keter ground them to dust by attrition. They'd been in talks with Prince Étienne of Brabant for near three months now, arranging the line of hastily-raised defences where they would retreat to, but it looked like the losses in getting there might be more dire than even the Iron Prince's bleakest predictions. Their plan had been sound, Klaus still believed, and nearly worked: a sudden offensive on the Dead King's western flank, as if they were trying to break away and join the armies in Cleves, had drawn the Enemy's strength away from the fortresses for a time.

The wounded had been evacuated from the southern fortresses first, and then the garrisons under the command of Princess Mathilda, and so the better part of the military strength in Hainaut would be preserved and able to stiffen the defence of northern Brabant. But the distraction force that Klaus and Princess Beatrice had led west to sell the lie by their very presence had found stiffer resistance than expected: they'd retaken the fortress at Luciennerie easily enough, for the Enemy had torn down the walls taking it, but heading into the hilly highlands afterwards they'd found a force Klaus had once believed to be an old legend: the Grey Legion, led by the silent and implacable Prince of Bones.

No petty skeletons, these, but undead whose ancient bones had been surrounded by a body of wrought iron and steel. Though slow and lumbering, the seven thousand abominations were near unbreakable by force of arms, a crushing steel fist before which all men crumbled. Their long axes entirely made of steel had reaped near two thousand lives before the Prince of Hannover understood who it was they were facing, and by then the Prince of Bones had entered the fray. It was said in Lycaonese legends that the Revenant who held sway over the Grey Legion was an ancient Iron King, slain by the Dead King's own hand and raised anew, but in Hannover the tale was slightly different – it was, Klaus's own father had told him as a child, their ancient ancestor Albrecht Papenheim. The Lord of Last Stands, the Lone Sentinel.

The same man who'd stubbornly held Twilight's Pass with only a bare bones garrison for a year even as an Alamans foray into Bremen was driven out. He'd died, the stories said, standing alone as the last of his army on the same dawn the armies that'd beaten back the southerners began marching north for the Pass. True to his charge 'til the last breath. Whatever the truth of who the Prince of Bones had once been, he'd since been made into an implacable servant of Keter: the Silent Guardian and the Blade of Mercy had both sallied out to meet him in battle and been swept aside almost contemptuously. The Painted Knife had struck it from the back trying to cut through the neck – a practical girl, that one, Klaus rather liked her – and found that below the armour was only a sea of furious sorcery that'd violently lashed out and blown her away. If the Repentant Magister had not been able to trap him within a circle of flames for an hour, the defeat they were inflicted that day might have been an outright rout. Not that their retreat south towards Brabant had been anything but a succession of losses since that first defeat.

Three days, that was the worst of it. Another three days and their host would have made it to the freshly raised fort at Engrenon and been able to dig in to await reinforcements. The way the day was going, though, it was not to be. Not unless hard decisions were made. A short trumpet call told the Iron Prince that the woman he'd been waiting for had arrived, and Princess Beatrice Volignac rode in with her personal guard at a brisk trot. The latest Princess of Hainaut looked rather ludicrous, at first glance: her considerable girth was coated in mail and heavy furs, and from a distance she looked like a bloated waterskin forcefully strapped atop a horse. Younger sister to Princess Julienne, she had the same green eyes and coal-black hair but unlike her late sister's they were set on a narrow, pinched face with too-large lips. Klaus had thought little of her at first, he'd admit as much. For anyone to grow fat as Princess Beatrice was would have been considered a shameful thing back home, thoughtless indulgence and selfishness. To eat so much meant that either another went hungry or granaries were taken from.

He'd been wrong though, even in his lazy assumption that her weight meant she'd be a poor rider. She was a better horsewoman than even her sister had been, and a finer lance as well. More importantly, Beatrice Volignac had a searing fire inside her that made her one of the most driven people the Prince of Hannover had ever met. She hardly slept, and Klaus had found her so proficient a captain of men he'd effectively ceded command of all Alamans forces to her. She had a defter touch with them, and under her command they'd risen to become almost as fierce fighters as his own soldiers.

"Her Grace Beatrice Volignac, Princess of Hainaut," the herald announced.

The woman in question reined in her horse by his side, gesturing for her escort to withdraw. Klaus glanced at his own riders and nodded. Without a word they did the same.

"Prince Klaus," the dark-haired woman said.

"Princess Beatrice," he replied. "I'll be blunt: the rearguard is failing and if we reinforce it we'll lose our entire host."

The Alamans princess grimaced.

"I'd begun to suspect as much," she admitted. "The lesser dead are slowing them down too much, it's only a matter of time until the Grey Legion catches up."

And a pitched battle against that, neither needed to say, was a fool's errand. They'd tried to send for the Witch of the Woods, whose sorceries might be a match for those relentless steel killers, but there was no telling if the riders had made it to a scrying station – or whether she'd arrive in time, even should she be reached.

"We've twenty thousand men to care for," the Prince of Hannover said, knowing it was likely closer to seventeen now. "Those soldiers who hold our back have proved brave and true, and this is poor repayment, but we cannot throw away the other sixteen thousand trying to save that four."

The Princess of Hainaut looked disgusted with herself, but she did not disagree.

"Weeping Heavens," she murmured, "what ugly creatures this war makes of us all."

Klaus's gaze turned to behind them, where the sprawl of their column could be made from atop the hill where they both sat. His own horse had scythed through the packs of ghouls that'd sprung from the snow and earth to ambush the flanks of the column's centre stretch, freeing it to resume its advance, but Keter had still gotten its due: the temporary slowing had been enough to force the rearguard to fully engage the undead skirmishers that'd been pursuing them all day. Though these were little more than skeletons with javelins and swords, wearing not a single piece of armour, the 'naked' skirmishers were damned fast and tireless, and one of the Dead King's favourite manners of tying down foot so that his heavier forces could catch up to them. It would be so here, the first battalions of sword and board corpses bearing old ringmail already beginning to emerge above nearby hilltops. The rearguard's shield wall was spreading out, preparing for the brutal melee heading towards it.

"Someone will have to take command there," Klaus said. "Else they'll break too soon."

There was no contempt in his tone as he spoke, for though the soldiers in the rear were mostly Arlesites his own brethren would behave little differently. Men often found great courage when they knew there was no avoiding death, but when there was still hope for life – as there would be, should those in the back of the shield wall break and run before too many of the dead arrived – it was only natural to find one's feet itching to flee. It was the duty of a good captain to make their soldiers understand why there was a need to stand and fight even when there would be no leaving the field alive.

"Agreed," Princess Beatrice said.

A heartbeat later they both began to speak-

"I'lll-"

A twin look of surprise was shared, and Klaus Papenheim let out a rueful chuckle.

"I'm at the end of my rope, Volignac," he bluntly said. "I'm an old cripple a long way from home, fading out no matter how much the priests fight it. You've still decades in you, and your sister's sons to raise."

"You're the Iron Prince," she flatly replied. "Your reputation is the reason this is a retreat and not a rout. So long as you still breathe our host believes it might survive this march. I'll entrust the safety of my nephews to you and beg you might request of the First Prince that she'll allow them to attend her in Salia."

Before he could dismiss that for the foolishness it was – how trite a trade, to keep alive an old sack of bones like him for a few more years when she might serve the cause for decades yet – when they were interrupted by the sound of swords unsheathing as one. Princess Beatrice's guards and his were all looking at a strange gash in the air. Through the opening Klaus glimpsed a night sky and eerily enough felt warm breeze drift out. What came out with it, though was more familiar a sight.

"Sheathe your swords," the Iron Prince ordered, then inclined his head in greeting. "White Knight. It's been some time."

"Prince Klaus," the Sword of Judgement replied, inclining his head in return.

"Come to join our little stand, have you?" Princess Beatrice said. "You're welcome to a few battalions. Plenty to spare."

"Indeed," the dark-skinned hero agreed. "Though I come bearing request on behalf of another, in truth."

"Indeed?" Klaus drily repeated.

"It is requested that your rearguard pull back by a hundred feet and any spears and pikes you have might be brought to its fore," the White Knight said, impervious to sarcasm.

"And who requests this, pray tell?" Princess Beatrice demanded.

It was a sound like cloth ripping, if it were a cloth so large as to cover half the world. Klaus Papenheim caught sight of the rippling gates and the soldiers that strode out of them. On the left side of the shield wall, painted soldiers bearing hooked swords and shields rushed out. On the other, rows and rows of shining steel marched out in cadence, shields raised and tightly packed. *Legionaries*. Army of Callow, by the banner: stark cloth, bearing the Miezian numerals for three.

"The Black Queen," Klaus Papenheim said, and it was not a question.

Gates kept opening, some as small as a single man while others were making room for engines of war being dragged out by wagon, and soldiers kept pouring out.

"Today it is our turn, Iron Prince, to go on the offensive," the Sword of Judgement smiled.

The Prince of Hannover's remaining hand reached for the pommel of the sword at his hip, clutching it tight. Another gate opened atop a hill to the west and, banners streaming behind them, a company of knights rode out to form a wedge aimed at the Enemy's flank. At their head was a single silhouette in a colourful patchwork cloak, twin great crows perched on her shoulders. A horn sounded: one, twice, thrice. Lances went down and the last knights of Callow began their charge, their warlord queen at the tip of the spear. Klaus Papenheim smiled a wolf's smile, fierce and toothy and so very eager to finally sink his fangs in the Enemy's throat.

"Then let's turn this army around, Princess Beatrice," the Iron Prince said, meeting his comrade's eye. "And remind Ol' Bones this war has yet to find a victor."

copaceticcockroach

Test, test ... Is this working? I think it is. Right? Well, let's give whoever is in the top spot a gentle ass whooping, cause whoever is in the top isn't that Practical.

For Liliet

Vote Now: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

For Others

And so Dread Emperor Heinous thus addressed his court: 'Are we not rulers of devils and dead, princes among usurpers? Why then should we suffer another to call himself king of our demesne?' All agreed in this, and so votes was declared upon a Practical Guide to Evil.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Aston Whiteman

I'll vote when the story finishes. Just like Wrm.

Seriously, constant reminders are annoying.

Unless you're actually the Bard in disguise.

Vo... Nah.

BritishTeaLover

Votes expire after a week, so only voting at the end of the story doesn't help it much as it won't keep it in the rankings whilst its being written when it needs the support.

eatenbypie

Agreed, it's getting old. Those who vote don't need the reminder, those who plan on voting when it's finished have a set opinion, and those who just read and don't vote don't really care. When it comes to those who irregularly vote, all these wannabe witty voting posts accomplish is deterring the stubborn types (like myself). It's gotten beyond obnoxious seeing this every time.

I did however make a point to vote today since it's the first update of the book, regardless of the well intentioned idiots.

Snowy

Yeah I used to vote every now and then when I saw a particularly inspired chapter but now I more or less stopped because of these posts.

I don't like being sold things, much less by shoddy salesmen. Even just the vote links were much less obnoxious.

[sengachi](#)

And I appreciate the reminder and the commentary to go with it typically amuses me.

If these comments don't inspire you to vote, simply pay them no mind. They have a purpose they serve, it's just not for you.

Kristina Adams

Awww that was a awesome chapter... your on fire !!!! what a way to come back. Thanks

[hyperflare](#)

Wow, your entitlement is impressive. You're getting this story, and the author asks for nothing. Yet you're spamming the comments with your whingeing about people posting a fun reminder to *click a link*. Scroll past the link, holy shit.

Jan Horáček

I do my self vote when reminded. 😊

SpacyRicochet

Yup, the reminders help me to actually vote!

imagesbe

Don't speak for everyone, I appreciate the reminders. Moreover, if these posts are enough to convince you to not vote, then clearly you didn't care that much in the first place. The "vote" posts are completely ignorable if you don't like them.

Aston Whiteman

TWI has no vote reminders yet stays at the top.

I come for EE storytelling not vote fans.

Unless more votes=more money for EE.

Is there no update Wednesday?

beleester

The front page has changed to say "Updates every Tuesday and Friday"

[onedollargum](#)

It still updated on Monday and skipped Tuesday though?

Onos

Presumably Erratic didn't want to delay the promised start of the last book by one day just to fit in with the new schedule. By the sounds of things the schedule change wasn't decided until he was already on break.

Daniel

I feel like the voting line is a party of the story now.

Insanenoodlyguy

I really doubt that you'd be a dedicated voter without the likes of us. Truthfully you are no great loss. The standing of this novel on tobwebfiction suggests that we are either successful or benign on the whole. Which means we are gonna keep going at it, since it's not so stupid after all.

Stephen M

I actually like the reminders to vote. Saves me a click when voting.

Otherwise it was good to remember that the Drow are intending to defend this action but to win it.

Keep wondering why the Bard doesn't lend a hand with that in mind unless she has grown fond of the existence of Keter.

Good to see K again. Leading mage lines too.

Jessica Day

Please stop this, most of us seem to appreciate the vote link and reminder. Voting is counted on a weekly basis so voting often is the intention of the system. Having this story appear at the top of the list brings attention to the author who relies on community support so everything is going to be helpful.

I honestly don't mean to be rude but your position is the minority one so please leave the rest of us alone when we participate in voting.

[Barthumphries](#)

Why start a vote thread without the typo thread?

Typo

Rumena the Tomb-Maker – and oh, that even the Black Queen named it this has been enough to make Rozala very wary
Change this to thus.

There was a similar typo earlier but I lost it in a copy/paste snafu. Maybe you can find it?

Wealthy Aardvark

Odds were never good, against the Dead King, but
-> unnecessary comma

Ratbiter was placid horse for a Bremen stampfen
-> not necessarily a typo, but this line could use an 'a'
after placid

before the could
-> before they could

LordSchulz

Also,
Ratbiter was placid horse for a Bremen stampfen

In spirit of other correct used german words in this story,
Bremen Stampfer,
Would make more sense.
stampfen is a verb.
German nouns are written with capital first letter and
Stampfer could actually be a horserace from the sound of it
(not a horseexpert).

asuka

A horn sounded: one, twice, thrice.
-> once, twice, thrice.

Exec

"unknown ever this far north."
Even*

"only three where human"
Were*

Wealthy Aardvark

The clasped arms
-> They clasped

Cicero

Thus instead of this is also valid. So I don't think it's a typo.

Un

Ignore the naysayers! The reminders are very helpful for those of us who love to vote but would otherwise forget. Keep up the good work!

ErraticErrata

First update of the month, which means extra chapter in the eponymous tab. This one's the last of the Winter series, still from the White Knight POV.

Welcome back folks, we're on the last stretch.

Mitrhe

God's above and below this chapter gave me all kinds of shivers.

Damn good to be back on Calernia.

Cloud Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)

The last part feels like someone has recently watched Endgame.

Drake

Thanks for the chapter, glad to see you back!

tkj ar rah

ahem

let me just be the first to say:

FUCK YEAH LETS GO BITCHES

W0000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000

tkj ar rah

it's good to be back

CrushTheDragon

We back in business and it feels fantastic.

Par

ahhhh!! HYPE! I'm so excited, what a great build up

simarilius

Great to have you back. Thanks for the chapter.

Big Brother

IT'S GUIDE DAY!

And so the Realms did tremble, for the greatest of Tale Treaders had returned, and her peoples marched upon the Dead that had

sullied her air and soil. Woe unto her enemies, for they shall be shattered into meal. Woe unto her allies, for they shall see what it means to be Practically Evil.

sygerrik

Hell. YES. Am I loving this return to the story, Rumena continues to prove he is best boi.

khazan7

"It"

I have seen many people in the comments relapsing to "he".

DadyCooool

Queue the Endgame: Portals soundtrack.

iLissuin

It's a little late, but this might be the best Christmas gift I've gotten this year 😊

So incredibly excited for the new book!

taovkool

Happy new year to Guide! So glad to see this back!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Happy New Decade!

apperatus27

Ah yes, I always read other novels and admire their talent of building a scene, then this prologue comes out and I remember why I always come back to this (And keep paying monthly, lol)

burguulkodar

where is it that you pay?

[peanutbuttercus](#)

<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>

ATRDCI

EE has a patreon.

ruduen

It looks like we're going right into the thick of things this time. We're seeing the front of the war. On the one hand, it's a

wonder to see everybody as united as they are. On the other hand, it does make me worry about what's simmering beneath the surface, given how spread out everybody is and how political concerns haven't all been taken care of yet.

nimelennar

The Alliance is still in pretty good shape.

I can't wait to see how it all goes awry,

[Adrian V](#)

One word: AWESOME!!!!

Loved this chapter, i can't wait to see the other heroes interact with Cat, and seeing their reactions to Cat and Hanno's interactions (i would say relationship but is better not to jinx it xD)

[Adrian V](#)

Time for a comment that talks more about my impressions now that i have sleep and re read xD

Not only do i love how this all started and what we were shown but the things that were mentioned and others that were implied for the future, for example on the first front (i will use the order the POV appeared) we have Killiam and Robber, the later more or less assures a POV at some point since he is a favorite for the interludes and Killiam being there we could see more of her since the last 2 books have barely mentioned her and i missed her!!!

I also think Otto will eventually get a name and he and Frederick will continue to be those 2 guys, maybe even go down in history as some duo xD

On the second we have Malaza that also gives us a posible way to see what happens later and Rumena who will surely kick ass and throw snark everywhere.

And lastly we have Cat charging on the front directly!!! Maybe this book will open with her battling this lord of bones, we needed to see more fights since she returned where she used direct application of force, this is important because she needs to project force to her allies and what better way than to kill/rekill an revenant that defeated and maybe killed at least 3 heroes.

Now a quick question: wich heroes are confirmed dead? i meant i think the "liked" part (plus chaotic explosions of sorcery) leaves it pretty clear at least she was maimed if not killed.

ALazyMonster

This is glorious!

konstantinvoncarstein

At last, the Guide has returned! 😊

Joel DELETED

Ah, the birthday present I wanted most of all. Wonderful

Spellblade's Father

"The Kingfisher Prince had held a buckling line by sheer dint of
refusing to die"

Sheer awesome. The Guide is back.

JJR

D E T E R M I N A T I O N

burguulkodar

I don't understand why Kingfisher Prince would be a valid hero name. What is the kingfisher meaning here? Does he like to fish? Is his banner that of a kingfisher? Is it metaphorical? If so, then what the hell is a kingfisher a metaphor for?

Ben

It's not a metaphor about kingfishers. The kingfisher is the symbol, or sigil, I guess, of that dude's Principdom. All of his soldiers fight under the Kingfisher banner, and thus associate it with whatever virtues and ideals are valued among fighting men from that principality. There's an earlier chapter about him where he and the cavalry under his command drink some toasts before charging down a cliff to attack an undead dragon or something, and one of those toasts was something like "To the Kingfisher, and may we never shame it." As the prince he's presumably supposed to embody the virtues and ideals of his principality, which the kingfisher is taken to represent—and now I guess he far more literally embodies them.

[peanutbuttercus](#)

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/04/01/inexorable/>

[Dresden 67](#)

I'm guessing that last scene with dozens of gates ripping open and reinforcements stepping through was at least partly inspired by Avengers: Endgame.

Nice.

konstantinvoncarstein

I had the same thought 😬

dadycool

The moment I finished reading, I went back, turned on the soundtrack, and reread it. It's a glorious combination.

Ed

Depending what sort of writer EE is, that scene may have been planned since the first book was written. Even if he's a discovery writer probably still been planned since he worked out Cat could use portals and was going to end up in this war, which was long before Endgame.

Reinforcements appearing from portals is always just a potentially awesome scene 😊

[Javvies](#)

Sweet. It's back.

Yes ... the arrival of your unexpected reinforcements is a pleasant surprise to be woken up to.

So Killian is alive, for all those wondering about where she disappeared to.

Pickler has been set loose to build war engines with a functionally unlimited budget as long as what she builds is useful. That's going to be ... effective.

It sounds like Robber and the goblins are going to get along disturbingly well with the Kingfisher's Alamans – I mean, charging out to grab a banner to use it for dishwashing? Robber and his lot will approve.

Heh. Rumena is a joy as ever. Meetings of the generals on that front are going to be fun.

Ah. Klaus is alive. His interactions with Cat are going to be interesting.

Also, yes, fall back so the surprise reinforcements have room to get up to speed in their charge. Always a good thing to give them room to work with. Though ... I suspect that the Knights will be less effective against the undead than the living, since undead don't exactly break or have fear the way living troops do. And the biggest value in conventional cavalry charges is that the troops on the receiving end are likely to break formation, since

an unbroken formation of infantry is not something even trained warhorses are going to want to run into.

hakureireimu

Except the Knights are also good against sorcery, and the undead are raised using sorcery.

[Mammon](#)

Probably not the same kind of sorcery. The knight's armours have engraved runes that make the sorceries fall apart, fail to penetrate and/or dissipate. Mostly used against raw or non-solid magic being thrown at them to destroy, rend or ward off.

While this indeed also worked against the Grim Binder creatures, those solid beings were conjured out of thin air and thus still relying on sorceries to exist and retain form at all. Throwing a platemail at that will indeed make it fall apart. The undead though, those are still a 'natural' physical component animated with magic but for their lethal effects not reliant on sorceries.

Some ancient magicks like bones so crumbled to dust that they'd fall apart were it not for magic, those would indeed falter when facing the knights of Callow same as a wraith would. But most undead would likely find themselves just as capable of killing these knights with spear formations and arrows as regular soldiers.

With their relentless morale and numbers allowing them to be alike the iron flanks to stop and tear apart the charges if the knights were to attack more dense parts of the army, knight charges are probably even going to be less effective against them. Charges rely in good part on shock and awe and routing the enemy, but horses can only stampede through so much before they're halted.

So against the Grey Legion, whose shell and weapons are ordinary steel, the knights would only ride themselves to death. They resist sorcery, but if they cannot get to the sorcery hidden beneath that steel then they'll find the enemy slaughtering them before they can slaughter the enemy.

Insanenoodlyguy

You really think fighting praes that callowan knights are unfamiliar with undead combat? The remnants and such will be a new and unpleasant thing to start learning, but the en masse hordes? Those are familiar

[Mammon](#)

I commented on the idea that Knights = effective against sorcery and undead = sorcery was so simple and clear-cut that the knights would just auto-win. See comment I commented upon. And that has nothing to do with Callow's experience with undead, but with this reader's anticipation of what the story will do next.

Wonder

I believe you are underestimating the knights . Do you really believe they would ride down on the undead army while aware of their own vulnerability without a plan? And not to even mention the warlord herself at the tip of the Calvary, It speaks for itself, if the Black Queen is at the front of the charge then I don't believe everything is as simple as it seems.

[Mammon](#)

See my reply on InsaneNoodleGuy right above your comment.

[Mental Mouse](#)

What makes you so sure they don't know anything about the Gray Legion? Or for that matter, that the Greys' iron armor is just ordinary armor, when it's containing a seething mass of sorcery? I'd bet the knights' weapons are enchanted/ invested with divine power as much as their armor.

[Mammon](#)

Winter IV specified that there was sorcery directly underneath the plate that was not clear, sensed or doing anything before being pierced through. As such, while the plate needs not be unenchanted, it has already been told that the sorcery lies underneath the plate rather than in it. In terms of these regular steel or iron shells the Grey Legion is wearing, the Callowan lances are just thinner pieces of ordinary steel. Once pierced through, if pierced through, only then the lashing out of sorcery will have the enchanted protections make a difference.

On the intent everyone seems to read in my comment for some reason, see my reply on InsaneNoodleGuy in the comment above the comment above your comment.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah ... but typical undead aren't exactly the kind of active magic that they're functionally immune to. They (presumably) can't just walk up to an undead and break the animating magics by brief physical contact.

They might well have other tricks up their vambraces for dealing with undead, and probably actually do, but they're going to be relying on special abilities/equipment to break the undead that they have because they're the super special counter magic Knights of Callow, not the mental shock power of being heavy cavalry charging at insufficiently disciplined infantry.

That is, living infantry can break in the face of a cavalry charge if insufficiently disciplined because it isn't easy to stand still in the face of several tons of horses wearing people preceded by pointy objects charging at you faster than you can run. That opens up the formation which means the horses can and will just keep going rather than stop or turn away because they can't jump over the obstacle in their path that would cripple them if they ran into it. Undead aren't going to break formation.

[Liliet](#)

Robber x Frederic: NEW SHIP

Axel Rafael

I Second that!

Razorfloss razor

God talk about an entrance. This was hype as fuck. Reading everyone reaction as just as they are about to give their final fuck you to the dead king when all of a sudden help start arriving. My body is so very ready.

NZPIEFACE

Mine sure as hell isn't.

NZPIEFACE

I love how it's definitely providence that let Cat know exactly where to land.

[Liliet](#)

Providence, or Masego helping aim~

[Liliet](#)

A wise bard arranges their own dramatic entrance!

thecorinthianman

Amazing how Rumena just takes my breath away every time. What a character you have made.

Mental Mouse

That said, those sudden appearances are setting the stage for a later scene similar to the one that Eudokia bagged on.

Magicturtle

Frederick and Otto os quickly becoming one of my favorite pairs
holy shit, they are badass

Valkyria

Finally it's back!
Anyone else feel like an addict finally back on their stuff?
Cause I sure do!

konstantinvoncarstein

Yeah, me too 😊

Shequi

RUMENA RUMENA RUMENA

Gods below and everburning be placated, the Guide has returned!

Squeamish

Yay it's back! So looking forward to the last ride

Mental Mouse

And it begins!

Including the quibbling: 😊

> the stone markers on the side of it: each had been set down at the length it would take for a candle to melt from the last marker,

Certainly it makes sense to have markers set at a given distance from each other, and the burn time of a standard candle is an ancient measure of time. That said, if said candle is *moving* – being carried in a coach or wagon, let alone on horseback – well, its burn time is going to be far short of standard!

sammax

I assume that they are placed such that it takes the same time to walk/ride from one stone candle to the next as it would for a standard candle to burn down, assuming some standardized walking or riding speed. That way you can roughly estimate the time by the number of candles you have passed instead of having to carry a burning candle with you.

RanVor

The hype is real, people.

RanVor

Hey guys, it's been a while since I last commented here. Don't worry, though, this doesn't necessarily mean I'm back for good. I still haven't decided if I'll ever be returning to regular commenting. You're still safe, at least for a while.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm curious, after everything, if you still hate the direction cat took. I assume since you are here at all that you still find yourself wanting to read this...

RanVor

I wouldn't say I hated it, exactly. I found the change of direction at the end of Book VI to be abrupt and disappointing in some ways, and I still like pre-Winter Cat more than the current one, but it makes sense for her to act this way and she's actually managed to get the all the idiots to listen to reason, which is always a plus. Also, she's still crazy and that's what matters the most, right?

RanVor

And by Book VI I mean Book IV, of course. Stupid Roman numerals.

dadycoool

Yeah, I miss the badass, unstoppable force of nature that was a teenaged Cat, but I also miss the cheerful, physically fit, and not-a-mushroom that was teenaged dadycoool. The sad fact is: not only did she grow up and gain new, big responsibilities, but the world changed around her and she adapted to match it. ngl, I very much agree with you. I didn't like it when she became an unfeeling Fae and I didn't like the extreme restraint she's been using, but it is what it is.

btw, if this kind of paragraph-length reply is what happens when I open my mouth, maybe I should keep it shut.

Dr.D

OH HELLS YEAH! Now THAT'S a chapter to come back with! Welcome back EE. 😊

Good to see Rumena being the menacing ancient monster that he is. And to see our dearly beloved Cat (even if only briefly from the

back) doing what she does best, bringing in the cavalry to save the day. I is a happy bunny.

Fern

Oh man, I'm getting awfully excited about this. This is what this story promised from day one: two huge armies fighting an apocalyptic dance to the death led by razor sharp minds very, very skilled at manipulating storytelling beats. Best of all, they've both got nothing to lose. Hell, these power liches are just the opening salvo from neshemah, who knows what other nasty shit he's got waiting in the wings.

Shoddi

EE, thank you for such a well written and engaging story. I'm glad it's back! That being said, of all the fantastic imagery you've set forth in this chapter, this passage is the one that amuses me the most:

" Cordelia Hasenbach had wrought some sort of financial wizardry that'd greatly lessen the debt burdens incurred defending Procer. Something about bundling together the debts of many principalities and slicing that mixed greater debt apart before selling the slices to the Merchant Lords and banks of Mercantis, and promised yet more aid to come. "

So, she's funding the war effort with "mort-gage" backed securities. Clever, so very clever.

Oshi

Yay! Someone else who noticed this. If she has done it right she can pull a JPMorgan and when some of it inevitably goes belly up she can reap plenty of profits at Mecantis's expense. Utter genius.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Hopefully this doesn't encourage lenders to make loans to nobles unlikely to be able to be able to pay them back and bundle them with debt from more reputable borrowers. That seems pretty unlikely, though. Who'd be stupid enough to participate in that kind of scheme?

Til

It's back baby! Missed this story so much.

Daniel E

I'm sorry Larat, but Rumena is now officially my new favorite treacherous lieutenant.

Mental Mouse

Ahem? When has Rumena ever been treacherous? Insolent and mischievous, certainly, but unlike Larat he's there in the fight when he's needed. Even if his allies don't know he's needed yet!

Oshi

Rumena is no ones Lieutenant. He is a General.

Mental Mouse

Oh yeah, and *now* the Dead King know that the Everdark is in play. Might be interesting to see what happens if he moves against the Dwarves currently occupying it...

sengachi

Oh it feels good to see this story back in action. I am very much looking forward to this new book.

Wonder

Deploy the goat bombs!!!!!!!!

Wonder

From the area of Night !!!!!

konstantin von carstein

I think he will have other things to worry about 😁

laquz24

Oh, this scratches several itches I didn't know I had, finally.

Daniel F

You should probably get that looked at :p

Jircniv

IT'S FINALLY HERE!!!!

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

(シ)シ

Imrix

Ah yes, the great counterpoint to the Praesi motto. Iron sharpens iron, but steel is an alloy.

Hayz

I have honestly loved this story from the start.
This is my favourite chapter by far!
Thanks EE

Holz

Wait, in which chapter did Klaus lose his arm? Am I just dumb?

Chapter 1: Recommence

"In the conduct of war offence is commonly preferable to defence; for in attacking a general acts according to their own designs, while in defence they act according to the designs of the enemy."
– Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First

The afternoon sun stared down blearily at our backs, banners flapping in the wind as we watched the soldiers on the field below. These were good flat grounds; my men had had time to set up and there were fewer than five hundred undead facing them: this was as close to a safe skirmish as we'd ever get in a war like this one.

I had no intention of wasting such a rare opportunity even if it'd been tragedy that dropped it into my lap. Hakram himself had handpicked the lines that made up the formation of three hundred legionaries, with an eye to ensuring they were greenhorns – as much as the Army of Callow still had any of those – instead of veterans. We wouldn't always have the luxury of well-trained soldiers to draw on, and if the assault companies were to be a success on the northern fields then we'd need to plan for the lowest fare of what we'd be able to field and not the finest. Even after only two months of training, though, my countrymen did me proud. Spears were hammered into the ground at a sharp angle, as if a line of long stakes, and behind them the first rank stepped forward in orderly manner: greatshield-bearing soldiers in heavy plate and short swords, a veritable wall on legs. Behind them the second rank set up, soldiers in mail coats handling halberds and the long hammers known as 'raven beaks'. The third and fourth ranks wielded the same mixture, though with heavier lean towards halberds, and behind them were kept in reserve our specialists.

We might not have the mage numbers the Legions of Terror could boast of, but we more than made up for that in priests. The House Insurgent had absolutely no qualms about using Light as much to

burn undead as their more traditional colleagues used it for healing.

The commanding officer of our trial assault formation was a young man from Ankou by the name of Algernon Beesbury, who'd swiftly climbed up the ranks by virtue of having both a solid tactical acumen and a facility with languages. He'd been fluent in Chantant before even enrolling, as it happened, and served as one of General Hune's favourite vanguards during the Proceran campaign only to make it to tribune rank shortly after the Princes' Graveyard. Adjutant spoke well of his wits, too, which was even higher praise than Hune's several official commendations as far as I was concerned. Tribune Beesbury was not disappointing me so far, as he ordered a spreading of the formation when the undead pack began to splinter. The zombies would keep moving swiftly and purposefully so long as the Binds within their number remained unbroken, though compared to the skeleton waves I found the fleshier undead to have a certain... feral way about them. Their bite tended to be poisonous, too. The process that saw zombies rise anew made their gums bleed as they died and keep suppurating blood and pus for weeks after they were dead.

Though it might take a while to kill, foul blood in a wound was poison all the same.

"How many Binds in the lot, do you think?" I said.

"I'd say no more than five, Your Majesty," Grandmaster Brandon Talbot replied.

Keen-eyed as he watched the unfolding skirmish through his open visor, the commander of the Order of the Broken Bells was careful not to bring his own mount too close to mine. Zombie liked to snap at other horses and given that she smelled like Winter and death it tended to unnerve even Callowan war mounts. Glancing at the man I marvelled that his beard was still so neatly cut: the aristocrat seemed to make it a point of pride to remain nobly groomed even when out on campaign as we'd been for half a month now.

"They are looking pretty sloppy," I conceded, the two of us eyeing the dead as they closed the last of the distance.

When there were more Binds the necromancy binding the dead together was... tighter according to Masego, though he'd gotten a little lost in a greater metaphor about how the Dead King used necromancy entirely when explaining it. Regardless, in practice the presence of more Binds allowed those same undead more control over their lesser brethren, and finer control as well. Given that the Binds still had soul bound to their dead frames, hence the name, that tended to mean better tactics for the pack than simply rushing at whatever living were closest. Talbot and I kept our eyes on the zombies as they hit the outer line. To my pleasure,

just as they'd been meant to they staked themselves on the spears. Not all of them did, for some avoided the jutting steel or simply tumbled forward with great enough speed they either broke the spear or ripped free of the point, but it broke the dead's momentum across the line.

"It would not work as well against skeletons," Captain Karolina Leisberg said, her Chantant accented in that attractively sharp Lycaonese way.

Where Grandmaster Talbot sat mounted at my right, the Iron Prince's representative sat the same at my left. Prince Klaus Papenheim had proved very much interested in our attempts to adjust war doctrine to the realities of war against Keter, to the extent that he'd sent one of the captains of his personal guard to have a look at this skirmish after I'd given him advance notice it would be taking place. That and I assumed he'd wanted eyes he trusted assessing how much damage the Dead King's latest nasty surprise had managed to sow behind our main lines. Gods, we were just lucky Tariq had caught the infiltrators before they made it into Brabant. If the fucking things had made it into one of those cramped refugee camps instead of being forced to prey on the isolated towns and villages of southern Hainaut instead, the damage would have been staggering in scope.

"It'll still slow them by simple virtue of being in the way," I reminded Captain Leisberg. "The object is to sap their momentum before the lines hit, not score kills."

We'd learned the hard way that a wave of armoured skeletons could topple even a proper Legion shield wall by simple virtue of being so damned heavy, if it got enough room for a proper charge.

"And it seems to be working as intended," Brandon Talbot noted.

Eyes returning to the skirmish, I caught sight of exactly what he meant. I'd missed the first exchange, but the results left in its wake spoke for themselves: a long line of zombies, pulped or hacked down by the polearms and long hammers while the line of greatshields anchored against the ground effortlessly bounced off the few dead that made it close to enough to scrabble at the wall of steel. The dead slowly forced their way behind the line of jutting spears but they were repeatedly butchered as they did until the mangled corpses were tall enough a pile that some of the zombies began using it as a way to leap above. There the halberds proved their worth over the raven beaks, a forest of jutting points that speared the few leapers clean through. Tribune Beesbury barked out an order and whistles were sounded by the sergeants. The mages and priests at the rear lashed out with flame and Light, providing cover to the rank of greatshields as it rose and retreated five paces before setting down again. They were adding depth to the killing floor to avoid further leapers,

I noted approvingly. Hune's man was living up to her commendations.

"A pack is splitting off from the rest," Captain Leisberg pointed out.

Eyes flicking to the side of the skirmish, I saw the Lycaonese was right. Maybe thirty zombies and what must have been a Bind within the lot were peeling off from the slaughter on the plain, heading southwest. There were villages there, as I recalled, though not large ones – likely the reason they'd not been hit in the initial wave of contamination when two neighbouring small towns had. The infiltrators had aimed for numbers above all else, perhaps understanding that weaponless zombies would require as much to make a dent in a line of proper soldiery.

"Shall I send out one of the Order's wings, my queen?" Grandmaster Talbot offered.

I mulled on that a moment, even as the assault formation on the plains continued its methodical savaging of the remaining undead. This might be the least of the infantry the Dead King could field, but I was still rather encouraged by the day's results.

"That village we sent Lord Tanja to, what was it called again?" I asked.

"Pierreplate, I believe," Brandon Talbot replied.

"About half a bell away," I said. "And the one Lady Osená was meant to get moving was maybe another half bell further west."

"The Levantines should be returning, then," Captain Leisberg said, quickly catching on to my meaning.

Lord Razin Tanja, who was now truly the Lord of Malaga instead of merely the heir designate – his kin back in Levant had found a technicality that allowed him to claim the title without physically returning to the Dominion – should already have been back, truth be told. I rather suspected he'd waited for Lady Aquiline to finish covering the grounds I'd assigned her and catch up to him before heading back together. I was not one to grudge a young man his fancy for a lithe-limbed whirlwind of swagger and knives, especially when said whirlwind had legs like Aquiline Osená's, but if Tanja was under the impression that he could use our hours on the field to flirt with his betrothed he was in dire need of *instructional sparring* with Adjutant.

"Send a pair of riders to warn them, just in case they got sloppy with their own scouting," I ordered Talbot, eyes following the fleeing undead.

The Levantines, particularly the Tartessos foot, were actually better hand at this sort of thing than any of mine save for goblins so it was likely an unnecessary warning. Still, why indulge in a gamble when a sure thing was close at hand?

"By your will, Your Majesty," the grandmaster said, bowing his head.

He guided his horse away, leaving to pass along my command, but I kept my attention on the undead. They were using the shoddy dirt road headed southwest instead of just running across broken terrain, I noted, so there was definitely a Bind doing their thinking for them. Not that it'd help them much, given the region and season. The borderlands between southern Hainaut and northern Brabant were a strange place, to my eyes: flat stony plains were broken up by valley-like dips in the ground where greenery grew almost aggressively, though the part I'd grown to despise was the damned bogs. They were everywhere, though they always spread like the clap in an army camp after winter snows melted. For a few months every year the entire region became the favourite piss bowl of the Gods, which made campaigning around it deeply unpleasant. The only part that was mildly tolerable about the bogs was the way so many birds flocked to them, which made for good hunting and a change of fare when catches were made. The road southwest was half-flooded by such a bog, which had lapped up at a turn already quite cramped up against a rocky hill.

It was half-expectantly that I watched that narrow passage as the dead neared it. If I'd been trying to lay an ambush around here, that was where I would have done it. Painted faces crested the hill and a heartbeat later a volley of javelins scythed through the flank of the zombie pack. Wouldn't be enough to put any of those down for good, but it'd pin and tumble quite a few as well as disrupt their 'formation'. I was not the only one looking, though, I noted.

"That'd be the Tartessos foot," I told Captain Leisberg. "Those call themselves slayers in honour of the Silent Slayer, the heroine that founded the ruling line of the city."

Lady Aquiline herself claimed direct descent from the woman, and for all I knew it might even be true. I'd never seen any people half so obsessed with Blood as the Levantines, save for actual Praesi blood mages.

"They are wearing almost as much paint as armour, and most of that leather," Karolina Leisberg skeptically said.

Lycaonese, I had found, held what I could only deem a very reasonable sort of respect for the virtues of putting on good steel armour whenever it was even remotely possible to get away with it. The way some of the Levantines disdained it was utterly baffling to them, and unfortunately that was one of the least

contentious ways their cultures seemed to rub each other wrong. The way the Dominion held single combat as a glorious thing, in particular, had a way of earning aggressive contempt from the northerners. It was, I'd come to believe, the difference between a people that held war as an honourable duty and one that held war as honourable, period. There were no frills to Lycaonese ways: if it worked, it did not matter how ugly or unfair or harsh the way of getting it done was. Captain Leisberg hadn't come across an honour duel, at least. Those always made the Lycaonese fall into black temper. There was a reason I'd ensured they were encamped at opposite ends whenever I could even though it was a headache to organize. These days I sometimes felt more like a juggler than a general or a queen. *And the moment I drop a single ball*, I thought, *people will die*.

It was a sobering thought, and the source of much of my patience these days.

"Slayers are monster-killers by training, not line infantry," I told her. "They're used to fighting things that consider plate little more than the crunchy part of the meal. I expect that when we finally get the Unravellers they'll be the ones fielding them for our front."

The woman's eyes brightened, for I'd said the magic word: *Unravellers*. The sheer intensity of the lust the Lycaonese held for those artefacts surprised me almost every time, though perhaps it shouldn't. We'd been fighting the alchemical monstrosities of the Dead King for not even two years while their kind had been the proverbial rock in Keter's boot for centuries.

"I'd heard the Workshop deemed them unfeasible," Captain Leisberg said.

Unfeasible wasn't exactly the right word. The first few attempts at making artefacts that disrupted necromancy had either been violently explosive failures or run into what Masego deemed a 'proportioning' problem, namely that those first attempts simply didn't have enough sorcery or Light in them to successfully unravel something like a wyrm or a beorn. Our people had eventually succeeded at making an artefact that *could* hold that much power, but it'd been a material solution. As in, the materials used in the making of that thing were about as expensive as arming two cohorts in full Legion standard. That'd been bad enough, but they'd also been quite rare: in particular, the kind of eldritch lumber they'd used grew only in the southern stretches of the Waning Woods. Which meant importing it in large quantities was a half-baked daydream. The Belfry had since claimed a breakthrough in figuring out a structural workaround, though, and fresh plans had been passed along to the Workshop a month past. We'd learn if they were truly functional soon enough, at least in principle.

I'd only venture to call it a true success after shoving a spear inside one of those fucking undead dragons collapsed the whole thing, instead of requiring three Named and a full mage contingent to get that job done.

"Might not be, after all," I said. "Though I'll not count the chickens before they're ha- Razin Tanja, you *shit*."

It'd been a beautiful little ambush, pretty as a pearl: javelins first, then a dozen Malaga foot had emerged to block the road, raising a shield wall the zombies promptly threw themselves against. The slayers had leapt into the chaotic melee and scythed through the lesser undead with almost laughable ease, Lady Aquiline Osená among them. Quick enough all that was left from the massacre was the Bind that'd led the pack. They should have killed it first, by my reckoning, since the zombies would regress to almost animal thoughtlessness after it was broken, but the reason why they hadn't had become rather clear when Razin Tanja stepped forward in chainmail and leather, a hooked sword in hand. The Levantines formed a circle around the two, those with shields in front, and took to shoving the undead back into the middle of the makeshift battle circle when it strayed too far from the Lord of Malaga.

"Foolish," the Lycaonese captain said at the sight, and I grunted in agreement.

Not that Aquiline was any better when it came to this sort of stuff: if anything she was much, much worse. The Grey Pilgrim had made clear that the two lordlings were to listen to my orders, so at least they usually obeyed when I was there to keep an eye on them, but when I wasn't this sort of inanity still cropped up with depressing regularity. It was like someone had chopped out the part of their brains where common sense was and replaced it with *glorious single combat* instead. Gods, I supposed I should be glad at least they weren't stabbing each other. Apparently the sole Dominion aristocrat killed at the Graveyard – Razin's own father – had not been slain by one of mine or the Tyrant's but instead by the Lord of Alava. I was rather glad that one had ended up on Malanza's front, even if he'd been somewhat easy on the eyes. On the plains the assault company under Tribune Beesbury was cleaning up the last of the zombies with admirable thoroughness and without much trouble, so I decided the Levantines were due the first visit. I could personally praise Beesbury and his three hundred for their work later.

"Grandmaster Talbot," I called out.

Zombie moved under the pressure of my knees almost eagerly, and I could tell she was itching for a flight. I patted her mane fondly.

"Later," I told her.

The leader of the Broken Bells was not long in attending me after the summons, and as a sign that he was getting used to my ways he'd come riding with twenty knights and my banner instead of a courtier's manners.

"Good man," I smiled at him, then turned to my knights. "Lord Tanja seems intent on putting on a spectacle. Wouldn't it be poor manners to fail to indulge him?"

There were a few smiles, and even a laugh. Though Levant's soldiery was not hated among my people, neither was it liked. It had not been forgot that a campaign had been fought against them in Iserre, or that they'd been part of the Grand Alliance back when it was still just a pack of hounds baying for fresh meat. Callowan meat, at least in part. I flicked a questioning glance at Captain Leisberg, to see if she wanted to accompany us, but she shook her head. With a courteous dip of mine I took my leave, staff of yew laid across Zombie's back as we took the lead on our ride down the hill. I kept a brisk pace and made no pretence of hiding my approach, so the Levantines saw us long before we came. Tanja finished his opponent before I got close enough to hail him, a clean blow that carved through the Bind's spine under the throat. The head, still wrapped in leathery but seemingly living flesh, tumbled to the ground. The Levantines let out a cheer. Hiding my irritation, I spurred Zombie onwards quicker, not slowing as I came upon the ring of soldiers surrounding the victorious young Lord of Malaga.

The warriors had to hastily scatter out of my way and instead of pulling on my reins I let Zombie enter the ring at a trot, circling Tanja. So maybe I wasn't hiding my irritation that much, all things considered. By the time Zombie had slowed to a halt, there was only silence surrounding me.

"Hail, Black Queen," Lady Aquiline called out.

"We'll get to you in a moment, Lady Osená," I flatly replied.

Lord Razin Tanja looked up at me with defiant eyes, his tanned skin and coal-black hair framed tight by his helm. It wouldn't do to upbraid him like a child in front of his own men and his betrothed, I reminded myself, even though it was tempting to allow myself to spit out a few scathing lines that'd cut him down to size. On the other hand, it wouldn't do to simply let this go either. He and Osená had been testing me more often lately, as if pushing to see how much I'd take from them. If I gave them an inch now, they'd be reaching for another before day's end. I stared down the Lord of Malaga without blinking until, reluctantly, he opened his mouth.

"Hail, Black Queen," Razin Tanja greeted me.

"And to you, Lord Razin," I calmly replied. "Now, would you care to explain to me why you were tormenting what is most likely the soul of an ancient crusader bound by dark sorcery into unwilling service to the Hidden Horror?"

Ah, the embarrassed silence of someone who'd not quite considered the implications of what they were doing. How nostalgic. I could see why people had done this to me so often, if it was always this darkly satisfying to be standing on this side of the exercise.

"Well?" I prompted amicably. "Do go on. I'm sure your reasons will be... enlightening."

That was just twisting the knife but then I wasn't Razin's mother. I had absolutely no interest in caring for his bruises, be they on his skin or his pride.

"The Volignac companies are already back at camp, last I heard," I casually said. "Because they saw no need to play around with corpses, they're having first crack at the ale rations that just got shipped in from Brabant."

I'd ordered some set aside for the assault formation too, as either reward or comfort for the way the skirmish went, but I saw no pressing need to mention that. Knowledge they'd be laying claim only to what the Procerans saw fit to leave behind went over with the Levantines about as well as I'd figured it would. There wasn't an army on the continent that didn't run on drink and brothels, save perhaps the one we were pitted against.

"It was a good kill," Lady Aquiline said, rallying to the defence of her betrothed.

Gallantly, some might have argued. Some but not me. My eyes flicked to her painted face, hardening.

"Made by a man half a bell late on his march back to camp," I said. "I don't suppose you have anything to say about *that*, Lady Osen?"

Embarrassment once more, and matching silence. And she should be damn well be embarrassed: they'd been sent out to ensure none of the zombie-makers had gotten or could get at villages, not to mess about. And considering they'd gone out with two hundred warriors each and there couldn't be more than fifty here with them right now, they couldn't even pretend with the parchment-thin claim they'd linked up for safety in numbers. For now, I'd generously assume the other warriors were left behind to be thorough in ensuring the safety of the evacuating Proceran civilians, though I'd be sure to ask pointed questions about this later. I was making no friends among the Levantines here by asserting my authority so bluntly, but then I didn't need to be

liked by these people. Only obeyed, and they'd been growing lax about that lately.

"Return to camp," I said, eyes sweeping across the ranks. "I'll expect a distinct lack of detours, this time."

It felt like I was spanking unruly children, which was all the more galling for not being entirely untrue. Neither of them were all that far from me in age, though sometimes I felt more like tired old Klaus Papenheim than the woman of twenty-three I truly was. I could understand why Tariq wanted me to keep an eye on them, too, to both meanings of that. For all their sloppy habits and general recklessness, the two Levantine nobles made for a very charismatic pair when they weren't straining my patience. Both brave and skilled at arms, and while Aquiline was a finer blade and the most popular of the two it was Razin I'd found had the firmer grasp on politics. If the Grey Pilgrim was in the market for successors to keep the Dominion stable after he died, then these two were by far his best bet from the current crop of the Blood.

Sadly, this did not in any way make them less of a trial to deal with.

I didn't linger around the Levantines any longer, guiding Zombie out of the battle circle as my knightly escort and Grandmaster Talbot fell in. The man who'd once been the heir to Marchford rode up to my side as we returned to the hill that'd served as our earlier vantage point.

"The Levantine fondness for duels truly is a tawdry habit," Brandon Talbot said. "It has no place in proper war-making."

"Duels are useful when they can be used to demoralize the enemy," I disagreed.

I'd myself duelled in the past, after all, and sent others to do the same on my behalf. Usually I'd done it to kill a Named foe before they could inflict great losses on my soldiers, or eliminate a titled fae before they could unleash a large working, but there was a reason I didn't use that method unless there was no other choice. Fighting on the front bound your soldiers to you in ways that could be hard to explain – it'd been my willingness to fight on the frontlines that'd first won me loyalty in the Fifteenth – but there was a difference between that and seeking out every duel there was to be had out there. One was sharing risk, the other courting death. Even the Lady of the Lake picked her fights and fled when they turned south on her.

"The dead have no morale," the Grandmaster said, and I didn't disagree. "Which makes all this posturing rather puerile."

"Lord Tanja is young and in need of proving himself to his warriors," I said. "Lady Osená's bloodline is famous for such duels, so there is a reputation to uphold."

"Facts which did not seem to hinder you in the slightest from disciplining them," the older man said, sounding faintly amused.

"Because if they pull something like that against a Revenant after these little victories let them think they're champions, they'll get themselves slaughtered like lambs," I grimly said. "And while it might be a fool's errand to expect Levantines to discard centuries of customs, I'll expect them to at least bend those to accommodate the realities of the war for survival we're fighting."

Neshamah could afford to toss fifty thousand Binds in a pit and forget about them until Last Dusk, if he felt like it. If half the visions the Sisters shared with me of the drow front in the deep north were accurate, then that was the kind of force he was willing to throw away on a fucking *distraction*. On the other hand, if either of the Dominion nobles got themselves killed the Grand Alliance had a damned mess on its hands. Whether it was about succession, command of their armies or even the casting of blame that'd no doubt follow there would be no part of it that wouldn't end up a nasty turn. So when I saw them playing duellist with undead, you might say my temper rose just a tad at the sight. Even in the wildest streaks of my days as Squire I'd never been reckless for recklessness' sake, much less acted so blithely unaware of the stakes at play.

"Doesn't matter," I finally sighed. "They're only in my charge until we've swept the region clean. We'll be moving on to other things afterwards, and the Pilgrim can shepherd his own cats."

"Another day's march south and we'll have reached into Brabantine lands proper," the bearded knight said. "We ought to be encountering the first of Prince Étienne's forward patrols come morning, and soon after our duty will be discharged."

"Looking forward to a stay in a proper city?" I teased.

"A warm bath," Brandon Talbot reverently said, "and food not cooked in a cauldron. The Heavens smile upon us indeed."

I chuckled. It was funny, the way months in the field could turn the simplest of things into luxuries. I was, myself, looking forward to finally getting a decent drink as well as a full night's sleep: wherever lay diplomacy also lay quality wine and wards good enough I wouldn't need to sleep with one eye open. Hanno was due back from out west, too, which would be nice. It was always easier when he was there to foist off chores o— *share the burdens with*, I'd of course meant, in an absolutely equal and unbiased manner.

"Let's get this business over with, then," I said. "I've had about as much as I can stomach of spring in these parts and the walking dead do nothing to improve the scenery."

"I'd hardly noticed a difference," Brandon Talbot drily said.

Let it not be said that one of my people had ever willingly let an occasion to rag on Procer pass them by. We returned to the hilltop only to learn that Captain Leisberg had already taken her leave and headed back to camp, from where she'd be changing mounts and riding straight for Prince Klaus' forces further north by the main roads. While I was somewhat irked she'd not stayed around long enough to discuss her impressions of the day's skirmish and the performance of the assault formation, she was not under my command and owed me nothing save perhaps the occasional courtesy. Odds were I'd need to have that talk with the Iron Prince himself, which truth be told I hardly minded. The First Prince's uncle was an old soldier of a breed that was deeply familiar to me: I'd spent most of my life either serving them drinks, fighting them or leading them in battle. If the man had known a few rebel songs and told a story about some wound he took during the Conquest, it might have been enough to make me homesick.

It was brisk business after my return, organizing the return of our soldiers to camp and sending out riders to check on the forces we'd sent further out. While we'd be keeping a force of knights here in case an undead force had slipped our notice and reinforcements were needed by one of our detachments, there was no real need for me to stay here to supervise in person. Grandmaster Talbot was perfectly capable of handling this without my breathing down his neck. Consequently, I'd been preparing to ride away with an escort when Zombie suddenly shivered in discomfort. She'd only ever done that around a single man, which meant it was no deep mystery as to who had finally emerged from the wilds again. It was hard to tell how old the man was, or where he came from, though Indrani had once told me he was only a few years older than her.

Between the tan and the filth, though he could have been from anywhere from twenty to forty and passed as anything but Soninke. I'd expected a Named of his bent to be athletic, but instead he was built like a bear: tall and broad-framed but undeniably heavyset. His clothes were thick leather, save for the fur boots and the beautiful hood he always kept up: lined in ermine and made of fox, it was beautifully sown and it seemed a waste it would be pressed up against long matted brown hair. A long knife and a hatchet at his side, the man might have passed for a warrior of some sort if not for the most eye-catching thing about him: the two great falcons seated on his shoulders, watching me with unnatural poise.

"Beastmaster," I greeted him, turning and betraying no hint of surprise at his sudden presence.

"Black Queen," the man rasped out. "I have found you a quarry."

My eyes narrowed. I'd not expected there to truly be one born from this crisis, as we'd been swift in crushing it. It was worrying it had anyway, even though I'd known the possibility was there. Events were quickening at brisker a pace than even our worst predictions.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"He," the Beastmaster said. "East."

"Where east?" I impatiently said.

"It will be easy to find," the Beastmaster replied, hacking out a laugh. "It is the only village on fire."

Shit, I thought. Couldn't I, just the once, get an easy Named to bring into the fold?

J

Shit, I thought. Couldn't I, just the once, get an easy commenter to bring into the vote? <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

asdagadsasd

Keep up the reminders good people of the remind squad, let not the naysayers dissuade you!

Annoyed about Voting Comments

Feel free too, I will continue to scroll past all the same. Sometimes it is a shame though, often I won't be able to find where the comment thread ends to actually discuss the damn story. Maybe there could be an option to collapse the comment? Or it could just be a tag at the bottom of the post?

caoimhinh

Fire always calls for Cat. Hahahaha

Miles

Surely they won't blame her for this one. It's not even green.

Decius

Yet

[boballab](#)

Depends if there is any goats near by.

NerfContessa

Indeed.

Didn't she take the tyrants mount back? :p

Shikkarasu

I find your lack of faith disturbing.

caoimhinh

"And in the middle of the war against the Hidden Horror, this guy appears. He became a Named and set a village on fire. What did the Black Queen do? Recruit him, of course! Coincidence? I don't think so!"

-Extract from "Is the Black Queen a Pyromaniac?", heated debate in the Temple of Manifold Truths, Atalante. Infamously known for coincidentally taking place right before a city fire.

Clinton Orebajo

That had me, I'm totally done!

NerfContessa

Oh my, you did it.

I laughed far too loud for the time of day...

Thank you.

NerfContessa

Wait, 2.YEARS,....

I hate completely. Silent time skips.

Insanenoodlyguy

That was just twisting the knife but then I wasn't Razin's mother. I had absolutely no interest in caring for his bruises, be they on his skin or his pride.

"The Volignac companies are already back at camp, last I heard," I casually said. "Because they saw no need to play around with

corpses, they're having first crack at the vote rations that just got shipped in from Topwebfictionon."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Annoyedaboutvoting

Yay a second vote thread, in case we hadn't scrolled past the first

Insanenoodlyguy

I love your name.

[tkjarrah](#)

interesting... ngl this timeskip feels a lot longer than three months, in terms of changes and developments, so when cat said they'd been fighting the dead king's forces for nigh on two years i almost thought that meant that we'd skipped forward two years and had a small heart attack

[tkjarrah](#)

also cat's only 23? i thought she was like 26 ish now geez, she's not wrong about how old she seems

[Liliet](#)

Let's play "count the time passing"!

Catherine was **eighteen** during the spring/summer campaign of Book 3. Then the next winter was the one where the heroes came and tried to kill her en masse while Callow rebuilt, and the very next spring was the Crusade's invasion. Black was sitting at Vales that whole time for the exact reason it was about to happen, he didn't spend over a year idle. Also, see again: the one, specific, rebuilding and heroes winter. This makes Catherine **nineteen** for the time period before the following winter, which is one within which she and Malicia bargained with the Dead King, whereupon she came to Everdark. In Everdark we have our next concrete time marker, because she asserts she is **not twenty-one yet**. Unless an additional year passed, she has to be no more than twenty, but it technically fits.

This is where the true fuckery starts, though, because we have a concrete marker of one (1) winter of fighting Keter so far: the one titular in Hanno's extra chapters. Book 5 was during that winter.

This is the spring directly after that winter – months of the truce plus the mentioned half a month on campaign. Technically you can tack on more time because it's not specified how long it took between the end of the truce and

the arrival of reinforcements in the Prologue, although that makes it incredibly questionable why the fuck it's still spring – the weather was getting spring-y in southern Procer at least three and a half months ago. I suppose we can imagine southern Procer gets spring in no more than a month after the winter solistice, which would give us an additional approximate one and a half months before the end of calendar spring. Assuming seasons last three months in Guideverse, which at this point I'm no longer willing to just assume lmao

All of that said, for Catherine to be twenty-three now, considering the concrete age marker during Book 3, it would have had to be **approximately three years**. She would have to have taken THREE YEARS to get to the campaign since the truce ended.

Yeah, I. I have nothing.

Or, alternatively, seasons could come less frequently than once per year in Guideverse. Maybe erratic's taking a page out of Discworld's book or ASOIAF's book. **Maybe it took over two years-as-counted-in-universe for Catherine to gather her army in Everdark and get through the Iserran campaign until the Prince's Graveyard whereupon the truce started.**

That was one LONG winter.

[Liliet](#)

P.S. the "three" and "two and a half" years calculations also assume that somehow it took **a year and a half between the start of the Crusade and mid-Everdark.**

caoimhinh

Another consideration:

Cat was **15 years** old at the beginning of Book 1, so to get to the age of 18 by Book 3, at least 2 years and a couple months should have passed, yet Book 1 was only like 3 months, right? I don't think 2 years passed across Book 2. I believe it was a year and a half, tops.

Crash

Nah, I think this is an interpretation problem with the "not yet 2 years of fighting in this chapter".

The way this was written implies that we time skipped after the prologue.

Now, the concret time marker of the everdark is neat for us. Not yet 21, okay. Written like this, I'm prone to believing she didn't just get to 20, she simply hasn't

gotten to 21 yet. So let's take the medium spot and assume she is 20 years and 6 months old, or around that marker.

Now, we get some interludes telling us Cat has spent the better part of a year away, and when she returns she likes to use that phrasing when referring to the time spent so far. Which makes me think that as of her return, past the Everdark, we have "not yet 21" + "the better part of a year" which, I think we can take to mean she got to 21 now. So let's assume that at the meetings in Salia she is indeed 21.

Okay, now we got the 3 months of truce plus give or take a few weeks and that leads us to the prologue where the armies walk out of the Twilight Ways.

In this chapter, we become aware of yet another timeskip which is the "not yet 2 years of fighting the Dead." Thus neatly getting us to Cat's 23 years of age if put together to the 3 months of truce and the unspecified amount of time spent in the Prince's Graveyard and return from the Everdark debacle.

Additionally, this explains how Beastmaster could be here at all since presumably Indrani would have had to fetch him and she has said before that he is not always guaranteed to be at Refuge.

caoimhinh

Well, she *could* have been 18 during the Fae Campaign and be 19 by the time of the Crusade's attack (depends on when exactly is Cat's birthday or how she is marking the time. We have seen some characters, like a Lycaonese girl in an interlude, count their age by the number of Winters they have lived).

By my count, Cat was 20 when she went to the Ever Dark, and they spent somewhere between 6 months and 10 months there. Although Cat counts that as a whole year on more than one occasion, with expressions like "one year ago" and "last year".

She should, nevertheless, be between 21 and 22 right now, not 23.

[Liliet](#)

Latest timeline updates, as of recent dedicated archeology work.

(Format note: I know Guideverse uses different months. Since we never got a full calendar, I'm going with our months instead. Just assume 'that 1/3rd of the season')

Catherine's birthday is in late May.
Book 1 begins in mid-May: late enough for Catherine to call it 'summer' when complaining about the heat, early enough that there's still at least a week before her birthday.

The Liesse Rebellion starts in approximately February. Summerholm's in April and Marchford's in May; approximately a month passes between Killian and Cat hooking up post-Summerholm and Three Hills. In Marchford it is STILL SPRING yet Catherine is ALREADY SEVENTEEN.

(This is how we know her birthday. As of Interlude: Precipitation, according to Amadeus, she "has been at this for two years"; Precipitation is in summer after Triumph, which is next spring after that; that makes a full two years and change.)

Catherine returns from Everdark in late winter / early spring before her 19th birthday.

The exact next turn of winter to spring is the Northern Crusade, Catherine is 19 at the time and turns 20 later in spring (either right before the journey to Keter or during it). She is 20 throughout Everdark, which lasts until winter that year, and Book 5, which ends at the end of the same winter.

The projected end of truce with the Dead King is at around the same time as her birthday; she joins the fight soon after (but with enough delay that Otto has time to despair).

Then there's a two year timeskip (repeatedly confirmed in text as two years specifically), and currently is late May/early June: Catherine's birthday has already happened, but the weather is still that of springtime (unpleasantly wet) (it makes sense for spring to be late in the north, which is where they are) and it has not yet been two years since Catherine's forces entered the fray against the Dead King.

Catherine is 23.

caoimhin

Yep, that matches with the age I had of Catherine being 21. Then this timeskip happened (which I do not like), but yeah. She is 23. It was the weird 2-year skip what threw most of us off.

P.S: So far it's been detrimental, in my opinion. Important things of the current plot got stagnated (like the war, where they haven't advanced the Proceran front lines in 2 whole years, despite the combined efforts of most of the continent) while a bunch of background stuff moved without actually having an impact except as supportive or secondary plot whose real meaningful repercussions will be felt just now. There were a lot of characters' personal affairs reaching a climax before the timeskip (Indrani's trauma with death, Masego's answer to her feelings, Catherine's promised talk with the Woe, the initial interactions of Heroes and Villains allying, Malicia's reaction to Amadeus's continuous rebellion, etc) and that was just skipped, and now we will have to learn about it inside one of Cat's mental musings instead of actually watching it happen; all this, just to gain the ability to pull things out of a hat and say "this was built during the past 2 years". I think it was a bad choice.

Liliet

I would argue that the timeskip was the best solution actually. I think Erratic came up with the timeline of events – how this war develops – first, THEN decided how to cover them in the actual book.

I would not have minded getting detailed and extensive endless serial of daily life during this war up to now, yes, I love slice of life. But that's what it would have been – a whole lot of routine and construction (like the industrial novels of the soviet times, which I adore shamelessly), approximately no actual plot.

Erratic chose to skip forward to when the plot picks up the pace again, and I honestly support that decision.

Masego and Indrani weren't going to NOT get along; I'm glad Erratic chose not to milk that for drama and instead skipped forward to a nice cozy status quo. (I wonder if they actually talked. I bet they didn't tbh, Masego wouldn't realize something is non-obvious and Indrani's still skittish)

The talk with the WoE? When was that promised and about what?

Malicia's reaction is absolutely going to come up yet. We don't even know what it will be T0. I mean, we got her initial reaction, what more was there to see up till now?

Indrani's trauma with death was I think quite thoroughly finished and packed away during the Twilight arc. Any immediate further development would be fairly artificial and forced imho.

At the end of Book 5, I was confused about what was going to happen next, and almost wasn't looking forward to Book 6, except in the most abstract sense: things just seemed... finished. All the plot threads packed away, character relationships covered, even heroic reactions to Catherine encompassed in between Antigone, Hanno and Tariq – in the interlude where we got Hanno's POV on the way to the trial town, the reaction after he got hurt, and Tariq's POV in the Epilogue. It was all just... covered. Complete. It was slice of life steady whirr going forward, unless something went seriously wrong, and...

Well, I'm really glad nothing went seriously wrong???

And I expect GREAT things out of the Amadeus situation. Whatever the fuck it actually is 0.0

caoimhinh

I disagree.

Why do people keep saying that if we hadn't gotten the 2-year timeskip we would have gotten a bunch of boring daily life chapters? We have NEVER had one of those, the closest were those chapters where Catherine had conversations with Akua, and those were deemed "character development". We always just get glimpses of their duties and daily lives only as a passing matter while they are carrying a greater purpose.

This whole series of books has always used *short* timeskips to move forward without wasting time in meaningless things while focusing on the developments of the plot, but always showing us the causes and effects of things. For example, we always skipped the time of travel until something interesting happen during the trip. When Cat orders something done, constructed or prepared, we don't see the process of it being done, BUT we do see what made Cat reach that point, her mental process for deciding to order it, and we actually see her making the order. Even when the thing was something secret, we still got to know *something* was being done. Never was it done as with the Arsenal now.

Imagine what it would have been like if we had never seen Cat carrying her dark staff, seen her putting Night in there, or Kairos mentioning it, and then

Catherine had suddenly pulled that sword out of her Night and killed the Saint of Swords with it. Bad, right?

Now, we wouldn't have been shown the construction of the Arsenal day-by-day, nor the organization of the Belfry and the Workshop and their menial task, that's absurd, what makes you think that?

Have we ever been shown the Sappers working on their new siege engines, or the Legionaries while they are building the palisades for a fight? Are we shown their sparring session and their drills? No, but we know those things happen because we are shown when the orders are given and a glimpse from the distance as they are being done and the story follows Catherine while she does other things and orders more to be done.

And the construction of the Arsenal was not the only thing happening, they were in the middle of a war suffering casualties, not calmly sight-seeing. There were lots of hard battles, in some of them they even lost Named, so it's not like there wasn't any action to show.

We should have seen the first battles of the Allied counterattack after Callow and the Drow joined, the casualties and setbacks suffered, the realization that they needed more than just numbers and strength to beat the Army of Keter, ordering the construction of the Arsenal, facing the Heroes as allies for the first time, the reactions of the Heroes having to work with Villains, the first internal conflicts between Heroes and Villains, the first assassination attempts and Cat's realization that hard measures had to be taken, etc.

And so many more things that happened during that 2-year timeskip that are just now mentioned as passing thoughts. That's not a slice of life, nor boring daily menial tasks, that's the plot!

This, though... it is just *wrong*.

Because this timeskip didn't advance what was necessary and skipped what we needed to see. Timeskips are useful for giving the characters time to prepare for a challenge, yeah. But you don't make a timeskip in the middle of a war and then say "2 years have passed, we haven't advanced at all. But fear not! For with this new thing that wasn't mentioned before the timeskip and was developed during it, we will finally be able to advance!" No, that's just... no.

The talk with the Woe?

Catherine promised Hakram that she would sit with him and the rest of the Woe to explain what had happened in the Ever Dark, what had changed about her, her deal with Sve Noc, the new situation with Akua, and also for Cat to know what had happened with the others during her absence. Plus pretty much just getting a get-together moment after all the mess they had been living. That was either **skipped** or never happened.

Malicia's reaction ALREADY HAPPENED BECAUSE IT WAS 2 YEARS AGO. The Legions of Terror reaction to both Malicia's mind control and Amadeus declared rebellion was also skipped. There's been a civil war in Praes for 2 years, do you think nothing relevant or worthy of being shown in a chapter has happened? Not to mention the whole mess with the Goblin Federation and the traitorous High Lady Abreha. All that was **skipped**.

"Indrani's trauma with death was I think quite thoroughly finished and packed away during the Twilight arc."

Not at all. In fact, Catherine strongly got the feeling that such a thing would only be worse after Indrani's actual death. She had constantly been saying that she would speak with Indrani when they got the time for it, and now 2 years have passed, completely disregarding that bit of personal matter.

"At the end of Book 5, I was confused about what was going to happen next, and almost wasn't looking forward to Book 6, except in the most abstract sense: things just seemed... finished. All the plot threads packed away, character relationships covered, even heroic reactions to Catherine"

Not really.

Hanno, Tariq, and Antigone are among the most well-behaved Heroes. They have great self-control (though we have seen they are all capable of great destruction and death). Their reactions are important, but far from the only ones that would happen among the Heroes when they learned they had to work side by side with Villains. Even then, those were the initial reactions to meeting them, that's a whole different thing to having to actually spend time with someone. Meeting someone in a business reunion is not the same as working in the same office as them or sharing an apartment with them. Hugely different things.

The plot threads were pretty much open, as I pointed out before, because there was A LOT of things happening in the personal life of the characters besides the big plot: Hanno had to learn to live with the Seraphim being silent; Masego and Indrani were supposed to have a personal talk about their feelings (I highly doubt Indrani is still skittish about it after 2 years, as you suggested); Pilgrim had to clear his name from doubts about him being partial towards -or being influenced by- the Black Queen; those are just the big ones. 2 years have passed, people keep living, which means they interact with others, relationships are formed and ended, people *grow and mature*, every single relevant character still alive is continuing their life in ways we don't know, and every single one of them is facing the horrors of the undead army of Keter, which means a good portion of them is traumatized now or dealing with it in some way, which is a thing that affects the army at large and has to be dealt with by the leaders.

All of this was just... **skipped**. And we will just learn of the aftermath and conclusions of all this, instead of seeing it develop.

Also, the current of events was moving EVERYWHERE, not just in the North of Procer.

Praes had a civil war brewing with many factions involved; Procer was dealing with unrest, political reorganization after the attempted Coup, refugees and hunger; the Dwarves were expanding in the lands of the Ever Dark and making commercial deals with the Grand Alliance, while watching for the moment to join the military offensive; Callow apparently had to deal with civil unrest after Akua's revelation; the League of Free Cities is at war, with General Basilia maybe on her way to become new Tyrant of Helike; and who knows what else was happening that will be revealed as just another afterthought in one of Catherine's musings.

Not to mention that apparently both Catherine and Amadeus have been Claimants for over 2 years without making the transition.

[Liliet](#)

> We should have seen the first battles of the Allied counterattack after Callow and the Drow joined, the casualties and setbacks suffered, the realization that they needed more than just numbers

and strength to beat the Army of Keter, ordering the construction of the Arsenal

You think they didn't immediately during first strategic planning realize they needed the Arsenal?

Some things just... don't need drama.

> facing the Heroes as allies for the first time, the reactions of the Heroes having to work with Villains, the first internal conflicts between Heroes and Villains, the first assassination attempts and Cat's realization that hard measures had to be taken, etc.

But nothing much changed – we get all the same dynamics now! We're not missing anything.

> The talk with the Woe?

> Catherine promised Hakram that she would sit with him and the rest of the Woe to explain what had happened in the Ever Dark, what had changed about her, her deal with Sve Noc, the new situation with Akua, and also for Cat to know what had happened with the others during her absence. Plus pretty much just getting a get-together moment after all the mess they had been living. That was either skipped or never happened.

Look, I like recap chapters too. But most people actually don't, so uh no I don't blame Erratic for this)=

> The Legions of Terror reaction to both Malicia's mind control and Amadeus declared rebellion was also skipped.

Most of the reaction will still be ongoing now. I do not consider a chapter with a no-name character's perspective on an antagonist's actions to be particularly valuable no.

> Hanno had to learn to live with the Seraphim being silent; Masego and Indrani were supposed to have a personal talk about their feelings (I highly doubt Indrani is still skittish about it after 2 years, as you suggested); Pilgrim had to clear his name from doubts about him being partial towards - or being influenced by- the Black Queen;

We are still getting answers to all of those, in person.

> All of this was just... skipped. And we will just learn of the aftermath and conclusions of all this, instead of seeing it develop.

Yep!

'Slice of life' is not an insult. I love slice of life. It covers the exact kind of thing you're talking about.

It's not the genre that PGTE is.

> Praes had a civil war brewing with many factions involved; Procer was dealing with unrest, political reorganization after the attempted Coup, refugees and hunger; the Dwarves were expanding in the lands of the Ever Dark and making commercial deals with the Grand Alliance, while watching for the moment to join the military offensive; Callow apparently had to deal with civil unrest after Akua's revelation; the League of Free Cities is at war, with General Basilia maybe on her way to become new Tyrant of Helike; and who knows what else was happening that will be revealed as just another afterthought in one of Catherine's musings.

Yep, and all of these things are not our main plot!

I have had an allergy to "side character #14 is not getting the spotlight they deserve" since late homestuck discourse. There are many stories to tell in the world for sure; the specific book is telling THIS ONE. The rest is what fanfiction is for.

> Not to mention that apparently both Catherine and Amadeus have been Claimants for over 2 years without making the transition.

Yep, and I expect that to *pay off*.

(I never did like the idea of Amadeus becoming DE. The fact that that's not what happened so far fills me with unholy glee)

WealthyAardvark

Cat might be counting the years she accrued while aging the Saint of Swords to death.

Oh shit timeskip

I'm pretty sure we did skip forward almost two years. She was barely 21 last book, right?

[Adrian_V](#)

Good question, but i doubt they could be at war for 2 years and survive, or at least without pushing and reclaiming more territory.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I don't think so, I think it's just half a month compared to the Prologue, as evidenced in this line:

[the aristocrat seemed to make it a point of pride to remain nobly groomed even when *out on campaign as we'd been for **half a month now.***]

The part of "almost two years now" probably refers to the amount of time that has passed since the start of the Dead King invasion.

Otherwise, it seems weird that they are barely starting to adjust the war doctrine and improvising after 2 whole years with the armies still learning to cooperate, while being still in the outermost territories taken by the Dead King (Northern Brabant and Southern Hainaut).

Besides the attitude Cat shows over Razin and Aquiline shows that they are still getting used to being supervised by her, and the conversations also show that they are just getting started with the advancements.

Crash

I personally took this 1 month of campaign to be referring to this specific spot they're fighting at instead of the full time elapsed in the Dead King campaign simply because the wording didn't make sense otherwise

Althought I am catching up now so hopefully the timeline is back to making sense on the next few chapters.

caoimhinh

Also, notice how Catherine was explaining the troops from Tartessos and Malaga to Captain Leisberg, how they fight and why they wear leather armor instead of steel. Something that would not happen if Captain Leisberg had been familiar with them. Considering Leisberg is one of the members of Klaus's personal team, if they had been fighting together for nearly 2 years then she would be familiar with the Dominion's troops sent to their front by now.

This time skip is of only about half a month, and the timeskip between last book's Epilogue and this book's Prologue being close to two months.

[Liliet](#)

See my comment above. The timeline nonsensicality is WILD.

Miles

A void demon is eating the years

JJR

Those are purely theoretical constructs. No one has ever observed a Demon of Absence or left records of them, so clearly they don't actually exist.

=P

konstantinvoncarstein

Yeah, it's probably only a bad choice of words from EE

[testalacon2017](#)

There is another timeskip between prologue and chapter 1, two years this time

burguulkodar

No, there is not.

Aston Whiteman

Thanks EE. Great writings.

ruduen

I'd still bet that Cat's birds would have a larger impact than a couple of falcons.

Gunslinger

Is that a two year timeskip? Not complaining, definitely smooths things out in terms of packing.

It also looks like the war against the dead king will be the backdrop for a while as Cat deals with other issues. Again, really promising stuff.

burguulkodar

No timeskip but 2 months since book 5 and half-month from prologue.

Grug

Interesting indeed. Have we ever seen this Beastmaster character before? I don't seem to recall him.

caoimhinh

He's one of the Named disciples of Ranger (5 in total if I recall correctly).

Indrani mentioned him way back in Book 2, during their first encounter with a Demon.

caoimhinh

Correction: Indrani mentioned him in Book 4 Chapter 24: Invitation (Redux), when they were considering options of allies for Callow, right before they decided to go to Keter.

"I could go to Refuge," Archer offered. "Most pupils will be gone, especially the heroes – last I heard Silver signed up with the White Knight – but there's bound to be one or two left I can beat into joining. Lady Ranger probably won't care enough to get involved."

I worried my lip with my teeth.

"Even by gate, it'd take most entire preparation time to get there and back," I finally said. "I wouldn't sneer at more Named, but I doubt they'll be enough to turn the tide unless some real powerhouses have been keeping quiet."

Sir Banana Hammock

I'm so hyped for this new book, any ideas on what Cat's Name is going to be?

caoimhinh

It could be anything at this point, honestly.

Most of the fandom is supporting either the Name of Dread Empress or a brand new Name related to being a Guide. I'm one of the latter, but it could be anything, Tariq mentioned a Name starting to take shape in the end of last book, but that was at Catherine's statement of "I will get the east in order the hard way." if Praes sallies forth against them, yet it could still come to nothing, like what happened with the Name of Black Queen, even if the Name takes shape and presents itself, it can still be refused or the process interrupted (like Cordelia and the Name of Warden of the West).

That said, EE has made a point through the last couple of books that having Catherine as a Named in all but name is kind of the thing now.

[TeK](#)

He kinda made a point that Names are not necessarily the best outcome.

caoimhinh

Yeah, kind of.

I mean, for all that talk about not having a Name meaning you have “no strings attached”, Catherine pretty much still lives and acts the way a Named does.

She is still personally and directly affected by stories, which forces her to think in those terms if she wants to win and outright survive even when having a conversation with a Hero; she still gets into Patterns of Three with Heroes; can be part of a Band of Five; Callow as a whole is still tied to her by Story, and the Heroes still see her as a Villain.

There hasn't been much difference except that she no longer has the boost of strength and agelessness of Villains, and even then Cat found a way to circumvent that by having a Fae Title and now being First Under the Night. She has periods now, though.

The only supposed advantage was that the Intercessor couldn't get to her directly and influence her the way she does to other Named, yet we already saw that such is not exactly the case, as we have seen the Bard appear and talk to others so long as there's another Named present, and Cat's mere mention of the Wandering Bard was enough to get her caught in a Time Bubble for a private chat with the Intercessor.

So what exactly is the difference?

Even her approach of “without Named rulers, countries won't have to fight each other for their battles” that's still what happens with Nameless rulers, Named simply have more personal involvement in such things. As long as rulers exist there will be whole countries affected by their decisions and armies dying when fighting their battles.

So it kind of defeats the purpose of avoiding a Name if she still is pretty much a Named, just without the official tag. And the rest of Calernia doesn't care either, they still treat her as if she had a Name.

[TeK](#)

I think she trailblazing the precedent of participating in the Plot without having a Name. Because everything you said is true. She is as important as a Named, and

yet has no Name. So what sets her apart from "common folk"?

hakureireimu

I've been predicting Arch Villain.

[Javvies](#)

Cat's working out a Mom-mode for wrangling Razin and Aquiline. Though Razin has disappointed me with this dueling nonsense. I thought he'd learned better.

Yes, the Lycaonese are going to be way more practical and pragmatic when it comes to warfighting than Levantines. The Levantines are all glory hounds first. Even the smarter ones.

'Ladi Williams

I suspect he's trying to gather rep from his soldiers by showing no fear...due to his young age.

Jacob McNeer

He's learned not to enter into honor duels against allies, he still needs to learn that they aren't a very good idea against enemies either.

Aston Whiteman

Hope Hanno and Cat become lovers.

Killian is way gone..

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah, i bet they won't even realize they are a couple until later, like they both know its a trope and try to avoid it but it just happens xD

Djd

I suppose the joke about how a guy and girl only need to be in the same room for people to start shipping them applies here.

Agent J

Guy and Girl? In the same room? Do you think my shipping so feeble a thing it requires such senseless limitations?

I happily ship Indrani x Agnes, thank you very much. We all know the Augur is a sweet and kindly girl that needs a bit of wildness in her life. Someone to playfully pester her out of her shell.

[TeK](#)

I mean as long as you keep to an animated objects it's not going overboard.

Agent J

Ah, a new challenge. I shall endeavour to overcome this as well.

JJR

Ahh, that's an easy one though! Who doesn't ship Saint with Sword?

[Adrian_V](#)

Ok i need to know how they managed to get the Beastmaster to come, it seems a lot happened between books, last i remember Idrani dismissed him because he wouldn't want to help them or something, although i wouldn't be surprised if The Raned ordered those in refuge to help, or maybe the prospect of this war was enough to entice him to come out? I mean many people have mentioned how this whole business would make the old monster come out and all (monster being people/beings with power).

Also what is the Workshop?

caoimhinh

Indrani said Beastmaster wouldn't help Callow fight against the Crusaders, fighting against the Dead King is a different matter.

As for the two organizations named this chapter with only the barest of context, I would say the Belfry is the group of Priests and the Workshop the unified mage/alchemist troop of the Grand Alliance. That's my hypothesis, anyway.

erebus42

If she ends up surviving this story, Cat should really consider becoming the principal at the Academy of Cardinal. It sounded like she was five minutes away from giving those two detention.

[MurkyTruths](#)

Avengers: The dead King

grzecho2222

I don't feel so good, mr Tarik.

[TeK](#)

"I am the king of Death. I come." is a pretty badass way of saying "I am inevitable"

caoimhinh

Also because Amadeus already got a phrase like that when he said "This is inevitability" to the Chancellor and the Court of Praes at the start of the Whore's War.

"This is treason," the man screamed.

"This is inevitability," Amadeus replied.

Some of the crowd rose. Swords were unsheathed, incantations whispered. It would be for naught.

"Some of you," the Black Knight said, "will fight this. Will cling to the old order, futile as it may be. For you I come bearing the word of the Empress."

He grinned, wide and sharp and vicious.

"Tremble, o ye mighty, for a new age is upon you."

Valkyria

Ah, only one chapter in and already something's on fire. How nostalgic.

Tom

She needs to go to make sure she gets credit for it

DoOd

"Hakram, you magnificent gossipy prince, make sure Everybody knows who started that fire before I'm anywhere close."

Hitogami

I've missed Cat's sarcasm and fire... 😊
Thanks for the chapter

Wonder

I can only imagine the Workshop will turn into the R&D department for the academy .

I also spotted this typos

the Bind that'd let the pack. " led"

by one of mine of the Tyrant's but instead by the Lord of Alava.
"or the tyrant's"

Exec

Great chapter, good to be back!
TYPO THREAD:

the side of skirmish
– the* skirmish

one of mine of the Tyrant's
– or* the tyrant's

had slowed to a half,
– halt*

could afford toss a fifty thousand
– to* toss
– unnecessary 'a'?

had ever willing let
– willingly*

emerged form the wilds
– from*

[TeK](#)

I applaud you for your valiant, albeit useless efforts.

WealthyAardvark

More typos

whistles where sounded
-> whistles were sounded

looking, tough, I noted
-> looking, though, I noted

that'd let the pack
-> that'd led the pack

Isaac Martinez

Is Cat counting on the years she used to kill The Saint?

Isaac Martinez

How old is Cat now?

Onos

Depends. If the years from her not-a-sword count (I think 11?) she's 34. If the 2ish years she spent as Winter don't count she's either 21 or 32. She's probably also spent long enough in Arcadia or thereabouts to throw things off slightly between her physical and chronological birthdays, but I wouldn't imagine by terribly much yet.

She did note that her not-a-sword didn't seem to affect her so hopefully we get an Interlude with someone musing on her age/appearance soon.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, everyone outside herself are counting years strictly by the calendar, and Cat knows that. So from their point of view, she's 23, no matter whether she *looks* like a 20-year-old (most likely) or a 30-year-old.

'Ladi Williams

What does he mean by a "quarry" in this case?

The way Cat thot about it. Seems it's a major issue...

Fayhem

Basically, the war against the dead has started popping up new Named and the Beastmaster has been scouting out when they show up so they can be properly incorporated into the war effort. He just reported that he found one to Cat, and she's mad because the new Named she has to go recruit into the army already sounds like a pain who will probably start fires she'll get blamed for.

ninegardens

To me it sounded like someone has recently come into a name, and Cat is planning to go recruit them.

caoimhinh

And that would also mean the guy is most likely a Villain. A Hero coming to his Name during the war on Keter would need no encouragement to join their campaign against the Dead King.

Fayhem

Well, they wouldn't need any encouragement to fight the Dead King. Doing so as part of an organized campaign where they take orders from other people (where leadership's a mix of

Heroes, Villains, and non-Named to boot) is where it tends to get sticky with Named.

ActionKermit

Here we go, Cat's now fighting her way through a zombie infested bog just like she did when she got her first Name!

[Liliet](#)

> sometimes I felt more like tired old Klaus Papenheim than the woman of twenty-three I truly was.

I'm sorry, when exactly did MORE THAN TWO YEARS manage to pass since the moment in Everdark when Catherine wasn't twenty-one yet?

Wasn't it a single winter, and then three more months?

[TeK](#)

I am confused about the timeline and her age since she was sixteen.

Daniel E

Something occurred to me upon the introduction of Beast Master here (not counting the 1-line mention from way back). Every single Villain we have seen thus far has been a main character, or otherwise directly affiliated with one, whereas random Heroes are popping up all over the place. Are there no minor Villains in the realm? I imagine there have to be at least a few people who get their powers from the Gods Below, but simply aren't in the spotlight. Like a Villain equivalent of Painted Knife and all the other newbies from Camps.

Kini

I think it's more an artifact of Cat not really paying attention to any villains that aren't her direct peers/rivals than anything else

[Dresden 67](#)

The Ghastly Marauder and an unspecified villain sorceress were mentioned by the Pilgrim and Black during 'Peers'.

Apparently the Marauder refused to get involved in the war out of fear of the Saint, while the sorceress was killed by the Tyrant; purely because it amused him.

Daniel E

Good catch. Though that is still quite a disparity in numbers.

Fayhem

It's been brought up in canon that Saint and Pilgrim between them were doing to villains in the rest of Calernia what Black and the Calamities were doing to heroes in Callow. I.e., snuffing them out pretty damn quick.

[Hydrargentium](#)

One might think that Praes would produce a decent share of villains, but it may very well be that Black dealt with most of those to prevent challenges to his order, the same way that he and Wakesa both challenged their predecessors. It may also be that the Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, has such a strong hold of the goings-on inside her empire that few even get the chance to become Named in the first place – the noble mentioned in the last Epilogue who had been “only a few moves away from becoming Chancellor”, being a possible example of that, if we assume that Chancellor is a Name.

Hg

Fayhem

Well, Praes did produce a decent share of villains – the Calamities. All the traditional Praes Names (bar Chancellor ofc) were already represented – Black Knight, Dread Empress, Warlock – with a handful of supporting Names as well, meaning Captain, Assassin, and Scribe. And good ol' Heiress, tho she obv was not part of that power structure.

I don't get the sense that individual nations tend to produce huge number of Named, at least at any single point in time – the Crusade only managed to scrape so many together by adding up practically the whole continent outside of Callow + Praes. With so many casualties in the Calamities it seems possible there could be new claimants to those Names in Praes now though, which could be interesting.

All that said, it is also true that being Named and unaligned with the existing power structure/regime might not be... **amazing** for long-term health in Praes. So that's a fair point as well.

seven cats

It took me a couple of weeks, but I caught up just in time for the last book! 😊

[TeK](#)

Shit, when you said “longer chapters”, you were not fucking around.

[5th Holy Sheeprabbit, Kilimanjaro Estelion Sharlulu Asheel
Vinchance Celenalia di ef Falufiluu'Luufilaafée \(The 35th\) da ne!](#)

Wait, Cat is 23 now?

Chapter 2: Enlistment

“My lords and ladies, have I not always been a firm believer in second chances?”

– Dread Empress Malevolent II, announcing her second (and penultimate) invasion of Callow

This would be the fifth one I brought in, so to speak.

The first time I’d come across a new Named was maybe two weeks after the first proper battle that’d followed Callow entering the war, which one of my own soldiers had jauntily named the ‘Scrap at the Gap’ only to see the quip tumble down into the pages of history. It’d been our first use of a pharos device, and the proliferation of gates out of the Twilight Ways had allowed us to take the dead flatfooted. The soldiers under Volignac and Papenheim had rallied with burning rage in their bellies, and we’d turned the chase around on Keter: we’d forced the dead to retreat and even dented the Grey Legion.

At the time we’d believed we could reclaim all of Hainaut if we struck out aggressively enough, so we’d concentrated on reclaiming the roads and strongholds of the western region of principality: the aim had been to establish a solid defensive line all the way to the border with Cleves and after solidifying root out the dead as we moved north in a Hainaut-wide curtain. No one had expected there to be anything still living in the region, for Keter had had the run of it for months, which was why when the Tartessos scouts had begun finding the remains of small undead raiding packs we’d expected a monster and not a half-feral woman in her seventies.

The Stained Sister had shattered Hakram's shoulder and nearly blinded him when we'd gone out to find what might be lurking in the hills. She'd been one of Hanno's, not mine, for even three days buried up to her neck in the corpses of everyone she'd ever known had not been enough to break her faith in Above. She'd listened anyway, when I laid down the law as it had been agreed on: so long as Named were willing to take up arms against Keter, they would fall under the aegis of the Truce and Terms.

Amnesty was offered to all willing to join the war against extinction, and peace would be kept between villains and heroes until the Dead King was no more. For those who were sworn to Above, the White Knight stood as representative in councils and first among equals. For those that dwelled in Below's shadow, the same duties fell to me. It was a simple enough arrangement, in principle. In practice it'd been as about as horribly complex and strenuous a state of affairs as I'd expected it to be, and it'd been a very long time since I was last called an optimist.

I'd picked up two more during our offensive to take back the capital late last summer, the two of them pretty middling villains – one lowlife gambler who'd managed to survive by stealing other people's luck and using it to avoid and escape the dead, the other a hedge mage who'd slit open her own brother's throat to fuel an enchantment that made her invisible to Dead King's armies but was now beset by his furious shade. Half-starved and almost pathetically grateful to be given shelter, the two of them had accepted the Truce and Terms without batting an eye. Unsurprisingly, getting them to toe the line afterwards had been more difficult.

The Pilfering Dicer now had nine fingers to illustrate the point that stealing the luck of my soldiers wasn't something you could talk your way out of, but at least I'd pawned off the mage to Indrani for her roving band and gotten only praise about her since. The Dicer I'd sent instead to the First Prince, as his talents were best suited for the sort of battles she was fighting on our behalf. The fourth had been both the easiest and the worst, in some ways, for though he'd come to me instead of the other way around it would be very much a delusion to claim I had any sort of *control* over the Beastmaster.

As I could not help but be reminded when the man opened his eyes, breathing out deeply.

"There are still a few," Beastmaster said. "Three or four. Less than earlier."

I looked at the great blaze across the half-dug dry moat and grimaced. It was rather surprised anyone but the fresh Named was still living.

"And you didn't consider helping them flee when you first noticed?" I replied, tone curt.

"And risk the ire of a green Named who could already do *this*?" Beastmaster snorted, gesturing towards the village.

The falcon that'd flown over the nameless village returned to its master's shoulder, undisturbed at having leant him its eyes while it was still up there. The Named at my side might not be anywhere as proficient a combatant as someone like Indrani or Hanno, but his talents were surprisingly broad in application and it'd be a rough affair to put him down if it came to that: I'd seen some of the creatures the Beastmaster used as mounts, and none of them were beasts to take lightly even without a rider on their back. More than anything else the man had proved his worth as eyes up in the sky even in regions where scrying might be disrupted, as was becoming increasingly common. His stable of birds of prey currently had a better record at tracking people than our sorcery, since even young Names could sometimes disrupt scrying ritual. There was a reason I kept the man close, and it wasn't his charm or sunny disposition.

"If he meant to kill them, they'd already be," I said, tone grown sharp.

Matted hair pressed against the side of his eyebrow, thick with filth, the man shrugged apathetically. I wasn't sure whether Beastmaster had been born a prick or he'd been taught the ancient ways of prickery by one of the finest practitioners of the art alive – the Ranger herself – but his utter unwillingness to risk so much as the tip of his toe for another's sake had a way of raising my hackles. Even when Indrani had been fresh out of Refuge and the Lady's tutelage she'd not been this... savagely unconcerned with everything that went on around her.

"Fine," I said. "Tell my knights where the survivors are, they'll help them out. Where's the boy?"

"The House of Light," Beastmaster said.

If this was going to be one of the religious ones, I really hoped it'd made it this far north that the Salian Conclave had struck down its decree naming me the Arch-heretic of the East. If I was lucky, they might even have heard that instead the Dead King had been proclaimed Arch-heretic Eternal. *Lucky, huh. That'd be the fucking day.* I whistled loudly, Grandmaster Talbot riding up without missing a beat or betraying irritation at the somewhat undignified summons.

"Beastmaster had eyes on survivors," I told the knight. "Have some your people get them out. Our healers are fresh?"

"Good as, my liege," Brandon Talbot replied. "Though I'll caution once more they are not the finest of that trade."

Yeah, the House Insurgent did tend to have that little defect. You couldn't learn to burn with Light without missing out on the deeper secrets of healing, apparently. The Grey Pilgrim had once told me it was more a consequence of mindset than a hard limit of ability, but then there was no one alive who could use Light the way Tariq Fleetfoot did – not even Hanno, who had the shade of near every dead hero up in the library shelves of his head.

"Have them do what they can," I grimly said.

Burns were nasty way to go.

"I'll be seeing to the hero," I added a moment later. "Hurry with the survivors, Talbot."

The man nodded, and after a nod to the Beastmaster – who bothered himself to return it, though seemingly with great effort – I rode out. This place must have been a nice little village, once upon a time. How many people had lived here? One hundred, two hundred? Couldn't be more than that. There was rarely such a thing as a proper street in places like this, even a dirt one, and this village was no exception. There were a tighter cluster of once-thatched houses now blazing up trails of smoke surrounding what might have once been a village market, but aside from that houses and shops had been raised rather haphazardly. They were scarcer on the outskirts, with the house nearest to the unfinished ditch standing entirely alone.

Zombie did not even need to jump over the trench, as a quick walk around the edge of what had been dug accomplished the same result rather less dramatically. It'd been poor sense, trying to dig a dry moat in so wide a circle. The villagers would have done better trying the same further in, or better yet raising a palisade instead. There was no way the work could have been finished in time to repel the dead, not with the numbers they had. What I'd been looking for was a mere three steps away from the edge of the finished ditch, slumped and still. I slowed my mount, frowning as I leant down to turn the corpse with the tip of my staff. At first glance the killing looked like it'd been done with Light, a hole torn right through the chest of the still-living woman, but the edges were too blackened. Charred.

Light was cleaner than this when used on living people, even those corrupted by curses and sorcery. Light and fire threaded together? Unusual. I would have thought someone more prone into coming a Name apt to wielding that if they'd been forged from a great fire, not the *source* of one. Hooves sounded against the ground behind me, a belated escort of knights. It was still a reflex for me to argue against the necessity of one, but there'd been twenty-three different assassination attempts against me in

the last year. Few had even come close, but I'd been taught the virtues of having eyes other than mine and armoured bodies in the way of harm.

"I'll be entering the House alone," I spoke without turning. "I'll not have numbers spooking our friend."

"If you so order, my queen," Grandmaster Talbot replied, the genteel disapproval in his tone clear.

I rolled my eyes. If the boy who'd done this still had fighting on his mind it was a lot more likely I'd end up protecting my escort than the other way around. I let the body I'd been examining slump back against the ground and spurred Zombie onwards. We passed through the outskirts briskly, though I slowed once more to verify the sort of injuries on other corpses were the same as the first before heading deeper in. Towards what should have been the market, as well as the small dirt path beyond it and led to the sole building in the village that was tall stone with a tiled slate roof: the House of Light. There the Named would be waiting, I knew, though I would not cross the threshold before figuring out exactly what it was I was dealing with here. Whether the boy was a hero, a villain or of those whose Role tread that narrow path where circumstance could cast you as either did not matter so much as the fact that he'd seemingly butchered an entire village.

If he was a hero, as the use of Light to kill would imply, he was unlikely to be the kind I got along with.

We closed in on the market, where the roar of the flames was almost deafening. Wary of entering the central grounds, where heat had hardened and cracked the muddy grounds, I led Zombie into lingering at the edge of the circle in one of the larger gaps. There'd been an inn among the lot of them, I noted, though it was hard to tell exactly how large it'd once been. It'd been hit hardest of all the village: the walls had been torn through with great blasts of Light, then the ceiling had fallen and caught fire. Even that rubble, though, was not enough to hide the sheer number of corpses there'd been inside. Those the flames had not yet devoured were close to the door, some even just out into the 'street'. They, I saw, had been hit in the back. The Grandmaster of the Order of the Broken Bells caught up to me as I sat studying the burning inn, face betraying utter disgust what he beheld.

"Gods," Brandon Talbot rasped out. "Even the children."

Only one of those was untouched by flame, pale brown hair fanning her face like a veil but doing nothing to hide the black-rimmed hole that'd torn through the middle of her back. There were bones I could see in the embers and flame, though, that even blackened

could not be mistaken for those of a grown man. And yet. Gods, and yet.

"Do you still remember that skirmish just a week away from the capital, last summer?" I quietly said. "What happened to that company of Volignac outriders, when they found that little village tucked away in the reeds."

"The dead wearing the guises of children," the bearded knight said, tone sickened. "I'd heard. I do not blame them for fleeing, Your Majesty. I am not certain if I could have done it myself, striking down infants with knight's steel."

And so Neshamah's abominations would have torn you down from your horse and clawed out your throat, I thought, the way they did too many of those honourable outriders. Honour has no place on this field. Not against the kind of foe we face. My voice came out cool, a warning under the swirling columns of smoke.

"This is not a war, Brandon Talbot, where hurried judgements thrive. Do not forget that."

Yet sometimes I wondered if that was not Below's game, lurking behind everything else. Even if we won against Keter what kind of creatures would we have become when we emerged from the crucible? Already I'd grown wary of castigating the slaughter of children without knowing more of how it'd come to be, and we'd yet to even step into the Dead King's lands. There was an old saying about the dangers of looking into the abyss that most peoples of Calernia held some form or another of. It'd been taught to me at the orphanage as 'beware of matching horror's eyes, lest it gaze back into yours', one of those Old Miezian sentences turned into proverbs only nobles and priests ever seemed to quote. The thing, though, was that horror wasn't sickness. It wasn't something that tainted you from watching it or fighting it, like ink or filth or oil.

Horror, horror was a *pit*.

It was a deep dark hole the world pushed you into, remorseless. Sometimes the only way through was to wade through the deeps of it, do whatever it took, and there lay the trouble: even if you got to climb out, after, who you'd been in that pit would never leave you. Gods, it'd be reassuring if it was a taint that'd made the decision for you, but it wasn't. Not really. It was just you, when you were scared and cold and desperate and *didn't want to die*. That tended to be an uglier sight than devils, in my experience. Nowadays Calernia was being dragged into the pit, one inch after another, and there were nights where that thought kept me from sleeping. Lessons learned in the deeps of pit were long in being unlearned, if they ever were at all. What kind of a world was it, that Cordelia Hasenbach and I would end up raising out of the ashes of the old?

"I sometimes wonder if even heroes are worth it," Grandmaster Talbot softly said, "if they must always be born of such grief."

"Men murder men," I said. "They rob and cheat and lie. From all I know we've done so since the First Dawn and will keep on doing it until the Last Dusk. Don't blame the blade for the heat of the forge, Talbot."

I bared my teeth.

"Blame the fucker who lit the furnace."

Though in this case, I thought, the two might just be the same. My gaze had moved on from the inn, swept across the rest of this would-be marketplace, and a story had unfolded before my eyes. It'd begun with the inn. There had been a gathering there, with perhaps as many as a hundred packed tight inside. The Named had let loose his power, moved to violence by something, and then the nightmare had begun. The villagers had been packed too tightly: panic and stampede began to kill them just as much as the power unleashed. The place had caught fire, smoke and heat further stirring the pot, and even as some tried to escape through the back the Named had left by the front to strike down the few that'd successfully escaped. The relief inside was short-lived, as the roof collapsed not long after.

From there, the tale grew murkier. I'd wager that the noise and escapees had moved those few villagers with a weapon to try to kill the Named, and he'd reacted... harshly. I'd yet to catch sight of him going for anything but a killing blow. From there it looked like the boy had swept through the village, heading to wherever he saw movement and killing until there was no one left save for a handful of hidden survivors. He'd then limped back to the House of Light, either exhausted or wounded or both. I breathed out, almost comforted by what I'd grasped. I was not dealing with coldblooded thrill-killer or a broken bird grown dragon's claws: wildly wandering around striking down those who moved in a panic was a mark of lapsed control. Lack of premeditation, too.

This was too much fear and too much power, not the first atrocity of a great monster in the making.

"You seem grieved, my queen," the knight quietly said, voice almost drowned out by the blaze.

"Better it had been a monster, Talbot," I tiredly said. "One of those I would have been able to use without guilt."

Zombie pulled ahead, answering my mood before my knee gave the order. The breeze shifted: like raking claws, threads of smoke were blown across our path. We rode through and broke the ghostly shackles, flanked by the unforgiving blaze on both sides as my

mount's hooves broke the hardened mud beneath them. And then, quick as a stolen kiss, the heat and smoke were gone. We tread then the path to the House of Light, where flame had not reached. Yet blood had, for it was smeared over the wooden door left slightly ajar. I dismounted smoothly, though not so smoothly that I did not hiss in pain when my bad leg touched the ground, and lay a light slap against Zombie's rump. She left to wander, gait unhurried, and a last look over my shoulder quelled any thought my knights might have held of following me inside. The Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, leaning on my staff of yew as I limped forward, I cracked the door open just enough to slip in and entered the temple.

There was a skylight. That was the first thing I noticed. Though a village like this was too poor to afford glass windows and so the walls had been full stone, a clever trick of architecture had allowed for the making of a skylight in what I'd taken to be just a lightly angled roof. And it had been cleverly done, too, as it was carved to allow for the sun's journey through the day. The stone floor had been painted with scenes from the Book of All Things and different times of the day would see light fall on different parts. It had been most ingeniously built, for a temple in the middle of nowhere. Procerans: so much to hold in contempt, so much to admire. Light fell from above on the painted scene of Gods in black and white standing on both sides of the wan silhouette of a woman, theirs hands held out. A choice offered.

The drying trail of blood that'd trickled down all the way to the woman was one of those vicious little ironies Creation was so fond of offering.

My staff struck the floor as I limped up, sounding obscenely loud in the silence of this place. At my sides roughly hewn benches, some of which had been toppled by struggle or negligence, only made it more palpable how *empty* the House was. At the very back, behind the painted scenes and the light, two bodies lay slumped. One was that of a priest, still clad in his pale robes. He was dead, a long cut-like wound opened from one shoulder to the opposite hip – and though it still bled blood, all the way to the painted stone, the outer edges of it were charred. Eyes wide open and unseeing of the sun pouring through the skylight, the back of his head lay against the altar he'd once tended to. Against the other side of the altar, bloodied and burned, lay the young boy who'd butchered more than a hundred souls beyond the gates of this place.

His face was a charred ruin. Stories, when they spoke of burns at all, delighted in telling of villains whose burn scars were disfiguring marks warning of wickedness. In a few there was even shoddy symbolism attempted: a face half-burned, the duality of a man's soul, Good and Evil at war. The boy's face just looked like someone had held it down against a fucking fire, and there was

nothing elegant or symbolic about that. It was just pain and ugliness and pus, having devoured an uneven two-thirds of the face of a kid who couldn't be more sixteen. It'd taken an eye with it, or close enough, as it had grown a clouded grey instead of whatever colour it'd once held. On the right side, on the part left untouched by fire, a lone blue eye and closely cut black hair were almost incongruously healthy compared to the rest of the young Named.

The boy wore a leather jerkin and woolen trousers, both so worn as to be near rags, and his shoes were little more than leather strips wrapped around a flat wooden sole. The wound I'd suspected he might have proved to be a knife slash on his leg, though not near anything that'd kill him. It'd still gone untreated and soaked the wool red. Not that infection was likely to kill him, now that he was Named. It was exhaustion, pain and horror keeping him down.

"Are you to be my punishment?" the boy rasped out. "I have sinned and do not deny it."

Gods, I thought, stricken. He sounded so very resigned.

"Have you?" I said, making myself sound only mildly interested. "Tell me about it."

"I am-"

"That is yet to be determined," I mildly said, cutting in. "Tell me about the killings."

The Alamans boy – and he must be that, for his accent in Chantant had that lakeside twang to it – forced himself to focus. His blue eye fluttered and the cloudy one turned to me as well, some thought returning to the gaze. He watched me and I returned the look, leaning on my dead staff of yew.

"You are not," the Named said, "an angel."

My answering smile was thin and sharp.

"Not," I agreed, "in any sense of the word."

"Who are you, then?" the boy rasped out.

"The judge, child," I said. "And if comes to that, the other two as well."

The Named laughed, though the convulsion twisted him in pain.

"A fitting end," he said. "I took their lives, stranger. I blinded and burned until nothing was left. How do you judge *that*?"

"Sloppy," I said, tone cool. "The inn was the correct place to begin, but to let loose while you were still inside? Sloppy is almost too kind a word. Packed that tight, all it took was a stroke of luck and any one of them might have caved your head in. You should have left, barred the doors and only then started the flames."

The boy's face twisted with rage at my indifference.

"I couldn't know if they were all-"

He stopped, biting his tongue. *Ah*, I thought. *There it is*. He'd wanted me to splatter him across the stones, justice swiftly done and harshly meted. But there'd been something more about this, a part still obscured. And where gentleness would unearth nothing this wounded child wanted buried, calculated callousness might just bait it out.

"You're not from here, are you?" I mused. "You've got that lakeside twang, like you're always chewing. It's a long way south, for a boy of no great means."

Lack of boots meant his family had never been even remotely wealthy. Refugee, it had me guessing. From one of the later waves, long after soldiery had ceased escorting civilians south.

"What does it matter?" the boy asked.

"Means either you came with someone," I said, "or you were capable of making it alone."

"Did you not see my work outside, stranger?" the Named mocked.

Confirmed, then, that the power wielded there was something he'd had for some time.

"I saw your convulsing terror burned across a few hundred people," I agreed. "So what is it that had you so scared, boy?"

The Named grit his teeth.

"I am-"

"Meat, until I deem it otherwise," I interrupted once more, tone gone cold. "So speak, *boy*."

I saw anger, in eyes both blue and clouded, and anger was an anchor. I knew that as bone deep as I knew my limp and the sound Liesse had made when it broke. It would keep him grounded in the here and now, at least long enough for our talk.

"It was too late," he snarled. "The disease was in them, same as it was in Maman. And I told them, told them I could see it and

they needed to send for a *real* priest, but they just wouldn't *listen-*"

His mouth closed with a snap.

"I do not beg for my life," the boy said. "I do not quibble nor defend."

And it fell into place, just like that. The ditch begun but abandoned, the way so many of them had been gathered in the same place.

"They were going to leave," I said.

I saw I had the right of it in the boy's eyes, even if he denied me an answer. A makeshift caravan of some sort, most likely, headed further south for one of the great refugee camps. When I'd last gotten a report on the seeded plague from the Grey Pilgrim, he'd mentioned his worry that there might yet be carriers in who the disease would be sleeping. Lying in wait. He'd caught the infiltrators headed for Brabant himself, but not even heroes could be everywhere. If the boy was right and the villagers had slipped further south without being caught? Thousands dead, should we be *lucky*. And we'd be putting out that fire for months instead of heading north as we needed to, losing a good chunk of the war season. *This might not be the only village where it was attempted*, I thought. *If it was attempted all*, I also considered, *and the boy did not simply go mad with enough will it became... more.*

I'd need Akua to study the bodies as well few survivors we'd pulled out. More than that, if this was the plan within the Dead King's plan then I needed to put out a warning there might be other villages like this out there. Villages that'd not had the mixed of luck of being stumbled upon by a Named.

"I couldn't let them," the boy said. "And they weren't real miracles, I know the priests said so, but they *worked*."

My gaze moved to the priest, dead and cold, the wound that was bloody but hardly mortal. If you could heal, anyway, use the Light. The boy was no natural wielder of Light, I realized, smiled upon by the Heavens and bestowed some manner of searing holy flame. But he did have a power he'd been born with. An eye for recognizing a magically seeded disease, the ability to wield highly concentrated light and flame in short bursts while losing control of it upon release? Those were the marks of a wild talent, a born mage. And one of great power, to have torn through a village while so unschooled. *How badly you must have wanted to be anything but a mage*, I thought, *for the only magic you ever used to be such a close mimicry of the Light*. It was heartbreaking. That he'd been warped into this, that he'd been broken after even that and then forced to look a truth in the

eye: he had the power to fight back against horror, just this once.

So long as he was willing to make a horror of his own.

"It was," I mused, "an easy mistake to make."

The blue eye fixed me with burning contempt.

"It was not," the boy replied. "And so mistake is either too feeble a word, or entirely mistaken."

"I was speaking," I replied, "of the mistake I made. I came in here, you see, expecting you to be one of Hanno's."

The Saint of Swords come again, my mind whispered. Necessity that bleeds the grip, the hard deed that keeps the night at bay. The bottom of my staff whispered against the stone as I limped forward and the young Named tensed, though truth be told he'd be too exhausted to put up a fight if taking his life was my intent. Instead, leaning against the yew I knelt in front of him – and, miracles of miracles, the pain in my leg was barely a whisper. Meeting the mismatched gaze, the clouded eye and burning blue, I reached out and gently tipped up his chin.

"My mistake," I quietly repeated. "No, from the beginning you were one of mine."

The gentleness, I thought, was what unmade him. A shiver went through his frame, turning into a tortured convulsion and only then a ragged sob tore its way out of his throat.

"I'm a monster," the boy wept. "Gods forgive, oh Gods forgive me."

My hand went down to his shoulder, comforting.

"Of course you are," I gently said. "That's what makes you one of mine. We're the wicked ones, you see."

"I don't want to be wicked," he rasped. "I just- I just couldn't..."

"We never can," I softly told him. "That's how we end up wicked, I think. Because we can't stand to be good, if it also means we must *let it go*."

"I didn't want to kill them," the boy whispered, "but what else could I do? If I'd had the Light, the real one, I could have healed them. Helped them. Instead..."

I drew back my hand and leaned on the yew I'd received in the depths of Liesse, born anew under twilit sky. I rose, the light

behind me drawing the eye to the snaking crimson blood of the dead priest on painted stone. *You are a child*, I thought.

"That is not the gift you were given," I said.

"My gift is death," he spat.

"Aye," I said. "So it is. Either accept that truth or die under the weight of your utter inconsequence."

The boy-Named flinched. He had, perhaps, expected comfort. Maybe a better woman would have offered it.

"The corpses smouldering outside were good, as much as most people are ever good," I said. "What do you think sets you apart from them?"

"Death," he said.

"Will," I corrected. "The belief, deep down, that you know what is right and you'll see it done."

He hesitated.

"It is the mark of Named," I said. "And why, even now, some part of you wonders – wasn't I *right*? Didn't it *need* to be done?"

"Did it?" the boy asked, prayed, pleaded.

You are a child, I thought once more, almost ashamed.

"What's your Name?" I asked.

"I am Tan- no, that is not the sort of name you meant at all, is it?" the boy whispered.

His fingers clenched.

"I am the Scorched Apostate," the boy said.

I nodded in approval.

"Come along, then," I said. "You have much to learn, and this war won't fight itself."

I did not wait for an answer, simply turning around and limping away without once looking back. One, two, three heartbeats: the Scorched Apostate dragged himself up to his feet and followed behind me, quickening his steps to catch up. *You are a child*, I thought once more. *But we're in the pit, now, and if Keter is to fall then this is the least of the horrors I'll need to stomach.*

We left the House of Light to its dead priest.

Neither of us looked back.

Big Brother

New Named! NEW NAMED! Huzzah, a new Villain!

[Liliet](#)

New coming of the Saint of Swords, Cat said. Granted he's not wielding Light, but neither was Saint.

I think everyone in-universe is growing increasingly confused about what villains even are, if this one's pegged as one.

Indignantpup

A hero would have been given the tools needed for the situation or possibly just tool, a Villain can and will lose. A hero might have saved them, but a villain can only make a large loss into a smaller one.

Darkening

I'm pretty sure she was saying that she'd *thought* he was another in the mold of the Saint, but then she realized he was a villain, not a hero.

[Mammon](#)

Or maybe he really was a new Saint, and she cleverly nope'd that with a few Story strings tugged and the Narrative subtly diverted to turn this would-be Grim Hero that would become a new Saint into a Villain instead to avoid that hassle.

medailyfun

One can do something like this before the Name was gained, not after

Ahad Mahmood

Whilst you can't change them immediately, Vivian and Indrani had semi heroic names. Vivian specifically was clearly a hero and whilst her journey with Cat eventually led to her relinquishing her name, such a journey could equally have led into a different name etc.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except Viv didn't lose her name when she first signed up with Cat... not until she turned to administration and diplomacy, and stopped being a Thief.

[Mammon](#)

Shrödingers Cat. If he previously said his Name and no one relevant is around to hear it, did the fallen Hero really make a sound? Before a Named or otherwise relevant Role observes and concludes whether he's a Hero or Villain, perhaps he's both and neither at the same time. Perhaps Cat didn't allow him to say his Name before twisting the Narrative in the right way, because with all who knew his Name being dead or irrelevant what he is wasn't yet defined until she'd define it.

[onedollargum](#)

With that eye and the way he convulsed I thought he was the second coming of the Tyrant.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, just an echo. Tyrant told her the "villain because they do what must be done as others flinch" was a groove she was carving into the world, and that it would spawn consequences. How fitting the first such one cat sees echos Kairos in the eyes as much as the ears

Nuke_The_Earth

I like that, it was poetic.

flashburn283

Nah, not inconvenient or annoying enough to be the next Tyrant.

Akuabestgurl

I'm pretty sure she's thinking that SHE's the new saint of swords. Having to do horrible things to keep the world turning

[crysjal](#)

The difference between the two was never an idea of good or bad, though it came to appear to be that eventually due to the effect of the Narrative. Good was about faith, trust and accepting the will of the Gods Above and obeying their mandates. Evil was about free will and choice. This named had will, he made a judgement and exercised his will by his own choice. That's what made him a Villain.

hakureireimu

But WTF is the even will of the Gods Above in this case? How do you know he's not fulfilling them?

Chancellor

The Name he took was the Scorched Apostate. The definition of Apostate is "a person who renounces a religious or political belief or principle."

He wanted an actual priest who could use Light to show up and went to the local House of Light for help but the priest there was a fake, which is why he stabbed him and told the fake priest to heal himself. Everything we know about the Apostate so far is that he wanted to be able to use Light to heal more than anything but instead he was born with the Gift. He had the gift for a while but instead of using it, he sought Light to cure this illness. Up until he learned that the town was going to go elsewhere and spread this sickness. The will of the Gods Above can be seen in the lack of both the fake priest and the Scorched Apostate ability to use the Light to heal. And Scorched took his name from renouncing the idea that the Gods Above will provide and taking matters into his own scorched hands.

[Mammon](#)

Did he have a will, or did Cat phrase it as such? As she was likely the first relevant and surviving to hear his Name, what he was, a Hero or Villain, might've been undefined. She might've taken this clear providence from Above to land a Hero here to stop the plague and birth a new Saint, and after the act of providence was done nope'd him telling her his Name until she changed the narrative of their conversation to make him a Villain instead. Being one that threads the line, the power of such a powerful and defining Name* like Cat to be his mentor could've been a big if not sole decision of what he'd truly be.

*I know her being Named is still a point of contest and yet to be re-Named.

[crysja1](#)

The difference is that he didn't ask for help. It wasn't that he didn't know what to do, he knew what he needed to do and acted on the choice put to him regardless of how horrible it may have been. He didn't decide that a higher power should make the call for him such as the old woman Hero mentioned earlier in the chapter, he made the

decision on his own. That's the whole point of what below endorses.

I feel you're trying to read too deeply into Cat being able to read and manipulate the Narrative here. You're also assuming Cat wouldn't want a new Saint, a monster to throw at the Dead King. She seemed pretty upset that this was ultimately just a kid she'd have to train up and involve in this whole affair.

Josh

A sense of right and wrong is in a very literal sense in this universe, a higher power. Most of the heroes we've seen came from a place of defiance to what is for what could be, and only after the initial act do the Gods take notice and make a bid for the person. I could easily see this going the other way and the kid receiving a bid from Contrition and him latching on in an attempt to justify his actions to himself. Its the same putch Cat gave, but instead of at the end mentioning that he should live with who he is, its he should live with being who he needs to be.

The second point is that he didn't ask for help before he made his choice, but he was begging for help and a reason to justify what he did afterward from Cat. Like in the everdark I think it was when Akua and Cat were talking and Akua said something along the lines of "that's who you are." And Cat reflected that asking Akua who she is would be giving Akua hella power over herself to define whatever she wanted.

Also I think it's significant that it's only after he mentions his name did he "leave the house of light to its dead priest" as an apostate. Beforehand he was begging for forgiveness at the altar of the gods that he supposedly already abandoned? That doesn't make much sense to me.

At the same time though, Cat mentioning that he was always one of hers seems an odd way of manipulating him into a Villian. She coulda said that solely for the sake of the kid and lied through her teeth, but I don't imagine that if she did have the ability to shape a new Named that she really needed to lie to him about that. Could have skipped that part and went directly into helping him come to terms with his atrocity.

But I'm pretty convinced right now that the commertors are right that she did something to shape the kid into being evil.

Hell, I was going to end this on a bad pun about her being a "guide to evil" for this kid, but can't find the exact words.

Liliet

"The difference between the two was never an idea of good or bad"

WOG says otherwise.

The issue is that what the Gods are like doesn't map directly onto what their followers are like, only vaguely corresponds through arcane criteria.

Tenthyr

He was willing to murder a village because he knew what the plague would do if unchecked. Cat and the Saint are two sides of the same coin: Cat does the horror because she wants to make a better world, Saint because there is no compromise with the Enemy.

It it wasn't obvious, the reason Cathrine hated the Saint so easy is because she saw herself.

Mental Mouse

Note that Pilgrim himself murdered a village....

Unoriginal

I always felt that the comparison between Tariq and Catherine was much more compelling. In another time-line Catherine could have easily been blessed by the choir of mercy. She acts towards the perceived benefit of many at the expense of the few, oftentimes sacrificing or risking on a personal level to see it through. In many ways the Pilgrim who's primary goal is to reduce the amount of suffering in the system and works under the same paradigm. Sacrifice the few for the many, no hesitation in regards to personal sacrifice or suffering.

jamesc9

It took me two more episodes to work out what I think that the good plan was.

I don't think that he had the credibility to achieve it, but here goes. They agree to stay together, and keep others with them who accidentally join. He goes ahead to warn the refugee camp, so that they have a welcoming party of actually effective healers.

Yes, it's brittle as anything. Would anyone like to turn it into a reliable plan?

Dr.D

From the very start, some of the earliest discussions Cat had with Black centered around whether Heros and Villains really correlated to Right and Wrong, or even Good and Evil. Black argued that a Villain could do just as much Right (practically) as those claiming to be a Heros, and that a Hero could do just as Wrong while claiming to be Good, and everyone on that dubious "Good" side would just nod along in agreement purely because of their Name being Good or Evil. The fact is that often times the Hero's actions have cost more lives, and caused more suffering than the Villain's – in reality, some Hero's actions were Wrong.

The Pilgrim's creation of a plague that killed an entire lakeside coastline to capture Black come to mind. He might have done it for with Good reasons, yet no one debated tat what he did was Wrong. Cat never worshipped any God's and yet apparently the gods below bestowed her with an Evil Name, and yet all she ever wanted was Good for others, right from day one.

So much of what Black did was to make things better for people of Calernia (as he saw it) and he actively pushed Cat to take it further. He knew he was limited and trained Cat to break the story, to push the boundaries of her Name, of what it meant to be a Villain, to make things better for others, to be a Good Villain; to be practically Evil not for Evils sake, but to do Right and to not let people suffer needlessly (unless they were nobles!).

The crusade is a good example. Cat was finally getting things better for people, the first prince selfishly decides it would be good for her politically to start a crusade, screw all the people in Callow, and every Hero jumps on the bandwagon, even while knowing this whole thing, including Cat being made the arch heretic was for Wrong reasons that to my mind that smell decidedly of... Evil.

Good does not necessarily mean Right, and Evil does not always mean Wrong.

I know I'd rather see things put right even if the reasoning behind it is a little "ends justify the means" like Cat's.

But yeah, b

Black and Cat are an exception to the rule. Most Villains are Evil for Evils sake, as Akua springs to mind.

Javvies

Eh, to be fair, the domestic political advantages Cordelia thought a Crusade would generate weren't the only reason she wanted a Crusade.

As I understand it, she wanted a Crusade to liberate Callow from Praes, knock Praes down for a while, and restore Callow as a buffer state against Praes ... which would allow everyone else to go after the Dead King. That is, Cordelia's endgame

when it came to the Crusade was going after the Dead King with as much of Calernia united in that goal as possible while not needing to worry about the Dread Empire or other Evil-aligned nations.

So, I probably wouldn't hammer Cordelia too harshly over wanting a Crusade – just about how she went about it.

stevenneiman

Distinctions I've seen:

Heroes: serve something greater, with the authority to decide right and wrong.

Villains: know what they think should be, and let any who disagree try to stop them

Heroes: Triumph in the pivotal moment.

Villains: hold unbeatable power until the pivotal moment, and if they're lucky achieve their aims even after the inevitable defeat

Heroes: Have the power to do what needs done

Villains: Do what needs done to have the power

Heroes: Conquer their flaws before conquering the challenges before them

Villains: revel in their flaws, or hone them into weapons.

Heroes: Lean into stories, knowing that the proper story can carry them through any hardship

Villains: Twist stories to their favor, hoping to turn what should doom them into a sort of salvation.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for posting these distinctions. Although I could quibble here and there, what you've written captures the broad essence of the difference.

[spamdesu](#)

Right now it looks like he might be best served with having some time with masego, given how he still is the most learned Mage-Scholar of Calernia.

Knowledge in Aboves and Belows Working could really help the Apostate get control a bit more

Shikkarasu

And maybe even learn more of the Light, since Zeze was able to craft Miracles without being a priest. They have very different reasons for it, but Scorch and Hierophant have similar goals.

Ahad Mahmood

Just because he follows Cat doesn't automatically make him a villain. I believe that he attempts to serve above but may eventually become adrift.

NerfContessa

And another deep, grimly focused look on the horror that is calernia.

Amazing writing.

[roseocean2012](#)

Nice entrance, new kid.

Par

Well, hot damn

[onedollargum](#)

Heated Damned indeed.

[tkjarrah](#)

oh huh so it **was** a two year timeskip after all. that's. hm. ill wait a bit longer to see how that shakes out

[amit27592](#)

Wait..Two year timeskip? How do you know? Did I miss something somewhere?

Ahad Mahmood

Whilst you can't change them immediately, Vivian and Indrani had semi heroic names. Vivian specifically was clearly a hero and whilst her journey with Cat eventually led to her relinquishing her name, such a journey could equally have led into a different name etc.

Ahad Mahmood

Wait how does one delete a comment, this is wrongly placed here

Isi Arnott-Campbell

You can't. Inconvenient, I know.

Insanenoodlyguy

what in the text makes you think that's now established as the case?

Zarquon

23 assassinations in the last year.

Insanenoodlyguy

That means nothing. It specifically said most of them hadn't come close. This is background stuff. She didn't say "My last year out here in the field" or anything. She's probably counting a lot of attempts that the Jack's found and dealt with in their infancies.

[Liliet](#)

With the new (old) timeline evidence rounded up on discord, it turns out erratic WAS keeping track of the timeline/Cat's age the whole time. So if she said she was 23 last chapter, it's worth assuming she IS 23, and there's been... a three year time skip. Because in the spring of the truce, she was 20.

And because the truce started at the end of winter, lasted three months, and now's spring, it couldn't have been less than a year. "Last summer" speaks to that, too.

[tkjarrah](#)

ooh interesting
any chance of getting a link to said evidence? not doubting, just curious

[Liliet](#)

One day... One day.

Insanenoodlyguy

... yeah okay, you got me there. It's been nearly 2 years.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. And her birthday is in late May.

zenanii

"I'd picked up two more during our offensive to take back the capital late last summer"

When Cat is talking about named, further supports the two year timeskip idea.

Gunslinger

Yup I didn't get where people got the 2 month number from. It seemed clear the war had been going on for a while

Cap'n Smurfy

I thought Catherine didn't want to be Queen of Winter. She keeps this up she's going to remake her Title, because that talk was Ice Cold.

RoflCat

Well, he's Scorched so clearly the way to treat him was pouring cold water over the afflicted area.

[Liliet](#)

Well, she was snapping him out of despair and self-hatred. Acupuncture.

danh3107

Welcome back Erratic, I look forward to seeing how the apostate clicks with the rest of the crew. I hope he becomes semi regular.

It's good to have you back

Arturo

Yay, a minion. The alliance is gonna crap their pants at a Black Queen 2.0

erebus42

Or dare I say a possible apprentice...? (Not necessarily with a capital A mind you, just the normal kind. One to learn your dark teachings and stand with you looking ominous.)

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, she's got a great example in Grey for this. She's going to be the type that is helpful and pop's in with advice, but does not become a permanent fixture in his life, in order to insure she doesn't doom herself with a mentor story.

[Liliet](#)

A mentor story only dooms if the new kid has the same speciality as you and is basically meant to replace you in your Role.

See also: Ranger.

g

HOW IS EVERY CHAPTER SO DARN GOOD?

erebus42

Damn...

Zggt

Yeah, named should be popping up everywhere for a huge clash of Good and Evil. Good to see Cat is on the ball in using every tool available, first of all because it's important to show she needs to do this to not lose horribly, but mostly because she's offering people what she had always wanted: a clear way to *help*. Villains can really use that.

[daegone823](#)

OMG I was wondering why more named werent popping up. Guess like a snowball they needed more time to gather.

Supper stoked to see the five new named can't wait to see these five maybe develop bands within bands.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I'm loving how Cat's just growing into this mould of a character that just mothers all the others.

Mikasi

Sudden Name Thought:

Dark Mother, maybe? I have no real evidence to back it up, literal random wild thought.

[Liliet](#)

Matron is better imho. Orphanage vibes, you know? :3

Fayhem

> Matron is better

Plus, literally every goblin would respond with I FUCKING KNEW IT.

[Liliet](#)

That is definitely a bonus.

[Liliet](#)

The Matron.

[Mammon](#)

That does fit the drow part of her current leadership as First under the Night, their leaders tend to be called Matrons too. But as I don't think Erratica puts much emphasis on that nor bases the story on D&D that much, I actually doubt Cat will become Matron as opposed to something more important to her as a main character as opposed to a support/mentor. She has been one to do things herself rather than delegate it to others, after all. Protagonist, eh?

Na

Maybe, but that's got goblin vibes in Calernia.

Akuabestgurl

She's an honorary matron with her own goblin colony already

[Liliet](#)

Cat grew up with an orphanage Matron

nick012000

Cat gets an apprentice? Neat. It looks like the mark she's carving on Creation is already bearing fruit. I wonder if he's going to get his own Band of Five, as well.

J

"My gift is [a vote](#)," he spat.

"Aye," I said. "So it is. Either accept that truth or die under the weight of your utter inconsequence."

WealthyAardvark

A belated call for voting means a belated typo thread.

not me mistaken
-> not be mistaken

all the way to the
-> all the way to the

WealthyAardvark

A few more from the same rough paragraph:

I'd need Akua to study the bodies as well few survivors we'd pulled out. More than that, if this was the plan within the Dead King's plan then I needed to put out a warning there might be other villages like this out there. Villages that'd not had the mixed of luck of being stumbled upon by a Named.

as well few survivors

like this out there

the mixed of luck

WealthyAardvark

I refreshed the page and, guided by Above, another typo lay before me.

in the deeps of pit were
-> deeps of the pit

ALazyMonster

And so the army of monsters grows one at a time, preparing to fight the end of the world.

[Mammon](#)

Unless this greater number of inexperienced and not as Story-important Named will inevitably lead to the Dead King gaining more Revenants and/or proving to be unstoppable in the second act. Nothing as dangerous for a hero and villain alike than a more powerful and beloved hero or villain with greater ties to the Story, and compared to Cat and other already defined Named either these new Named or the barely introduced Heroes under Hanno should be wary.

Decius

Gotta have secondary characters to provide the necessary narrative weight to the losses. Cat's running out of parts of herself, and she's already died so many times that it's not notable anymore.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Imagine if Cat gets turned into a Revenant near the end, but then does the same thing she did to Akua.

Shequi

"The belief, deep down, that you know what is right and you'll see it done."

Hell of a callback, Cat.

[Liliet](#)

And we continue with our confusion of what exactly a villain even *is*~

[sivarajan](#)

That isn't necessarily a sign of a (capital-v) Villain, just a Named.

[Adrian_V](#)

Queen of Lost and Found indeed.

Real interesting chapter here, i can hope they heal his burns somewhat, it could even represent him accepting what he did or something, because burns are ugly, in the sense that they could never really heal, soemtimes with pus always, etc.

And a year since the last book? at least some months since the prologue.

[Liliet](#)

The prologue was spring and now is spring again, meaning it was at least a year. More likely three, for Catherine's age to line up.

caoimhinh

Yeah, the timeline gets more confusing every chapter. Now Cat even mentioned that they made an offensive to take back the capital (of Brabant, I assume) late **last summer**, yet they are now in **spring** according to last chapter.

So apparently at least a year has passed since their counteroffensive started (A.K.A when Callow joined the war against Keter). That or there was a mistake in last chapter's mention of it being spring now...

Or EE lost sight of the timeline (during the hiatus he was working on his coming project, so this *could* happen, even if it's unlikely)and thus this confusion happened.

Either way, a clearer establishment of the timeline and exactly how much time has passed would be nice.

lennymaster

The timeline was discussed in discord and it seems Eraticerrata definitely has kept track of time.

caoimhinh

Could you share that timeline here, please? A screenshot or just a summary would be enough.

How much time has passed exactly according to the official version given by EE?

nimelennar

I doubt, with a Name like Scorched Apostate, that they can ever be healed fully.

caoimhinh

Yeah, although Names can change, so there might be hope. The scorching also doesn't need to be literal to be meaningful and effective.

A mark or scar is very likely to remain at the very least, given what we know about Names and their meaningful wounds.

Insanenoodlyguy

In some ways you want to avoid that. He will be scorched. Better to keep as much of it on the outside as he can, least the inside decide to compensate. Maybe he could get a functional eye or something, but trying to heal him completely outside of very careful situations (likely transition to another name kinds) would find him either torn up by his own "you don't deserve to look human" guilt or some helpful new personal tragedy to keep the levels even.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Unfortunately, as a Villain he's probably stuck with his disfigurement.

konstantinvoncarstein

Poor boy...

ruduen

I'm not sure if I'm anticipating or dreading the day in which the Pilfering Dicer and the Fortunate Fool are put together in the same room.

Probably dreading, given who probably has more control in that situation.

erebus42

I suppose it depends on the context. If they were apposed to eachother especially in a situation that their respective talents would lend themselves to (a game of chance for instance), you would probably get something like a game of Push from the Magicians (Books and TV series) where the laws of probability basically just start having a seizure. If they were collaborating on the other hand, you might get a situation where potentially infinite luck was shared between the two as the Dicer continously took from the Fool while the Fool's luck continously replenished itself.

RoflCat

Catherine, I don't think picking up a Named whose power is all about burning is going to help your fire-related reputation.

Decius

I don't know, I think it's going to make her fire-related reputation **better**.

It used to be that cities burned in her wake; now, they burn before she even gets there!

shadw21

City burning is now subcontracted out and I've told them not to do any city burning for the time being...

Now stop blaming me for the fires!

[Liliet](#)

Welp, this answers my question.

Catherine somehow thinks the new coming of the Saint of Swords is a villain, OR she claims a hero as one of her own ♥

caoimhinh

I think she actually meant that she had initially thought that, but then realized the boy wasn't a Hero who made hard choices, but rather a Villain with good intentions.

"...I came in here, you see, expecting you to be one of Hanno's."

The Saint of Swords come again. Necessity that bleeds the grip, the hard deed that keeps the night at bay.

hakureireimu

But what is even the difference between the 2 ?????

lennymaster

That is the question, is it not? What makes a Hero aside from Heavens approval? What marks a Villian aside a Bargain struck?

[sivarajan](#)

Heroes and Villains (capitalized) are well-defined allegiances, to Above and Below respectively. Is there a reason, other than the deliberately misleading terms, to expect them to mean something more?

RoflCat

Story-wise.

Heroes who made hard choices are rewarded/forgiven for their deeds. (see Pilgrim killing that village to capture Black)

While villains with good intentions will pretty much always end with feeling of tragedies because the result isn't something they intended and/or aimed for (heroes making hard choices aimed for those result)

See: Cat's history, or in this kid's case his self-loathing at not being able to save those people because he doesn't have the real Light to use.

Mammon

Or maybe he really was a new Saint, and she cleverly nope'd that with a few Story strings tugged and the Narrative subtly diverted to turn this would-be Grim Hero that would become a new Saint into a Villain instead to avoid that hassle.

As she was likely the first relevant and surviving person to hear his Name, what he was; a Hero or Villain, might've been undefined. It probably was providence from Above to land a Hero here to stop the plague and birth a new Saint, but with the act of providence done yet with his Name untold Cat negated this by nope'ing him telling her his Name until she changed the narrative of their conversation to make him a Villain instead. As she said before in this same chapter, some thread a thin line with but decisions and acts deciding whether they come out a Hero or Villain. With her experience, Cat might've been able to manipulate this to her advantage.

On the mage thing, this might be Shrödinger's Cat. Until someone relevant narrates it in their internal monologue, is it Light or Magic? Until Cat opened that box by making a hard all, the fire-light might've been both. We don't know how much Creation is fluent in this to allow for Providence to have it's control and power over it, or for more realistic manipulation to practically the same, so perhaps she quite literally defined what happened simply by observing it and adding her own definitions.

*I know her being Named is still a point of contest and yet to be re-Named.

Burnsy17

Creation and the Gods, crafting this Name: "Oh what a tragic life this young man will lead! Torn between duty and morality, to walk the line between cruelty and the greater good. What narrow path shall he tread between Good and Evil? And where will that path lead? To the tragedy of the fall and a just end at the point of a sword, or to the beautiful poetry of redemption in de-"

Cat: "Dibs."

Wonder

Two face is in the war!!

[sivarajan](#)

Two-Face is taken: Hanno.

Wonder

Two- face is in the war!!

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

It is sad, in a way, that Kat sees him as a boy. For he is about sixteen, or about the same age she was when Black offered her the knife only seven years ago.⁸

Darkening

Man, now I almost want the story to end with her handing someone her knife.

Decius

Blade first, in the heart, just like Black did so long ago.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh I'm 90% sure that's the last chapter of this epic series. Stories don't like repetition, but bookends, that's a different story.

superkeaton

Well, no one said playing Calernia's baby sitter would be fun, did they? Maybe Rogue or Masego can help him guide his fire.

Decius

Masego lacks the patience or tact needed to deal with such a fragile person; he'd say something because it was true and the Apostate would end up killing himself either directly or indirectly.

He needs someone who can understand what it's like being an unrepentant mass killer, and how to shape someone's psyche. And Akua is right there.

konstantinvoncarstein

You mean a repentant mass killer?

superkeaton

I suppose, but Akua tends to take more of a backline, administrative role these days. Still, it's an interaction I'd love to see happen. I'd also like him to meet White, given that he's someone Apostate so desperately wants to be like.

Darkening

Gods, I just can't get over how great EE is at setting a scene and enrapturing me. It's always incredible to see these moments, these pivots for lack of a non story word to describe them. Seeing the moments in a life that will forever shape them into something new. Whatever happens to him, the Scorched Apostate will never be the same for having met the Black Queen, and I can't wait for more.

[Mammon](#)

Five new Named have appeared.

Oh no. Five new Named have appeared. Mirror Knight, all the Heroes with their great power, the Villains joining us, and now even more Named appearing? How f*cked are we if Creation deems that much necessary for what is to come?

konstantinvoncarstein

Neshamah is not called the primordial abomination for nothing 😏

Isi Arnott-Campbell

My brain can only interpret that emoji as flirtatious. Gave me a good chuckle thinking of the Dead King that way for a moment.

konstantinvoncarstein

Lol 😂 Personnaly, I prefer Hanno 😊 (or at least how I imagine him)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Completely fair, but I've always been something of a monster-fucker.

konstantinvoncarstein

At least we can be sure he has much experience 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Very true. This gives me all kinds of terrible ideas. After all, there are works of fan fiction for this series; it's only a matter of time before one of "those" kinds of fan stories pops up... 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

Gods Below and Everburning, please save the Guide from rule 34! 😊

And Hanno can use **Recall** for more than finding new cooking recipes...

Isi Arnott-Campbell

No-one can save us from this. No protection can hold against this scourge forever. This is the true Hidden Horror our brave heroes and wily villains must unite against.

That's a good idea about Recall, though. If I ever find myself at a point in life where I'd write erotic fanfiction I'll have to remember it.

[spamdesu](#)

Reblogged this on [highpriestoffluff](#).

[Javvies](#)

The timeline is fucking weird as hell.

The Scorched Apostate. Now there's an interesting Name. And a useful fellow – especially if his knack at using the Gift to emulate Light is not a Named-trick, and is instead something that can be learned by other mages. Even if it can't be, another mage Named is going to be useful anyway.

[Dresden 67](#)

I'm betting his ability to use the Gift will always be somewhat narrow, and focused on offensive, fire based magic.

Like the Red Mage back in the Prologue of Book 4, who couldn't use any shielding spells at all.

[Javvies](#)

Whether or not he's going to be much good at defensive or utility magics is yet to be determined. However, I will note that it's indicated that he can heal people, at least of the supernatural plague, full extent of that ability is unknown.

At any rate, it's also worth keeping in mind that he has thus far been entirely untrained, and will likely receive instruction from both Akua and Masego. The insights of the Hierophant are likely to be of great value to the Scorched Apostate's emulation of Light. And the kid's abilities are only going to grow and expand.

Besides, even if the kid's greatest value is as an offensive mage asset, he's another Named Mage, and his biggest trick thus far is using his mage abilities to emulate aspects of the Light of Above. The first would be useful all by itself in any sort of war, and the second is going to be even more useful considering that they're fighting the Dead King and armies of undead.

Ultimate procrastinator

He said he couldn't heal them, and that if his magic were actual Light he could have. Maybe that's foreshadowing of him learning healing later, but between his agreement with the priest that his abilities are "not real miracles" and the aside near the beginning about priests of the House Insurgent being worse at healing as a result of learning to burn with the Light, I tend to think it's indicating that he is not a healer

Alex Straughan

So far only Heroic Names have put hard limits on magic. That seems like it might be an above thing to me. Below is more about breaking rules for power than submitting to them.

Earl of Purple

We've also seen more Heroic Mage Names than Villain Mage Names. And the Villains we've seen have all had Names that are quite broad about magic- Warlock, Apprentice, Hierophant and Diabolist are all either generalists or specialised as a personal thing, not a Name thing. Warlock was able to counter the Witch of the Woods quite effectively, and she's noted to be the most powerful Heroic Mage in the Grand Alliance. Most Heroic Mages we've seen just aren't that tier; we haven't seen any Villain Mages that haven't been that tier (except Apprentice, who had a Transitional Name).

Scorched Apostate and this unknown hedge witch haunted by her dead brother are more powerful than Killian or other un-Named mages, but aren't that tier (probably).

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

If this guy is a villain than so is Pilgrim and Saint of Swords.

NZPIEFACE

The definition of a Villain and Hero in this story hasn't been clearly stated yet. The closest we've ever got is "Which side gives you the power", but then we still get people whose Names can go either way, e.g. Thief.

konstantinvoncarstein

No. Villains receive their power from Below, Heroes from Above. The exact criteria that makes one or the other give said power is not yet understood. But SoS and the pilgrim are definitely heroes

Onos

I'm wondering if the final push comes from the nascent Named's own perception of their actions/motivations/whatever. Cat saw Heros get crushed by Black, so thought power to enact change came from Evil. Apostate is sickened by what he's done and personally sees it as Evil, whereas Pilgrim sees the necessity in such an action and deems it Good.

I would hazard that in these "borderline" cases the soul in question could reach out to either set of Gods in their defining moment, thereby setting their path. We already know that Named's own perceptions influence their appearance and the manifestation of aspects so being able to influence the nature of the source of their power doesn't seem entirely unreasonable.

Tom

Trogdor

Ardea1210

For everyone arguing about whether he is a hero or a villain, his name is the Scorched Apostate. An apostate is someone who defects, or refuses to follow a religion. Seems pretty villainous to me.

Daniel E

Ask and you shall receive, I suppose. In the previous chapter, I was musing that we had not seen any side character Villains, while random Heroes were popping out of the woodwork (sometimes literally). Starting chapter 2 and we get a couple of low-life Named. Not exactly front line material those two, but still cool. I keep reading, and think that perhaps the nature of Villains is such we simply don't get any heavy-hitters outside that generation's core group.

Cue end of chapter, and we're presented with a powerhouse of a Villain, wielding a bastardized combination of Light & Magic (poor SOB, I actually feel bad for him). So minor characters as relatively major Villains are a thing. Book 6 is shaping up to be a fun ride indeed.

Earl of Purple

Really interested in that Pilfering Dicer. He's the kind of villain that, I think, could probably escape notice pretty much indefinitely, if he played his cards right. I doubt he's the type to play cards, or be cautious, but his ability to steal luck would make him pretty hard to fight, I think. Unless you're a hero/villain capable of fighting through a bit of bad luck and still hitting somebody with good luck.

Scorched Apostate's another interesting guy; his bastardised Light- if it truly is Light, and not just particularly hot and glowy pyromancy- will be very useful, whilst simultaneously upsetting a lot of priests and true Light-using heroes.

Draconic

He forgot to ask the most important question in this situation.
"You're a monster, aren't you?"
"The very worst kind."

caoimhinh

It's because there was already no doubt about it.
Catherine stated that she was a monster too before he could even ask.

"My mistake," I quietly repeated. "No, from the beginning you were one of mine."

The gentleness, I thought, was what unmade him. A shiver went through his frame, turning into a tortured convulsion and only then a ragged sob tore its way out of his throat.

"I'm a monster," the boy wept. "Gods forgive, oh Gods forgive me."

My hand went down to his shoulder, comforting.

"Of course you are," I gently said. "That's what makes you one of mine. We're the wicked ones, you see."

"I don't want to be wicked," he rasped. "I just- I just couldn't..."

"We never can," I softly told him. "That's how we end up wicked, I think. Because we can't stand to be good, if it also means we must *let it go*."

[Draconic](#)

She only said that he is a monster, and that they are both wicked. Besides, sometimes questions need to be asked, even if you already know the answer.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I'm a bit rusty, hope this works. Also, thought I'd use the epigraph this time to see if it'd bother fewer people.

"My lords and ladies, have I not always been a firm believer in [voting](#) for A Practical Guide to Evil?"

– Dread Empress Malevolent II, announcing her second (and penultimate) [vote](#) for PGtE.

Exec

I'm not sure if it's a typo, but something about that Epigraph feels really off.

"her second invasion (and penultimate) of Callow"

Shouldn't it be "her second (and penultimate) invasion of Callow"?

epokki

thanks

MrMaturity

Heavy breathing Where is my chapter.....

Satan

A hero like Saint would have believed deep down that they were acting for the "greater good," while Scorch at best thinks he's a "lesser evil." Is it the righteousness that separates heroes and villains? The Pilgrim seems to be in between the two camps, which might explain his colour being grey instead of black or white. I suspect the Seraphim would never think of themselves as anything but Good, no matter how evil their acts.

lunt27

So I caught up to current with this series just recently. Going back to this chapter to say that this actually made me cry. Poor scorchy, I hope people write fanfics about him in the future.

Chapter 3: Standard

"The tragedy of our time, of every time, is that while there is power in knowledge there can be just as much in ignorance."
– First Princess Eugénie of Lange

I watched the Scorched Apostate sit in silence, face solemn, as the two healers from the House Insurgent finished seeing to the wound on his leg and moved to the larger task of his heavy burns. I'd had him brought away from where the last four survivors of the nameless village were being looked at by another priest. Grandmaster Talbot spoke with the priestess in question – a fair-haired Liessen girl in her late twenties – before trudging his way to me through boggy grounds. With his helmet removed, Brandon Talbot's neatness was even more apparent than usual, all the more glaring for the contrast with his worn armour. He sketched a bow and I flicked an impatient hand to tell him to cut it out. I'd made my peace with a lot of the formalities having put on a fancy hat meant for me, but they had no place out in the field.

"My queen," the knight said. "Sister Cecily says the survivors are physically healthy and without disease."

If the boy was right about the seeded plague and his eyes were sharp as I suspected they were, he might have spared them for that very reason. Or it might be he'd simply missed them before exhaustion caught up with him and he ended up retreating to the temple.

"Send a rider ahead to Lord Adjutant, informing him he is prepare a quarantined tent for them," I ordered. "Then have them sent back on some of your spare mounts, under escort."

"By your will, Your Majesty," he said, then hesitated. "Though it is unlikely they will know how to ride."

"Tie them on, if need be," I flatly said. "They're in no state to walk and I'll not have them rubbing elbows with this one."

The last two words were married to a jerky nod of the head towards the young villain I'd found.

"Agreed," Grandmaster Talbot said, tone heavy with distaste. "I'll see to it."

I let him handle the arrangements, gaze lingering on the Named. Two healers from the House Insurgent spent thirty heartbeats trying to heal the burns, but to no avail. There was less bleeding beneath the blackened skin, but no other difference to speak of. The charred ruin that'd been made of the Scorched Apostate's face was not something Light or sorcery would be able mend, I suspected. I limped up to the three of them, the two priests ending their attempts as I approached and falling into deep bows. The House Insurgent's priests always seemed to be trying to make up for the my significantly more nuanced relationship with the House Constant by open displays of esteem and allegiance, which I still wasn't quite sure how to deal with. Over my years of ruling Callow I'd had good working relationships with a few brothers and sisters of the House, but genuine *deference* from people sworn to Above was still something I struggled with.

"A gallant effort," I said, "but those are beyond Light's ability to mend."

The boy's eyes betrayed no disappointment at my words, only a sort of cynical satisfaction. He'd not believed for a moment he'd be freed from the burns.

"I can only apologize our failure," the older of the priests said, and seemed intent to continue along that line until I briskly shook my head.

"There is no need for that. It is a natural thing, and not unknown to me," I said. "I once had such a scar as well."

A long red cut that went all the way across my chest, where the Lone Swordsman had gutted me before leaving me to die.

"Once?" the boy spoke up, picking up on the implication. "No longer?"

"It took a death, but I was rid of it," I agreed. "But you're rather too young to be thinking of trifling with angels."

It'd taken snatching a resurrection from Contrition to wipe the scar away, and I was not truly certain it'd been the angelic touch and not the victory before it that'd actually done the trick there. I'd ask Tariq to have a look at the boy regardless, just in case Mercy might feel like living up to the virtue it claimed, but his Name seemed like it might just resist the change tooth and nail: he wasn't called the *Lightly Singed* Apostate.

"Thank you," I told the priests. "I would speak with him alone, if you don't mind."

Deeps bows once more, and murmurs of agreement.

"Congratulations," I told the Scorched Apostate. "You are Named, and the first of this spring to be brought into a treaty backed by almost every crown on Calernia."

He blinked with his blue eye, uncomprehending.

"There's a proper formal name for it," I idly continued, "but most of us call it the Truce and the Terms."

"A treaty about what?" the boy asked.

"Not hanging boys like you when we find them," I said.

"I'm not a boy," the boy insisted. "I'm fourteen."

I did not betray my surprise. The burns had made it hard to tell his age and he was tall for a boy of fourteen. Especially a peasant one. *Fourteen*, I thought with muted grief, *and already hundreds of corpses to your name*. There were some among the Named he'd be rubbing elbows with that would be impressed by this. They wouldn't even all be villains.

"That's the part that trips you up?" I still asked, dimly amused. "Not the hanging, being called a boy?"

"You can call me Tancred instead," the young villain said. "Or Scorched."

I did not quite have the heart to tell him no one would ever call him the latter save as mockery, though I suspected even Archer would feel a little bad about making sport of someone so painfully earnest.

"Tancred," I said, a half-hearted concession. "You are Named, and though there will be an investigation about what took place in this nameless village-"

"Marserac," the boy interrupted, tone heavy. "It is called Marserac."

I forced myself not to look at the burning wrecks in the distance behind us. Only a handful of far-flung houses would survive of what *had* been called Marserac.

"Do not interrupt me again," I said, tone calm but firm.

Tancred bit the sole part of his lip that was not a blackened ruin, looking like I'd slapped him. I made my heart ache, but it needed to be done. I was not his mother or his friend: I was his patroness, and perhaps on occasion I'd be his teacher. Boundaries needed to be set from the very beginning.

"As the Scorched Apostate, you have been approached by one of the Grand Alliance's high officers and extended the chance to sign and abide by the Truce and Terms," I said. "Though what took place in Marserac will be investigated by my people, and your claim of a seeded plague looked into, even if you are mistaken in that claim you'll still fall under the blanket amnesty that comes with agreeing to abide by the treaty."

Tancred's sole blue eye burned with indignation and he looked about to boil over, but he kept his tongue. My lips quirked in approval. Good. If he could master himself on this day, of all days, then he had some promise.

"Speak," I said.

"That's *rotten*," the Scorched Apostate burst out before I'd even finished the word. "That I'd still get away with it if I'd just-"

He shivered, and I could almost see his mind shying away from fully looking at what it was he'd done today. There would be a need to nip that habit in the bud – failing to recognize what you were was a dangerous thing, for a villain – but even now I still had enough mercy in me to leave that for another day.

"- if it'd just been slaughter for slaughter's sake," Tancred forced out, "murder for sport. That's *rotten*."

The boy hesitated.

"Sir," he hesitantly tacked on, half as a question.

"That'll do," I said. "And it's not a pretty thing, you're not wrong about that. The business of survival never is."

The indignation had yet to abate, so I flicked out a hand in permission for him to speak once more.

"They say we're winning the war, though," the Apostate said. "Last summer the Black Queen and the Iron Prince almost took back the capital in Hainaut, and since then the attack midwinter was beaten back. Why does there need to be an amnesty for villains?"

"For heroes as well," I plainly said. "We've no sole claim on bloody swords."

It was somewhat refreshing not to have been recognized, I found, but this perception that we'd achieved anything but a bloody stalemate against the Dead King – the ruling champion of wars of attrition – needed to be put to rest. This summer we might just begin turning the tide, Gods willing or out of my damned way, but the sole front that could be said to have truly gained victories until now was the Lycaonese one. Those hard fuckers up in Twilight's Pass were making all of us proud.

"There is a truce, Tancred, because that first summer offensive in Hainaut nearly lost us the war," I said, tone serious. "Because the midwinter attacks would have broken through the defensive line if the Fortunate Fool hadn't sacrificed himself to take out the Lord of Ghouls, or if the Witch of the Woods hadn't flattened one of our own fortresses with two thousand of our soldiers still in it. Because we need every Named, even the worst of them, and each one that hides from us out fear might end up raised into the Dead King's ranks instead if he gets his hands on them."

The young villain looked at me as if he'd never seen me before. My assessment had been stark, true, but I'd wager that was not the reason: I was not speaking as an officer would, but as someone who had a seat at the kind of table where there were precious few warranting one.

"So crimes committed before joining the treaty are granted amnesty, no matter how foul," I said. "Heroes and villains are to observe the peace of the Truce with each other until Keter falls, no matter past enmities. Should conflicts arise, or accusations need to be made about breaches of the Truce, they are to be brought to their representative under the Terms."

I nodded at his inquisitive look, granting leave to speak. Indignation had gutted out, looked like, as it tended to when it was cast against the abstract instead of something you could see or hear. Curiosity was more tempting a mistress than arguing with me, at least for now.

"And who are they?" the Scorched Apostate asked.

"The White Knight, for heroes," I said. "The Black Queen, for villains. Those who claim to be neither can choose who they would appeal to. A band was assembled under the Archer that has a degree of legal authority as well, but they are wanderers."

Tancred slowly nodded, seemingly not unfamiliar with the Name. Indrani's reputation had made it this far north, then. She'd be pleased to hear it, vain creature that she was.

"Under the Terms are also set out obligations that must be fulfilled to remain protected by the Truce," I continued. "I'll let you paw through the lot of them later – actually, can you read?"

Tancred looked away, then shook his head.

"Something else to see to, then," I said. "They'll be read to you in detail by a sworn representative until you can read them yourself. The crux of them is simple: follow the laws of the land and serve in the war against the Dead King. If there are lesser grievances or breaches, punishment will be meted out by your representative under the Terms."

Quite a few of the heroes had howled at that last detail, a few like the Blade of Mercy and the Blessed Artificer even threatening to walk if it was upheld, but with both the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim in my corner we'd had the clout to ram it through. Not that Tariq hadn't had his reservations, but we were all aware that precious few villains would even consider Truce if joining it meant they were under heroic jurisdiction. On my side of the deal the trouble had been making it clear to the Named that I was actually serious about enforcing the Terms. The Pilfering Dicer hadn't really believed me, and so Hakram had held out his hand on a stump as I hacked a finger off as chastisement. There'd been another sort of challenge too, unsurprisingly: two other villains had lost little time before trying to take my place as representative by force of arms.

The Barrow Sword had been pleasantly straightforward about it, telling me outright he intended to use me as a stepping stone to rise high enough he could bargain with the Dominion to be named as the founder of a line of Blood. He'd just as straightforwardly submitted when I'd struck him hard enough with Night to blast him through two carts and a palisade. We'd had drinks after, and while he was a ruthless bastard he was also halfway decent company if you didn't get him started on the Silent Slayer's line. The Red Reaver had not been so respectable in his ambition. He'd tried to slit my throat in my sleep only to be caught by Indrani while trying to slip through my tent's wards, and after that I'd... made an example. A warning to anyone else who might have similar ambition and lack of sense. There had not been a challenge since, though I'd no doubt that the longer this war lasted the more I'd end up having to face.

"I will fight the Hidden Horror," the Scorched Apostate solemnly said, "on that you have my oath. I will march north and face the dead."

"You'll be headed to the Belfry for a few months, Tancred, unless there's a pressing need for your talents," I drily told him.

While the smouldering remnants of Marserac behind us were testament to the power the young villain was capable of wielding, I had no intention of sending a mage so spectacularly untaught straight into the nightmare of the northern defensive line. That was a recipe for either losing a company to an uncontrolled blaze or serving up Keter a fresh Revenant. Named lost a great deal of power after the Dead King got to them, and some aspects Neshamah either could not or would not maintain in death, but a Revenant spellcaster with this much of a bite to him would be a rough ride to deal with even if he ended up having only one trick.

"The Belfry, sir?" the boy hesitantly asked.

"This isn't the kind of war that can be won with boots on the ground alone, Tancred," I said. "The Grand Alliance understood that well before it began mobilizing. There would be a need for fresh sorceries, for unprecedented warding schemes and artefacts. A safe haven would have to be built for those scholars who would study the Hidden Horror's tricks and learn how to unmake them, too, one beyond his reach. And so the Arsenal was ordered raised."

I let a moment pass, gauging how much I should truly say. There'd been some of us, at the beginning, who'd argued that the Arsenal's existence should be kept a secret. Princess Rozala had been one of the more ardent partisans of that belief, arguing that against Keter the best defence was secrecy, and the Grey Pilgrim had backed her – which meant the Blood had as well. In private with me, Tariq had argued that by keeping the Arsenal secret now we would later get the benefit of revealing it when tipping a pivot one way or another, but I'd been unconvinced then and I was unconvinced now. As it happened Hasenbach and I had, for once, been in complete and utter agreement. Even if one was willing to write off the effects on morale that knowing such a place existed would have on the rank and file of the Grand Alliance, which neither of us was, the fact remained that practically speaking keeping it secret would be near impossible.

Too many people would be involved in its construction and its upkeep. Whether it be building the towers and laboratories, bringing in food by cart or even something as simple as making the beds in the rooms there would be a need for workers and servants to handle the labour. That we'd gathered some of the finest magical minds in Procer, Callow and Levant before going further by bringing in scholars, priests and artisans meant that numbers alone would make disappearances glaringly obvious anyway.

And it wasn't like the Dead King wasn't going to expect us to have such a facility. No, better to lay false trails by the dozen and keep the *location* secret rather than attempt the improbable outcome of utter secrecy.

"There are two societies within it, the Workshop and the Belfry," I continued. "The Workshop concerns itself with the making of artefacts, armaments and alchemies. The Belfry's mandate is broader in scope: study of the Dead King's creatures, war magic and warding, experimental research."

I let a beat pass so the details could sink in. The part that mattered most I'd consciously split from the rest.

"The Belfry also concerns itself with teaching mages," I told the boy.

It'd been a struggle to pull away Masego from his attempts to establish his proof of concept for Quartered Seasons and the other half dozen projects he'd picked up, but the results had been well worth the hassle: he'd trained up a few talented Proceran practitioners to what he called 'acceptable' scrying ritual standards, which was maybe two decades ahead of what anyone west of the Whitecaps had previously been capable of. That cadre now served as permanent teachers for the hedge talents the First Prince was sifting through Procer for, sent in by bands of twenty for teaching. The scrying network for the Grand Alliance was arguably the largest and widest-reaching on the continent at the moment, if likely still inferior in quality and reliability to Praes'. Communications grew harder the closer we were to active warfare against Keter, too, now that Neshamah had begun using disruptive rituals.

Adjusting our rituals so that the disruptions wouldn't affect them was exactly the kind of puzzle the Belfry had been assembled to solve, though, so we'd see how long that lasted.

Getting a training camp running for war magic had been a great deal less successful, unfortunately. Even after lowering the bar of used sorcery to the standard of the Legions of Terror we'd proved incapable of reliably training up mages in that manner. We were running thin on instructors, true, but at the end of the day the unpleasant truth was that there was simply a limited amount of people in Procer with a Gift that was strong enough to be useful for war. The total number of mages living in the Principate was likely higher than that in the Empire, by simple dint of population, but the *quality* of those talents was the trouble. Massed sorcery remained beyond our grasp for now, though at least training up a handful ritual cadres had proved a workable alternative. Standardization remained the largest issue there, since no two cadres were capable of doing the same things and there was only haphazard overlap.

"Are you not going to teach me?" the boy quietly asked.

His face was hard to read, which I supposed was a feeble silver lining to the scorching of his face. His voice, though, his stance? He was fourteen and, Named or not, he'd seen precious little of the world. He might as well be an open book to me.

"There are things you'll learn from me," I said. "Magic, however, isn't one of them. I don't have the Gift. I do happen to be acquainted with a few of the finest practitioners of it alive, though, so rustling up a good tutor for you shouldn't be all that difficult."

Who to send him to would be something to consider. Masego's interest in teaching could best be described as passing, though he was a rather able tutor when talked into it. Hierophant also had so much on his plate the meal could feed two and he'd lost the ability to practice magic. Roland might be a better fit, anyway, given that his tendency to be a generalist meant he always had common grounds with pupils. The Rogue Sorcerer was a hero, though, and the way he ended up saddled with the work that no one else was particularly good at meant his days were nearly as filled as Masego's. The Hunted Magician owed Indrani a favour which I might be able to call in for this, but the Proceran villain was an enchanter for the Workshop and just... generally unpleasant. I'd rather the Scorched Apostate be taught by a Named mage instead of a Nameless one, but we'd have to see.

"But I will be sent to this Belfry," Tancred said, hesitant.

"Not alone," I replied, taking a measure of pity on him. "I'm to head south myself before long, and I meant to pass through the Arsenal. I'll be accompanying you there, at least."

Indrani had been riding me about physically setting foot at the Arsenal for a few months now, though until today I'd been on the fence about taking the detour there after the council. This settled it, though, since I'd want to settle the boy comfortably under someone able to teach him before moving on. Archer wasn't wrong, either, when she said that it was sloppy of me to have never met so many Named on our side, including villains I represented under the Terms. How many were there nowadays, between the Workshop and the Belfry? Ten, twelve? Less than half of that were of mine, since it was harder to find villains willing to play nice with others than heroes, but even getting a good look at the currents of the place might not be a bad idea. If we lost the Arsenal, the war would begin a death spiral downwards in a matter of months: best to make sure it wouldn't shatter itself from within.

"Good," the Scorched Apostate said, perking up. "I have-"

I wasn't riding Zombie this time so her discomfort could not serve as warning for the closeness of the Beastmaster, but the old trick I'd once taught Vivienne still worked. Someone had been looking at me intently, too intently. It'd been an attempt to sneak up on me, I decided, and there were few who'd attempt that against me in broad daylight.

"Beastmaster," I interrupted, "have you grown shy? Come out properly, introduce yourself."

The man bedecked in furs and leather let out a grunt and circled away from my back, only then catching Tancred's notice. Only one hawk was still on his shoulder.

"Your pet witch sent word," Beastmaster said. "She makes haste, as you ordered."

"Have you called her that to her face?" I asked, morbidly curious.

I almost hoped he hadn't, just so he might try it before me: it'd been too long since I'd seen Akua flay someone alive with her tongue. The Beastmaster spat to the side.

"Better to embrace vipers than speak with witches," the Named dismissively said.

So, I thought amusedly, *you've most definitely called her that to her face and the predictable ensued*. Slow learner, was he? Not that he'd been the first. It never ceased to amaze me that some people somehow ended up thinking *Akua Sahelian* would be an easy prey for barbs or bluster just because she did not have a Name while they did. It was like sticking your hand in a wolf's maw and expecting the teeth not to wound because they weren't a bear's.

"That hawk," Tancred said. "I've seen it before."

"She saw you," Beastmaster replied.

Since apparently Ranger's education in Refuge had not extended to basic courtesies – and Gods, I'd meant that as a jab but now that I *thought* about it – I saw to the introductions myself.

"Tancred, this is the Beastmaster," I said. "He's a former pupil of the Lady of the Lake, and now a mercenary in the service of the Grand Alliance."

Paid not in coin, which I would almost have preferred. The Beastmaster had instead bargained for certain rights and permissions, as well as guides to be provided to show him paths to ancient places in the depths of Brocelian Forest. Coin meant little to the Named of Refuge, used as they were to barter instead, and the relative modesty of the man's demands meant he'd

gotten near everything he'd asked for. He'd simply been too useful an asset to be carelessly tossed aside, and even with Refuge having effectively collapsed it wasn't like he'd not had other places to go. The fighting in the Free Cities was far from over, despite General Basilia's streak of victories.

"Greetings," Tancred said, though he was frowning.

"Beastmaster, this is the Scorched Apostate," I said. "He has agreed to abide by the Truce and the Terms."

The older Named looked the younger up and down, seeing no longer the villain who'd caused the blaze in the distance but a boy a fourteen with most his face lost to burns and clothes that were well on their way to being rags. He was visibly unimpressed.

"Another one plucked out of the mud?" Beastmaster said with a hard bark of laughter. "At least this one has fight in him."

"Not half an hour ago," I mildly reminded him, "you were wary of him. Did you boldness perhaps travel by foot, to be arriving so late after the rest of you?"

His face darkened. I met his gaze squarely. Like Archer in the early days, he'd take any attempt at diplomacy as weakness and continue to push his luck. But he wasn't Indrani, and I was not a Squire well out of her depth. I'd killed harder men than him and done it with a great deal less power than I could now call on. Confident in his strength as he might be, he'd be looking at the trail of corpses left in my wake and be forced to admit that were Named among the lot that would have butchered him without batting an eye. And so he backed down, or at least as close to that as his character could afford to let him.

"There is nothing left to hunt," the Beastmaster said. "I take my leave of you."

I could sting him further, but there would be no point to it save passing pleasure. Not that I'd let the retreat pass entirely without comment, lest he take that as relief on my part.

"By all means," I replied. "The conversation was getting stale."

Beastmaster's lips thinned, but he strode away without speaking any further. I glanced at Tancred, who'd been following all of it with wide eyes and now was looking at me a little guiltily.

"I'm sorry," the Scorched Apostate said. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"Trouble?" I echoed.

"Won't he complain to the Black Queen?" the boy asked. "You've made an enemy of a powerful Named on my behalf."

He seemed genuinely worried, which was a little touching.

"You seem to have misunderstood the nature of my relationship with him," I said, smoothing away any trace of my amusement.

Tancred looked appalled, and a little sickened.

"I am sorry, sir," he said. "I did not mean to insult your lover."

I choked. Beastmaster, of all men? Gods, I'd rather sleep with the Mirror Knight. The man might be an insufferable prick, but at least he bathed regularly.

"He's not my lover, he's my *subordinate*," I said.

In the boy's defence, he seemed pretty mortified by the mistake. His embarrassment passed soon enough, though, and left behind only the latest hint in a series of them that'd been growing the longer we spoke.

"Those priests and horsemen," the young villain said. "They were Callowan. And yet they bowed to you."

"So they did," I agreed.

My hand reached within my cloak to extricate the long dragonbone pipe Masego had gifted me so many years ago, then producing a satchel of Orense bitterleaf from another pocket. Sadly the bitterleaf enough had come to replace wakeleaf as my vice of choice as it was much easier to get your hands on this far north. The smoke was heavier than wakeleaf's, and it was often mixed with sweeter herbs to take the edge of the sourness off, but it scratched the itch well enough when stuffed in a pipe.

"You implied you were a high officer of the Grand Alliance," the Scorched Apostate continued. "But that's not all you are, is it?"

I passed my palm over the pipe, flames flickering within through a twist of the Night, and pulled at the mouth a few times before spewing out a steam of smoke.

"Who *are* you?" Tancred asked.

"The Firstborn named me Losara, the Queen of Lost and Found," I lazily replied. "To the Wasteland I was the Squire, the Carrion Lord's sole apprentice. The fae knew me by many names, though the last I ever bore was that of Sovereign of Moonless Nights. On this side of the Whitecaps, though? It's a simple name I am known by."

"The Black Queen," the boy whispered hoarsely. "The leader of the Woe."

"Aye," I said, with a crooked smile. "And now let's find you some boots, because I refuse to keep wincing every time I look at your shoes."

epokki

Please help EE out, and vote on <http://topwebfiction.com/?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .

The series also has a pretty active Discord server, <https://discord.gg/Ad3D63W>

[Barthumphries](#)

The Scorched Apostate may have burned the text but that's no reason to ignore the resulting typos:

Did you boldness perhaps travel by foot, to be arriving so late after the rest of you?

Change you to your.

Plus some others. Are your eyes as good as Beastmaster's with the hawk, to find them all?

[jamesgoddard4236508](#)

The "typo" you mentioned is correct already.

WealthyAardvark

And this is why Editor is a paid profession. Even when a typo has been pointed out to you, you don't always see it.

WealthyAardvark

he is prepare

-> he is to prepare

rather to young

-> rather too young

I made my heart ache

-> It made

a handful ritual cadres

-> handful of

Tom

When I click your link it says that my vote has been counted, but if I click "vote" next to pgte in the list, the timer for my vote wasn't actually reset. So I'm pretty sure clicking the link you gave doesn't actually mean you've voted; only going to the voting booth page for pgte (<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>) and clicking the vote button there actually registers your vote.

Par

Reminder to VOTE:

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

fbt

i keep (somehow) forgetting btwn updates (while reading other stuff) just how awesome this story is. It really is some of the best damn writing I've seen in years (and i read a *lot*). So great! And yeah, i have a patreon feed running, ofc. 😊

Aston Whiteman

oN gnirob gnitov rednimer esaelp.

EE sknahT.

[tkjarrah](#)

> I choked. Beastmaster, of all men? Gods, I'd rather sleep with the Mirror Knight. The man might be an insufferable prick, but at least he bathed regularly.

never change, catherine
never change

[tkjarrah](#)

a lot to chew over this chapter! quartered seasons, the arsenal and the belfry (which tbh seems like the alpha test for cardinal, or the research parts of it at any rate), Refuge no longer being a thing...
also cat and indrani are still sleeping together it seems like so probably no new romantic developments for cat

medailyfun

after this chapter I expect Beastmaster to take a bath eventually and then...

WuseMajor

Ranger left to join Amadeus. Without her, there's little to hold the rest there.

[onedollargum](#)

The Apostate is a precious cinnamon roll- too good for this word.

[Liliet](#)

But he's a viiiiillllainnnnnnn

I'm fucking dying @ what this classification is turning into, too beautiful~

[TeK](#)

He did slaughter a village, men and women and children, on what can be technically described as a guess. He could have tried to tell someone instead, even if he did not know the army was nearby. Being tragic does not make you good.

[Liliet](#)

"What can be technically described as a guess"

No, he didn't know the army was nearby, and if he'd left to go fetch someone else from further away they'd leave for the refugee camps and it would be too late.

He could reasonably expect his leaving to end up with, as Cat gently put it, "thousands dead, if we're lucky".

There is a difference between 'morally good' and 'good at this particular job'.

[TeK](#)

That is something correct you just said. I just struggle to understand why Cat said he is a Villain.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Remember that Good and Evil are not good and evil. Heroism is more about obedience to the Heavens than moral fiber and Evil is more about an unwillingness to be trod upon than destructive intentions.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The instant I posted this I noticed that I'd repeated "Evil" instead of saying "villainy," but it's too late to edit. Ugh.

[Liliet](#)

Because she wanted him to be, either because it was more convenient to her / played into her plans, or because she thought it was better for him than being a SoS-style hero, or both. Or because she confused herself, but I think intentional messing is more likely.

^ My analysis of the whole system sparked by this discussion :3

Mengha

This analysis is genius, and I appreciate that.

It seems to fit with what EE has written so far, and that underlying genius in their writing is also appreciated

[Liliet](#)

Thank you ^^

I do fucking adore the genius in EE's writing, that WAS the motivational force behind this analysis ♥ ♥
♥

NerfContessa

Amazing analysis.
As long as the chapter though could have been said in much concise ways.

Not by me, I ramble just as much once I get going, mind. 😊

[onedollargum](#)

For me it's this:

"I do not beg for my life," the boy said. "I do not quibble nor defend."

Justification only matters to the Just.

[Liliet](#)

His point in that context is that she *should* kill him.

SpeckofStardust

Most likely because he started it off by killing the man who disagreed with him that there was a plague/ need for a better healer.

Mitrhe

He almost seems like the villainous counterpart to Tariq. What's interesting is that both seem to ascribe to the philosophy of Utilitarianism, doing the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people, at the expense of the unfortunate few. I always felt that the only reason Tariq was a hero and not a villain was his adherence to the choir of Mercy, and that had he followed the same path without them that he would be a villain in truth.

What is interesting is that the gods above and the gods below are diametrically opposed, but not along the lines of good and evil as so many in the story assume, rather the gods above represent order, rigid adherence to existing laws at any cost, obedience to your betters, and regular worship, the gods below on the other hand represent a far more hands off, mercantile point of view. Every request you make of the gods below is a bargain, an exchange of services rendered, a clear cut transaction. Where the gods above believe in the purest form of order, the gods below believe in near perfect chaos, where the only thing binding people to agreements is their word and whatever leverage you have over them.

Neither side is inherently good or evil, although if I had to pick I would say that the gods above trend more towards evil than the gods below, but that's simply my belief that personal freedoms are more important than strict adherence to tradition, and thus entirely subjective.

Navi-Hank

It's rather like the difference between Law and Chaos in SMT

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Scorched Apostate is a 14 year old boy. OK, it's a world where that's old enough to be treated as an adult, but even so, I sincerely doubt he *has* a considered philosophy. Rather, he was forced by circumstance to commit an atrocity for the sake of preventing disaster, and is still in the process of owning his own actions.

Note that he didn't have the practical influence or magical training to do anything more subtle than slaughtering the infected – "telling someone" outside the town was clearly beyond his reach, and he couldn't persuade the townsfolk nor dominate them either.

Given the nature of his power (I'd guess he has at most a single Aspect), I suspect more such horrors are

in his future. How he reconciles himself to that will shape what kind of Villain he turns out to be... and naturally, Cat wants her hand and her experience on the scales for that.

lennymaster

He told the villagers. He explicitly told them to send for a better healer, instead of the local Priest who could not even call on enough Light to heal his as Cat classified: serious, but to a healer far from mortal wound. They refused to listen and intended to head for the nearest refugee camp.

Miles

I choked. Beastmaster, of all men? Gods, I'd rather sleep with the Mirror Knight. The man might be an insufferable prick, but at least he voted for pgte.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

ruduen

Ah, another hint on what's been going on in the meantime. It sounds like we'll be seeing Akua again soon, so that's one more question to soon be answered.

Also: Go vote! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for the voting reminder.

[*Liliet*](#)

bless u

[*Javvies*](#)

Yeah, kid, this war is ugly. And you're going to need to grow up fast.

But first, you're going to school.

Masego will probably be interested in the Scorched Apostate's emulation of Light.

Rogue Sorcerer, being a decent sort, will probably feel sorry for the kid, and even sorrier that he wound up a Villain – kid drew a very short straw.

The Blessed Artificer? Now that sounds like a potentially very useful sort of person in this war.

caoimhinh

Blessed Artificer is probably bound to a work station chair in the Workshop to keep working 24/7, hahahaha.

Raved Thrad

"Hey, Arty, 'nother Belfry class is graduating in a week, so we'll need another batch of sparklers."

"Godsdammit, why the ever living fuck do we need *goblinfire* sparklers every time a batch of new Named graduate?"

"Way above my pay grade. Not my fault the faculty want to twit the Black Queen. You wanna bitch about it, go bitch to the Grey Pilgrim and the White Knight."

PoiDess

Tancred endures

erebus42

Cat keeps saying she isn't people's mothers and yet...

[Liliet](#)

She's doing her best, but her only role model is Amadeus...

Death Knight

Who is the best mentor in the history of fiction.

Mingablo

You take that back. No one beats Uncle Iron.

Mingablo

Iroh. Dumbass autocorrect.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

If you hadn't posted a correction I would've assumed you meant Papenheim.

Raved Thrad

At this point in the game, Klaus Papenheim getting the Name "Iron Uncle" would be all sorts of cool. And strange. But mostly cool.

[Liliet](#)

Maybe not best mentor, but definitely contending for Best Dad.

Second place mentor after Uncle Iroh.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Who knows, maybe her new Name is the Mother.

[TeK](#)

The amount of her new Names theorised can feel a small book.
The amount people got right so far is zero.

[piratedesigns](#)

I'm not putting money on it, but based on the end of Book 5 and other continuous references, I will be delightedly unsurprised if/when she comes into the Name Triumphant.

[TeK](#)

They call it First and Only of her Name for a reason bro.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm pretty sure Triumphant wasn't a Name, but the epithet for the first Dread Tyrant (Emperor/Empress) of Praes.

If Cat does end up getting caught by a name, Mother of Night would be pretty badass.

[Liliet](#)

Well, if it's Black Queen, I'll be saying I called it.

Even if it wasn't my *favorite* option in Book 5.

[TeK](#)

I am pretty sure that unless EE deliberately went through every comment here, on Discord and Reddit, made a least of Names that were theorised, and then picked one that wasn't in the said list, there's still a chance that someone called it.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, I agree.

Axel Rafael

Dude, you got me snorting and laughing hard at this one xD
Thank you

Insanenoodlyguy

"This isn't the kind of war that can be won with boots on the ground alone, Tancred," I said. "The topwebfiction understood that well before it began mobilizing. There would be a need for fresh votes, for each lasts but a week. A steady voting reminder would have to be built for those readers who would study the erratic's tracts and learn how to support them, too, one week at time. And so the vote reminder was ordered applied."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Rafiuddin Alauddin

I have no other choice but to open my account and give you a like and vote, hope you are happy you bloody Clown

Andrew Mitchell

Nicely done!

apperatus27

Hah! It's about time she got a Grey Pilgrim moment. This feels like the start of the series, but she's Black this time.

[*onedollargum*](#)

My thoughts exactly. A parent-child story has its roots planted.

Raved Thrad

Pretty much what it felt like to me, too.

[*onedollargum*](#)

Damn, Cat, you found a kid and you want to "settle down" at the academy, take him under your wing and give him shoes? That's downright parental of you.

Death Knight

Tancred is not long for this world. Cat is long overdue losing someone she cared for in the quest to defeat the Ultimate Evil.

[*TeK*](#)

Introducing new characters to kill of instead of properly dealing with a loss of someone we knew for several books is a mark of a lesser writer.

IDKWhoitis

Well, losing both the apprentice and a longtime friend would definitely give Cat the narrative weight to fuck over the Dead King, so...

TeK

So she would orchestrate it, because hard times and all the jazz?

Mental Mouse

Cat wouldn't *orchestrate* it, but if it happens she'll damn well take advantage of it.

Frivolous

Yet more annoying hints about Masego's inability to practice magic and yet he's dangerous (according to Antigone the Witch of the Woods) and also able to teach mages (according to Catherine here).

Which doesn't make a lot of sense. How can he teach mages unless he can demonstrate magic? How can he defend himself against a powerful untrained mage? Does he use just his Aspects to do so?

I want an update heavily featuring Masego in teaching mode so I can get to the bottom of this puzzle. I was upset when I learned he'd lost his magic, and I have no idea exactly how true this is.

Big Brother

Remember, there's Theoretical and Practical teaching, on top of the fact Masego can "piggyback", for lack of a better term, another caster's magic and make it his own.

Frivolous

If he's only able to wield/steal another's magic, how would he be dangerous to Hanno?

Antigone clearly indicated that Masego was dangerous to both her and Hanno, not just her. So it doesn't have to do (only) with other casters.

I don't expect a really good answer here. Just expressing my frustration with not knowing exactly what is going on with Hierophant.

Liliet

I'd guess he can still imitate miracles without using sorcery for it. It's less flexible than sorcery since it just leaves him with an array of specific tricks rather than a programming language, but in a fight...

Big Brother

Correct me if I'm wrong here EE, but isn't one of Masego's Aspects Usurp? Or am I misremembering that from a quote? "Usurpation is the heart of magic" or some such?

sutortyrannus

While I'm by no means EE, the aspect is **Wrest**.

Big Brother

That is more than a fair correction. I was misremembering it and confused it with the quote.

medailyfun

with the proper story backing his aspects can be very dangerous

Mental Mouse

Consider if he figures out Hanno's trick of using a bit of light to redirect a working entirely...

Mammon

He can still throw a fey sun at Hanno, that's technically not magic as in his now lost Gift.

Mental Mouse

Masego may not be a sorcerer, but neither was Amadeus, nor are Ranger, Cat herself, Pilgrim, the White Knight, the Mirror Knight, etc. By which I mean that even without his sorcery, he's still a continental-class Named, who furthermore retains his unparalleled knowledge and experience in sorcerous matters.

Shikkarasu

Let us not forget the time he **Ruined** the Skein's whole demiplane. He can destroy any Named that misstep near him, and he can do it with a single word. Zeze is still dangerous.

Death Knight

This is correct. Even though Masego can no longer wield magic of his own, he still has his insights. Insights he can share with mages. Think taking an exam on Complex analysis with the Professor standing next to you whispering instructions on how you can go about solving the problem at hand.

If that fails he can simply instruct the mage to begin casting and then guide their magic so they can see how it suppose to..."flow"?

...

I don't know how magic works in this setting. I really wish EE would release his notes on how magic functions in his world. Or failing that, just state the fundamental laws which are invariable and hold everywhere, like the conservation of mass and energy in our world.

[TeK](#)

I think that while hard magic systems have their place, soft magic is much more "magical", but harder to pull off consistently, without resorting to asspulls.

[TeK](#)

By which I mean "No, don't release the rules, it'll take out the charm"

[Adrian_V](#)

He has the theory down and he can wield/steal magic, is more like he can't produce his own, think of it like he is only a conductor rather than a battery xD

Sun Dog

How does anyone ever teach someone about electricity or gravity without the ability to wield the fundamental forces of the cosmos? By explaining them, with metaphor or visualization. Masego is like an expert mechanic who lost the use of his hands, he still knows an awful lot on the subject and can tell people what they're doing wrong.

As for how dangerous he is, he's still a Named themed around dissecting and stealing the use of miracles. He still has Ruin, Witness, and Wrest for Aspects. So he can corrupt/destroy, see the past, and usurp command of any magic in his vicinity. That's all plenty dangerous.

[Adrian_V](#)

God I loved this chapter, brilliant way of introducing world exposition using Tancred as an audience substitute for our questions, plus I am liking him, I would have liked him for everything so far including the way he and Cat interact (like how he obviously arouses protective feelings in her) but he jumped right in my top five characters with that Cat x Beastmaster comment xD, I just laughed at Cat so hard then.

I can't wait for other interludes or extra chapters to see more of what happened and is happening first hand either, and lastly i wonder what happened in refuge? It could be some problem but i bet is just that without Ranger there for an extended period of time the whole thing dissolved into true anarchy with a good dosis of slugfest xD

H.

Aaahh seeing Cat do the famous elder villian thing is cute. She learned so well from when Black did it to her. Complete with the moment of 'oh shit *that's* who this is'.

[Liliet](#)

TBF Amadeus's identity was called out like 5 seconds after he arrived on the scene. He didn't get nearly this good an opportunity.

Cat, now, Cat's been milking the 'you can't guess who I am mwahahaha' thing since War College.

Poor Tancred missed the hint Cat provided in "You're not one of Hanno's but one of mine". Then again, he probably doesn't know the White Knight's Name ;u;

[Liliet](#)

* name. Jeez, fingers,

rednoserudolph

Wow, Scorched is so "young protagonist" that it almost hurts.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

"Gods willing or out of my damned way" and "I am sorry, sir, i did not mean to insult your lover."

I cant decide which one of these i like best. Both of them are just amazing.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They're both cool, but I still like "... he wasn't called the *Lightly Singed* Apostate."

Raved Thrad

Tancred's just so adorable. He's about as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as you can get for a newly-minted Villain. Not even Catherine was this innocent when she started out as the Squire.

As mentioned elsewhere, it really does feel like it's Catherine's turn to be Black to a young, new Villain. And considering just

how nurturing Catherine really is (though she'll deny it very very loudly) just how far is this relationship going to go? I can foresee a mentor-student relationship, but I can just as easily see poor little Tancred finding his first serious crush in Catherine. I mean the poor guy's lost everything: he's already said his mother died to the plague, and with the destruction of Marserac we can posit that he's lost any meager belongings he might have still had with most (but probably not all) of the remaining shreds of his innocence. He's so emotionally fragile that he's already reaching out and latching onto whoever will provide him any sort of human touch.

If Tancred does end up in any sort of medium- or long-term interaction with Catherine, basic training at the Arsenal notwithstanding, then I can't wait to see how the Crows react to him. Might they see him as a postulant under the wing of the Priestess of the Young Night?

And speaking of training, what're the odds that it'll be *Akua Sahelian* who ends up instructing the lad in magic? That, right there, is a scary proposition.

Raved Thrad

Random horrid thought: what if it's *Vivienne* Tancred ends up having a thing for? That would be the Vader/Padme echo to end all Vader/Padme echoes.

Right now Vivienne is basically being an unpowered princess punching above her weight class, so if Tancred's first words to her are anything resembling "are you an angel?" and the Black Queen ends up being Qui-Gontherine to his Anakin, then we know the war against Neshamalpatine is going to go to bantha poodoo.

Fayhem

Literally every single thing about this comment triggered me. That's impressively thorough.

Raved Thrad



[Mental Mouse](#)

Viv is a lot older than Tancred, and has been around the block a few times. I doubt she'd be falling for a disfigured and callow (ordinary meaning) kid.

Raved Thrad

Isn't Vivs supposed to be around Catherine's age? If she's mid-20s-ish to Tancred's 14, then it's within reach of the Vader/Padme age gap.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I forget, I had thought she was a bit older than that. But she's also a more restrained type, which is why even with equal ages, I'd still be betting on Abigail.

[Liliet](#)

I doubt her main objection to hooking up with a 14 year old will be his appearance.

Raved Thrad

"Are you an angel?" the new Named asked her earnestly. *Vivienne shuddered as images inundated her. Of heated glances, and furtive kisses. Of fumblings in the dark. Of being with child. Of dying, a hole burned in her chest, as the Apostate screamed at her in crazed rage.*

"Uh, no, I haven't been on the side of the angels in a while. Hey, look, it's the Grey Pilgrim."

Vivienne pointed off to the side, and when the Scorched Apostate turned to look, she *ran*.

Mental Mouse

Remember, (1) this is a world where that's old enough to function as an adult – Cat herself was only 15 when she got her Call to Adventure. (2) He is also Named, not to mention blooded, and (3) Abigail isn't that old herself, and has specifically mentioned her taste for younger men – though she usually prefers them "pretty".

Upshot being that I wouldn't bet too heavily against that ship.

Barthumphries

Calling it now, the boy is the Dead King in disguise. The face was burned so that nobody could recognize him, so that the Dead King wouldn't have to work so hard to try to pretend to be who he is. That's why the boy is a villain and not a hero. This is just Neshamah working to get a free trip to the secret location.

Mammon

Oh, now there's a thought no one has voiced yet. Probably not, but who knows?

konstantinvoncarstein

Neshamah would never expose himself like this. Anyway, Tancred was bathed in Light, so no necromancy

Andrew Mitchell

Fake light made by sorcery.

konstantinvoncarstein

You forgot the 2 priests 😊

Andrew Mitchell

I thought that as well. But you get all the kudos if it works out that way.

Mental Mouse

I'm pretty sure even a fresh body wouldn't hide Neshamah's presence from Cat.

Barthumphries

It's a sharf in his head, just like when he was in Masego.

Mammon

Everyone's getting caught up in Apostate's comment on Cat x Beastmaster. Why is everyone getting caught up on that when... Nevermind. Of course everyone conveniently and luckily forgot the whole part of there now being a terrifying behemoth of a Revenant. Such is the power of the Fortunate Fool, that even his corpse can manipulate the audience itself to overlook his existence when convenient.

P

All Katwas that he sacrificed himself to take out a Revenant, not that his body was lost to the Dead King. The one doesn't necessarily follow from the other, his sacrifice could have been what was needed to turn the battle, with his corpse properly cremated afterwards.

[Mammon](#)

That's what he conveniently wants you to assume!

Also in case it wasn't clear my initial comment was drenched thickly in sarcasm and lightheartedness, no actual thought should be invested on putting this theory under scrutiny.

Ezario Gerion

Oh god, I can't wait for the other members of Woe to point out Catherine's obvious motherly actions that she loudly denies. When would we hear the ironic "Like mother like son"?

Raved Thrad

How soon before we get a Tancred interlude where he finds himself referring to Catherine as "Mother?" 😊

Andrew Mitchell

♥ ♥ ♥

[Liliet](#)

Took Cat about three years...

Ezario Gerion

Also, Tancred is going to meet with Hanno at some point, isn't he? Thought of this gives me Berserk flashbacks.

Alegio

The momment the boy uses goblin fire TBH.

Hardric62

"What is it, Ime?"
"Dread Majesty, Lord Amadeus has been sighted in Ater."
"Finally! So where is he, and what is he doing?"
"He was last seen in the inn on Flying Fortress street.
With Ranger."
twitch "So he's come with Hye to murder me, has he?"
"If he has, he and the Ranger have been doing a lot of
boinking in preparation."
"Boinking?" *chair arm creaks*
"Yes, Dread Majesty."
"He. Came back. To Praes. TO FUCK RANGER!"
"It would seem so, Dread Majesty."
*chair arm cracks under Named strength, Malicia starts
foaming at the mouth in jealous rage*

[knockoffnikolai](#)

To clarify, she's jealous that *she's* not fucking
Ranger, right?

Raved Thrad

Only if Malicia is into bloodplay. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

Magicturtle

Guys come on, 1 or 2 voting reminders are fine but 5? Please show a little consideration for people. I voted (followed the first link) but it was pretty annoying to have to scroll through so many comments that wanted me to vote, before getting to the meat of the comments. Besides EE isn't that desperate for votes, seeing how he dominates 1st place

KageLupus

Is it annoying? I've never really minded it or saw the problem with it. Sure this chapter had more than normal, but that feels like people wanting to get the Guide back up in the polls after the long break. And to a lesser extent jumping on this "change a section of the chapter to be about voting" bandwagon.

I kind of like reading the different attempts people make at the voting posts, if they are creative enough. Even with as many as were in this chapter it is still only five posts out of dozens.

Magicturtle

Sure some of them is creative, it is still annoying to scroll through so many reminders, especially on the phone though. The

guide is on the top with twice as many votes as the number 2 so its not cause people dont recognise this story for the piece of art that it is. Maybe its just me, but seeing so many comments saying the same thing just makes it a bit tedious. I dont want to step on any toes, just wonder if 1 or 2 comments demanding that we isnt enough? To vote shouldnt be a chore or something you have to, its just a nice thing to do for the author. The Guide have allready cemented its place as a cult fiction, i feel, so its not like it doesnt get the respect that it deserve. Would it really be such a big problem, to cut back a little bit on those types of comments?

[Liliet](#)

People can't see if others have posted vote reminders until they refresh. Not everyone thinks to.

Magicturtle

That is an excellent point that i didnt realise. I would delete or the very least edit my other comments, where it possible 😊

[Liliet](#)

I see you understood the part of my point I didn't say, too XD

[NZPIEFACE](#)

i feel dumb for forgetting ranger was the lady of the lake. amadeus is literally arthur.

[TeK](#)

Only in this tale, he was the one giving a sword.

Fayhem

ಠ_ಠ

Take my upvote, you damn savage.

Frivolous

Hmm. I hope that when Cath killed the Barrow Sword she got some good Aspect-items out of the corpse.

Maybe she got some out of the Fortunate Fool, too. Who knows? Though really the Alliance should have some kind of general order to save any Named corpses for Catherine to loot.

Frivolous

Er, the Red Reaver, I meant, not the Barrow Sword.

Mental Mouse

It's a shame that, iirc, Cat never got to grab an aspect from Saint. Can't actually blame her, between Pilgrim being right there and the Crown running riot, but still.

TeK

We can't be sure she didn't. She did return later to pluck out Pilgrim's Forgive, no reason for her to not get Saber's aspect.

Mental Mouse

Aside from having a Choir in the room – and Saint was after all a hero. Grabbing from Saint would have been seriously pushy in that context.

TeK

But we don't know what happened after she resurrected Tariq, so the answer should be "whatever plot demands".

Mental Mouse

Indeed, but what does the plot demand? We know that Cat prevailed with the Choir by invoking their own nature. We also know that the Choirs are immensely powerful, and all three times we've seen them stymied was by someone who had managed to attain a privileged narrative position.

Consider that by this point, Cat had already fought and bled for her position as "the moral Villain", the one who gets to call out Heroes on *their* moral failings. Going for an aspect from Saint at any of the three possible points would have blown that badly.

First, Saint had gone off the rails, so *when Cat fought her* Cat had a massive plot advantage: Saint had fallen into the antagonist role in a story where the party had well and truly earned their win; Cat was not only the party leader, but she'd predicted the betrayal and prepared a weapon specifically for that opponent... and so she won – the extreme of calling out the wayward Hero. But immediately *after* that fight, there was another crisis at hand, the rogue Crown. Saint's powers weren't relevant to dealing with the Crown, so taking an aspect would have meant Cat turning her attention *away* from that crisis to rob the corpse for her own personal benefit. Whoops...

Instead, she did the “proper” thing, which was trying for the crown (and being stymied in that by the other two heroes). So then that crisis was settled, but robbing the corpse would still have been using necromancy on a Hero’s corpse for her own personal benefit, and there was still a Hero in the room to stand witness.

So, she goes to get a walking-stick, and comes back to face the Choir of Mercy. Because she passed the first two chances *and* turned down the Sword of Callow, she’s still the “moral Villain”, so the Choir doesn’t blast her on sight, and she gets to argue that “resurrecting him will greatly serve the cause of Mercy, surely you can overlook the necromancy and presumption...”.

But then turning around and doing the same necromancy on Saint, for her own profit, with the Choir still in the room... that would have utterly cheapened and disrespected Mercy’s forbearance, leaving her as just a powerful Villain robbing a Hero’s corpse – with *both* the Choir and their now-living champion in the room. That... does not sound to me like a good survival strategy, much less maintaining her “moral Villain” role.

[Liliet](#)

tl;dr it would be fucking *rude* of her

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, she’d get exactly one from each corpse. And she tends to use them upfront, probably because that leaves less room for “that artifact you were counting on has failed you”.

Shikkarasu

I want to know what she got from the Stalwart Paladin. I **know** she plucked out an aspect when she killed him. She sassed an Choir for that trinket. This has been bugging me for nearly *two years*.

superkeaton

Fine, I’ll admit it, he’s adorable.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> ... he wasn’t called the *Lightly Singed* Apostate.

LOL!

[Liliet](#)

Tancred is TOO ADORABLE AND PURE

I love his indignation at potentially getting away with being wrong... and worry about getting Cat in trouble...

Yeah, definitely a villain... definitely... it is definitely not just for the reason of Cat claiming him... no cognitive dissonance going on here at all~

Raved Thrad

Hey, Tancred's an orphan now, and they found him all alone, so does that mean he's a foundling? 😊

Ultimate procrastinator

"Yes, I'm the Black Queen, Catherine Foundling. This is my student, Tancred Foundling – no relation – and we're... what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Raved Thrad

"What is it, Mother?"

"It's nothing, Tan... what did you just call me?"

John

Maybe the only thing stopping her from legally adopting him into House Foundling is the political fallout of adding another villain to Callow's very short line of royal succession.

Mental Mouse

Also the fallout of adding a *Proceran* to the line of succession. Not to mention that she, personally, is still carrying the flag for "no Named rulers"!

Mental Mouse

And Cat blows a raspberry to Above...

IDKWhoitis

Well this makes Black a sort of a grandpa doesn't it?

If Tancred proceeds to have a college arc with Cat hiding his Name while putting him into school, I'll have a good laugh.

Bet she wouldn't even see the parallels until Masego points it out. Or she would deny it repeatedly.

On another note, when will we see Hanno and Cat together again? Because that's bound to be a fun chapter.

GuloGulos

That last quote gave me chills....literal chills.

club

Want the story of the fortunate fool for next months bones

How would someone with that power even sacrifice themselves?

[Javvies](#)

Throwing themselves into things where even "luck" can't help them.

Remember what happened to the Bumbling Conjuror? He was protected from Apprentice (and mundanes), but Warlock oneshot him seemingly casually.

There are limits to the amount of protection that kind of Name power can grant.

Maybe it was purely enemy action, maybe he stretched it too far from enemy action to survive an explosion in close proximity (maybe he ran up and grappled to plant a bag of sharpeners on the Revenant or something).

Raved Thrad

"Hah, fear the power of my Aspects: (I) **Win**, (you) **Lose**, and (rocks) **Fall** (and everyone dies)!"

[Mental Mouse](#)

But you can only use that last Aspect once... 😊

Raved Thrad

And so he did. 😊

Raved Thrad

I wonder where that "commend is awaiting moderation" thing came from. >_>

Alegio

I cant wait for the boy to get a mission, something catches fire (probably goblin fire), and then everybody ends like "Just like Cat" even though it was not his fault.

Oh, and also some interactions of him and Abigail acting as an older sister that knows how ot feels to be teased by Cat.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I wouldn't bet on "older sister", given Abigail's known temperament. That would actually be a hilarious match, but poor Abigail! Bad enough she worries about being hung for desertion, but to get a lover who's totally besotted, yet could still fry her by accident?

Raved Thrad

Actually, I expect Cat to make some offhand comment to Abigail like "Look out for him, would you?" which will drive her to utter distraction. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Agreed, that's also likely, though I'm pretty sure a Named wouldn't actually be placed under the command of a non-Named human.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Abigil would go for a 14 year old.

Shikkarasu

Ya, aside from all of the nope involved, that doesn't seem like the sort of thing that EE would write into any of the characters.

[Aranaya](#)

Damn, she's really enjoying this I Have Many Names bit.

Chapter 4: Shadowed

"By my own hand I have made my enemies, and so own them just as a craftsman owns his craft."

– Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner

Dusk was shyly peeking over the horizon when Akua Sahelian arrived.

Tancred's exhaustion had caught up to him before long, and he now lay curled under a blanket on the closest thing to dry land we'd been able to find: a large flat stone. The boy was resting his head against a rolled-up horse blanket, too-large boots dangling out of the covers, and drooling into the coarse cloth. He was dreaming, though from way he sometimes clenched his teeth it must

have been a nightmare. Hardly a surprise, after the storm of fire and death he'd unleashed on Marserac: it would take a colder soul than this one possessed to sleep restfully after that kind of butchery. I tore away my gaze from the boy, knowing that if stared any longer I'd find it more difficult to resist soothing his sleep. I'd always had a hard time picking my attachments, and though that'd saved my life more than once in the past it would not always remain that way. Though I was only a claimant, even after two years in the crucible, it could not be denied I was once more on the path to being Named.

That meant an apprentice – a real apprentice, not an occasional pupil or a child under patronage – might just be the first step on the road to an early grave. There were ways around it, at least. The Lady of the Lake was the example to emulate there, for once. Ranger had been a teacher for decades in Refuge without ever falling to that peril. In my more charitable moments I wondered if the way she'd been so harsh with all she taught was not in that sense a way of preserving her own life, but that charity was ever passing. Regardless, there were parts of her methods worth emulating. Teaching many students, teaching a general method more than passing one's own signature talents, not allowing yourself to be drawn into the stories of one's pupils. All were rules to consider when seeing to the youngest villains in my charge, and perhaps even when Cardinal itself would be raised. Much as I intended to be sitting on the council arbitrating the Liesse Accords instead of teaching, I might be moved to dabble on occasion. It might prove necessary, should we be thin on the ground for teachers in the early years.

Regardless, I must step carefully until I grasped the nature of the Name I was moving towards. I had opponents still out there that would slit my throat through even the slightest of missteps. One in particular had been most noticeable by her absence, though I was not so foolish as to believe that just because I'd not heard of the Wandering Bard she'd not been busy weaving her nets. But we were busy too, and though the Dead King was our enemy I'd not forgotten his parting short at the Peace of Salia. *There is a place in the heart of Levant*, the Hidden Horror had told us, *where the first pilgrim of grey slew many men*. And there, he'd claimed, there would be a secret buried that would tell us how Kairos Theodosian had saved all our lives. The Dead King had claimed that Tariq would know of the place, and that'd proved true enough: it was valley in the depths of southern Levant known as the Verdant Hollow. Finding the truths buried there had not been anywhere as simple as the King of Death had implied, though.

For one, the White Knight's aspect could not see into what had taken place within the bounds of the valley during the first Grey Pilgrim's life. It had not stopped us following the thread, but it'd certainly slowed us down. *Soon, though*, I thought. Vivienne's reports was clear about that. With Tariq's influence

backing us we'd been able to bargain with the Holy Seljun for access to the secret records of the Isbili and using those another trail had been found. I'd winced at the number and calibre of Named we'd had to send to follow it, but the band of five under the Painted Knife had found success in the form of a secret they'd refused to entrust to scrying rituals. A knot of hope and fear had laid nest in my stomach ever since I'd read the report. The truth they were bringing north would not be a gentle one. Yet the grim cast of my thoughts was dismissed by the beat of wings on the wind. I turned, having felt her presence nearing in the Night long before either ear or eye afforded the same, and felt the same clench of the heart I always did when I saw the span of those black wings on the wind.

Akua had taken to embracing the changeable nature that her strange half-life lent her – in part because emphasizing her unearthly nature helped my reputation, making her seem more as a bound spirit than the Doom of Liesse now keeping my council – so it'd been expected that she would start shapechanging for reasons both practical and entirely dramatic. I'd even expected that it came to choosing a shape that could fly she would not settle for a paler imitation of Sve Noc. Yet I'd expected some mimicry of a Wasteland legend, like the rain-birds the Taghreb claimed the Miezans had hunted to extinction or the red-feathered ibis whose croaks at dusk were said to be prophetic by Soninke myths. What she had chosen, instead, was a black swan. Swans were not native to the Wasteland: they were Callowan beasts, most known to nest in the south. Liesse had been called the City of Swans, once upon a time. That the woman who'd once been the Doom of Liesse would take the shape of an ebony-black swan was a gesture of many nuances, and one I still had difficulty parsing.

The few knights still with me, no more than a score, turned hard gazes towards the nearing bird almost to the last. The revelation that the Advisor Kivule was in truth the Doom of Liesse bound to my service had been ill-received, though it'd been a strangely fascinating exercise to see why and by who. The House Insurgent had in fact praised my efforts to redeem the former Diabolist in their sermons, nearly sidestepping the issue that we were both villains of disputable retirement, and the eastern parts of my armies had been largely indifferent. The Order of the Broken Bells, and indeed most Callowan highborn among my armies, had not been so blithe in their indifference. I'd had petitions to allow her to stand trial before either a military tribunal or a noble one that'd gotten increasingly pressing as time went on, and even my blunt reply that I still had a use of Akua had not been enough to put the matter to rest. It was a black mark on my record for a lot of my countrymen, and if not for the constant pressure of Keter to the north I suspected the backlash would have been a lot worse.

As it was, there'd still been desertions. Not many, but given how few of those I'd suffered since the first campaign of the Fifteenth it had stung in ways that were hard to explain. That was a candle to the bonfire that'd been the reaction back in Callow, though. Vivienne had appointed Duchess Kegan Iarsmai of Daoine to the office of Governess-General of Callow before leaving the kingdom for the Proceran campaign which had been, and in many ways still was, good sense. The Duchess' armies were the largest military force left in Callow, she had the clout and pedigree to keep the northern nobles in line and most of all there was absolutely no doubt that Kegan Iarsmai would reply to secret offers from the Tower by steel and public hangings. Duchess Kegan was also the ruler of the Deoraithe, whose ancestral spirits had been stolen and used as a glorified fuel for the doomsday fortress at the heart of Akua's Folly. The news that I now kept the eponymous Akua in my service, even as a shade, had... not been well received.

What few gains in trust I'd made with Daoine had gone the way of thin air, and there was now little doubt that when the war with Keter was settled Duchess Kegan would exercise the right I'd promised her when I'd first bargained for her aid: namely, that the freshly-elevated Grand Duchy of Daoine would be allowed to secede from the Kingdom of Callow while remaining a military ally and suffering no loss of trading rights or privileges with the kingdom. At least the northern baronies hadn't agitated over it beyond some expected opportunistic posturing: they'd least felt the taste of both the Praesi occupation and Akua's span of folly, so truth be told they'd had little to agitate *with*. And that was only the reaction of nobles, who as the Hierarch had once reminded me were but a few to the many. Though news travelled slow and the shifting nature of rumours gave the hydra a hundred different heads, my reputation had taken a hit back home as well.

A lot of my appeal to the people as a ruler, Hakram had noted in that clear-eyed way of his, had come from how harshly I'd dealt with the Folly and the fae incursions. Akua's survival was a complication in what had had previously been a straightforward story, and people rarely took well to such added twists and turns. There'd not been riots, at least, but there'd been open unrest in the growing southern towns. Many of the former refugees settled there had lost kin in Liesse, and having had my name associated with years of food and shelter in the wake of the ravaging of the south had only helped quell the tensions so much. The House Constant had stayed aloof, as if usually did when it came to worldly affairs, but the Jacks had made it clear that most of the small factions that'd been leaning the way of the House Insurgent now had second thoughts. No, the revelation had cost me a great deal of trust that I would likely never regain: a decade of good rule might see this turn into nothing but a bump in the road, but I didn't have a decade of rule ahead of me.

I fully intended to abdicate in the wake of the war against Keter, so at this point it was more important to gild Vivienne's reputation than glue back a few lost feathers onto mine. As a silver lining that'd proved almost ludicrously easy. Before my thoughts could wander down that rabbit hole, though, elegant talons touched the ground beneath open wings and darkness shifted from swan to woman. Akua had perfected the process: it looked like she was rising from a kneeling position, sweeping up gracefully. Her first attempts, Archer assured me, had looked a lot more like a kid failing at a pirouette. The Doom of Liesse rose to her full height, skirts sweeping around her, and tastefully curtsied.

"My queen," Akua greeted me.

The hard eyes of my knights remained on her back and, I almost imagined, on mine. It made me feel restless, and as it happened I had decent reason to indulge the urge to move: I'd sent for Akua because I needed answers about what had taken place in Marserac, and the village in question was ahead.

"Walk with me," I said.

She did, without missing a beat. We'd had these walks often enough, over the last two years, that it felt like a natural thing for her to fall perfectly in step with my limp. There was a lot that felt natural these days about having her at my side, which I needed no warning to know was a dangerous thing.

"You heard about what happened here," I said, brusquely gesturing towards the burning village.

Unlike me, whose limp was forcing to slog through the wet grounds inelegantly, she was not dipping in so much as a toe. I could probably achieve the same thing by calling on the Night, but she needed not such thing – where once her body had been a soul given flesh by Winter, she now used the power of Sve Noc for the same effect. She didn't need to draw on Night, per se, as she was *made* of Night – changing the properties of her physical shell was child's play to her, like playing with clay.

"I did," Akua acknowledged. "And from the looks of that sleeping boy under a Callowan blanket, you have gathered another stray to your hearth."

"The Scorched Apostate," I said.

She let out a sigh of sympathy.

"An unfortunate Name in many ways," Akua said. "Those marks will not be easily shed even should he stay at your feet."

"He won't, not for long," I said. "He's headed for the Belfry."

"Mage?" she inferred, interest rising. "He does not have the look of one from a wealthy household."

"Talent is not distributed according to land holdings," I grunted back.

The shade glanced at me, seemingly amused. Akua Sahelian was a lovely sight in any light I would care to name, even more so now that she had discarded the veils she had worn as 'Advisor Kivule', but I'd grown partial to the way she looked under spreading twilight. Shapely as she was – tall and full-breasted yet slender, an almost hourglass shape I'd believed belonged only in stories before first witnessing the unearthly beauty of Wasteland highborn with my own eyes – there was no time of the day that would do her figure disservice, much less in the tight and high-waisted dress of black and scarlet she'd chosen to wear, but twilight always lent her a certain... It was the golden eyes, I thought, and the sharp bones of her face. Under dusk's cast she looked as gorgeous and terrible as the old tales had promised the fae would be. She felt me stare, no doubt, but said nothing of it. It wouldn't be the first time, nor would it be the last.

"Magic is not an inexpensive art to train in, heart of my heart," she said. "I cast not unkind auspice on the boy's talent, but merely express surprise that one with such a powerful Gift did not burn themselves out long before they could become Named."

I wasn't ignorant of the dangers of having a powerful magical talent without being taught, of course. The War Collage had gone into some detail about it, and Black had made certain I read the highborn screeds about the matter like *Sorcerous' Bequest* and *The Burden of Privilege*. Praesi highborn often used the death rates as a justification for the ways High Seats plucked out young mages from their families for training and servitude. Mind you, Black had wanted to replace that with Legion schooling and at least one mandatory term of service in the ranks – he'd be much more interested in breaking the grip of the High Seats over the loyalty of the finest mages in Praes than in ensuring the freedom of practitioners. Knowing him he'd have no issue with said freedom either should it come as a consequence of his policies, though.

"He's got only the one trick, as far as I can tell," I reluctantly conceded. "And it's some sort of imitation of what Light can do in a fight."

"A limited repertoire would help," Akua confirmed. "Quite a few untaught mages end up using similar wild spells – the easiest of conjurations and illusions – regardless of where they are born with no ill effect. It is lack of control married to strong emotion that is the most common killer for hedge practitioners, but an intense obsession on a single crude formula would... restrain this danger."

She paused, afterwards.

"An imitation of the Light," she repeated, tone ambiguous. "How very Proceran."

It did not sound like a compliment, nor was it meant to be one. The distaste was not directed at Tancred, though.

"Not all peoples in the world hold magic as the gift of all gifts," I reminded her.

My own had a complicated relationship with sorcery, for one. It was a rare city in Callow that was not warded, or where a few practitioners could not be hired with coin through the Hedge Guild. Yet magic would never be held in high esteem the way steel or prayer would be, for sorcery was inherently linked to Praes for most of us. Though Wizards of the West and Wise Enchantresses had been a staple of Callowan Names for centuries, none of them had ever held so much as a regent's title – mages were advisors and retainers in Callow, never rulers.

"Nor should they," Akua said. "Though it is a great talent, it is only ever one among the many needed for one to achieve greatness. It is those calling the Gift a curse I hold in contempt."

I didn't disagree, as it happened. The reason why the power of mages had first been curbed in Procer was eminently reasonable: some of the largest wizard guilds had taken to playing kingmaker in the First Prince elections, only to get harshly disciplined when a candidate they'd opposed and even tried to depose consolidated power and began dismantling their guilds. First Prince Louis Merovins had not been bloodthirsty man, so he'd ended their power by ruinous taxes and starkly limiting guild sizes instead of brutal purges. Yet his successors had simply kept their boots on the throat of Proceran wizardry without ever reconsidering the matter, often with the House of Light's enthusiastic endorsement. Proceran mages couldn't even serve as healers, which I found absurd as magical healing could accomplish things that priestly healing simply could not. Mages were not outright hated, in the Principate, but they did tend to be viewed as keeping to a disreputable trade. I did not think it a coincidence that we'd gotten more villain Named mages out of Procer than we had heroes.

"Things will change," I said. "Hasenbach founded her Order of the Red Lion and they're just too useful to be despised. Now we're gathering and training their mages for war, which ought to gild the record even further. The Principate will have to adjust, after Keter."

A few thousand mages trained in war whose edge had been honed against the Kingdom of the Dead would not meekly bend their neck so the boot could be placed on it again. And I somehow doubted

that someone with Cordelia Hasenbach's ruthless streak of practicality would simply release a force like that back into the wilds. Given how badly the higher ranks of the House of Light had blundered when backing the attempted coup against her before the Peace of Salia, I believed the First Prince might even have the pull to force through some much-needed reforms.

"It is in the nature of rot that it is not so easily removed," Akua disagreed.

I simply grunted, unwilling to dispute the point here and now. We had other cats to skin, and we'd wander far off the beaten path. Metaphorically speaking, anyway. In practice we'd reached the outskirts of Marserac and that now familiar half-dug ditch.

"The boy's also got good eyes, like as not," I said. "It's why I sent for you. He claims he found traces of the Dead King's seeded plague in the villagers."

Her brow rose, arching with irritating elegance. When I did the same thing, it just made me look kind of angry.

"A much rarer talent, this, if it is not an aspect," Akua told me. "It implies either an exceptional sensitivity to magic or a physical gift."

I had an inkling it wouldn't be an aspect. Tancred might have had the power before reaching Marserac, but the Name had gotten its weight through the choices he'd made in the village. An aspect beforehand would be putting the cart before the horse.

"Humans don't usually have the latter, as I understand it," I frowned.

One of the pleasures of conversation with Akua, as it happened, was not having to always spell out everything. Sidestepping the notion of it being an aspect was enough for the implied to be understood.

"There are always exceptions," the golden-eyed shade shrugged. "But you are largely correct. It is a gift most often achieved by twining the line with beings so blessed."

A delicate way of saying that the Scorched Apostate was either a one in a hundred thousand birth or there was nonhuman blood running through his veins. Either way there was more to his story than I would have guessed at first glance, and he'd not struck me as a simple soul from the start. Something else to dig into, though that was the kind of matter best tossed into Hakram's lap. Aside from the practical consideration of having left him in charge of serving as my go-between with the Jacks, there was the more esoteric one of avoiding taking too direct an interest in Tancred's past. Unruly curiosity had a way of carrying costs for

Named. I looked down at the first corpse I'd encountered earlier, still slumped and scorched.

"Find the plague seeds if there are any to be found," I ordered. "If the Dead King really has such a weapon, we might have a situation on our hands."

It wasn't that I feared there'd be major spread beyond the initial outbreaks: we'd caught this early enough that we ought to be able to contain if not outright smother the attack. Even if one of the refugee camps was turned we'd be able to strike quick enough to prevent a disaster. The Grand Alliance's use of the Twilight Ways meant we marched and deployed significantly quicker than the dead, after all. Yet containment would occupy our armies long enough a summer offensive would become more difficult while simultaneously making us vulnerable to an offensive on the northern defence lines.

"If there is something to be found, I will," Akua replied, calmly certain.

And I believed her, too. Aisha had once warned me about the Sahelians, and this one most of all. They were always trusted, my old friend had told me, by people who ought to know better. *Because they are charming, my queen*, Aisha Bishara had warned me as only a fellow daughter of the Wasteland could. *Because they are beautiful and fascinating and so very useful that certainly it couldn't hurt to bring them into the fold just the once.* And she'd been right, I thought as I watched the woman who'd once been my bitterest enemy kneel by a corpse, weaving strands of Night with her hands. Already I could hardly imagine fighting this war without Akua at my side, and some days it would be untrue to call the amount of trust I put in her *measured*. If this had been achieved as it'd been in the Everdark, where I had been starved of the company of nearly all I trusted, it would have been one thing. But she had done this while the Woe were at my side, and my armies as well.

Even as a shade whose power I could strip with little more than a prayer, Akua Sahelian remained one of the most dangerous people I had ever met.

I sat on the side of the trench, staff propped up between my shoulder and my neck, and brought down the hood of the Mantle of Woe on my head before closing my eyes. Though night was creeping in, I still felt exhausted. I'd not had an empty day, that much was true, but I fancied it to be a different kind of tired. The kind that saw only days like this one writ in the horizon and could not tell how long the world would remain so. I knew, in principle, that we were reaching a turning point: I'd read the same reports as Hasenbach, had the conversation with the Iron Prince a dozen times. Within months we'd reach the peak of the Grand Alliance's fighting capacity, with Procer's industry and

manpower fully turned to war and the wealth injected into every nation's war machine by Mercantis and the dwarves finally being brought to bear. This summer would be the time where we went on the offensive, when we took back every Proceran shore and dug in before the assault on Keter itself.

And still I felt so very tired. Neshamah was fighting against us the kind of war where even victory had a taste of defeat. And sometimes, sometimes we just *lost*. So I closed my eyes and let my mind drift, as close to sleeping as I could get without drifting into slumber, and let Akua unfold the leather bag holding the set of tool's she'd use to cut open a corpse and find out if it had been seeded with death or worse yet. I waited perhaps half an hour before I got my answer, eyes fluttering open as I heard the shade rise to her feet. Though her dress had been traded for more practical surgeon's garb – a heavy leather apron over a long-sleeved cloth shirt and fitted trousers – there was no mistaking the blood on her forearms. Or, for that matter, the small stone-like sphere she held in the bloody palm of her hand. Golden eyes met mine, gaze perfectly matched even in the shade of my hood.

"Tell me," I said.

"It is sorcerous in nature," Akua confirmed. "More specifically an enchantment, and though I cannot yet tell you the nature of it – I will need the use of my full workshop to ascertain that for sure – I can already tell you two truths. The first should be evident."

She slightly rotated the sphere, revealing a slightly scorched surface.

"The sorcery that killed this woman damaged the 'seed', and rendered it inert," she said. "Whether it was a delicate enough enchantment structure that damage was enough to disrupt it or that is a property inhering to the sorcery used by the Scorched Apostate, I cannot be sure. If it is the latter, I would urge you to hurry the boy's journey to the Belfry – the implications of that would be far-reaching indeed."

I slowly nodded. If there was a particular sort of sorcery that was damaging to the Dead King's own methods, we needed to get a precise spell formula for it as soon as possible and spread knowledge of it to every single mage in the Grand Alliance to that could learn it.

"The second truth is this 'seed' was aptly named," Akua continued. "It is not meant to permanently remain in this state, but to eventually dissolve and release another enchantment held under the outer shell."

"A plague?" I pressed.

"I cannot yet tell, Catherine," Akua said. "Without a full component kit I cannot even properly gauge how long the shell is supposed to last before dissolving, though from the lack of observable reaction to both silver and cold iron it ought to be more than a lunar month from now."

Cold iron, as I recalled, was a hindrance to weak magics while silver strengthened some and hindered others. The Dead King's necromancies, unfortunately, were not affected by it. Some of his early works likely had been, but Neshamah had not been resting on his laurels all these centuries: his necromantic magic was unlike any other on Calernia.

"Shit," I feelingly said. "It would have killed the boy if he'd ever learned, but I was half-hoping he'd gone mad. We'll need to ring the alarm, Akua. This is the first time he's managed to slip a meaningful force behind our lines since the Lord of Ghouls got offed."

"It is quite possible that Light used in the correct manner will be able to disrupt the enchantments," Akua reassured me. "If nothing else, that should relieve some of the logistical burden in weeding out the seeded."

I sighed but conceded the point with a half-nod. Priests were already everywhere in the refugee camps, if we figured out a countermeasure using Light we could further limit the casualties.

"Collect all the seeds you can find," I told her. "I want to know everything about those things we can, and spares to send the Belfry's way."

"I will see to it," the golden-eyed shade replied. "Shall I keep them until we return to camp?"

"Do," I said.

There was not much I could do with one, save asking for the opinion of Sve Noc – which I'd rather do when we were safe back in camp anyway, along with my usual nightly communion. Out here in the open, there was no telling what might be lurking. I left Akua to the labour, dragging myself up and limping away. Night had fallen in earnest, and under the starlight sky I headed back towards the boy and my knights. And the priests as well, as I'd forgot. One of them was leaning over Tancred, back hiding what his hands were doing, and I frowned. The Light had already proven unable to help, and though the House Insurgent were loyalists I'd rather not have them putting around a fresh Named with highly destructive inclinations. I hastened my steps, and only when I was within a dozen feet did the priest notice my approach. He withdrew his hand, looking embarrassed. He'd been smoothing away the boy's last tufts of hair. It was the younger of the two

Brothers, I recognized that much though I'd never caught either's name.

"Don't," I said, and gestured, for him to move away.

He did with great swiftness and looked ill at ease under my glare.

"I apologize, Your Majesty," he murmured. "It's, only – I have a little brother his age, my queen. He's just a kid, isn't he? Even though he burned the village, he's just a kid."

My expression softened. I'd not noticed earlier, but the priest couldn't have been more than twenty himself. His robes were slightly askew, like they'd not been made for someone with his exact frame, and he moved a little jerkily. Embarrassed and a little intimidated, I felt it safe to assume.

"I don't fault your kindness," I said. "But after a day like this one, waking with a stranger's hand on his brow might be... ill-received."

The priest might have ended up with a black-rimmed hole in his chest, even Tancred had woken up still in the grips of his nightmare. Although, from the looks of it, that had passed. He no longer moved or flinched in his sleep, and his breath was slow. Nearly imperceptible.

"My apologies once more, Your Majesty," the priest repeated.

I waved it away.

"Hold on to the kindness," I said. "It's rarer than rubies, these days. Only add a little caution to it, would you?"

I patted his shoulder as I limped past him, feeling him go still as stone. My score of knights had dismounted, for it'd be absurd for them to remain mounted for hours, and the horses had been tied to a log in the distance. They moved as little as the rest of us, the stillness having caught up to even the animals. Brandon Talbot was long gone, but he'd left one of his officers to lead my escort. Figuring I might as well inform the man we'd be here for some time still, I picked out the man in question – George Redfern, as I recalled. Helm on, the knight was looking up at the moonless sky but even through the steel had little trouble hearing me arrive. My limp was not quiet.

"Your Majesty," the man bowed.

Starlight caught the edge of his plate armour, revealing a carved passage from the Book of All Things. And, to my mild surprise, what looked like dried blood. Talbot had not mentioned the Order fighting today.

"You're wounded," I said.

"The priests have already seen to it, my liege," he reassured me.

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Your helm, sir," I mildly said.

He stuttered out a surprised apology and hurried in taking off his helmet, revealing a reddish mustachioed face. His gorget was loose around his neck. The priest earlier had been a little off too.

"Fuck," I said. "*Fuck.*"

Night howled through my veins as I drank deep from the well.

"My queen?" the impostor asked.

"New kind of ghoul, Neshamah?" I asked in Ashkaran.

The thing that was not George Redfern grinned.

"What gave it away?" the King of Death replied in the same

The lance of Night burned through his head in the blink of an eye, but every other knight and priest was moving. Flesh squelched and boiled as the ghouls squirmed out of the shells, turning into unnaturally flowing things with claws and gaping maws. There'd been no bodies, so they must have eaten the dead. Replaced them one by one over the span of the afternoon and evening, while I was distracted. Still, for all their vicious cleverness and sharp caution there were only a score of ghouls and one – and night had fallen. My staff struck the ground as I let loose my anger, lines of Night slithering outwards at breakneck speeds – the first ghoul I caught I speared through the flank, and when it tried to flow around the wound I detonated the strand into black flame. Two, three, four, five. Up the count went as they ran, first towards me and then away from me. I kept only the last alive, wrapping it in solid strands of Night instead of killing it. We'd need a containment box for it, but it would be headed towards the Belfry soon enough. I strode towards it, fingers clenched around my staff.

"You ought to know better than to try me by night, by now," I hissed.

The ghoul laughed, shaking in an unnatural spasm. It'd not been meant to make such a sound.

"Ought I?" the Dead King replied. "Catherine, Catherine. You never watch your back as carefully as you should."

I stilled. The priest had been standing over the Scorched Apostate, whose breathing had become so faint it almost couldn't be heard. The slight pressure I felt from the ghoul vanished, the Dead King's attention with it, and I turned my eyes to the boy on the stone. Who slowly put aside the blanket he'd been huddling under and rose to his feet in his too-large boots. His skin was pale. He was not breathing. The Scorched Apostate's hand rose and brightly shining flame gathered to it.

"I'm sorry, Tancred," I quietly said. "Gods, I'm so sorry."

I should have watched more closely, I should have moved quicker, I should have... I should have protected him.

"But it's not that kind of a war, is it?" I murmured, Night flooding my veins. "Sometimes, sometimes I just lose."

I took the part of me that felt like weeping and put it in the box.

I had a Revenant to kill.

epokki

Please help EE out, and vote for PGTE at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .
The series also has a pretty active Discord server, <https://discord.gg/Ad3D63W>

Aston

Yes!

[*tkjarrah*](#)

fucking hells
i think the most disturbing part is that neshamah seems to be having *fun*

IDKWhoitis

Cat is like his only *cough* friend he likes talking to. Ranger and Bard are pests to him.

It's not even about smothering a child to him. It's that he tricked Cat and feels a high about her losing even when she avoided a bigger loss.

He can't do that with Bard or Ranger easily, or without drastic consequences.

Alex Straughan

The Bard isn't a pest to him, if anything he is too wary of her to have fun.

I see it as Cat being strong enough to be worth talking too while weak enough he's not too worried.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Malicia is a friend of sorts, Ranger at least rates pulling out her favorite foods and drinks.

Indeed, I'd say DK has more frenemies than is really good for him.

Someperson

I wonder if that's on purpose. Harder for the story to kill DK when most of the people who might be capable of ending him are "frenemies"

luminiousblu

It sort of **is** fun though. It's like when you read about a new chess trick and blow your buddy out of the water with it, or when you figure out a new way to filet a fish and wow your boyfriend with how fast the fish comes out of the fridge and into the pan, descaled and all.

The only disturbing part is that he's doing it on a person, but in all fairness, why would Neshamah realistically even view Tancred as a person? Neshamah is a lich. It's a little bit hard to view people as, well, people when you live dozens of times longer, are dozens of times smarter, and are thousands of times more powerful. Neshamah's made it very clear that he doesn't really view anyone but full immortals on the way to godhood or entities of similar power as equals or even really relevant partners. Do you view the fish you filet with compassion? Even if you do, does that stop you from eating it?

jamesc9

Thank you for a compelling description of a horrific thing. Of course it is, because you're describing the Hidden Horror.

NerfContessa

Fuck.

I liked the story that young hero told, and already thought the priest to be doing SOMETHING, but thought it was some light stupidity.

Shit.

Big Brother

NO! I Wanted to see more of Tancred!

[Mammon](#)

We didn't, but we kinda could've known that something like this would've and had to happen the moment that Cat said that Tancred had some anti-necrotic means to oppose the Dead King and that the Belfry enabled these means to be spread amongst greater numbers. If Cat had no such inclination and Scorched would've been the lone wielder of this Excalibur for a while, then Providence might've saved the Scorched in the nick of time, but no such respite for the wicked who commit the sin of pragmatically trying to optimise and upscale weaponry to minimise losses.

Jworks

I wouldn't be surprised if this isn't the last of him. Maybe he somehow resurrects himself like cat did, but it seems strange to introduce this character then kill him so quickly.

[Mammon](#)

You're not going to be surprised, there's no narrative reason nor hint that he's going to come back. Just like how the Stalward Paladin wasn't exactly a lasting character. It's the beginning of the book, where deaths tend to last.

Razorfloss razor

Oh shit didn't see that coming and god damn he got schorie that sucks. Cat is going to be in a mood for a while

Insanenoodlyguy

Which means odds are good that Akua had called it: he really did have something to pass on that'd really ruin the Dead Kings day. And now that's not a consideration anymore.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

magesbe

And Callow is understandably pissed that Akua is alive and if not completely free, at least able to walk around and do stuff on her own. Honestly it could have been a lot worse and if Cat did plan on continuing to rule, I think she could most past it as long as she beats the Dead King.

Aston

I'm sure the whole thing with the Dead King having a war is because the Big Bad is coming to their continent.

The war is a skirmish compared to...

Alternative worse enemy.

Like Gnomes.

Miles

There's not enough story left for another big bad. This is the last volume

Allsmart

Yep... Its a pity I liked the boy.

Darkening

Well, that was a much shorter run than I expected for him. Disappointing,

danh3107

Well fuck me

IDKWhoitis

So.. That time I was mentioning Tancred dying.

I didn't mean so soon. Shit.

Well Dead King proceeds to be my favorite Bastard, getting the kid first before he can be dangerous.

Although now I wonder if Tancred was a plant, he could detect something without specialized tools...

But on the other hand, he was offed so quickly I think the Dead King was mildly threatened. He was willing to deploy a trap card early to kick Cat in the metaphorical shin, but that's petty. I think a surgical strike to smother a dangerous Name is actually why these ghouls are here.

OH, Cat's going to have to tear apart Tancred's soul to see if something can be salvaged... Because it's too useful to let lie.

Poor Cat. 😞

RoflCat

In some way, her refusal to get into a mentor role is a factor in her failing to save him.

Because Creation wouldn't like it when a pupil die before the mentor, unless it's a story of a mentor seeking revenge for slain students though usually those requires a group of students to qualify.

By refusing to pick up that thread, she herself is safer from Story shenanigans but at the same time it also means there was no Story protection for him.

IDKWhoitis

Oh man, that's some Saw level mind game right there. And we know some asshole is going to point this out...

jamesc9

Sorry, I'm exhibiting my ignorance. Could you please unpack 'Saw', so I can decide whether to engage with it?

[Javvies](#)

I presume it's a reference to the horror movie franchise.

... I think it's where people get abducted and put into deathtrap gauntlets in groups.

Unless that's a different horror movie franchise. I haven't seen them.

Shikkarasu

What Javvies said below. Specifically the mindgames references the part where each deathtrap has two solutions. The obvious one where the group lets one of their number get killed, and another, less obvious/harder solution where they find a way to save everyone.

The plot of basically every Saw movie is that they don't realise until the end that they could have gamed the system and *not* killed all those people.

Shikkarasu

My theory is that the Plague was a ruse. Nussy seeded a few towns to fish for Named that might hinder him and smother them/ turn them into undead spies before Cat could protect them. Cat just happened to notice a moment before DK finished. It's a

natural reply to the Black Queen playing gotta Cat-ch'em all with Named.

Nessy is always 3 steps ahead.

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah, he knows that no matter how potentially powerfull the individual no ones starts up invincible, instead of letting the story come up naturally or opose it liek Black was doing before cat he helps it along...and is prepared to off the heroes (and villains too for that matter) while they are young, worse case they hurt him by going in a blaze of lory but that is still better than letting some new name row up by directly oposing him.

Halinn

Hell, he can be farming for revenants by seeding isolated places with things that would need a Named to solve...

NerfContessa

So calernia war is Actually Neshemah playing a cross of Sims and farming simulator?


[Javvies](#)

Ouch. That's brutal.

And remarkably unfortunate. Tancred/Scorched Apostate would have been quite useful going forwards.

On the flip side, there's no longer a need to worry that he'll end up being the apprentice/successor that exposes Cat for being a mentor death.

konstantinvoncarstein

But now we have to worry about the red flags  that are Cat speaking of grooming Vivienne and what she herself will do after the war

Insanenoodlyguy

It's much safer though. That's a political appointment, and it's specifically one that's not a named. That's about leaving a legacy, which has far less risk then having a direct heir/apprentice. If she had the Name of Black Queen truly and Viv was to become the next one, it'd be different, but as it stands for now it shouldn't be a problem.

0x

The box is building, and inside is escalation incarnate!

edrey

Holy fucking fuck, i need more vocabulary for this, i was looking forward to the boy potential, and this is the third chapter, that is how you make people have a pause to breath

[Adrian V](#)

I knew something like this would happen, i mean the surest way to avoid death by mentor story would be this, but i thought it would be later or maybe if no one mentioned it we could avoid it, but the moment Cat saw the priest my heart fell, when she didn't immediately overreact it fell even more since such an out of character behaviour (Cat is what some might call a paranoid fuck xD) could only mean disaster incoming.

RIP Tancred, you probably would have been a powerhouse or dangerous enough that Nessy (DK nickname xD) obviously rushed to kill you, those hints and theories about his power mentioned here were probably spot on and that is why he decided to kill him fast. Its was such that he revealed a new kind of ghoul to do it.

I do hope ther eis another kid around that could fill the lost puppy picked kind of role for Cat xD, dialogue implies he isn't the first (and there could actually be more than 1 in fact)

dadycool

Fuck's sake, Erratic. We just met him. Sure, he's proven a significant enough threat to warrant that kind of response, but still. I suppose this may teach Cat to moderate her mentor meter, rather than suppress it all the way to avoid that story.

konstantinvoncarstein

I think Tancred's death is a narrative device to make us feel how this war is. To set the tone for the rest of the book

dadycool

Yeah. It calls to mind the times Cat's lost friends to the various wars and intrigue, like Ratface getting killed as punishment from Malicia, Nauk both times, or the Gallowborn. It's one thing to lost an army of Redshirts. It's a whole other ballgame to lose even a single friend.

I guess I thought the war was already real enough, given the various interludes, but it hadn't kicked in "onscreen" yet, considering Cat hadn't directly felt it yet. Again, 'Oh dear, three Principates, dozens or armies, and numerous Heroes were lost to the Dead King.' v. 'Oh shit, my new psudo-apprentice just got gouled!"

Death Knight

Wait till Hakram bites it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

He's vital enough to her cause that I doubt he'll die before the climax of the book. He might end up being the last named character DK offs though, or among the last.

Also, your phrasing made me imagine Adjutant eating a ghoul.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Gotta re-establish that standard for the new Book....

Juff

Typo Thread:

from way he > from the way he
if stared > if I stared
I must step > I had to step
was valley > was a valley
Isbili and > Isbili, and
laid nest > laid nested
that it came > that when it came
bird almost > bird, almost
and by who > and by whom
nearly sidestepping (should this be neatly)
Duchess' > Duchess's
nobles in line and (imo should add the oxford comma)
as if usually > as it usually
whose limp was forcing (maybe "who was forced by my limp")
needed not such > needed no such
Sorcerous' Bequest (either Sorcerors' or remove the apostrophe)
he'd bee much > he'd been much
Hight Seats > High Seats
been bloodthirsty > been a bloodthirsty
hated, in > hated in
if is not > if it's not
it," I frowned. > it." I frowned.
exceptions," the > exceptions." The
long enough a > long enough that a
difficult while > difficult, while
tool's > tools
inhering > inherent
Alliance to that > Alliance that
refugee camps, if > refugee camps. If
putting around (puttering maybe)
I recognized that much though > I recognized that much, though
even Tancred had > if Tancred had
Majesty," the > Majesty." The
passage form > passage from

in the same > in the same.
by night, by now (maybe "at night, by now")
put in the box. > put it in the box.

[Barthumphries](#)

he'd bee much more interested in breaking the grip of the Hight
Seats
Change bee to been

We had other cats to skin, and we'd wander far off the beaten
path.
Change wander to wandered

Plus at least one more still.

ruduen

Oof, that's rough. It's narratively rough enough that it's
something I want to glare at the Bard for, but as always, almost
everything could warrant glaring at the bard.

I do wonder how developed Scorched was as a Name. If he was at a
stage where he had managed to claim his first aspect, it does
mean that Cat might need to do some more graverobbing – I imagine
that given the nature of his powers, it'll involve either
bringing an interesting trinket to the Belfry, or gaining quite a
knife.

[benthelynx](#)

Can she do that without a name?

Darkening

She ripped Shine out of the Grey Pilgrim and I think it was
Ban from the Named elf revenant on the mission where the
Twilight Ways were formed, so yeah, she's quite capable. Cat
does say, she's the high priestess of a pair of goddesses
that built their ascension on stolen power. It's kind of a
thing with Night.

[Javvies](#)

She pulled Forgive out of Pilgrim, not Shine. Forgive was
his ability to resurrect people. Shine is the star one.

[Liliet](#)

Welp, that was a *well-executed* punch to the gut.

Well-played, EE and Neshamah. Well-played.

[Mammon](#)

Scorced Apostate: I'm a spellcaster.

Hierophant: Exists.

Rogue Sorcerer: Exists.

Witch of the Woods: Exists.

Pilgrim (kinda): Exists.

Multiple mage organisations: Exist.

Finite doom leading to less plot protection and Story relevance if there's many of a thing: Exists.

Scorced Apostate: I- I mean, I'm a pri- *Dies instantly*

Decius

Dead King: Hey, I could use one of those.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, of those Pilgrim isn't a spellcaster, and is still primed for a Heroic Sacrifice. Rogue Sorcerer may not be a proper sorcerer, we never did get the full story on that one.

[Mammon](#)

That's why I added the kinda to Pilgrim. He's more a cleric/priest, but in terms of slinging around light he kinda overlaps with the mage's purpose in battle scenes.

And Rogue not being 'proper' doesn't matter, it seems that a magic talent/focus isn't too common even amongst Names in Calernia and that they're something special indeed. Casting magic at all and having this as his main focus categorises him a spellcaster. As seen in the moments before Tyrant's Swan Song, he's listed amongst 'the spellcasters' when they commented how bad things must be when providence sees to all these heavy-hitters being brought to bear.

Wonder

Heartbroken for Catherine , for Tancred .

[Sethur](#)

"I took the part of me that felt like weeping and put it in the box."

Oh Cat, you are so much like your father... 🙄

Darkening

Jeez, I hadn't even thought of that, but yeah, that's very Black of her.

Death Knight

"How big could it really be if it can fit in a box?"

burguulkodar

Depends on how big the box is.

konstantinvoncarstein

Not too big, so Cat can use it to hit people

shadw21

I'm sure Cat can use the Night to lift some pretty big boxes.

dadycoool

Strange thought that just occurred to me: "Would Cat become the Dread Princess if Black became the Dread Emperor?" Followed by an even more strange thought and action utterly out of character for him: "Would she become the Chancellor?"

IDKWhoitis

The Praesi would be scared shitless of her, and she has some degree of plotting under her belt. So she would be not completely unqualified. However Cat's disgust with Praesi political institutions would probably push her to hang all the high born before she would be chancellor.

Although burning highborn at the stake would definitely be a family bonding experience for her and Black.

[Burlyraven](#)

So it's totally a longshot considering he is a Villain, but I wonder if Tancred is actually dead, or more accurately, wholly defeated. There was the hint that he was already something other than human, and his power seems directly suited to countering the DK's tricks, so I'm not entirely convinced that there won't be a moment of throwing off the dark shackles, especially because we see Cat, a jaded "old" warrior, having given up on the young victim gifted with power. Just a thought. Maybe I've been watching too much Shounen anime, though.

Even if he does escape/revive/purify himself, I'm not seeing a clean victory.

Decius

He started off by mass killing.

He was never a protagonist.

Cat thought that being on Team Below would suffice. She was wrong.

He's on Team Dead.

Burlyraven

Oh, there's many reasons I'm probably wrong, but killing dozens to potentially save thousands or millions isn't one of them. That just makes him dark and/or tragic, which are perfect descriptors for an anti-villain.

Another reason I want there to be hope that this is the case, is that it may be the closest the Woe can get to a happy ending, as it makes the Woe the experienced team that acts as a group mentor to the young specialized godslayer. In that case, the Woe would act as guardians for the the living nuke, which likely gives each some epic moments and a coin flip chance of making it out alive, but also carries the slight risk of the entire planet going grey-goo.

SpeckofStardust

Ya he started off his killings to make a point, aka the priest who likely had no way to do anything better then what he did. As such him being a villain is not a question.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Nicely done. Scorched Apostate had enough development in two chapters to actually feel bad about rather than a cheap sacrificial lamb. Feel I should've seen this coming what with the "sometimes we just lose" line but I didn't so this was a nice gut punch. Hammers home how absolutely brutal this war is going to be and I'm loving it. Anyone want to take betting odds that at least one of the Woe will be dead before the story is done?

dadycool

No bet. Three of them are physically crippled, one is completely Nameless, and the last is having/just had some kind of existential crisis. Cat can't walk without a cane/staff, Masego can neither see nor practice magic, Hakram has one boney hand that can get hacked by a Necromancer if he's unlucky, Vivienne has no Name to call upon and is stuck on the throne, and Indrani is either the one most or least likely to get offed, considering she has been before.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Do Masego's magic eyeballs no longer function? I thought they still did.

konstantinvoncarstein

They still function

Death Knight

Yep. My denari is on Hakram.

Decius

Hakram will die, become a revenant, and then be destroyed. Everyone else gets an epilogue: Masego will 'retire' to a life of researching DK's wreckage. Akua will be long-priced into nonexistence, Cat will intend to become Headmistress of Hogwarts but will die when the entire school is burned by gnomefire.

Archer goes on to further adventures.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Archer becomes the protagonist of a spinoff "harem anime" type story as joked sometime prior to the start of this book by someone whose identity I've forgotten.

luminiousblu

Getting long-priced is off the table at this point. If anything Akua will just fuck off on her own. Cat spends an entire segment morosely thinking about how good Akua is at getting Cat to trust her, and this time she doesn't even spend time trying to convince herself she's still going to punish her for it.

ninegardens

"I trust you" and "You get to avoid consequences" are pretty separate things though.

Cat is going to have to make sacrifices in this war, and Akua has set herself up as a person DESERVING of being sacrificed.

I'm not placing bets either way on Akua's survival, just saying that Cat trusting her, or even forgiving her, is not necessarily enough to escape the long price.

[BarthHumphries](#)

I called it last chapter, the Scorched Apostate is the Dead King. He didn't have basic elf blood, he wasn't 1 in a million lucky, he was able to see the seeded plague because it was easy for him to see his own work.

Nashamah or whatever his name is, has a lot of people. We've seen that fights to eradicate a people create Named. It stands to reason that the Dead King would have some of his people turn into Named. He then seeded a fragment of himself into the boy,

destroyed the face so that nobody could not recognize him (I know everyone from that village you say you're from and you're lying about coming from there).

This was a test. Now the Dead King knows that a gifted child will be sent to the Belfry no matter how the war effort may need that child. So he can try the same thing again but far away from where Catherine is and thus learn the secret location.

IDKWhoitis

This could be discovered when Cat goes graverobbing on Tancreds body...

But I'm personally not feeling it. I'll keep traveling down this rabbit hole because it's fun through...

To go under the radar of both Cat's 6th sense and allow Light to heal his minor wounds would be very difficult for a construct to do.

However, it is the Dead King, and he's more than a bit of a Bastard. So if the priests were picked off beforehand, then the repairs to the leg could have been controlled but the Face not work. Tancred could have had latent enchantments embedded in him, and not have known he too was infected. Or worst yet, patient zero.

Or to add to the list of weird, horrible nightmare fuel: Tancred could have been deep undercover from Sanctuary, and have been living breathing with advanced latent magical prompts and enchantments.

[Barthumphries](#)

He wasn't a construct. He was a living breathing normal human whose entire life and circumstances of birth, etc., were crafted by a millennia-old person specifically in the hopes of creating a Named such as this. Then he was disfigured so that nobody could "not recognize" him as being ostensibly where he was from, he was snuck into the town, may have been responsible for seeding the plague, then had his memory wiped.

There would have been two triggers to release the wiping, a timed trigger for a few months, and a manual trigger. This was accomplished the same way that Cat's memory was temporarily wiped to defeat the Skein.

burguulkodar

This theory is nonsense. The reasons are so obvious I find myself too lazy to type them. Just read the chapters again, many things don't fit because it could have been done better.

This is what it seems: The Dead King (through scouts) saw the fire targeted on a village he seeded a magical plague and immediately used important resources (new type of ghoul) to nip the huge threat a new named posed while still in its infancy. In this he counted with Cat not wanting to personally mentor and guide/protect the boy because she was afraid for herself in that role.

There you have it.

superkeaton

Called it, damn me. Should have been more careful, Cat. A boy who could sniff out the Dead King's plots was worth more than his weight in gold.

Death Knight

His sorcery can still be stolen by Cat through the Night. Doesn't mean she could use it, just store it somewhere until Masego or Rogue can take a look at it.

Hells, she could probably even summon Akua who's literally walking distance away to take it on her behalf.

burguulkodar

Whatever the boy did was not an Aspect, so it can't be stolen.

Decius

The Goddess of stealing will take that as a challenge.

Death Knight

Harvesting night to get abilities is the whole shtick of the Drow. Book 4 showed us that even your garden variety humans can be stolen from. So stealing somebody's unique magic definitely is possible through the Night.

burguulkodar

You keep dreaming, kids.

DungareeDio

Well that's a real kick in the teeth to start my day with.

jack

As soon as Cat realised that the priest was fake, I knew the boy was dead.

burguulkodar

Your comment reminded me: we still do not know what spooked her (just as the Dead King was curious, so are we!)

Fayhem

Given the callout to the Lord of Ghouls earlier I suspect it's that she's seen things like this before, because this war fucking sucks.

Nathan

Both of them were suddenly a little too thin for their clothes/armor. That is what tipped her off. Presumably she saw this before.

Morgenstern

I can tell you what tipped *me* off:

– 1) his ****robes**** were slightly askew, ****like they'd not been made for someone with his exact frame****

– 2) he ****moved a little jerkily****

(Tancred: He no longer moved or flinched in his sleep, and his breath was slow. Nearly imperceptible. – After the priest just did something with his hands on the boy that Cat could not see.)

3) I patted his shoulder as I limped past him – feeling him go ****still as stone****.

——-

Then the blood on the knight where she KNOWS there has been no recent fight and no blood before when she last saw him. The “priest saw to it” – the same one that was off before.

Yeah, they're ALL so dead. But my hackles raised with the very first notice of the priest suddenly not fitting his clothes anymore and got worse when he moved somewhat strangely. Whereas he did NOT raise any “odd” notice before.

JRogue

If Tancred really does have a way to see through and destroy the Dead Kings “seeds” it is possible that the Dead King is about to get a surprise. Maybe even an Aspect will manifest.

Or EE just wanted to tear our hearts out and write a kickass fight scene.

Either way, I'm here for it.

Tohron

No idea what's going to happen next, but one idea that just popped into my head: what if the Scorched Apostate was a ploy by the Wandering Bard to get both Catherine and Neshemah killed?

Specifically, if Catherine fell into the Mentor role (and the Apostate seems almost crafted for that position), then that would add a lot of weight to the Dead King killing her at some point, which in turn would lock him into a plot where the Scorched Apostate eventually defeats him permanently.

Mental Mouse

So wait, DK just sandbagged 21 knights and priests, all of which have holy protections, without any of them being able to so much as alert Cat and Akua? I call shenanigans...

Also, better check those horses too...

Andrew Mitchell

> Also, better check those horses too...

Yeah, they'll need to be slaughtered too.

Morgenstern

Yep. Special armor against sorcery... (and priests wielding the Light) – I feel bad about that, too.

Daniel E

Welp, easy come easy go I suppose. On a lighter note, now taking bets about what Cat's Aspects will be. My guess; Mistake, Sarcasm, and Badgers.

Akuabestgurl

Starting it off with a weeklong kick in the nuts.

Cold EE. Cold.

Captain Amazing

I think she does the steal the dead from death thing again but Tancred loses his magic. He always wanted to be a priest but Above rejected him. So Catherine can rez him as a priest of Night. Night was about making difficult choices for survival from

the beginning and the Sisters want to spread their faith to humans. His Name isn't actually about his magic and becoming a priest of Night would make him even more of an apostate. This way, Catherine gets to teach him directly too. Tancred can replace her without needing to kill her. Please author? Please?

burguulkodar

Too fanfictional.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Villains don't get Resurrected, Cat is an Outlier.

shadw21

Cat had at the time, a freshly re-acquired, transitional name and was offered to be made queen by a Choir as she had, "A kingdom, an enemy and a claim." Her first story as a Villainous squire resolved on her death, and the second one started around her claim to the Kingdom, and her 'talk' with the Choir could be considered her Name vision quest thing like what Black put her through.

As she told the Choir, "You're not the Gods. You're part of the story too. You have to follow the rules. And if you won't give me my due, I'll Take it." and she became/confirmed herself as a Villain once more.

Nuke_The_Earth

Shit. Actual, genuine shit. Damn it all, I liked that kid.

Zengar

I just had a thought, although possibly it isn't a new one and I just missed it in a previous comment section. Warden of the West is a Name that we know exists and that we know is unclaimed. All of those with a better claim to it than Catherine either are already Named or have already rejected it. Has Cat been paying so much attention to the pitfalls of growing into a Villain Name that she missed the start of a Redemption Arc? Her falling reputation in Callow would fit right in with one of those, the darkness needs to be recognized before it can be transcended.

Black Spiral Dancer

Dream on. A priestess of a Goddess/demi-goddess from below will never ever get a Heroic Name.

seven cats

Warden of the West is a Proceran title though, I'd assume it'd go to someone with more of a cultural connection to it.

Badziew

Plot within plot within plot: Dead King deliberately allowed the seeds to be discovered, so that they would be shipped to Belfry (or any other secret place) to be researched and prodded upon... and thus reveal its location to DK or release some nasty sorcery or (most likely) do both things at once.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

I mean, are you really Cats apprentice if you haven't cheated death on your first day on the job?

Captain Amazing

Hahaha a fellow believer!

kilotoncake

Is Neshamah pulling a Conquest? See, if he had control over northern Procer for months, there really is no reason for anyone to be alive, unless it's part of some plan. He's laid the grounds for THE chosen Named who will defeat the King of Death to be born there, after all, why would some comfy merchant prince from Mercantis have a compelling reason to fight DK when there are orphans aplenty right there. So, any threat to him must come from there, but also he's prepared the forces to snuff them out every time like Black used to do. Sowing the seeds in his backyard to reap them all the more easily. Unlike Black, DK has inevitability. When the heroes' strength escalates, so would the level of his potential new revenants. So, unless they pulled another angel corpse from the jungles of Levant, they're gonna need some amazing firepower to beat DK.

agumentic

Rereading the chapter, it's interesting to see all the signs of things going wrong and how Cat fails to notice them.

Chapter 5: Expired

"It which does not take the knife of mistake by the grip is destined to take it by the blade instead."

– Drow saying

When I'd still been a girl of sixteen, the closest thing I ever got to a father taught me the basics of killing mages. *Hit them*

quick, Black had said, and don't give them time to dig in. Hinder visibility and close the distance. Always go for killing strokes, a wounded mage is twice as dangerous. They'd been good lessons, time had taught me, though they shone most against Wasteland practitioners. Unfortunately, they'd been lessons meant to be used against mundane mages. Not Named. Not Revenants.

Those I'd learned to fight the hard way.

The Scorched Apostate's – no, he was just the Revenant now, lest guilt slow my hand – wrist came down jerkily and a strand of brilliant mageflame shot out towards me. It was quick for a spell of that calibre, both in casting and in movement. I breathed out and let the Night flow through my veins, chasing away the cool touch of spring and sharpening my eyesight. The properties of that spell were still unknown to me, so caution was in order. *Would that I'd believed that just a bell ago,* the thought came, bitter and unbidden. Dark power roiled in a circle, expanding outwards between myself and the flame as the unstable portal into Arcadia came into being with a quiet keening sound. The Revenant's other hand rose, flames gathering to it, but I wouldn't fall for this shallow a trick. I was already grasping the Night with my will when the still-moving strand went around the expanding portal, and I saw no need for great subtlety: I broke the strands that made up the edge of the portal-gate, leaving the working to violently collapse.

The detonation of Night did not disperse the flame, to my surprise, but it at least established that the Revenant's sorcery was not entirely unaffected the power I wielded: it was knocked off its trajectory. My sharpened sight picked out the way the Night seemed to unravel when in direct touch with the brightly shining flame, much as Night did when in direct contact with true Light. A consequence of *source purity*, Hierophant had once told me: Light was said to be a gift from Above, while Night ran from the fountainhead of Sve Noc. There was an inherent superiority to the fundamental stuff Light was made of. Magic should not have been able to mimic that effect, of course, but people kept telling me usurpation was the essence of sorcery for a reason. It didn't matter, though. This was a fresh Revenant, not a fully settled one, so when I painted surprise on my face and let the flame continue streaking towards me – swiftly joined by a second strand – it did not look any further. It did not notice the fine line of Night I had slithering along the ground, the way it formed a loose circle around it.

When the first strand of bright flame came within two feet of me, I breathed out and took a step back through a gate into the Twilight Ways before closing it. I did not look at the kinder, softer starry sky above and simply kept my mind turned to the Night strand I'd left behind in Creation. Using it as a compass, I took five brisk steps forward before raising my staff and

opening a gate back into Creation. The Revenant had the time to half-turn towards me before I unleashed a torrent of raw Night from the tip of my staff, aimed straight at its head.

Decapitation wouldn't kill one of them, it'd take more damage than that to break the necromancy animating it, but it *would* blind it. With the sole two spells it ought to be able to control still out there it should have no – ah, clever Revenant. Even as I stepped back out into Creation, in the same heartbeat it dismissed the sorcery it'd been using and began a fresh spell right on its own face. It wasn't quite quick enough, or powerful enough: half of my torrent remained untouched and so tore right through the left half of its face.

Even the right side was damaged, because it did not quite have the control to detonate one of its spells so close to itself harmlessly, but for a Revenant such surface damage was mere cosmetic. I struck the ground with my staff, seizing the circle of Night I'd left behind and sharpening it to an edge before pulling it tight: like a razor-sharp garotte, it sprung towards the Revenant at ankle-height like I'd pulled on a noose knot. For a heartbeat the undead Named hesitated. I was close, a mere three steps behind it, and it wanted to kill me. But its legs were being threatened. It chose, and chose poorly. Two spells bloomed, one striking toward the Night-wire and the other towards my face. That single heartbeat had allowed me to take a step forward, and so before the spell towards me could shoot out I slapped away the arm with the side of staff. It knocked the Revenant askew, which disrupted its aim with the other spell as well. As it tried and fail to gain its footing back, I struck out with my free hand even as the Night-wire sliced through its too-large boots – the box's lid trembled – at ankle height.

My fingers sunk into its chest, coated with Night, and I went looking for an aspect should there be any to take. Two-half formed, I found with cool disappointment, but nothing I could make my own. I still ripped out the shapeless bundle that tasted vaguely of sight, dust trickling down my fingers as I drew back and let the Revenant hit the ground. It had, I found, decent combat sense for one so freshly raised: it'd shot out the two spells after all, and instead of trying to form others from scratch it was now guiding both strands of bright flame straight towards my torso. It would have been a proper monster, I thought, if given time to sharpen. Instead I whisked out all the Night still flowing through me, shaped it and tapped the butt of my staff against its chest once before taking a limping step back. The black flames I'd birthed ate through the flesh as if it were dry kindling, though not so fast that I did not have to take another two painful steps back to evade the strands of bright sorcery still chasing me.

The strands of flame gutted out suddenly, after the second step, but this wasn't my first Revenant fight. I left my own flame to

its work until it was undeniable that more than half the body was gone, only then smothering them out with a twist of will. I breathed out, leaning against my staff, and felt my leg throb with violent pain. It was an almost welcome distraction from the way I'd taken a boy of fourteen under my protection and then he'd not even lasted through the *fucking night*. Though she made no sound at all, I felt Akua's presence in the Night as she hurried at my side. Too late for the fight, which had felt like it lasted an hour but in practice couldn't even have lasted a long prayer's length. The hem of her dress sweeping the wet grass and stoe as she slowed her pace, the shade came to stand at my side. She followed my gaze, which had dipped beyond Tancred's broken corpse to the mutilated remnants of the ghouls who'd eaten and impersonated my escort.

If she offered me sympathy – pity by another name – Gods forgive me, but I'd find a way to put her back into the godsdamned cloak. I was in no mood for platitudes.

"A new breed of ghouls," Akua said, tone calm. "Impersonators?"

I breathed in, breathed out. Good. Yes, there were more important matters at hand than the way I felt like screaming.

"Yes. They were slightly off," I said. "Too small, maybe? It was hard to tell."

"It might be a matter of mass," she suggested. "It tends to be one of limitations for shapeshifters."

"Sisters make it that those are too expensive to make often," I grunted back. "They weren't anything to boast of in combat, not like the war-breeds, but that's clearly what not they're meant for."

"The presage boxes the Arsenal makes can be used to weed out such impostors," Akua noted. "Assuming those ghouls are, in fact, still necromantic constructs."

"They are, the Dead King was able to speak through one. But the boxes glow when there's *any* undead within a hundred feet, Akua," I skeptically said. "Sure, this far behind our lines that'll work as a test but out there on campaign? I'll be damned if they don't be turn into lanterns you can't even put out."

"We might need to rely on priests until more precise instruments can be created, then," the shade said. "Regardless, as a preliminary to deeper studies you've left enough of the corpses that they can be tested for baser weaknesses."

"Back to camp, then," I said, keeping my voice steady. "We'll put the bodies in the Night. Do the same with the villagers, and some of the building materials as well. We're trying to recover more

than the seeds now: we'll have to see if they can reproduce the Revenant's sorcery as well."

"Agreed," Akua said. "It can be done within half an hour, I'd wager. If you would retrieve your mount?"

I breathed in, breathed out. The horses, the one's that'd not moved much. They still hadn't, so they'd probably been killed, but I'd have to make sure.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I can do that."

The golden-eyed woman stood at my side, still as only a shade could be. Waiting for me to move first. I took a step, fingers taut around the yew, and caught sight of the horse blanket still on the flat stone where the boy had been sleeping.

"*Fuck*," I hissed out.

Leaving my staff to stand unnaturally upright in my wake, I strode away. Even with only one woman for audience it would have felt childish to throw it down. Yet the urge to just break something was consuming my hand, the desire so strong Night was flickering around my hands without having been called upon.

"I should have caught it, Akua," I said. "*I should have godsdamn caught it*. I'm getting slow on the uptake. Worse yet I'm getting sloppy. I should have dragged him back to camp immediately even if he had to ride with the survivors the whole way. Instead I waited here for you and the kid got killed because I figured we could take it slightly easy just once."

I was starting to make mistakes, and I couldn't afford mistakes.

"Yes," Akua Sahelian frankly said. "You should have."

It should have angered me, the way she confirmed my disgrace without so much as a speck of hesitation, but it didn't. I wouldn't have allowed myself to lose my grip around her if I'd not been willing to suffer that sort of appraisal in the first place.

"I wouldn't fallen for something like this in Iserre," I said. "Or even in Salia. I'm losing my touch."

I'd run rings around the Pilgrim and the Tyrant, but now a pack of fresh ghouls was enough to snatch a boy under my protection? I would have called it humiliating, if the greater failure here wasn't that a kid had been slain and put down again, so instead I just called it shameful.

"The Graveyard was the span of a single night," Akua said. "Salia of a few evenings – the parts that mattered, at least."

I turned a hard glare on her, but she did not bat an eye. Why would she? She'd faced me down when I'd come at her with steel and Winter, with Name and host. She had no fear of my temper, this one.

"If you use even the sharpest sword in the world every single day, it is only a matter of time until its edge grows dull," the shade told me.

"We've all been in the same war, Diabolist," I snarled. "That's not an excuse."

Because the heroes weren't faltering, were they? Or Archer, or Hierophant, or even grizzled old Klaus Papenheim – who'd lost so much it sometimes beggared my comprehension as to how he got up in the morning.

"You have been the preeminent general in Hainaut's defence for more than year," Akua evenly replied, "while also acting as captain and peacemaker for Named or Blood of every stripe, serving as one of the chief strategists of the Grand Alliance and, all the while, being the diplomatic broker between it and the Empire Ever Dark."

"That-"

"I am by no mean excusing you, Catherine," Akua interrupted, meeting my anger without blinking. "This *is* a failure, and an even starker one is the way you came to make this one in the first place. You were warned by Adjutant that you could only take so much on your shoulders without running yourself ragged. You did not heed his words."

"Didn't I?" I snapped. "I as good as handed over Callow and the negotiations for the Accords to Vivienne. Hakram sifts through every single report and letter before they make it to my desk, culling what doesn't need me in particular – Hells, I haven't seen an actual list of our supply stocks in a year, only summaries. Indrani and her band are handling finding the new Named, Masego and Roland are running the Arsenal. I don't even strike beyond our defensive lines anymore: we send out bands of five!"

I panted quietly, the tirade having set my lungs aflame.

"How much more can I possibly delegate?" I asked. "I'm not whining, Akua, I'm genuinely asking – how much more of this can I *possibly delegate*?"

"Turn over full command of the Third Army to General Abigail," the golden-eyed shade answered without missing a beat.

"She's not there yet," I said. "Not against-"

"Then demote her, or name someone able in her stead," Akua said. "You are making, dearest, an old mistake of my people."

"Haven't raised any flying fortresses, have I?" I scoffed.

"You have warred with the same enemy for too long, fought him too often," she said, tone flat. "The Dead King is learning your back of tricks, your art of war. You are teaching your strengths and weaknesses to the Enemy, Catherine, and it is learning. That you tire, that you grow impatient, that sometimes kindness is what moves your hand instead of practicality."

The thing was, Merciless Gods, that she might just be right. I wanted to dismiss her, to ask who if not me, to tell her that insisting on seeing Creation always through the eyes of the Wasteland would lead her to mistake after mistake. Except she'd not been the one to slip-up, had she? And she might not have been the only one to notice I was getting tired, either. Was that why Razin and Aquiline had started pushing me again, testing boundaries I'd thought settled? The Dominion's nobles, as a rule, were not the kind of people who'd let a weakening warlord keep the reins. My own people hadn't said anything, but would they? To Callowans, I was still the Black Queen. If it looked like I was slipping, how many of them would simply assume a fresh game was afoot?

"You need to step back," Akua said. "Sharpen your edge once more and return to the field only on your own terms. Else you will bury yourself in a grave you insisted on digging every shovelful of yourself."

I gestured sharply at her, before limping back to my staff, and she did not say more. Adjutant, I thought, would have gently kept prodding until I either agreed or dismissed. Unlike him, Akua Sahelian was well-acquainted with the sin of pride: the shade said nothing that would further bruise mine. She would not bring this up again, I knew, for which I was almost grateful. I'd turn to Hakram for advice over this, trusting in the clarity of his gaze where mine grew muddled, but I would be able to move towards the decision on my own terms. For the grace of Akua's approach I was almost grateful, yes, but also bitterly angry. Because if I could have had this, the best of her, without the rest?

"Sometimes," I said, tone low and fierce, "I wish you..."

She'd been a master at keeping her thoughts away from her face even before she'd gained the ability to shape it at will, but the sudden stillness of it gave her away. Surprise.

"It doesn't matter," I said, shaking my head.

A hundred thousand souls, for which there would be a price long in the taking. That much was an absolute truth, a bedrock. A look

passed through the golden eyes, one that straddled the line between loathing and yearning. I had, once more, offered artless cruelty. Akua Sahelian was too good a liar not to have caught it'd been genuine feeling that moved me to speak.

"I'll find my horse," I said, cutting through the stillness. "And take care of the corpses here. I'll leave Marserac to you."

Golden eyes met mine and only then did she incline her head.

"As you say," Akua Sahelian murmured.

—

We took the Twilight Ways back to camp, laden with corpses kept in the Night.

That sort of capacity was one of advantages the bounty of my patronesses boasted compared to the Light, which tended to be its superior in direct applications and confrontations. Dimensional pockets were usually the province of talented mages, who required significant power and resources to establish them, or of Named — Black, for example, had been able to carry quite the arsenal in his shadow when he'd still been the Black Knight. It was a rarer ability in heroes than villains, though not unheard of. The Myrmidon had one, as I recalled. Having a domain could allow Named to cheat, too, if they were clever enough and its nature allowed. It was still a rather rare skill, in the larger scheme of things, and one priests were patently incapable of learning. In contrast, knowledge of how to create such a space in the Night was considered a useful but hardly uncommon Secret among the Mighty. It required a certain amount of power not held beneath the lesser ranks of the Mighty, but aside from that little was needed to have one save knowledge of the trick.

The warm breeze of the realm I'd seen the birth of turned into outright wind, when flying on Zombie's back, but I hardly minded. The noise of it against my ears was drowning out all thoughts save for the most disjointed, too much of a distraction for a brooding mood to truly seize me. Akua, once more on swan's wings, was keeping pace with me further down. We'd used the same crack to slip through into Twilight, so like me she'd not need the use of a gate to return to Creation — or, indeed, to be guided towards an exit beyond what the starlit compass provided. It was the subtler means of using this realm, though in some ways also the most difficult of the two; for there were two ways to use the Twilight Ways for travel, at least that we'd grasped so far.

The first was rather similar in nature to using Arcadia, the making of a gate using power. The crux of the difference was in the ease of use: to enter Arcadia there'd been need of either a powerful ritual by mages taught in that branch of sorcery, or that a sufficiently powerful fae intervened. Oh, there were

natural places of alignment between Arcadia and Creation where anyone could cross through freely – there was one near Refuge, and allegedly one in the deeps of the Brocelian Forest – but those were rare and the fae often made sport of those who ventured though. In contrast, the Twilight Ways had always been meant to be used for travel: they welcomed such use, encouraged it and enabled it. Mages found it easy to open a temporary small gate without even a ritual if the fabric of Creation was thin enough where they tried, and even elsewhere the amount of power needed to form such a gate was significantly smaller than if one had tried the same with Arcadia. More importantly, it required less skill. It'd been described to me as the Ways reaching out and meeting the spellcaster halfway, helping them... anchor, for lack of a better term.

And it was not only mages who could succeed at this. It was possible with Night as well, though the Mighty had admitted to me that drow seemed to need a certain knack to be able to do so no matter how powerful they were. Said knack seemed, to my amusement, to run particularly strong among the Losara Sigil as well as another band of familiar souls: the Longstride Cabal in the far north, who'd once tried to hunt me in Great Strycht. Light could open a gate as well, though once more there seemed to be some ineffable requirement we poorly understood: the Lanterns could create such gates almost to a man, while Procerans struggled greatly and my own House Insurgent had proved incapable of consistent results. No matter the provenance or power, though, all had the benefit of what some Arlesite poet had named the '*starlit compass*'. Anyone entering the Twilight Ways with a clear destination in mind would feel the call of that destination ahead of them, and known where to weave a gate out. Not so accurately as I had when I'd been Sovereign of Moonless Night, but usually within a mile of where they intended to arrive.

This was also the method by which permanent gates could be established, though we'd found that to be chancy business. A physical, permanent gate tended to disrupt every other kind of gating in the region around it and they were finicky beasts besides. Hierophant had nearly lost an arm trying to make a second one, afterwards telling me that the Ways had somehow been *displeased* by him being the architect of more than one. The Witch of the Woods, on the other hand, had forged one on the outskirts of Salia in an afternoon's work and without any difficulty whatsoever. We still knew so little about the Ways, in the end, and perhaps come better days we'd be able to spend the scholars to plumb the depths of the secrets but as it was the Belfry had too much on its plate to be able to spend many hours on it. Besides, I was disinclined to complain too much of the eccentricities of Twilight when one of them was the realm's active antipathy for the Dead King and all his works.

The second manner of using the Ways was the one Akua and I had used tonight, which Archer – who'd effectively pioneered it, and still remained a finer practitioner of than anyone save perhaps the Grey Pilgrim himself – had named *sidling*. Those of us with senses that were not entirely physical could often sense where the fabric of Creation thinned, but with practice it could be learned to feel out where there were... cracks between Creation and the Twilight Ways. Cracks one could slip through when they were found, though they were ephemeral things and particularly capricious where gates of any sort had been recently used. It could take some time to find the cracks, and often required some luck as well as fine senses, which was why near everyone using the method was either Named or nonhuman. Given the difficulties involved one might be tempted to dismiss *sidling* as an inferior form of travel, save for two facts: sidled paths through the Ways were measurably faster and more precise than those come of gates, and there were also completely traceless.

A Twilight gate, even only a temporary one, could found by scrying, rituals or even just having a sufficiently sensitive entity close when it happened – whenever we used them to deploy troops against the Dead King, the surprise was strategic and almost never tactical. Our presence was known ahead of being seen, always. Archer, on the other hand, had once sidled out of the Ways with her entire band with only a crumbling wall between her and the Prince of Bones and the Revenant hadn't had a clue before she shot it in the back of the head. Not that it'd killed the thing, but it'd been a gallant effort. Beneath me, the black swan Akua had shapeshifted into began a graceful arc downwards and I led Zombie into the same. The wind's howl picked up, until my mount landed at a gallop and obeyed the touch of my hand by folding in her wings. I pressed down against her mane even as Akua's graceful form passed between what seemed to be two raised stones and disappeared.

Zombie navigated the slope leading down to the raised stones and slipped between them: a heartbeat later, after a sensation like a hand passing through my hair, we were on Creation again.

As a testament to the accuracy of *sidling*, we'd emerged a mere twenty feet away from the camp's main gate. Akua's elegant landing had seen her rise into human shape again, and she caught up to me after I reined in my horse's heady gallop to a halt. By the time the shade was once more at my side, a frown had made its way onto my face: I was looking at the camp, and not liking what I was seeing. The outer defences were untroubled, remaining both well-manned and vigilant. The army camp's layout was a recent advance, a merging of the Belfry's advances in temporary warding and the demands of military efficient: four interlocked squares, all sharing the same initial lines of defence. First a ditch dug into the ground, followed by a thin stripe of solid ground leading to a second ditch, itself leading directly into a

traditional Legion palisade, bolstered by watchtowers. The stripe of solid ground between ditches had stone markers wedged in at regular intervals, carved with a runic ward that would produce a loud bell-like ringing sound as well as begin glowing should there be movement within the span of the ward.

The teeth of the defence were at the bottom of the second ditch: spikes might not do much against undead, but the gout of flame from enchanted metal rods and the Light-infused stones could turn the bottom of the palisade into a brutal killing yard.

The warding stones had not been activated, and atop the palisade the watchful gazes of a mixture of Callowan and Proceran soldiers were not something I found any fault in. It was the pulsing lights at the heart of the camp, where the four squares interlocked, that had me frowning. Each of the squares held its own separate set of three large-scale protection wards – against scrying, vermin and illusions – but they were also connected to the central array near my own tent. That array was mostly there to serve as a stabilizer, but it could also be used to forcefully purge power that accumulated in any of the wards because of imprecisions in how they were laid. Essentially it was a pressure valve we could activate before the wards started breaking down from the impurities, though the act of release itself sent out a pulse of power that tended to screw with all the lesser enchantments and wards within the camps so we very much avoided using it if we could. Yet it'd been activated tonight, that much was clear from the way there were still glimmering lights above the centre of the camp.

Likely more than once, too, for the leftover sorcery to be this visible.

"Akua?" I prompted.

"It was activated when there were no accumulated impurities to purge," the shade said, sounding displeased.

She would be, having personally set down the central array this ought to have turned into a proper mess.

"And what would that actually do?" I asked.

"Still send out a pulse of sorcery," Akua said. "Yet it would be weaker, and the sorcery would be drawn from wards that are functioning as intended. Likely it would damage them, perhaps even crack the wardstones."

I vehemently cursed in Kharsum. The materials for those were damned expensive, as you couldn't just carve runes and lay enchantments on any slab of sandstone grabbed from the side of the road if you wanted to make proper wards: you had to get materials from places where power of one sort or another had

flowed for a long time. Even worse, it was the labour of weeks if not months to both anchor the ward in the stone and then align that ward with the rest of the wardstones so they'd bolster each other instead of conflict.

"Unless my general staff and Princess Beatrice suddenly went mad, they'll have an explanation for it," I said, in a tone that implied they damn well better have an explanation for it.

Ahead of us the watch had seen us lingering in front of the gate, and by the sounds of it recognized our admittedly distinctive appearances. Hails were sent out and I answered with my raised staff, which was enough to get the gates open. A group of five Lanterns, twice as many Proceran fantassins and what looked like one of the Third Army's mages bid us to approach, the mage holding a presage box in her hands.

"There is someone else with the authority to order such purging," Akua pensively said.

She was right, I considered as we entered the camp and the gates thunderously closed behind us. There was one more.

Which meant, like as not, that the White Knight was back early.

epokki

Please help EE out, and vote for PGTE at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .
The series also has a pretty active Discord server, <https://discord.gg/Ad3D63W>

Insanenoodlyguy

"I'll find my horse," I said, cutting through the stillness. "And take care of the corpses here. I'll leave voting to you."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .

[Barthumphries](#)

Insanenoodlyguy, what about typos?

Though she made no sound at all, I felt Akua's presence in the Night as she hurried at my side.
Change "at" to "to".

The hem of her dress sweeping the wet grass and stoe as she slowed her pace, the shade came to stand at my side.
Change stoe to stone.

There are at least 8 more typos. Can you find them all?

Indra

Thanks. Been waiting for it 😊

[tkjarrah](#)

oh boy im worried about those corpses being in the night that definitely seems like the sort of game neshamah would pull, tricks inside tricks – something that catherine would almost certainly keep for study, poisoned or tainted to affect the night and the sisters from within

Vagabond

I didn't consider this possibility.
But it is a sound idea, since usurpation is called the essence of sorcery. And the hidden horror is probably the most capable sorcerer of the continent. And Night is one of its primary adversaries. And, in what might be foreshadowing, the usurpation being the essence of sorcery saying was repeated in this chapter. He will/does/has probably try/tried this with the Light as well (sucessfully I'd wager)...

Schemes within schemes. If your theory is correct, cat was played on so many levels here if she was a reliable narrator in this chapter. I'm honestly so excited for this book! 😊

Darkening

I mean, we saw something similar to that already with what happened when Cat raised a drow as a winter zombie and it gave Sve Noc an in to her power. But I suspect the goddesses are keeping an eye out for that sort of thing since it's a trick they themselves have used.

[HannaB](#)

This, IMHO.

[Javvies](#)

Plus, I'm pretty sure that the difference between using power to store something and using power to more intimately interact with something is a difference significant to matter for this context.

I'm more concerned about the magical examination and investigation of the seeds and their carriers than the storage of them.

Razorfloss razor

Fatigue gets the best of us. Cat is not going to like her mandatory break at all however it's very much needed.

caoimhinh

Well, she's apparently already planned a vacation South to visit the Arsenal and check on the Named there, so that might be a break.

Although this war apparently has more leisure than what Catherine says, because despite Cat listing a lot of events during the past couple of chapters, she's still here strolling the countryside instead of fighting at the frontlines where the power of Night is most needed.

[HannaB](#)

Catherine's main duties and capabilities are not in fighting. She can define the course of a skirmish, if she's lucky change the course of a battle, but to decide the campaign she needs to stay on top of administrative duties and strategic decision making, not frontline fighting. The marginal benefit is higher.

Mitrhe

Damn. Way to be brutal Cat. Akua is hunting for salvation she knows she will never receive, you should have held your tongue, but that's not you, is it?

Take that leave, sharpen yourself back up, and take that bag of bones down.

Oshi

This is going to be a slow and excruciating buildup. I was relaly hoping for a quicker one but damn...a month or two before it gets to good stuff.

caoimhinh

And we already **skipped** a lot of the good stuff too, as Catherine pointed out in the last couple of chapters: the battle for the attempted -and failed- retaking of Hainaut's capital, the death of the Fortunate Fool to take down the Lord of Ghouls, the construction of Arsenal to establish the Belfry and the Workshop, the battles against the Prince of Bones, the

apparent collapse of Refuge, what has happened in Praes with Amadeus, and many other events.

The 2-years timeskip landed us in a brief respite of the desperate war for survival that the previous Books had been building up, apparently. I would have preferred that all those events had been shown in the chapters, even if it would have taken 30 chapters to do so. A series of short timeskips across dozens of chapters works better and flows more naturally than one big timeskip that flies over so many big events, even if bigger ones are promised for the future. Sure, it gives EE the chance to pull out things we have never seen before and state "this was prepared during the timeskip" as it's been done with all the artifacts and tricks the Workshop and Belfry developed and are going to be used now, but it still feels weird.

The tension, anticipation, and hype that was accumulated in the previous book went up smoke and turned to confusion the moment Cat said "we have been in war for 2 years" while calmly strolling the small villages away from the frontlines and thinking to go *further away* to visit the Arsenal, and stating that they even could send away Mages, Named and Priests away for *months* without apparent issue.

I mean, sure, the future chapters are probably (and hopefully) going to be filled with battles and emotions that will show us why the war against the Dead King is so dangerous and terrible. But these 5 chapters so far feel kind of lackluster since EE skipped the initial horrors of the war and landed us in the calm before the big storm that's supposed to be the end of this war, with the repercussions of all those events we skipped being about to blow up in our faces.

Tom

I see your point about how the flow from the previous book feels broken, but I'm glad EE didn't spend another book on those two years, because the plot would simply be: team living gets stuck in a stalemate with team dead for two years. I'm sure he could make it entertaining, but I would still find it frustrating to read chapter after chapter of our protagonists not making meaningful headway or suffering meaningful setbacks. If he'd written, "We'd driven the Dead King's armies back to the outskirts of Keter and were readying ourselves for the final push," I'd be right there with you, because it would plainly be skipping some important parts of the story. But I think this is all right because it lets him do a big chunk of worldbuilding without putting the story on the back burner to do so.

[HannaB](#)

This.

[spamdesu](#)

Also the thing I see coming are once again Interludes with insights into past happenings, specifically the two years

Crash

had he done a series of shorter timeskips we'd have more howls about the timeline and just as many people asking for a single timeskip to neatly deal with all this.

That aside, it's not feasible i don't think. The mess with the Army of Callow alone would most likely be enough to fill up a good 20 of those 30 chapters you used as an example, furthermore this is a mess we'd have to learn about over interludes: Cat couldn't go herself, she had to be in Salia and we would be reading another good 20 chapters of diplomacy and people dragging their feet while Cat and Cordelia get increasingly fed up, Hanno has all the facial expression of a Carrot and Tariq has more platitudes than long term plans (am still not over this complete dumbass thinking they could keep a damn MageTech central hidden from the HIDDEN HORROR. Gods.) ; Then we'd be having some interludes in the League as well, so we can see what General Basilia is up to and the war mustering.

All the while, the usual malcontents will be crying about "too many interludes" this and "go back to Cat" that while we're going through some important story details.

No, I think this single giant timeskip is much more elegant a solution. Now, as we did in the later bits of the last Book after the Everdark we can instead slowly get acquainted with the changes that are actually relevant when they come up and Cat mentions then to us. And if necessary, have a couple Interludes set in the past as we have done before.

There is no way to please everyone but this, I think, is the path of least resistance.

We also have a good precedent for it in the Book 4, as said before. Give it a chance, maybe you'll change your mind.

(Wow, finally finished my re-read and caught up! The new update schedule makes me sad, used to be I had the full week with new chapters from different things. Not so anymore. Ah well, whatever is best for you EE!)

violentink

I think you go where the story is. We've been battling the King of the Dead for multiple books – I don't think we need

to see marginal gains created in the initial two years of slogging war. Also, the desperate war for survival was because not everyone was fighting the dead. Last book ended with everyone (more or less) pointed the right way, heroes and villains aligned. I think this was the perfect place to start the finale and I for one am loving this new arc.

Earl of Purple

Adding to the points made by the others, I think the story is about Cat. And after two years as a claimant, smaller or less time skips would leave people wondering when she's getting her Name.

I think that this means she's not getting a front line Name, but a rulership or mentor Name. The fighter and strategist role she's filling isn't the one her Name wants her to, so she hasn't advanced the story of claiming the Name.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I ever got > I'd ever had
unaffected the > unaffected by the
them, it'd take more damage than that to break the necromancy
animating it, but (ought to be – instead of commas)
fail to gain > failed to gain
grass and stoe > grass and stone
clearly what not > clearly not what
be turn into > turn into
consuming my hand (is that right or should it be mind)
back of tricks > bag of tricks
insisting on seeing Creation always (maybe “always insisting on
seeing Creation”)
shovelful of yourself > shovelful yourself (or by yourself)
or dismissed > or dismissed him
away form her > away from her
one of advantages > one of the advantages
its nature allowed > its nature allowed for it
most difficult > more difficult
using Arcadia, (: or – fits better)
knkack > knack
known where > know where
and there were > and they were
could found by > could be found by
entity close > entity close by
military efficient: > military efficiency:
thing stripe > thin stripe
as well a begin > as well as begin
this ought to have turned into a proper mess. (sounds like
there's missing words)

Also, some of the colons seem to be used in place of semi-colons. not sure if intentional.

Konstantin von Karstein

So the TW are hostile to the DK's forces 🙄 It's probably because Tariq gave the one crown shaping it. It explains why Neshamah is not sending entire armies in the grand alliance rear, or besieging Salia.

caoimhinh

So convenient XD.

Maybe it's because the Twilight Roads were created with the purpose of moving armies against the Dead King. But yeah, since Neshamah is a far better mage than all of them, a convenient restriction like that was necessary to avoid the Army of Keter marching out through the TW and fucking them all over now that apparently the big physical gates aren't so necessary as initially believed and nearly anyone with a bit of magic or luck can access that realm.

Crash

Probably the purpose thing.

Reckon you could think of the Ways as large scale Artifact and as these things are created for a purpose/to fulfill a specific need it wouldn't make sense to have it straight up get taken over by the thing it was literally made to deal with, in this case, Nessie-boy.

That said, the Ways are a secondary dimension between Arcadia and Creation and we all know how much Stories mean to the Fae, maybe some of that trickled down and coupled with Tariq's will shaped them into something that dislikes the Dead King; It may be that this affects him alone but I suspect that, in the future, should the Grand Alliance (or more likely the signatories of the Geneva Conven—, I mean, the Liesse Accords) find themselves all waging war upon someone that someone may find the Ways are closed to them as well.

Larat, the Fae, made a crown and was the first member of a new court, giving it a tendency to stories. Tariq Fleetfoot is a sneaky wanderer and so the Twilight Ways catter to those who wander and makes it possible for them to find their way. The Grey Pilgrim, hero in service of Above, gave his crown and life to give the united peoples of Calernia a fighting chance against a great Horror.

And so, the Twilight Ways become the tool of war in the tale of the War on Death, leave cracks for those who know where to look and shows the way to those who wander.

Or, it would be deeply inconvenient if Malicia suddenly could pop her assassins right in the middle of any army she likes and Neshamah just teleported his Dragons straight into the heart of your camp. Very effective and practical, mind you. Also terrible for the plot, aye?

NZPIEFACE

I feel it distressing how you can just feel how tired Cat is in this chapter.
poor cat.

dadycoool

I was holding out hope that everything after Cat woke up was a (possibly prophetic) dream or something, but Akua's explanation makes much more sense. I suppose this will herald the rise of General Abigail, the Uncannily Lucky.

Liliet

Whew.

)=

Burlyraven

Well my longshot theory on a revival for Tancred is looking about as dead as he is, but maybe Cat will give him a funeral pyre. There's still room for that unformed aspect to be a rebirth by fire.

The updates on the Twilight Ways are interesting, though. Definitely some room for Names specifically aligned to them to arise.

Javvies

Hanno isn't an idiot these days (or, at least, not as much of one), so he probably has what he thinks is a good reason for doing what he did.

Ah, yes, Cat has fallen into the trap of being the indispensable woman, and has trouble delegating to others.

ninegardens

Huh... so if I remember correctly, the Lanterns are associated with Levant- and hence directly to the pilgrim. The Drow associated to Cat, and Sve Noc.

Archer was there at the founding also, and is high skilled, and I'd put bets that Roland is one of the best mage practitioners of the ways.

By contrast, DK had just suffered a major defeat(?) at the founding of the ways, and Heiropant also is not well liked..

The main logic of the ways seems to be how aligned people are with that particular band of five.

I'd be curious how Tyrants Horse brigade (the katarphy? The... those horse riding people) interact with the twilight ways, seems like they should have either some distinct advantage or disadvantage, depending how you interpret Tyrants role in events.

Not sure where the Witch of the wilds fits into that.

Konstantin von Karstein

Nice theory. And it's kataphraktoi 😊

KageLupus

I don't think that the Ways are tied to the original band of Five. Rather, it sounds like anyone of sufficient power and skill (minus Neshamah) can open a permanent gate, but only once. Masego was part of the first gate created and arguably was the main hand behind it. Cat supplied the power but Masego and his Wrest do most of the fine manipulation.

I would guess that if Cat tried to create a second permanent gate she would run into the same problem that Masego did. The Twilight Ways are a refuge for travelers, not a glorified subway for anyone with power. Limiting gates to a single one per person means that each one has to be personal and meaningful. It keeps the Twilight Ways from being filled with "tunnels" from location to location, and instead be more useful for individual travelers going to a general destination.

Plus, from a narrative perspective, being able to make a permanent gate anywhere and any time would be too broken and mess up the flow of the story. That provides a strong meta reason to disallow Masego making a gate whenever he feels like it, and an equally strong in-story reason since the Guideverse cares about meta narratives.

WealthyAardvark

It might be related to the sacrifice to sustain the realm. Cat thought it would just be an offering of blood, and maybe it is for a temporary gate. But perhaps a permanent gate takes something more essential, a piece of the soul or life essence or whatever? It might be that he was wounded in some

way by the first sacrifice such that the second almost killed him. If so, maybe someone could recover enough to make a second permanent gate safely, maybe not.

HannaB

It feels like a democracy thing to me, in long-term perspective. The gates are going to be where *many people, summed over the centuries*, wanted them to be, whether they agreed on things or not. Averaged out.

If every practitioner gets only one chance to make a new gate of their own, that'll kind of encourage them to think hard about it / save it for the most necessary moment, which is precisely the kind of drama guideverse feeds on, let alone a semi-fae realm.

laguz24

I think that it is like rolling dice for helkians just like the tyrant's role. Also, I thought that it was a two-month time skip since they have been at war for two years, just not against the dead king.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Do Revenants Names change after they die? Thief of Stars, White Knight and Sage of the West would suggest not, but Lord of Ghouls and Prince of Bones sound very Revenant-y. Unless they were necromancers before being turned into Revenants. Would that count as irony? I can just imagine Neshamah bitch-slapping the poser calling himself the "Lord of Ghouls" while the Dead fucking King is in town. Also we need an extra chapter detailing the fight against the Lord of Ghouls he seems like a total badass and it's always epic when a joke character like Fortunate Fool goes CMHB + Heroic Sacrifice. For that matter, would love more backstory extra chapters, I'm actually interested in Saint of Swords beginnings like for Pilgrim. Drake Knight fight or Barrow Lord was probably amazing. And since it's been a year can't wait to see how Ranger and Black Knight have been doing. Please don't have them win/lsoe offscreen, I love seeing Black in action.

Also, which races can interbreed in Calernia? We know humans and elves and humans and fae can, but what about other pairings? If goblins and orcs have children would that create the most terrifying stabby psychos in history? WOULD they be Cat-sized?

Super tangent but this is the type of shit I wonder when I'm drunk.

Darkening

It's entirely possible that people simply don't know who those revenants *are* and that's just what they've been dubbed by people fighting them. I can't imagine DK is eager to reveal who they are, since that would give people an idea of their aspects, and I bet he's got some ancient revenants no one alive has ever heard of.

As for interbreeding, Fey are more concepts than flesh, so I would be entirely unsurprised if they were capable of breeding with anything or anyone. There was talk of Taghreb mixing with Djinn and other magical creatures in an effort to make better mages. As for orcs and goblins, hard to say if they can breed with any other species since most humans hate/fear/despise them and goblins are insular enough I suspect it doesn't come up much. I suppose the juniper/aisha teasing is a sign it's not *impossible*, but I'd think if half orcs were a thing we'd have heard of it at some point. I... don't recall hearing about demon/devilspawn, but I could be wrong and there's some Wasteland family that regularly infuses their family with infernal blood. I suppose since Talbot made a comment at one point about how they could use magic to let Cat sire a child, that if you throw enough sorcery at the problem life finds a way.

Lordy

What does Community Mental Health Board have with anything?

Sun Dog

Crowning Moment of Heroic Badassery, would be my assumption. tvtropes talk.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Actually meant Crouching Moron, Hidden Badass. Indeed a trope but also the acronym Red from Overly Sarcastic used in her video.

Sun Dog

I agree with Darkening. Cat turned down the Name of Black Queen, but is widely known by it anyways. I suspect Lord of Ghouls and Prince of Bones are what people call prominent Revenants, with no respect to their actual Names in life.

Especially if Pappenheim was right that the Prince is a distant ancestor and Proceran hero famed for his last stand against Keter.

Tyck

..Oh, dear. I wonder if the Tower is sufficiently warded to prevent Sidling. Ranger must be amazing at it. I can see Malicia

establishing a gauntlet for Black to have to go through and then he and Ranger just slip out of Twilight right next to her with a 'nice Demon army. We have to talk.'

Black Spiral Dancer

Slow build-up, but necessary.

Ernest Pereira

Well, I've done it. I've finally caught up.

[Aranaya](#)

Why do I hear someone screaming in the background

Chapter 6: Equivalent

"Fairness is the refrain of the lazy, the inept, the heroic. Anyone unwilling to stack the deck and murder the judge to seize victory has no place wielding any real power."
– Dread Emperor Callous

I'd seen enough presage boxes by now I could tell who it was from the Workshop that'd made them. The Blind Maker's carved enchantments were in beautifully fluid cursive, like the High Tyrian they derived from, and they felt warm to the touch. The Bitter Blacksmith – the heroine, not her villain brother at the Morgentor – chiselled in hers with swift, impersonal precision while avoiding flourishes. She had little taste for such work and always sought to finish it as quickly as was possible without compromising quality. The Hunted Magician, whose work was being held up in front of me right now, took to the craft with the same amount of cryptic paranoia that was his signature in everything else. Though the symbols he used were some sort of ancient Mavii runes and like much of that ancient people's work they were as much art as function, within them the villain carved entirely unnecessary and unrelated symbols. Masego had told me that carving those signs in any order but what it must have originally been done in would make the box fail to function, sounding about as impressed by this as he'd been miffed.

The runes on the side, which I fancied to look like a wheel woven from winds when taken in all at once, remained inert even when brought close to me. The mage from the Third Army – a lieutenant, by the stripes – tested Akua as well before drawing back with a

sharp nod at the rest of the force surrounding us. She saluted me, pointedly not looking at Akua more than she needed to. Blonde, that woman, I noted. Liessen did tend to be fair-haired.

"Your Majesty," she greeted me in Chantant. "Lieutenant Eve Baldry, tenth company. I'm currently under loan to Captain Raphael Twice-Drowned of the Ardeni Guard."

Fantassins, then, not proper Volignac foot. The ten soldiers who'd come along with the Lanterns and the lieutenant had undeniably had that look about them, it must be said. It wasn't a question of equipment, not anymore, as Cordelia had with my enthusiastic blessing begun offering to pay the mercenary companies with good steel the moment trade with the Kingdom Under opened again. Nowadays fantassins were not significantly better or worse off in equipment than Proceran regulars, though the personal armies of the princes and princesses still boasted superior arms as well as training. But where regulars and sworn men wore the colours of some royalty or another, fantassins wore marks just as garish as the names of their leaders and companies. As a rule, the more outlandish the names and colours the longer they'd been in the mercenary trade, which meant the eye-watering shades of orange and green on their feathered helms were a good sign.

Any soldiers wearing colours that bright in a war against Black's legions would get a goblin arrow in the throat before the campaign's first night was over, but the Principate had fought a different sort of wars in the days before the Dead King. The Ardeni Guard was not familiar to me as I knew only the most distinguished of the companies in Hainaut, like the Grands Routiers and Hermosa Foxes. I'd taken Klaus Papenheim's solid advice and left Princess Beatrice Volignac to handle the fantassins along with southern Procer process as a whole, which meant I was not forced to entertain half a hundred swaggering captains for meals regularly but also that I was only passingly knowledgeable about that particular slice of our forces. I cast a curious glance at the Lanterns – faces painted white and gold and built like they'd spent the better part of their lives in a shield wall instead of a temple – but got no introduction out of them, only respectful nods. The formal priesthood the Dominion answered to only the Gods Above, in principle, and not even the Holy Seljun could command something of them should they be disciplined. In practice they tended to be receptive to requests from the Blood, though not to the point of outright subservience. The only person I'd ever seen the warrior-priests take a knee for was the Grey Pilgrim.

To me they offered respect but no great deference, and to use them on the field I usually needed to pass the order down to them through Aquiline or Razin. Inconvenient, but given how brutally

effective they'd proved against undead I'd keep my complaining down to a pittance.

"Well met, lieutenant," I replied in Lower Miezán. "I don't suppose you could tell me what the lights above are about?"

"Above my paygrade I'm afraid, ma'am," the blonde mage said. "I heard there was a scuffle, but my orders didn't come with a briefing attached. Captain Raphael might know, though, they're in charge of the gate for the first night rotation."

I frowned. I was more inclined to head directly to the heart of the camp and interrogate someone in charge than stop by for a chat with a fantassin captain, but the casualness of the mage's reply was surprising me. She did not seem concerned in the slightest.

"Muster wasn't sounded?" I asked.

"It wasn't," Lieutenant Baldry confirmed.

Akua hummed out in amusement.

"The White Knight has returned, hasn't he?" she asked.

The Callowán lieutenant turned a cold glare to the shade, long enough to acknowledge a question had been asked before turning to me to answer it.

"Lord White returned about half a bell ago, ma'am," Lieutenant Baldry agreed. "He's got another two Named with him, though I can't say I recognized either."

I could have said I was warned of another's coming by the sound of footsteps, but that would almost have been untrue. The sound of boots on earth was a small thing compared to the almost aggressive loudness of what the approaching soldier was wearing: there was a good coat of mail somewhere under there, and a cuirass, but it was almost hard to see under the green-and-orange striped vest that went down to their thigh, which were in turn covered by bouffant pants going down to the knees that added bright blue to the palette. None of the... frills, though, seemed to hinder movement: the pants were tucked into good steel greaves, and the vest was close enough to the body it shouldn't get caught in anything when a sword was being swung. The long dyed hair, half orange and half green with two small stripes of blue, was the finishing touch to the ensemble, framing an almost comically unremarkable face. The fantassins parted for them, which allowed me an easy guess.

"Captain Raphael?" I asked in Chantant.

Gods, let them be the captain. I was not sure my eyes could physically take the amount of garishness it would take for the captain to out-peacock this one.

"We meet once more, Black Queen," the Proceran boldly replied. "A strange turn of fate, that would see us fight side by side when we were once enemies."

I smiled blandly, wondering if I was meant to have any clue at all who this was beyond some mercenary captain. Still, it wouldn't do to let anyone know I was confused.

"Yes," I gallantly tried. "That is true."

At my side Akua's stance stiffened the slightest bit, which was the Sahelian equivalent of uproarious laughter at my expense. All right, so maybe it'd not been the finest of my illusions.

"Twice-Drowned?" I prodded, cocking my head to the side.

"When the grounds collapsed at the Battle of Trifelin, I fell into an underground well," Captain Raphael smiled. "Along with a few hundred pounds of stone. Yet it was still more pleasant an evening than being subjected to your tender mercies at the Battle of the Camps, Your Majesty."

Trifelin was, from what I recalled, a major defeat that Princess Rozala had been inflicted in the early months of her defence of Cleves the first time she'd been charged with the defence of the principality. It'd been a hard setback that could have turned into a proper disaster had heroes not held the rearguard of the retreat. Impressive they'd survived that mess when standing in the thick of it, much less the implication they'd been on the field at the Camps when I'd opened the gate into Arcadia and dropped a lake on the crusaders. *Someone to keep an eye on*, I decided. Survive enough scraps by the skin of your teeth, these days, and a Name might not be too far ahead.

"You may rest assured, captain, that when lakes next fall you'll be on the side welcoming it," I said, tone droll. "And as it happens, I've questions you might have the answer to."

"It would be my pleasure, Your Majesty," the captain replied with a sweeping bow.

I took a step forward, Akua falling in behind, only to find Captain Raphael had offered me their arm. *How long has it been since someone tried that?* I wondered, baffled and just a little charmed. I took the offered courtesy and we walked towards the closest watchtower, where a brazier was being used to roast meat in a way that would have seen a legionary of my armies harshly reprimanded for. Fantassins, though, had different standards of discipline.

"I have heard that the White Knight returned," I began.

"Indeed," the captain agreed. "Along with the Valiant Champion and a girl from parts unknown."

I forced my face to remain calm, my fingers to remain unclenched. The Valiant Champion, huh. Hanno was usually cleverer than this when bringing strays home – that I'd not skinned that so-called *heroine* alive and made a cloak out of the leather was already showing great restraint, as far as I was concerned. The Champion was an ally in the fight against Keter, and so would be extended all courtesies and privileges that the Truce and Terms required of me. Yet I'd rather eat my own hand than offer a thimble more to that woman, and that was not an enmity that would ever be buried.

"And it was Lord Hanno who ordered the use of the warding array?" I asked.

Raphael nodded and leaned in close, lowering their voice.

"I am told there was some manner of infiltration by the Dead King," the captain said. "It was quickly dealt with through use of the sorcery that lies at the heart of the camps, though that section still remains closed."

"Casualties?" I bluntly asked.

It wasn't that Neshamah wasn't capable of subtlety: he was, and often the costs of missing his quieter schemes were the stuff nightmares were made of. On the other hand, even if Hanno had ridden in with providence at his back to unmask the Hidden Horror's latest ploy this seemed too sloppy of an attempt to feasibly have lasted on the long term. Which meant this wasn't an infiltration attempt, it was strapping goblinfire to a sapper's back and sending him running at a gate. The Dead King was always willing to trade lives or resources for corpses, even at seemingly ruinous rates.

"I know not, Your Majesty," Captain Raphael said. "Though I was told the central camp was closed by the Deadhand's order, so your man ought to have the answers you seek."

He usually did, truth be told. I'd come to sincerely believe that the Empire's occupation of my homeland might have led to widespread chaos and rebellion within a few years, if Scribe hadn't been at my father's side. Like Black, who'd never settled in a Callowan city to rule the kingdom from, I'd been forced to discharge a great many responsibilities from a glum succession of army camps, small towns and fortresses – without Hakram keeping everything organized even as we moved, it would have all gone to shit with remarkable haste. Even now, he tended to know more about what was going on in the camp than I did.

"Then I will seek him in turn," I said. "I thank you for the conversation, Captain Raphael."

Taking the hint, they adroitly extricated their arm from mine and offered another gallant bow.

"Until fate deigns to reunite us, Black Queen," the mercenary smoothly replied.

While I wasn't always the, uh, sharpest when it came to picking up on this sort of thing I was pretty sure I was being flirted with. One hand, well, *Alamans*. They'd try to seduce the Choir of Contrition, if the angels showed enough leg. On the other hand, it was kind of flattering. It'd been a while since someone without a Name had tried their hand at that with me, even so superficially. It put the slightest of springs to my step as I left the fantassin captain behind. Akua did not say a word, though she did begin walking at my side instead of remaining a step behind as we headed deeper into camp.

"Hakram's on board with whatever the White Knight pulled, sounds like," I murmured.

Reassuring, that. I'd come to put a surprising degree of trust onto Hanno's shoulders, since the Peace of Salia, but it was not the kind of trust that went without questioning or disagreement. Adjutant, though, I trusted implicitly. I might as well begin questioning my own limbs, should I not. If he'd backed this there was a good reason it for it.

"The Sword of Judgement has proved a capable ally," Akua conceded. "And unlike some of his more rambunctious colleagues, he is not one to resort to collateral damage when there are other approaches to be had."

That'd been a pleasant surprise, since while heroes tended to be careful with the lives of others they tended to be a great deal less so with equipment. Even when that equipment was very, very valuable. It was a cold hard truth that there were artefacts and siege machinery in this camp that were worth more than soldiers, and though that was an ugly thing to face it came with being a professional soldier. I could send for reinforcements, if what was lost was lives, but there were only so many wardstones to distribute across all the fronts and they were not easily replaced.

"He's a solid one," I grunted in agreement.

I wouldn't have been able to pull off the Terms and Truce without him, that much couldn't be denied. There'd been heroes that simply would not have been willing to deal with a villain if he'd not leant me the weight of his seal of approval, and that would have led to deaths. Even just a few of those would have made it

seem like I was trying to conscript Named into my service, which would have gone... badly. Tariq still had a lot of pull with heroes he'd helped or saved when they were younger, that much couldn't be denied, but as word of my raising him from the dead at the Graveyard had spread so had rumours that he was somehow under my influence. He was no longer the unquestioned grandfatherly fount of wisdom he'd once been to his side, though his record over the last two years had certainly begun redeeming the dip in his reputation.

The avenue leading to the heart of the camp was guarded by checkpoints at regular intervals and it was not long before we found our first one, along with a proper company of my soldiers. The captain commanding it knew about as much as Captain Raphael had, which wasn't much, but she sent a runner ahead of us along before providing us with a full line in escort. I did not need more defending inside my own camp, but twenty legionaries at your back did tend to expedite most conversations. We continued deeper in, the sparse conversation I'd shared with Akua petering out entirely. I spoke with my soldiers instead, learning with pleasure that the line's lieutenant was an old hand from the Fifteenth. He'd been from the second wave of Callowan recruits, after Three Hills and Marchford – when Black had essentially emptied the Legion training camps in the kingdom and tossed all those green men my way.

"Lost a finger at Dormer," Lieutenant Oliver told me almost eagerly. "From one of them Immortals critters, after the Hellhound sent us up the hill."

"They were hard bastards, even for fae," I said. "Summer's finest."

"Shit name though, no offence Your Majesty," the veteran snorted, and I grinned back. "After Lady Dartwick nicked those banners, they were pretty moral when the gobbos from ninth company unloaded. Finger got fixed up good anyway, one of them Soninke wizards from Afolabi's legion put it right back on."

"Not even a scar?" I teased. "All the best war stories have scars to go with them."

"Aye," Lieutenant Oliver mourned. "It tingles a little when there's magic in the air, I know it, but these fresh pups from after the Folly don't believe me. Say it's all in my head."

"Tell them you have me convinced, next time," I suggested.

"That ought to make a few of the little pricks piss their armour," Lieutenant Oliver gleefully said, then remembered who he was speaking to. "Um, Your Majesty."

I snorted, clapped the man's shoulder.

"I've spent more time on a saddle than a throne, soldier," I reminded him amusedly. "By all means, make the little pricks piss their armour."

That got a howl of laughter out of the lot of them, and it was in a better mood that I hit the second checkpoint. Where, looming tall above Osen's sworn swords, I found the key to getting answers about what had happened in the camp tonight. No amount of polish would ever remove the scorch marks Summer flame had left on Adjutant's plate, though as time passed he'd come to like the look. It was distinctive, as was his height even among his own kind. The black, fur-like hair nowadays going down to his jaw on the sides was another distinction, as it was far longer than either Legion or Army regulations would allow. Still, there was a reason he was not known as the Blacksteel: the most distinctive part of all was the fleshless hands, one of sheer bone and the other cast in pale spectral light. Hakram Deadhand had earned his sobriquet twice over, and *Dead the Hand* remained a favourite to sing among my soldiers.

A few lines had even been added after his scrap with the Baron of Thorns, as his brutal dismantling of the Revenant while reciting orc poetry had made something of an impression. Hakram strode through the Levantine armymen, either not noticing or caring how a few of them had to hastily move out of the way or been bowled over. His broad face looked relieved.

"Catherine," he greeted me, arm taking arm in a legionary's salute. "I'd wondered if you were ambushed. Beastmaster knew little, but it seemed likely."

"We were," I darkly replied.

Good mood gone the way of mist under morning sun, I fixed a calm look on my face before dismissing my legionary escort with a few kind words. By the considering look on Hakram's face, he'd picked up on the general vicinity of how badly my night had gone.

"So were we," Adjutant added in a low voice as we passed through the checkpoint.

He settled at my right side, so naturally I almost didn't notice, while Akua took my left. Not an unapt summation of the last two years, I thought.

"What happened?" I quietly asked. "Our defences shouldn't allow for infiltration, Hakram. We've put the stones in every gate, any enchantment he hits our people with should be disrupted."

"Ghouls slipped in," the tall orc told me. "A new kind, that can-"

"Shapeshift," Akua murmured.

Hakram shot her a considering look and she offered back a slight nod.

"Your escort," Adjutant told me, and it was not a question.

"We have the bodies in the Night," I said.

A halfwit would have put one and one together, given that much to go on, and Hakram was the very opposite.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Beastmaster said he was just a boy."

My finger clenched around my staff until the knuckles turned white.

"Sometimes we just lose," I softly replied, through teeth I did not remember clenching.

It fit, though. I felt like my entire body was clenching every time I thought of the kid I'd had to put down because of my own sloppiness.

"I'll be seeing what duties I can shake loose, to avoid repeating the mistakes that led do that loss," I forced out.

As if by coincidence, his flank leaned against mine. It was the most comfort either of us would allow him to give me in public but, trivial as it might seem, I was shamefully grateful for it.

"The presage boxes should have caught them," I said, and if my voice was a little choked all three of us pretended not to have heard it.

"We've found a weakness in our defences," Adjutant gravelled.
"The Order of Broken Bells."

Akua caught on before me, somewhat unsurprisingly. Generations of her forbears had cut their teeth on this very obstacle, after all.

"Their armour," the golden-eyed shade said. "The same hymn carvings that disrupt active sorcery prevented the ghouls from triggering the boxes."

Fuck, I thought. The weakness we could fix, the corpses we could not. I'd lost even more knights, by the sounds of it.

"Talbot?" I asked.

Losing him would be a setback. Not only was he the highest-ranking noble officer in my armies, the man had essentially put the Broken Bells together from scratch. In both politics and war, his death would be a loss keenly felt.

"Getting his eye fixed by the White Knight's fresh helper," Hakram replied. "The ghouls were caught out before they could finish what they'd been sent for."

My eyes narrowed, relief at the Grandmaster of the Broken Bells surviving being shoved at the back of my mind.

"Assassinations, but that's nothing new," I said. "Wouldn't have been worth revealing another breed of ghouls for. They went after the wardstones."

"They meant to contaminate the lesser array in the Third Army camp," the orc confirmed. "They were caught out by the White Knight, but the alarm being rung only made them strike out aggressively."

"Losses?" Akua asked.

"Light," Adjutant said. "Twenty dead, half again that wounded. They aimed for high-ranking officers but got caught before getting to them. The wardstones from the Third's camp were hit with some sort of sorcery that Senior Mage Dastardly called 'poisonous'. He had some difficulty elaborating on this, but was adamant it was a problem."

I felt Akua gaze's fall on me.

"Go," I said. "I'll want a damage assessment as soon as you can deliver."

She bowed, more for the eyes peeled on us than anything else, and without another word melted into the nearest shadows.

"So the array purge was used to flush out the 'poison'," I said, then flicked a glance at the lights in the distance.

It'd take more than one purge to have that much sorcerous aftermath left behind.

"Whatever shapeshifting trick it is the ghouls use, it is of a nature similar to enchantment," Hakram replied.

And the sorcery sent flowing out by a purge screwed with enchantments, which was why I disliked using those in the first place.

"It unmasked them," I mused. "Clever."

Sounded like Hanno, too. He preferred helping people help themselves rather than sweeping in on a white horse and fixing everything before disappearing into the sunset. Hopefully that hadn't cost us a few months of vulnerability to the Dead King's tricks, though. Gods, the vermin wards better be fucking holding at least. The atrocities Neshamah could commit with undead rats

and bugs were not something I ever intended to suffer through again.

"I ordered the central camp closed as soon as we learned, but they were already inside," Hakram told me. "They eat and impersonate people at a distressing rate, Catherine. We think the Barrow Sword and the White Knight's followers cleared them out, but we're keeping the camp closed until everyone with access to the stones has been cleared with both Light and sorcery."

I grunted in approval.

"Full audit of the ranks come morning," I said. "I don't care if they grumble, there'll be no risks taken with something that dangerous. And for the Order-"

"Talbot already offered that every knight should dismount and submit to testing by Light whenever they enter camp," Hakram told me.

"We'll see if something less clumsy can be arranged," I replied.

I had clever enough people in my employ, and if nothing else I could have Razin and Aquiline cut their teeth on the logistics of it. After I shoved them back into the Pilgrim's tender embrace, they'd hold their commands without my looking over their shoulder. They needed to be prepared to deal with situations like this on their own. This deep in the camp and with Adjutant at my side, we went through the last checkpoints without anyone trying to stop us. Even though the situation had, in principle, already been handled I still wanted to at least speak with Hanno. Besides, since he'd brought in another Named I would prefer having a look at them before too long. Best not to have one of those wandering camp without being able to put a Name and face to them, even if a name wasn't always forthcoming. The last ring of defences was manned entirely by the Army of Callow, which did tend to end up with those duties by virtue of both being my personal army and the best organized of the troops. When the Iron Prince's own troops were around it was another story, but Prince Klaus was far from here, holding the northern defence line in our absence.

I got to hit three birds with one stone when the captain in command informed me that the White Knight was currently in the same tent where Grandmaster Brandon Talbot was being healed, supervising the work being done by the healer he'd brought in. It wasn't a long walk from there, and I knew my way around the camp well: a few moments later I was parting open the tent flap and passing it to Hakram before slipping into the tent. Within a heartbeat of that I saw a half-naked Brandon Talbot try to rise to his feet, to the vocal if inarticulate protest of the two heroes in the tent, but he only stopped when I sharply gestured for him to sit.

"Don't blind yourself on my account," I said. "My queenly honour will withstand your staying seated."

"Much obliged, Your Majesty," Grandmaster Talbot replied.

He was careful not to move his head this time, having been levied a heavy frown by the healer in front of him.

"The nerves were almost healed," said young girl mourned. "We'll have to start over, Sir Brandon. Please remain still, if it pleases you."

The tent flap closed behind Hakram, who had to bend his neck the slightest bit to avoid his head touching the ceiling of it.

"Catherine," the White Knight greeted me with a smile.

"Hanno," I replied, feeling my lips quirk the slightest bit.

It really was good to have him back. Even just sitting on a crate in a leather jerking, keeping an eye on his duckling, the dark-skinned man felt like an island of calm in a chaotic sea.

"I would greet you properly, Your Majesty, but I cannot stay my hand," the young girl apologized without turning.

And she was *young*, I saw. Scrawny and that dirty tunic she wore had seen better days, but for all that there was no denying the pulsing potency of the Light she was wielding to help my knight.

"You do me more courtesy by healing Brandon Talbot than a hundred curtsies would scrape together," I said. "White Knight?"

"Introductions can be seen to when her attention is not elsewhere demanded," Hanno said. "Though I wager you've other questions. I've news to give you, regardless."

"Do you now?" Hakram gravelled from behind me.

"Not so urgent as to need an intermediary, Adjutant," the White Knight told my second, unmoved.

The relationship between those two was best described as cordial dislike, though I'd never quite managed to put a finger on the source of it.

"What happened, Hanno?" I asked, cutting through the tension.

"After stumbling across one of the ghouls, I did what was necessary to flush out those in hiding before major damage could be done," he said. "Yet this was part of a greater scheme, Catherine. I've been speaking with Prince Klaus, and before coming here I met with the Peregrine."

My brow rose.

"Tell me," I ordered.

"The Order of the Red Lion confirmed that the dead were massing for an offensive until an hour ago," he said. "And now I fully understand why they gathered, and now no longer do."

"I don't suppose you intend to share at some point?" I drily replied.

He shot me an amused look.

"I found Pascale here," he said, gesturing towards the young girl, "with the help of the Valiant Champion after following up on a rumour that Tariq had been seen in the region."

I'd already made plain my feelings on that woman to the hero, so I saw no need to belabor the point by expressing the again now. Talk of the Pilgrim, though, sparked my interest. The Peregrine had lent his hand to none of the fronts, instead staying true to the roots of his Name and journeying wherever the Choir of Mercy deemed him to be most needed. If he'd really come here, then either we'd narrowly avoided a disaster or we were about to have one on our hands.

"It was a Revenant behind all of this," Hanno told me. "We named her the Plague-Maker, though besides her Praesi origins and talent in sorcery we know little of her."

"You found plague seeds as well," I breathed out.

"It was a scheme in two parts, as far as we can tell," the White Knight said. "First, after slipping through our defensive lines—"

"Which she shouldn't have fucking been able to do, Revenant or not," I bluntly said. "That's the reason we send the Augur all our oracles, so that she can warn us about shit like this."

"There was demonic taint on her," he told me. "Absence, Tariq believes, which might be why she blindsided us. I do not know when the Dead King might have found such a Named—"

"I do," I replied. "And if it's from when I believe, she's not the last one he'll have in store."

Malicia herself had once told me that Dread Empress Maleficent II had used demons of absence to avert the disastrous consequences of the three Secret Wars, for after failed invasions of the Serenity a counter-invasion of Ater by hellgate had been imminent. I couldn't know how many people the general who'd later become Dread Empress had throw to the dogs to avert utter calamity, but considering how ruthless Maleficent the Second had ended up being as a ruler I doubted that it'd be a small number.

Hells, considering half the continent was fighting Keter these days and we were still slowly losing I couldn't even blame her.

"A discussion to be had later, then," the White Knight said.

"Regardless, the undead plagues were meant to draw a significant fighting force south. A large force of zombies was massed around the Plague-Maker, hidden in the wilds, which I believe was meant to attack this very camp."

"The new ghouls were meant to hit our wards and leadership right before," I said.

"Exactly," Hanno nodded. "And, as a precaution, even if we won that battle handily we would be kept occupied by massive breakouts of the seeded plague in Brabant."

"Which we'd have to move to suppress, even as his armies took a swing at the northern defence line," I muttered.

It'd been, I thought, a pretty good plan. And it ought to have scrapped this summer as a season for an offensive war even if it didn't go entirely his way, all at the price of at most a single Revenant.

"You caught the Plague-Maker first, I take it," I said.

"Tariq found her in a western crossroads town, seeding refugee caravans passing through," Hanno said. "Rafaella and I caught up with him just as the confrontation began."

My eyes flicked to the young girl who was, by the looks of it, checking on Talbot's eye one last time before declaring him healed.

"That is where we found Pascale," Hanno agreed. "She'd caught on to the Plague-Maker's work."

I felt my hackles raise, though I wasn't quite sure why.

"Hale as you might hope to be, Sir Brandon," the girl – Pascale, apparently – smiled. "I am finished, if it pleases you."

"You have my most sincere thanks, Lady Apostle," the Grandmaster replied, rising to his feet. "If there is anything I can do to repay you-"

"I have already been repaid," the girl said, "in the only way that matters."

He bowed to her anyway, for he was a decent man, and offered to give me a report even as he put on a shirt before I bluntly told him to sleep off his healing and find me on the morrow. My shoulders were still tense, and I was not quite sure why. Hakram

hovered close behind me, having picked up on my discomfort but being as confused as to the source of it as I was.

"I take it the Grey Pilgrim did as the Grey Pilgrim does," I said, getting the conversation going again.

"He stepped in to protect me, when I tried to heal the plague," Pascale happily told me. "My Choosing had already happened, but it is not suited to strife and I was most distressed."

"He drove the Revenant off and we caught her as she tried to escape," Hanno elaborated. "She called on the undead she'd been gathering, but we held them off long enough for the pilgrim's star to shine."

Meaning Tariq had smote into the ground what must have been at least a few hundred zombies but most likely had been a few thousand. It was easy to forget how fucking terrifying Tariq Fleetfoot could be, when he had the right story had his back.

"Lucky us you'd learned enough of the Light by then to pick up on the plague," I warmly told the girl.

She blushed.

"I had not, Your Majesty," she admitted. "My father was a wizard, who taught me of the Three Tells and the Seven Essences. Yet even so, magic would have failed. Yet my prayers were answered by Above, in our hour of need."

"You are," I slowly said, "a mage."

"I was," the young girl told me with an elated smile. "When I became the Stalwart Apostle the sorcery vanished from my veins, and the Light finally answered my prayers."

A crack resounded in the room. It had, I dimly realized, come from my staff. My grip had been too tight around it.

"Did they listen to you?" I quietly asked. "When you warned them about the plague?"

I felt the White Knight's heavy gaze on me but did not meet in. I looked only at this slip of a girl, who was so smilingly alive where the boy was dead.

"They did not," Pascale sadly said. "But the Heavens did, when I knelt and asked for guidance. And through the Light, I found the way to dissolve the plague."

This was, I told myself, nothing I should not have expected. A Named – or close enough – in the service of Evil, had been sowing death and preparing to bring about a great woe. It was only

natural for the Heavens to put together a Named meant to end those designs, as the girl clearly had been.

"Ninety-nine times out of a hundred," I said, voice cold, "nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, that *act of faith* would have killed dozens of thousands."

The girl looked like I'd struck her.

"Catherine," the White Knight warned me.

My fingers clenched tighter still around the staff of yew, death made into a marching stick. He'd been a wretched boy, Tancred, but he'd not been *wrong*. To act instead of pray, to trust his the ugly work of his hands rather than the silent Heavens. How many thousands, hundreds of thousands, *millions* had stood in this girl's place over the centuries and seen their faith rewarded only by a grisly death? No, the Scorched Apostate had not been wrong. He'd not been Chosen either, he'd done his own choosing. And the Heavens had damned him for it, so damn the presumptuous fucks for that in turn. Hakram's hand warmed my shoulder and I closed my eyes for a long moment.

"It's been a long day," I finally said. "We'll speak tomorrow."

There was a reason I was more than halfway fond of Hanno of Arwad: he looked at me for a heartbeat the nodded.

"Tomorrow," the White Knight softly agreed, eyes considering.

I walked out of the tent and into the night, Hakram hastening to catch up.

Tancred had not been wrong, I thought, shoulders tight and teeth gritted.

But what did that matter, when he was dead?

Aston Whiteman

Thanks EE!

taovkool

Stalwart Apostle and Scorched Apostate, huh? Two new opposing Names. Should put that on the list.

[*ftaku*](#)

And another example of one upsmanship by heaven. Instead of making a tough choice, miraculously having the answer given to them. This is why Black disdains heros

Zgggt

Not even that. Above gave an easy answer, removed the need to make a hard choice, and made sure that others were there to hold the new hero's hand when things get bad... And made someone who *wished real hard* get rewarded with something other than a cold dose of reality and a humiliating death.

[TeK](#)

Which is a bad thing somehow.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

I would call the Apostate and the Apostle more complementary than anything.

Also, a new mechanic for Good vs Evil. It's no longer a war, it's now a competition. One-upmanship indeed.

rabidRay

The fact that a group of people is *inferior* by every definition of the word is not good. If you want to point an issue into why Calernia looks the way it does, it starts there.

Fayhem

If the Gods Above were the only gods this point might possibly be a somewhat valid point? But if one person gets answered by the Gods Above and gets a good deal, and another person gets the Gods Below and gets a shitty deal, it seems to me like the rational conclusion there is that Below has shitty gods.

I mean, Cat is furious here and just all kinds of lashing out, but what exactly is the counterscenario here? That Above should also have intervened for poor Tancred? Setting aside that the proposal there is that they should have answered someone who never actually tried asking (which is not an equivalent story), that seems like it's disregarding that Guide has a Manichaeian metaphysical setup – there are two sides, and they both have an equal claim and ability to act. Cat is lashing out at Above for “damning” Tancred, but it's not Above that makes someone a villain. That's Below's purview. I mean, do we even have actual evidence that Above

necessarily wouldn't have stepped in to help Tancred *if Below hadn't placed their claim first*? Cat likes to place the blame for bad things happening on Above one way or another and a *lot* of the fanbase seems eager to take her lead, but "bad things happening" is the actual specific purview of the *other* side – Cat's eagerness to look away from that fact is an example of how she can be an unreliable narrator, *not* a good example of an unbiased objective assessment that everybody reading should just accept unquestioned.

RanVor

One thing that irks me in the reasoning of all you Above defenders is the assumption that Tancred didn't try to pray, which I find highly unlikely. His characterization suggested that he used to be fairly religious before the Marserac incident (supported by his Name – an apostate is a person who renounces faith), and if I understood correctly, he mentioned his mother being infected as well. I'm sure he did pray for the Light many times. Just not in the specific moment when the Above wanted him to do it.

Fayhem

> Just not in the specific moment when the Above wanted him to do it.
AKA, the specific plot-relevant moment where a Name could have happened? Do you think Names can just happen literally whenever?

RanVor

> AKA, the specific plot-relevant moment where a Name could have happened?

Yes, that's exactly what I was referring to. Now take a look at Tancred's Name and tell me, what can drive a person to apostasy if not severe disillusionment with religion?

Fayhem

Sorry, I'm not interested enough in your point to respond meaningfully.

RanVor

I see. Okay, carry on in your willful blindness, then.

RanVor

@Fayhem

I see. Okay, carry on in your wilful blindness, then.

Fayhem

Also, one thing that irks me is that you completely dodged replying to my main point to laser-focus on an aside that was more or less a throwaway.

RanVor

That's because your main point is of little interest to me, and I wasn't replying to you specifically, but your entire side of the argument.

SilverDargon

I respect the point you're trying to make but I think you're forgetting something important. Namely the duality between the two new named.

You say that the gods below offered a shittier deal than Above and that means its their "fault," that Tancred got screwed over, but Its important to remember that someone was going to get a shit deal anyways. Its been said multiple times in the story that Above and Below have equal power to influence the world, and whenever above tips its hand, below gets a foot in the door to empower someone for their team as well. So maybe Tancred could have been a hero if he'd decided to keep praying instead of going out and trying to fix it himself, but if that had happened than Pascale would have ended up a villain. Its useless to argue about which side is at fault because its not like they both could have ended up heroes, only one person can fill a role at a time.

The practical (hehehe) effects of their naming though is that the coalition gets TWO whole named with the power to spot the plagues the Dead King is throwing around. Because Above and Below both acted, therefore keeping the balance, in theory the army gets that much more effective against a threat that both Above and Below wanted gone.

My theory is that Once the Dead King sees that there are two new named running around with the power to specifically fuck him over he figured he had to decide which one to kill. Between the Hero and the Villian, which one gets plot armor? Catherine is running up against the same issue that has Amadeus so fucked in

the head. Below gets offered shit deals and has to suffer and rely on their own power and cunning while above gets near guaranteed success by sitting pretty and thinking happy thoughts. He takes it out on the Heroes in an attempt to 'prove' that they don't deserve the wins they get, and Cat see's a system that takes broken people on both sides and arbitrarily fucks one of them over.

Its not fair to blame Pascale for what happened to Tancred and Catherine KNOWS that. Its why she excused herself after snapping at her basically unprovoked. I appreciate that she's trying to be better than the Black Knight was whenever she can, even when this is obviously an emotionally trying spot for her.

Thanks for coming to my TED talk.

NerfContessa

Mostly agree.

Still hate it, the boy had story potential up the wazoo....

luminiousblu

>The fact that a group of people is inferior by every definition of the word

Welcome to, like, real life? I can't think of a single setting where this isn't true. Even if we totally ignore the good vs. evil thing going on, mages vs. nonmages is clearly not even close to equal. One of them tries their best to subvert the rules, the other utterly ignores them. Then there's people who are just born stronger (Catherine, apparently; most girls can't beat the snot out of pit fighters twice as heavy no matter how quick they are on their feet due to simple physics), born smarter (Akua), born richer (Akua again), born hotter (Malicia). What're you to do?

[onedollargum](#)

While it's "good" that above wants to help people in this manner, the problem is that they don't do so reliably. Cat is saying that less than one percent of the people would have been answered favourably in this manner. The complacency that it breeds is staggeringly deadly, as the people around those rare chosen will be inspired to emulate their example.

It's like playing the lottery instead of going out searching for a job to make ends meet except, in this

case, not paying the bills means untold thousands of people die.

If every single one of Cat's soldiers were to put down their swords and pray for deliverance instead then the war with Keter would end really quickly, and only the Dead King would be happy with the result.

[TeK](#)

There is a saying "Trust in God, but do your best". I guess it's cultural thing, but for me, self-reliance and faith were never mutually exclusive concepts, so I have a hard time understanding your point.

erebus42

I believe the point they're trying to make is that in this case that self reliance aspect is missing. The Apostle is one of that rare few who when she prayed for her problems to go away, she was given an easy solution. That's all well and good for her and the people she saved, but that is not a reliable occurrence. Blind faith that things will work out if you hope hard enough can often lead to complacency and cause people to forget that only way that all will be well is by making it so. The Apostate on the other hand was not given such a neat little solution and so had to do his best with what he had. And his reward for taking the harder road and saving thousands was being murdered and damned for his troubles.

[TeK](#)

That is true and honestly I tried to argue against that point only because I didn't want to admit that I was wrong.

Which I am.

Fayhem

> And his reward for taking the harder road and saving thousands was being murdered and damned for his troubles.

No, his reward was the power of a Name. If he was "damned" by being a villain, I'll note again that it isn't Above that makes villains – that's Below's purview. And Hero or Villain are mutually exclusive claims – does anyone actually have hard evidence that Above necessarily **wouldn't** have helped Tancred **if** Below hadn't staked a claim first? As Cat noted

herself, “making hard choices for the greater good” is a Role we’ve seen attached to heroes before. And he was murdered by the Dead King, who was originally empowered by – you guessed it – Below. Not to mention that Tancred did in fact get someone there who **could** have protected him; she just didn’t succeed (for reasons that are understandable but don’t change anything about what happened), and is now furiously externalizing her guilt at any convenient target.

tl;dr – Cat is eager to point the finger at the other side rather than the one that is still nominally her own, which she’s good at since she’s a well-written charismatic character and which is a normal human response (especially when under great strain and suffering from genuine emotional distress) but that still isn’t something that the fanbase should just up and follow her in doing IMO.

Josh

I think it helps to remember that, in general, the only reason why it can be framed in this way is because Cat is the main character. Cat is the type of grey that really rings as true to us because she operates the same way that we, being real people, understand.

But remember that Cat is such a unique breed of villain that her existence has been enough to change the foundations of the entire world. The world before Cat didn’t really operate on that logic. And, to be fair, Cat hasn’t been Named since the end of Book 2, which means she’s been able to develop without the direct influence that everyone else has had to deal with.

Fact is, from everything that we can tell, that for every other villain before her the act of being able to make a hard choice was indistinguishable from the expectation of being able to make the choice. To put it another way, the type of person in this universe who was able to take matters into their own hands became, without exception, the type of person who demanded to be able to make those decisions and fuck everyone else.

And if you are going to force a morally ambiguous standard on everyone despite that, let’s be consistent here. People who ask for help and get ignored don’t usually develop into monsters that murder thousands of people just because it’s funny. No, the type of person who could do that is already

capable of doing that before they ask for help, so is it really all that horrible that a god would see that person asking and tell them to fuck off? Tragic, yes. Hypocritical, not really.

Josh

Just as a follow up because my comment may be a little confusing: you're assuming that every villian could have been a Cat if only the heroes worked with them, instead of assuming that every villian except Cat is a Dread Empress Malevolent, regardless of what the heroes do. And my contention is that, statistically, you have way more reason to assume the latter than the former.

luminiousblu

The idea that taking the harder road deserves a reward is inherently idiotic. Roads are roads, and where they lead has nothing to do with how rocky they are. Tancred, best I can tell, got fucked over, not by Below, but by Catherine dodging story bullets. Tancred was in a spot of trouble when the Mysterious and Powerful mentor character shows up to rescue him, which means that, story-wise, he should be safe for a while. Catherine explicitly refuses to slot into the role due to her fear of possible future ramifications, which means that the plot armor offered to Tancred was basically denied. At that point, reality ensues, and the uber lich kills an emerging threat. Compare what happened with Hanno, Grey, and Pascale – it's almost the exact same scenario. What do you think went differently?

Thor

That's exactly why Cat is pissed. Scorched Appostate made the hard choice to stop the plague and Good just left him to fail. Instead they decided to empower the person who made the objectively wrong choice to do nothing.

beleester

We don't know what would have happened if Pascale hadn't received an answer to her prayers. Maybe she would have done the same thing Tancred did, maybe she would have tried something else to reveal the plague, any method she chose might or might not have succeeded. But in a setting where the Gods can and do help people when they ask, there's nothing inherently foolish about prayer.

Sure, it's not guaranteed, but Evil doesn't offer any guarantees either – Tancred didn't survive past his first appearance. Sometimes you just lose.

Fayhem

Thank you for your reasonable response! Pascale getting an easy answer in response to asking for one does mean she never had to make the awful choice that Tancred did – but are we seriously claiming now that it's a good thing that Tancred had to make that awful choice? It's true that if Pascale had prayed for an answer, not gotten one, and then sat on her hands and did nothing that disaster could have ensued. But we have no actual evidence that she would have responded to a lack of answer by doing nothing, do we? We just have evidence that Above was able to save one person who reached out to them directly but couldn't save everyone, which in a Manichaeian setting where Good and Evil have equal power and check each other accordingly is going to inevitably be the case and doesn't prove that Good wouldn't like to save everyone if they could.

Honestly, it legit bothers me how eager so many people are to unhesitatingly accept all of Cat's assessments even when she's explicitly emotionally distraught, run to the raw edge of ragged, and sufficiently compromised by both things that she can even acknowledge herself (which doesn't come easy for her) that she's making mistakes and she needs to take a break because she's lashing out at targets who don't deserve it.

[ayon96](#)

But remember that she tried to warn others of the plague before turning to Above which is different than praying to Above without doing anything.

That's really one of the differences between Good and Evil.

RanVor

Except Tancred did it as well.

SpeckofStardust

Yes and after he was rejected he went and stabbed a man to prove his point that said priest had no right to disagree with him about the plague. The girl decide to so to speak asked more directly for a better healer.

RanVor

Excuse me, but I don't remember any deicide being involved. Could you clarify?

He who travels the stories

@TeK:

Of course it is a bad thing. Why? Because it is absolutely self-gratifying.

The Scorched Apostate wished for the Light so badly he turned his magic into something so close to it as possible. Do you think he did not pray for Above to give him the means to help him cure the plague, too? But they did not help him. He was left with the necessary Evil of Below.

But then Above goes and gives that girl the ability to cure the plague, turning her magic into Light. Mocking the hard decisions the Scorched Apostate had to make; somehow trying to turn THEIR lack of delivering on their promises of help in the face of Evil into HIS personal failure, he should have "just hoped a little harder".

You can not rely on Above to save you but Above has the audacity to frame not relying on them, to not have faith despite their fickleness, to search for other, more reliable ways as Evil. That is why it is a bad thing: they paint the 999 out of 1000 who did not get their help as having a personal flaw, blaming them for Above's failings. You can't reasonably expect people to rely on you when you are simply not reliable but Above does just that, pointing at that one time they helped and how well that played out, not mentioning the 999 times they failed to deliver.

AbraKadabra

This. You are correct.

Konstantin von Karstein

Which saved or will save many lives, so I don't really see the problem.

ThatOneGuy

Her pick fought to try and stop the plague. He got his face burned and then butchered by undead before turning into an undead.

The hero pick got the free pass, no undead ambush as she got to play hero... And she is left alive bringing the key to stop plague while Scorched got burned and died... For trying to do the same thing.

Not so much annoyed at the lives being saved, but the folks above getting to decide who gets to be saved and who

die... Especially since they were both mage born wanting to be priests.

Mental Mouse

Unfortunately, Cat lost hers through carelessness....

tithin

A good chapter, thank you.

tkjarrah

nb character nb character! raphael's outfit sounds SO UGLY im in love

Adrian_V

Yeah, poor Cat, the horrors she has to put up with xD

KageLupus

One of my favorite parts of the story is the way that stuff like this is just dropped in without being a big deal or sounding strange. Random character gets introduced as they and Cat just immediately understands that that is how pronouns works and goes with it.

My favorite is still the dwarf honor seeker murdering monsters for a marriage license, though.

chris S

Not trying to downplay it here, but also remember Cat is high priestess of an entire race who don't use the "traditional" concept of gender. It'd be more surprising if she was taken for a loop by it.

erebus42

Damn, talk about the universe pissing on you while you're down...

Oshi

Poor Cat. Beating herself up right into a new name.

Djinn O'Cide

Well, I never post here, but four posts already and no-one's reminded people to go vote.

Here:

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Liliet](#)

Thank you!

Juff

Typo Thread:

Mavii runes and > Mavii runes, and
Liessen > Liessens
southern Procer process (is this correct)
priesthood the Dominion > priesthood of the Dominion
fortresses – without (should be a separated sentence)
ahead of us along > ahead of us
pretty moral > pretty mortal
been bowled > be bowled
led do that > led to that
leather jerking > leather jerkin
Scrawny and that > Scrawny, and that
they gathered, and now no longer do (hard to parse. maybe and
“and have now dispersed”)
expressing the again > expressing it again
had throw to > had thrown to
it’d be a > it’d been a
Brandon,” the > Brandon.” The
not meet in > not meet it
trust his the > trust the
Hakram’s hand warmed (are his hands warm?)
heartbeat the nodded > heartbeat, then nodded

NerfGlaistigUaine

Well that’s fucking unfair, but then when did fairness matter.
Apostate was right, but why should the dead care? One has a
village saved and fresh Light to her name and the other, only
ashes. This chapter does make me empathize with Black though.

“None of it is earned. It is handed to them, and this offends
me.”

Even with all the great speeches in this story, Black’s Rage
against the Heavens speech is still the most epic.

decius

“None of it is earned. It is handed to them, and this offends
me.”

Justice only matters to the Just.

[TeK](#)

Justifications matter for everyone.

[sivarajan](#)

"Fairness is the refrain of the lazy, the inept, the heroic. Anyone unwilling to stack the deck and murder the judge to seize victory has no place wielding any real power."

Adrian_V

Tancred is looking to have a bigger impact than we hoped after he died, and we seriously need a list of current named, maybe in that meeting that was mentioend Cat is going to they will be mentioned, like "we have xxx and xxx in this front, these in another and we could move these others, etc".

Oh and Hakram doesn't liek Hanno wonder why that is? xD Like father like daughter xD (scribe dislikes Ranger if i remember).

This chapter tells us 2 things about cat right now: 1) she needs to get laid, 2) she needs more than get laid, as in an actual relationship with someone she can consider an equal (wich sadly wasn't the case with Kilian sicne she was always liek a subordinate), i just hope neither dies as a consequence.

And as much as i get why Cat reacted like that i can't help but feel sorry for that girl, i suppose that character development can make her the replacement goldfish for Tancred, it would be cool actually.

TeK

Sex saves lives.

Adrian_V

Things is that she needs more than sex, a lover could serve as a good sounding board and has the ability to point out her flaws, wich is something we have seen happen between Hanno and Her, on both ways, it shouldm't mirrow Black and Raner's realationship, more like Masego's parents actually. Speaking of it, if Black and Malicia would have actually developed a healthy relationship then a lot of the plot wouldn't have happened xD. Instead neither could really see the other as an equal, mostly Malicia but even Black, sure it could be said is something every willain is unable to do but we have seen Cat has learned to actually stop and consider being in the wrong among other bits of character development, and Hanno too if i remember well their talk after he woke up last book.

Point

More generally than just a lover, she really needs any other outlet for her stress than pouring herself into her work.

She failed Tancred because she is spread too thin, and offloading some of her duties will only go so far. Hakram

can do a little to mitigate her stress, as we see in this chapter, but her position only allows for so much comfort.

NZPIEFACE

Regarding the new Named mentioned, I love the Bitter Blacksmiths. They're siblings with the same Name, but one is a Heroine, and one is a Villain.

Huh, EE was really shoving in the fact that Above and Below mirror each other.

Liliet

Yep, sounds like it! Bless ♥

TeK

I wonder, why don't Heavens help everyone? Is it deliberate malice on their part? Or is it the lack of strength to help everyone? It can't be indifference, they do help after all. So Cat must think it is deliberate malice then. Which is absurd. Unless she thinks that Heavens reward you only blind faith. But then what about all those whose blind fate was not rewarded?

See, I have trouble understanding her point now, except that she is angry and Above make for a convenient scapegoat.

RoflCat

>But then what about all those whose blind fate was not rewarded?

That's the point of her 99/100, 999/1000 talk. The Heavens don't always answer because they can only interfere if the Story allows, and those moments where prayers did nothing? Many died. Yet all praise Above for the one good thing they did while ignoring the ones they left behind.

TeK

I don't think you got what I meant. You said it yourself, Heavens can help only if story allows. It is not deliberate malice, nor is it indifference. So I am lost as to why any kind of blame is laid at their hands. It seems petty and entitled. It's like getting angry at the fireman that he only saved your family, and not also your stamp collection.

NZPIEFACE

It is kind of petty, but completely understandable. Cat is approaching the whole praying thing rationally. There's no point in praying if your prayers only have a tiny chance of being answered when it matters. So you should act,

which means you're a Villain and now you've turned your back on Above.

She's angry about how doing the smart thing means you get fucked over by Gods.

[TeK](#)

But if you approach it rationally from the position of Heavens, this kind of triage does make sense. If you can save one kid, you would also be saving your first, even if it is kinda cruel. Moreover, in Guideverse, praying is not as useless as in our universe, and that bias might also skew perception of the matter. Because praying works. And finally, Heavens are kinda non-sentient, so blaming them for anything is extremely ludicrous. Like they actually resurrected Cat, but somehow that was taken for granted, like it was all her. But if it is a bad thing, oh those damn evil Heavens.

Now if w are being honest, the boy would've died if he did not acted. But maybe that is precisely the reason Heavens did not hold his hand: because he didn't need them. And well, after that, he did reject Heavens through his actions, he proclaimed that he is a strong independent mage who don't need no Heaven. It is not irrational to not spare a limited resource of providence on someone who explicitly rejected your help.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That's a pretty good point. Cat still thinks its bullshit though.

[TeK](#)

She kinda has to, at that point. Not the time to doubt yourself.

willfultrooper

Your firefighter analogy is completely one-sided and leaves no room for a counter-argument or at-least a counter-argument that could use that same analogy i.e firefighters saves family but not stamp collection, on Below's behalf. I will instead hijack the firefighter part. Let's say Above are firefighters and they have the ability to save a house out of one hundred. This could be for a number of reasons not enough water (or power in above's case) as one such example. Let's say a fire happens and we know for certain homes are going to be burnt to the ground. We don't know how many and so some (not all but for arguments sake lets' say 50 left) fled

their homes. Now lets say the apostate is the the one homeowner who realised that maybe the firefighters won't save him and so he takes numerous steps to save his home and fight the fires. The apostle on the other hand just sat there and believed really hard that the firefighters will save their house (let's not forget the other 48 people I have not yet mentioned who believe the same thing). In this scenario 98 out of the 100 houses burn to the ground.

The Apostate is then ridiculed and or ostracised by the firefighters (I know firefighters won't actually do this in real life but in this instance this is what above did to the apostate so just go with it) for trying to do their jobs and not having faith in them whilst the Apostle is praised for staying in her home despite the risk of the fire and the firefighters thank her for the faith she had in them. 52 are alive in this scenario, the 50 who fled and the Apostle who's home is saved and the other is the apostate. All 48 of the other homeowners who stayed are dead because the firefighters couldn't save their homes and they were thus burned alive. Despite the fact that the Apostate saved his house he is instead branded as an unfaithful member of the community for not believing in the firefighters. Whilst the Apostle who did NOTHING was showered with praise and the 48 people who died are forgotten. This I believe is the argument NZPIEFACE was trying to make.

(I know this isn't the way firefighters would have behaved, it's an analogy)

[TeK](#)

Now I have to say that yes, my firefighter analogy was entirely sophistry. I struggled when I was writing whether I should use a proper argument, but in the end I fell to the Dark Side. And I am sorry 😊

See, there is a flaw in your argument as well. The first part is alright. Let's assume (and I believe it is a reasonable assumption) that firefighters know which homeowners will fight the fire. Now let's say that fighting the fire has a 10% chance to work, and praying has 0.01% chance. And firefighters can give one house a 100% chance increase. It is only natural, if your goal is maximizing the amount of people saved, to give that increase to the praying ones. So blaming firefighters for that is absurd.

Now let's get to the part where firefighters ridicule the homeowner who fought the fire. Now first of all, we need to establish exactly what "fighting the fire"

entails. Which is, apparently, slaughtering every single person inside the house in cold blood, including children and elderly. Now let's balance that by the fact that not all houses in the village caught on fire initially, and that taking the fire out by yourself saves not only your house, but an entire village. Theoretically at least. We don't know if there really was no better way. If waiting it out would certainly lead to the entire village catching fire. But let's assume so nonetheless.

So now you got a saviour with bloody hands, and Sainty Mc'Praysalot. To be more precise, we got two new recruits. One puts out fire with murder (?), another without. And look, the dastardly culprit wants to kill the both of them, and you can only save one. Moreover, your dark counterpart (the firefighter village deserve, but not the one it needs right now) is here to save the murderly one. So now again, the same situation, you can only save one, but the murderly one with the Dark Mommy has a 50% to survive, and another one is pretty screwed on her own. And again, giving her the 100% chance to survive is more efficient.

And now let's change it a little. Let's say that firefighters don't really fight fire, but bestow the fire extinguisher to the Chosen one. Now can you blame them for bestowing that extinguisher on the person who chose NOT to slaughter an entire village? And will you blame those firefighters for protecting the person you already gave your one and only extinguisher too? Say what you want, but if Tankred was chosen by Above, he would be another Saint of Swords.

Ya all hated Saint of Swords.

Fayhem

> Say what you want, but if Tankred was chosen by Above, he would be another Saint of Swords.

> Ya all hated Saint of Swords.

A GOOD POINT.

RanVor

Except he wouldn't. What he wanted was the ability to heal. Just because he was capable of slaughtering everyone doesn't mean he'd do it if presented with another option. Or that he'd still be capable of doing it after being chosen, for that matter.

willfultrooper

Ok fair, it would be far more practical to give resources to the individual most likely to, let's say minimise collateral damage. However, continuing on with the firefighters providing a fire extinguisher analogy but I will instead change fire extinguisher with water hose for this thought exercise and will use the term trees for a substitute for a fraction of the population and the forest as a substitute of the entire population. Before we continue I'd like to state that my argument is that the Apostate is justified with his actions and also Catherine's anger towards how people treat the heavens or the heroes by proxy is also justified.

Continuing on from your previous point of the Apostle being given the water hose and the apostate stuck with "Dark Mommy" as you call Catherine, the fact that Saint was chosen as a hero clearly demonstrates that the firefighters have no qualms with choosing individuals who are ready to get down and dirty, this also includes the pilgrim if you have not forgotten his little plague that he dropped. So the fact that the firefighters did not choose the apostate for his actions (the actions being murderous yet with good intent i.e limiting casualties) are invalid, instead the reason he was not chosen was because he did not believe that the firefighters would provide him with a water hose during a forest fire and instead chose to cut down the trees with the potential to spread the fire (This is an actually valid tactic done to prevent the spread of forest fires, the cutting down or removing of trees to minimise damage done in a forest). In fact, the very reason he chose the axe was because he did not receive the water hose and instead chose to cut down trees (the villagers in this instance) choosing decisive action in order to spare the rest of the forest. Thus, his action to use the axe to cut down trees was a reaction to the firefighters not giving him the water hose resulting in trees being cut down but the rest of the forest being saved. Whereas the Apostle prayed or asked really hard and was given the water hose and she thus saved the ENTIRE forest was also a reaction being granted the water hose.

The reason why Catherine was angry was because the Apostle did nothing to earn that water hose and yet was granted the water hose by the firefighters, when we know for a fact that if the fire were to occur there were other individuals who were asking for it.

(Transitioning back to PGTE: The plague was happening, chances were that other people were asking for aid as well, if the Apostate had allowed the plague to spread hundreds of thousands would have died and so he weighed the hundreds to the countless lives that could be lost if it continued to spread and decided on the killing the villagers. He was forced to make that choice and was thus gaining a Name, earning it whilst the Apostle had her named granted to her) The anger Catherine has for the firefighters is not the fact that they gave out the water hose, but the fact that the Apostate was branded a villain for taking matters in his own hands by said firefighters and the fact that the firefighters and the Apostle were praised in proxy whilst the Apostate was left cold and instead villainised.

Fayhem

> There's no point in praying if your prayers only have a tiny chance of being answered when it matters. So you should act, which means you're a Villain and now you've turned your back on Above.

Praying isn't mutually exclusive with action. It costs nothing and a 1% chance of a free solution to an awful scenario is actually a wonderful rate of return for an investment of literally nothing. Saying there's no point to praying in Guideverse bc there's a low chance it will work is like saying you shouldn't play the lottery in a scenario where you don't have to pay to enter the lottery and it's just a giant pot of free money you have a chance at getting if you just ask for it. Stopping at the 1% chance and then not doing anything if it doesn't work is a bad plan, yes, but there's no actual evidence that would have happened with Pascale. Pascale prayed and got lucky, Tancred didn't get lucky, and the kid Cat identified with and wanted to help was the one who got the short straw *in much more significant ways than this* and so she's lashing out. Which I do completely agree with you in saying is kind of petty, but completely understandable.

Also, and I will keep repeating this until it looks like people are acknowledging it, *there is more than one side in the Guideverse*. So re: your thing about "which means you're a villain" – Below is the side that makes Villains, not Above. Being mad at Above because they only have equal power to Below and so can't help everyone feels like being mad at Above because of what Below is doing, which seems like a weird transference of responsibility to me. It honestly seems like a lot of claims against Above that the

fanbase makes are based on effectively transferring arguments re: theodicy from the real world to the Guideverse, but that's erasing the fact that such objections IRL are responding to the premise of a benevolent *and all-powerful* Heavenly force/entity that could easily overpower Evil if it decided to. And that is explicitly *not* the premise of the metaphysics of the Guideverse.

RanVor

I guess time doesn't count as "something", then.

[Mammon](#)

You're thinking of the issue in two dimensions, while Cat sees the problem in three. The third one being the inevitable consequences of an approach over time. That's what she and Black (and EE) are able of seeing and about in approach. Seeing that the current Good and Evil are only temporary fixes that by success and cultural shaping make everything worse and more morally inbred in the end.

When Black conquered Callow, he didn't try to change it. He went for the quiet slow death, essentially keeping things good enough to make the people content and have Callow literally die out by old age their eternal vete with Praes. He didn't put a boot on Callow's neck to gain its riches and keep it from rising up right now, he made it so that in one generation from now Callow wouldn't want to rebel. As Cat monologued, the martial law of the legions was often a good thing by discipline and Praesi occupation was starting to become less of a blight from Below.

When she was to decide how the Drow were to reshape their ruling class, Cat mentioned how she was aware that corruption and loopholing of the system was inevitable. That in about 200 years, there would be some class that by finding methods around it would remove the intent of her system. That's why she didn't give the Drow a system that benefitted them right now against DK, but some system that would at least hopefully not corrupt too much in the centuries after.

That is Cat's problem with Above. It has forcefully shaped a dependency on Heroes that enables the stubborn and self-defeating air of Good vs Evil that allows Good to not even question their own righteousness or expect Above to fix the worst of things. But once a Hero dies of old age or doesn't show up in the nick of time, what good is that system then?

Providence and prayer don't work 99/100 times, and do 1/100 times. And sure, it may save the day that 1/100 times. But

people have gotten to rely on this, too many have gotten to expect this and not do anything else. That 1/100 times is being used as the solution too many times, seen as the only option too many times.

Her issue doesn't necessarily lie with Providence (though she does clearly have a distaste for the heroes getting such aid that makes them contempt and overconfident), but how it has corrupted the Good countries. How it has made these fight Evil because Evil (Such as invading Callow for their lands- I mean Evil) and then expecting Above to save their asses if things go south. For not expecting the consequences of their actions when they feel their greedy actions were righteous, and calling it Evil when consequences do strike at them.

TeK

And if we look in four dimensions, cold-eyed murderers doing bad things for good reason can backfire pretty spectacularly too. The saying about good intentions and whatnot. I think it all comes down to a basic arithmetics: You can't add up lesser evils to a greater good.

As I wrote earlier, self-reliance and faith are not opposing concepts to me, though they do seem this way in this novel. But I just don't agree. The fact that your prayers are sometimes answered is more of a reason to pray, not less. Because I think the focus should be on the fact that she chose not to murder innocent people, and personally? I think that is the reason Heavens chose to help her.

Mammon

Cat doesn't do bad things for a good cause, she's a ruler. The big issue with this argument is that at this point, she's the representative of what morals and righteousness Callow has rather than being beholden to cultural and legal norms of others. As also seen by Cat not maintaining the cultural norms and values of the long prices for small slights, and Procer deciding that their landgrabbing of Callow after Black was dethroned was righteous and in name of Above.

Your argument no longer floats, as Cat has long since ascended past what you're referring to. She's not to make the hard calls of being the lesser evil any more. She's making the calls and has been doing this both more politically correct than many of Above, and in favour of the war and good in a way that doesn't even allow one to call it a lesser evil any more. In many regards, she has ascended in position to a point where the actions of

Tariq and the likes have since made them the lesser or even greater evil by action even if not by their own perspective and believes.

And your second paragraph's argument is kinda missing the very point that others may have been making and I have been trying to make, by you making it about the person praying. Instead of the by you and others used firefighter argument I'll be using soldiers instead.

One cannot blame the soldier for doing what they're told, or blame them for the war. One should go to the generals and commanders that order the war crimes, and the politicians that started the war. You're in this comparison the republican that tries to take this argument blaming Trump and the higher-ups for committing some war crime on Afghanistan civilians, rephrase it to the soldier that did it being blamed by me, and then trying to defend the soldier by saying that they were doing what they were told. Trying to rephrase the argument to fit your narrative.

My argument of what I think Cat hates lies not with the people or even the Named (though she indeed utterly loathed f.e. Pilgrim when he confidently proclaims that Good will prevail because they've got Providence on their side, thus neither having to worry nor think of the consequences and risks), but with Above. Above created the situation where people pray to them for salvation and Heroes so blindly rely on them. Above created the situation where Heroes are needed to save the day, only to then die of old age and see to another time of troubles and rising of new Villains requiring the rising of a new Hero and the continuing of the cycle of dependency.

Above is responsible for both the Good countries' reliance on Heroes and their selfrighteousness, as well as the long-term consequences, moral inbreeding and inevitable results of what Evil would look like because of Good's doing. Above is responsible for this, responsible for changing it, and by doing neither is responsible for the fallout. And in some regard, the more experienced and guiding Named like Tariq who for so long refused to work together with Cat and see her as anything but Evil despite his side being the selfish invaders, are similarly to blame for maintaining a crappy status quo.

The upper echelons that should improve have grown stagnant and faulty, still maintaining a system that results in Villains being blamed for making the hard

call even for doing the right thing, while propagating the people to pray. In that, and they do seem to be somewhat sentient or at least able to know that they're doing wrong, Above is indeed being a little bitch.

Konstantin von Karstein

The only Good country who heavily relied on Heroes was the Old Kingdom of Callow, and it was because its neighbours were madmen creating undead plagues, Flying Fortress and stealing its weather. All the other Good countries we have seen had few Heroes, or they are not playing a great role in managing the country. Tariq has an important role in the Dominion, but the Levantine are perfectly capable of managing themselves without him.

So, I don't think Above is perpetuating the situation where people need them, they are just answering distress calls and helping those in need.

And you said that the Villains are blamed for making the hard calls, but it's true only in very few case, like Cat and Tancred. For most of Calernian history, most Villains were monsters who needed to be put down.

Concerning Tariq, he is of the only school of heroism, where all Villains were madmen. Catherine is not the average Villain, she is an exception to the rule. Tariq was wrong, but his actions were comprehensible.

Peter

The Scorched Apostate did by himself what the Stalwart Apostle required Taric AND a Deus Ex Machina from Above to do. Yet the Scorched Apostate died while the Stalwart Apostle got to live, which just seems unfair.

[sivarajan](#)

"Fairness is the refrain of the lazy, the inept, the heroic. Anyone unwilling to stack the deck and murder the judge to seize victory has no place wielding any real power."

[Valeren](#)

Mainly because above and Below are not inherently about good vs evil but about submission to greater power vs personal. The idea is that above will save you, yes, if you do what they want, when, where and how they want, while below favors personal choices and ambition. Now i'm not going to pretend that Evil is not evil, the point is that one should not pretend that Above is either:

They are gods, mortals are basically like toys and pawns for them and this has been shown more than once.

[doominator10](#)

I'm very curious as to the courteous dislike Adjutant and White Knight seem to have for each other.

RoflCat

Cath = Black
Hakram = Scribe
White Knight = Ranger

In a nutshell.

[TeK](#)

Hanno is not a Ranger, he is Malicia.

ninegardens

Or alternatively- he's a Squire.

Scribe's antagonism with Cat was because she was new on the scene, and potentially a story liability.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Fuck. Damn. This sucks.

The whole scene with Hanno just goes to show how Cat fucked up and paid dearly for it, yet how the heroes manage to win on every front that mattered for them.

Instead of using sorcery to remove the plague, they can now use the Light, as long as they pray hard enough.

dadycoool

And that's the kind of BS that Black Knight spent over 20 years railing against. Didn't he rant about it to Cat during one of her early study sessions?

[sivarajan](#)

Book 2, Chapter 36, Madman.

RoflCat

What really sucks, though, is that one of the reason Tancred is dead is Cath herself refusing to get into a mentor Role.

The Stalwart Apostle was saved by the 'everyone's mentor' Tariq timely intervention.

While Cath's refusal to become Apostate's resulted in her failing

to notice the danger approaching him, though given this is Below maybe she is already in the 'vengeful mentor seeking vengeance for students murdered' path.

And as much as I'd like Cath to be nicer to Apostle as part of trying to make up for what she failed for Tancred, the girl's power is Light while Cath uses Night, I highly doubt we'll get that path.

NZPIEFACE

tfw you realize that the heroes have a mentor thus not dying in the crib

this is literally what black did. killing problems before they start. but now the grey pilgrim is there to stop it.

dadycool

I'm really getting Cat-Tariq foil vibes. Caring mentor/Uncaring mentor, protective/vengeful, and those are just the way they're opposite. In most other ways, it's a Dark Mirror kind of relationship.

Mammon

But Pilgrim has an immunity to being killed over being the Mentor, while Cat mentioned how mentorship is an incredibly risky thing for anyone else. Just look at what happened to Black, despite Scribe's concern. Cat made a hard but important choice to not risk her own life as the Black Queen, First under the Night and so on for a newbie mage, while Pilgrim thanks to the Orphim's protection and his Role doesn't need to worry about such a Story death being likely or even inevitable.

As a result, it's not really the same. Even in hindsight, Cat made the hard but necessary call while Above once again can just ignore the rules they set by making exceptions. Kinda similar to the whole Heroes saving soldiers but ignoring the value of items in their collateral despite being more valuable than the soldiers. It might be called Evil to make that call, but practically one can call it stupid evil of Above that they work so superficially only to see Providence making it work too often for them to see this.

Konstantin von Karstein

If I remember correctly, the Heaven don't cheat concerning the Mentor-immunity of Tariq. What spooked Cat the first time she heard of him is that he is so good at story-fu that he is capable of dodging any such mentor story. It's like Black, who managed to kill countless Heroes despite being a Villain.

Mammon

I assume that in part it is also him defying this norm so often (and the first times with aid of his Choir) that he got the same immunity to it as Cat seems to be getting for telling Choirs to bugger off. His story-fu is no longer a hard requisite beyond what he does superficially.

AbraKadabra

Which probably means Cat New role will be black pilgrim.

Frivolous

Unless I'm mistaken, Captain Raphael Twice-Drowned is the first uncertain-gender character we've seen so far who isn't also a drow. And even then, the drow uses the pronoun 'it', while Raphael uses 'their'.

In other news, I wonder why Hakram and Hanno don't like each other. Could it be because Cat finds Hanno attractive, and Hakram is being all big-brother-protective of her?

Decius

The drow are not of uncertain gender. 'Drow' IS a gender. They use it/its pronouns.

dadycool

I hadn't noticed the pronouns until you mentioned them. I wonder what that was all about. Androgynous, perhaps? I like the concept of this extremely sinister-looking orc with his dead hands and black armor laying down the big-brother Talk with the shining leader of mortal Light on his Warlord's behalf.

ninegardens

>In other news, I wonder why Hakram and Hanno don't like each other. Could it be because Cat finds Hanno attractive, and Hakram is being all big-brother-protective of her?

I mean... this feels doubtful. Given what we've heard of Hakram, and given what he knows of Cat's previous... engagements.... And given that we have at least mild confirm that HannoxCat is not a thing.

Possibly Hakram sets Hanno's coin hand itching? As in Hakram is stated to be creepy- even Kairos found him weird.

Liliet

I HADNT NOTICED UNTIL YOU POINTED IT OUT

NB CHARACTER NB CHARACTER NB CHARACTER

(Upon reread, there's very little pronoun use regarding them, artful on erratic's part)

Burlyraven

So now I'm thinking Tancred getting a revival might not be a good thing, if it were to happen. There's room for a story of Evil and Good coming together to face the True Enemy, with the Scorched Apostate and the Stalwart Apostle as the two sides of the same coin (possibly long lost twins), but the tone of the story is definitely tending towards Cat going down a dark path. And if so, any revivals would be pretty dark and twisted, and possibly even set Cat up as the monster to replace the Dead King.

I was prepared to say, though, that if we got more details on Tancred in another chapter past his death, it would almost be more forced to **not** revive him. As is, I think it might be best for everyone if he really was fridged.

NZPIEFACE

Do you think it's possible for Tancred and Pascale to work together though?

Her existence, like, as a whole, basically invalidates what he did. It's what he's built from, "doing what was necessary". How shattered do you think he'd be if he learned he was just wrong?

Decius

Work together? No.

But a cunning leader could easily place them in a rivalry to cleanse more plague than the other, and then into a rivalry to destroy more undead than the other, building to a point where one of them has a choice to either save themselves or take a great personal risk to protect the other.

Insanenoodlyguy

And then they kiss!

Burlyraven

If it did turn out that they were long lost siblings, then maybe (and there are hints that the story would allow it), but that's another reason I'm not really a fan of a revival anymore, because it's very likely that scenario ends with Cat as a mad witch type guarding the vengeful Scorched Apostate as he seeks to rid the world of the so called chosen.

TeK

Not really possible to work together, since one of them is kinda dead.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

lmao

Decius

>"Masego had told me that carving those signs in any order but what it must have originally been done in would make the box fail to function, sounding about as impressed by this as he'd been miffed."

And that was when I knew that the Dead King had created a fake box that fails to function, for the purpose of having his ghouls use it to create a sense of security and prove that they aren't.

[Liliet](#)

Oof.

TBF they have other means of detection.

dadycool

EE, You can't keep doing this to us. Our hearts can only take so much twisting, squeezing, and stabbing. Cat's already learned her lesson regarding predictability etc. You don't need to twist the knife like that.

I suppose it's already established that Villains can only truly exist as foils to Heroes, but I'd thought we were past that.

[Liliet](#)

Poor Pascale. She does not deserve this. It's not HER fault Tancred died, but Cat can't really help being emotional about the whole thing, now =x

RoflCat

It just feels awful to be the opposite side of the spectrum.

On one side, a new Named granted power she desire to answer the needs, with protective grandpa and caring sempais to help her in time of danger.

On the other side, a new Named forced to use the power he has to slaughter the 'few' to save the many, picked up by a person that refused to become his mentor despite his longing for one, and then get murdered in his sleep and murdered again by his not-mentor.

One side got everything, the other side lost everything, and she's on the latter side.

RanVor

Of course, Cat's treatment of Pascale is entirely undeserved, but let's be honest, anybody would be infuriated in a situation like that. The Stalwart Apostle's very existence is basically a huge middle finger to Tancred's tragic choice and the emotional trauma Cat has just gone through, and a stark reminder of just how much more convenient it is to be a Hero.

shadw21

I wonder if Pascale got Named at the same time, before, or after Tancred took his Name. If it was before, or at the same time, then Tancred was just Below's response/equalizing force to Pascale's being named. If it was after that, or after/ while Tancred was being killed, then Above absolutely did it to rub it in, or at best, as Providence to the side of 'Good'/the entire army as Tancred's replacement.

I wonder if Pascale is aligned with a specific Choir or not, if so there might be a fourth Choir Cat might be confronting down the road if given the chance.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but she doesn't have to be infuriated AT the kid, you know?

grzecho2222

"The atrocities Neshamah could commit with undead rats and bugs were not something I ever intended to suffer through again."
Do I sense 4th-degree inter-dimensional warp fuckery?

Konstantin von Karstein

It's more likely the vermin is loaded with plagues and poisons and sended in the water and food supplies.

[TeK](#)

He probably uses dead rats to write bad puns.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah, that counts as a pretty good reason to activate the countermeasures.

Heroes and Above are bullshit.

[Javvies](#)

That wasn't supposed to be a reply.
Dammit wordpress.

zenanii

So the villainous apostle gets killed in his sleep and the heroic apostle triumphs against all odds.

Even though Cat is considered a villain she technically isn't named. We do know she might be on her way to transition into a name.

Consider these facts and it feels like this is a not so subtle nudge from Order to have Cat join their side when she claims her next name.

hakureireimu

This seems like the opposite of being a Hero.

Aurelian

It caught my attention that Hakram had to hasten to catch up to Cathrine. As far as I remember, her limp is no longer mentioned since Cat knelt in front of Tancred when she met him in the temple.

The next thing that got me thinking was her staff making a cracking noise from her grip.

Theory mode on: an increase in strength and the lack of a limp could be the benefits of being named. Maybe she already is started on that road. Her passionate anger for how unfair the gods above is also a sideeffect of this. The unfairness is an old story for her and she usually is able to step outside of her shoes and analyse the situation.

As for what name it could be, I think the following can be taken as the core of the role "I should have watched more closely, I should have moved quicker, I should have... I should have protected him." In my limited knowledge I can only think of a knight or a paladin wanting to protect at their core. This doesn't quite suite Cat anymore.

However, she was the equal of the Peregrine when they were fighting and it seems that Tancred getting a rez is not out of the question, so I'd wager her role would be something like the Below version of the Grey Pilgrim.

Theory mode off.

Whatever the Name Cat is presented with to use, I am looking forward to her stepping out of her shoes and analysing the situation.

[TeK](#)

Don't you find it a little horrifying how everyone just glossed over how Tankred murdered an entire village? Like Cat says it's OK and he had no other choice and we just go "Oh, that's fine then, what a good lad"? When it was established that she is an Unreliable Narrator? But still, everyone kinda just agreed that it was perfectly normal and the village had to die. Am I the only one who finds it concerning? Is it just me? Am I crazy?

RanVor

You mean the village of terminally ill people who were about to spread a deadly plague all over the land, which he destroyed out of desperation after being denied every other possibility of counteracting the spread, an act he felt incredibly guilty about and had only been offered amnesty because it's wartime and the Grand Alliance needs every means of fighting back against the Hidden Horror available?

[Tek](#)

Wait a sec, I am just gonna go into thre nearest hospital, find the list of people with AIDS andju kill them all.

For the greater good ofc.

RanVor

Sure, go ahead. Just remember to make sure your country is at war with an invincible undead demigod out to annihilate all life before proceeding.

pretentiousinfiniteregression

Oh well, that's actually a perfect comparison. You see I wasn't so sure at first, but that comparison – which, again, is obviously a perfect one to one of Tancred's entire tragedy – really blew me away. Consider this mind changed good sir or madam.

matesbe

Wow, talk about strawmanning. First of all, people with AIDS are contagious, but only if their body fluids get in someone else's body, which is completely avoidable in day-to-day life. Secondly, these villagers either refused to admit they were sick or didn't care, which makes them far more dangerous (especially since this was probably far more contagious than AIDS).

byzantine279

It would be closer to finding out Smallpox had returned and burning the town where it was present to the ground and killing everyone in the process.

Plagues are... well, we haven't really seen one in modern times. Even the Spanish Flu back in 1918 was nothing like smallpox or the Black Death.

[TeK](#)

My point is, I feel doubtful about "every possibility of counteracting a spread". I am not blaming him, mind you. I'm just saying, shouldn't we be at least a little concerned about that?

RanVor

Interesting, because I believe Tancred was 100% to blame for his actions. He did, in fact, kill every infected person in Marserac of his own volition, if under the influence of strong emotions. It is not true, however, that he didn't do everything in his power to attempt to resolve the situation nonviolently first. He did. The choice he ended up making was the wrong one, but the fact that he had to make it at all is undeniably tragic.

Point

If he hadn't killed them, they would have evacuated and played a part in the Dead King's plans. Knowing that, was his decision really so wrong?

It may have been *morally* wrong, but that doesn't mean it was the wrong thing to do in that situation.

RanVor

Morally wrong is what I meant. From a purely practical standpoint, he was absolutely correct.

ninegardens

This is valid concern.

As in, Cat's argument is "Doing nothing would have resulted in MORE death and devastation, and the idea of waiting for above to save us is dangerous for EVERYONE,"

To which many would counter "Yeah, but nine times out of ten, in normal circumstance, if the best plan you can come up with is 'burn people to death', then you didn't think hard enough"

Of course we are not in normal circumstances... so the actual morality gets hazy.

Ultimate_procrastinator

Agreed, though it's worth noting that 'burn people to death' wasn't the best plan he could come up with; the best was warning people and trying to convince them not to go to the refugee camps. He only resorted to burning when they wouldn't listen (and possibly when someone shoved his face into a fire? I don't remember that being directly stated, but I feel like it was implied). In other words, he thought as hard as he could, but there's only so much a young teenager with no authority and no reason for others to believe him can do when his only actual power is burning things

ninegardens

He tried "Talk to people and failed", AFTER THAT his best plan was "Burn people to death"... even if that is the best plan you can come up with given your current information... even if thousands of lives are on the line...

Maybe you should just fail.

Just fail and hope like hell the cavalry comes. Sometimes your plan is so horrible that failure IS a option. Or set buildings on fire and ATTRACT the cavalry, *without* killing people.

To be clear, this is not a condemnation of him, I'm simply arguing that the argument of "Don't do evil things, even if it seems like the greater good" holds a lot of weight. Especially here, where by the looks of it Grey Pilgrim and Co blew up DK entire plague plan any, hence invalidating the need for all this death. No way for Tancred to know that of course, but um.... him killing people due assuming his knowledge was sufficient is kind of the crux of the tragedy here.

[As an aside, is it weird to think that Tancred did exactly the thing that GP would have done, for exactly the same reasons, and he's a villian?]

Ultimate_procrastinator

All of that is true; at this point, it pretty much comes down to which is more important to you morally: following principles regardless of what outcome it looks like they'll lead to, or taking the option that looks like it will cause the least pain in the long run regardless of how horrible it is. In this case, the cavalry WAS nearby, so setting the fire to attract them would have worked, but if they hadn't been, if this had just been a side story about a village far enough away from the action that no one was around, and Tancred had stuck to his principle, we'd have a very different

tragedy about the problem of sticking to principles even when you have no reason to believe it will help. Of course, this is also a debate that has been going in for quite a while in ethics, pretty much exactly for this reason: you can never tell exactly what will happen. Sometimes sticking to principle saves everyone even when you had no way of knowing that would happen; sometimes trying to save more lives just kills some people needlessly even when every piece of information you have points to it being the "greater good."

In response to your aside, that is pretty weird, although it probably has to do with how GP has the Choir of Mercy whispering in his ear and telling him which decision will minimize long-term suffering, while Tancred ended up deciding on his own.

As an aside of my own, I remember once reading (probably on TVTropes) that how much sympathy we tend to have for characters who embrace a utilitarian, "for the greater good" philosophy tends to be directly related to who they expect to make sacrifices for that greater good: if they only sacrifice others while preserving themselves they get very little sympathy and are generally villainous (in the traditional storytelling sense, not the in-universe Guide sense), while expecting everyone up to and including themselves to make those sacrifices tends to get them into antihero territory at the very least

RanVor

It is sad how many people fail to remember that the villagers were about to leave and Tancred had to make a decision *immediately*.

As for your aside, it's not weird at all. Tariq Fleetfoot is the king of bullshit.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

And 99/100 times, that won't work.

Tom

I'd reread chapter 2, it's hardly glossed over.

byzantine279

A village that was corrupted by what (as far as he could possibly have known) was an incurable plague that would have killed tens of thousands?

What do you think a quarantine really is? It's sacrificing the few to save the many – these days we just hav sufficient resources and tech to also try to save the few without risking the many.

reveen

ITT update were super mad at a literal child who just wants to heal people for gaining the power to do so in a way that the Protagonist doesn't approve of.

Because clearly the fact that life isn't fair is only something to be bothered about when it happens to Cat.

[Luxuria Tenebris](#)

So i found something interesting:

|I took a step forward, Akua falling in behind, only to found Captain Raphael had offered me their arm. How long has it been since someone tried that? |I rose to my feet, swallowing a snort when the greatest abomination ever born to Calernia chivalrously offered me his arm.

My random suspicion from this chapter is that Raphael is Neshamah, there is also that Raphael is wearing large amounts of clothing, and shortly after we are told that certain enchantments block the boxes, and that Raphael apparently survived drowning in Cleves while the Dead King is attacking.

Probably wrong, but wanted to voice my thoughts.

ninegardens

Ohhhh... that is suspicious. Good catch. Cat is not being paranoid enough.

Tom

This is brilliant. Would like this if WordPress would let me...

dadycoool

Completely circumstantial, utterly illogical, and no reason to believe it to be accurate. OK, I'm convinced. The best foreshadowing is what the reader dismisses as not-foreshadowing.

ohJohN

Interesting, it at least seems possible.

I am a little surprised that Cat isn't paranoid about everyone rn. They know how the ghouls escaped detection, but don't have

extensive countermeasures in place yet. And DK really wanted Tancred dead, enough to reveal the new ghouls, presumably because he could sense/destroy the plague seeds. Now there's another Named with a similar talent; even if the Plague-Maker got nuked, that doesn't necessarily mean Pascale isn't also a target.

ninegardens

>"It's been a long day," I finally said. "We'll speak tomorrow."
>There was a reason I was more than halfway fond of Hanno of Arwad: he looked at me for a heartbeat the nodded.
>"Tomorrow," the White Knight softly agreed, eyes considering.

You know... I almost kind of wonder if Hanno draws no distinction between Heroes and Villains. He's used to managing a ragtag band of misfits, who are sometimes at each others throats. Now he has to manage (on occasion) the Black Queen and other villains.... but who cares? He don't judge.

I get the feel he's more likely to disagree with the ACTIONS of certain villainous sorts... but it seems highly likely that he doesn't buy into (or even notice) the "bestowed" vs "damned" distinction.

Like, even dealing with Hierarch or Black, I don't remember ever getting the vibe he cared where their powers were coming from.

He's sort of... repeatedly blind to a bunch of social assumptions that make him ever so endearing.

... also gonna be kind of weird if Cat be frustrated about "Above rigs the game and gives nicer gifts" and he just shrugs and goes "Named are Named. Who cares about above or below? That's not my business."

[Javvies](#)

Yeah, that counts as a pretty good reason to activate the countermeasures.

Heroes and Above are bullshit.

RanVor

To me, this entire setup reeks of a play from Below to pull Cat back into their clutches. This soon after losing Tancred, the Black Queen meets another child mage with the exact same ability to detect the plague, thrust into the exact same terrible situation, only this time, the child got a magic fix from Above to spare her from having to make the hard choice. Really? That's way too contrived to be a mere coincidence. The situation is perfectly tailored to rekindle Cat's dying resentment towards

Heroes, the same that has been driving Black for decades, and lead her to a new Villainous Name.

The practical Evil has slipped from the Hellgods' grasp, and they want it back.

Aurelian

Agreed. It feels like Cat getting so worked up about the unfairness of the situation is the result of the Name looming.

agesbe

You don't need a name to be upset by the unfairness of the situation. A kid who she was fond of, who made a hard decision that he greatly regretted but couldn't see a way out of, was killed and it was her fault.

Then there's this other kid who accomplished the same thing without bloodying her hands, and lived. Feeling resentment mixed with not a little bit of guilt is a completely human emotion.

Jon Ismael

Parallelisms this explicit are way too interesting not to discuss. Focusing on the Roles of Tancred and Pascale in the story against the Dead King, they were clearly the sword and shield against DK.

It fits so well even with the hero/villain dynamic, because heroes are usually reactionary (putting out fires, saving lives), while villains are proactive (starting fires, putting lives in danger). Tancred ultimately wants to save lives, but has resigned himself to the fact that he had to take it upon himself to destroy The Enemy('s seeded plague) to do that, while Pascale desperately wanted to save the lives in front of her, even if it might endanger others. It fits nicely to the theme of following Above's guidelines for doing Good vs. Below's seek to improve your current position ALWAYS.

Sure Pascale lives and is able to do what Tancred wishes he could do, but healing plagues won't defeat the Dead King or his armies. Sorcery-light serves the goal better, even if it had to be pried from Tancred's cold undead torso. Again, fitting the theme with the choice: (relative) safety in maintaining the status quo, or sacrifices in pursuit of something greater.

Kinda sucky that the pursuit of peace involves lots of dead orphans on the side that's hard-carrying this operation. (Not that the Lycaonese aren't putting in work, but they only started regaining ground after a certain side joined the fight.)

Aurelian

People on HIV effective treatment cannot pass it on or is very unlikely, as well as it is a criminal offence to infect knowingly someone with HIV. Also, they don't turn into undead and follow the commands of a necromancer.

ninegardens

Random question: Is Below on the DK side? Is Below opposed to DK.

The way I read it now is that Above is 100% behind smiting the Dead king, and Below is sort of... 50:50 supporting the local villains and supporting the dead king.

From Below's point of view, this seems like a pit fit, to the winner go the spoils, much like Cat vs Sve Noc.

Do we have any evidence either way on this one?

As far as "Is this a Below play to rope Cat back in?"... to me it feels less like that and more like... this is Below's mode of operation. They had out big shiny powerful tools, with a terrible price attached to them, and you (either Tancred or Cat) either use those tools effectively, or you screw it up. Below isn't there to ensure that you use them well.

Neither Cat nor Tancred was paranoid enough, and here we are.

Above gave the heroes different tools... I would even argue *weaker* tools, but also handed them much more of a user manual, in the form of good fortune.

shadw21

Below is probably just happy to see so much 'excitement' up there, lots of death and destruction, with stories being made or acted out. Below will support both sides, probably in unequal measure at any given point, in whatever ways makes the situation more interesting to them/it.

There's so much of Below that it there's not likely a real way to measure it's approval, which likely endlessly shifts as well. Whatever was in charge of the one hell that DK took over would probably like to have it back though, if there was a single devil or demon that 'ruled' over it at all before the takeover.

dadycool

Thinking about it, the only person Below was 100% behind was Kairos.

I was always under the impression that DK actually made a hell, rather than take it over. And even if he did take it over, any devil/demon that was in it at the time is now

either dead or completely his. Below is Survival of the Fittest, after all.

shadw21

I can agree with that, Kairos was the last of the true 'Age of Wonders' villains, since I suspect Dead King may predated that age, though I could be wrong there.

I'm pretty sure it was said outright at one point that he'd invaded one, and was going to try for a second realm before the Bard/Intercessor got, further, involved and sent the elves after him.

Tom

> He'd been a wretched boy, Tancred, but he'd not been wrong. To act instead of pray, to trust his the ugly work of his hands rather than the silent Heavens.

How does Cat know that he didn't pray before he acted? Tancred came across as the praying type to me (quotes from chapter 2):

> Against the other side of the altar, bloodied and burned, lay the young boy who'd butchered more than a hundred souls beyond the gates of this place.

> "Are you to be my punishment?" the boy rasped out. "I have sinned and do not deny it."

> "You are not," the Named said, "an angel."

> "I'm a monster," the boy wept. "Gods forgive, oh Gods forgive me."

> "I didn't want to kill them," the boy whispered, "but what else could I do? If I'd had the Light, the real one, I could have healed them. Helped them. Instead..."

Given how he's acting **after** killing everyone, I find it hard to believe that he wouldn't have prayed fervently beforehand. The major difference I see between Tancred and Pascale is that Pascale's prayers were answered by Above, and Tancred's were not, so he took action. It looks like Above and Below got together, said "Hey look, a two-fer. Which one do you want?" and flipped a coin. (Not that that would piss Cat off any less.)

Anyway, I'm hoping for Tancred's return in an enchanted, heavily-armored walking sarcophagus that spews fire and pithy quotes in a deep voice. Between the Arsenal and the Belfry, they can pull it off, right? 😊

Point

As for your first question, I'd guess that he prayed, but he got nothing.

I *would* say that his probably prayers weren't answered because Pascale's already had been, but that argument doesn't seem to fit with the themes of the story. More likely, I'd guess that it was the faith he offered or the content of the prayer (or both) that made the difference. Maybe he prayed only as a last resort, not really believing it had a chance to help, and/or he prayed for the power to heal, rather than praying for Above to do the healing. That would do much more to highlight some differences between Above and Below (but it's a stretch to assume it given what we know of his situation and Pascale's).

But in the end, Cat doesn't know any more than us. She's pretty clearly viewing his situation through the lens of her own; she assumes that he skipped praying because that's what she would have done.

sutortyrannus

Even in death, Tancred endures.

Ultimate_procrastinator

I just realized (and forgive me if someone else has posted the same idea in the last couple hours and I haven't seen) that while this chapter highlights the Good and Evil approaches as, in essence, 'wait for the gods to fix things' vs. 'do it yourself,' it also mentions near the beginning that Hanno actually doesn't take the 'standard' Good approach:

I think it's also worth noting here that Catherine's idea of 'villain fixes it themselves' is not exactly the standard Evil approach, either; that would actually be the various flying fortresses, talking tigers, etc, a strategy that could more aptly be described as 'hope these absurd, outlandish plans call enough attention to the problem for someone actually sane and competent to fix it.'

Many comment threads on previous chapters and books have pointed out that Hanno seems to be the Practical Good counterpart to Cat's Practical Evil, and that the Cardinal system in the postwar will shift everyone more towards practicality in general. In essence, it's a paradigm shift for both Above and Below: the old dichotomy was "Pray and hope this is the one in a million times that actually works" vs "Make everything worse trying to do it yourself;" the new dichotomy is "give others what they need to fix the problem, with some hope in the heavens to back you up" vs "it's all on you and the few you trust to fix everything." Given this, and that Calernia runs on stories, and the older the stories are the harder it is to avoid falling into them, I can't help but wonder if rather than an attempt by Above or Below to

tie Cat into their camp, the situation with Pascale and Tancred is essentially the backlash of the old story as Cat and Hanno dig their way out of it and carve a new rut into creation.

If this is true, we could expect that going forward, the story will present similarly mirrored situations, but with no consistent slant towards Good or Evil, and more importantly, with the less practical response ALWAYS being the one favored. For example, next time they could stumble across someone who came into a Name, tried to train their friends and families to fight the undead while heading for the refugee camps and were slaughtered, closely followed by a Named who massacred their own village, combined the corpses into a giant flesh titan, and somehow successfully defeated a legion of zombies with it (granted, EE would be a lot more creative than just 'basically the same situation with the specifics changed out', but it illustrates the point) (also, I can't actually imagine a scenario where using zombies against the Dead King goes well in the long run). Actually, thinking about it, situations wouldn't even have to be mirrored; as long as there's that definite push towards the impractical, Stupid Good/Evil response rather than the rational, Practical one, with no consistent favor towards either Evil or Good, the theory would hold. Of course, if the story doesn't meet one or both of those conditions going forward, then the theory is most likely wrong. And then hey, we get to make more theories!

...Ah, who am I kidding, we'll do that even if this one's right 😊

seven cats

NB CHARACTER 😊

Morgenstern

Hm. Curious. Two parallel "choosings" – happening BEFORE the need for those powers... and somehow everything ends up in a moral discussion here, while I keep wondering about the plot significance of TWO of those... of why we would even get two. If they are the true plot by the DK, the real "seeds". Two *mages* no less... Maybe I'm as off on my plot instincts as Cat currently is, but I got a whole different feeling where her "source unknown"-"something's wrong"-feeling came from, not the morality of Good vs. Evil, but that something is just *off* about that happening, two peeps for the same ROLE; that the real ploy of the DK might indeed not have been found, while everyone thinks it's over and done, caught before it could develop into something more. And that right after talk about how his most insidious plots are so very hard to find. Maybe I'm drawing on all the wrong strings, the wrong combination, but I suddenly feared for what the "healing" might have done to Talbot, after he just got a flag of how awful it would be to lose him. Or that big hidden workshop where young Named get sent that the DK just *has* to want to find out about. Mind seeds? I can't stop poking at

wondering how the hell these two actually got named in the first place, by what events, to end up with TWO such same abilities. Do the Gods just like to hedge their bets?

SpeckofStardust

It's a known thing that for every direct action the God's above or Below do their other side gets to do an = action, as such the 2 named in question may have been an agreed on actions by both side's because the dead king is that much of a problem. The arguable limited scale could be due to a unknown rules.... Saying this I just got something, we know that 'great' villains tend to have gifts from the below when it comes to their own death's, what is the above's equivalent?

Point

I don't think creating names is generally a direct intervention, and looking at Tancred's death and Cat's reactions, it seems that his role in the story is less plot-related than it is related to Cat's motivations.

As for villains' ability to go out with a bang, I'd guess that it's partially balanced out by Providence and many death-related heroic tropes. For example, if a hero sacrifices his life for his friends to escape, I assume their escape is virtually guaranteed.

Daniel E

We can infer from '200 Heroic Axioms' that Heroes don't get a direct line to Above upon death, but their gifts are substantially more numerous in varied circumstances. One in particular comes to mind; "If your powers are lost, they will nearly always return greater than before so long as the appropriate moral lesson is learned. With kindness and humility comes overwhelming martial might."

superkeaton

The poor Apostle, she has no idea that the Black Queen isn't personally angry with her. Hopefully Hanno explains that to her, because it should be plenty obvious to him what Cat's mad about.

ereshkigala

IMHO, there are a few points that have yet to be brought up here:

1) Cat is angry that Above intervenes only one time in a thousand and yet gets praised by everyone, but the same happens with everyone that saves people. Philanthropists only save a tiny portion of the population with their charities and yet everyone

praises them. The Red Cross doesn't save everyone that needs doctors, and yet everyone praises them.

2) Ultimately, even if someone could help everyone in the world – and we have no evidence that Above can – they are not required to do so. You can't demand others to solve your every problem as if they were your slave; they have every right to say "no" for whatever arbitrary reason. And when they do help even once you should recognize that they did so in whatever manner is appropriate.

3) There is nothing "unfair" about becoming a villain; it always gives you more power to pursue your goals, it always is power tailored to your choices/personality, it comes with agelessness and immunity to disease, and it comes without being bound to the service of the gods.

Below is not required to give you anything else, or support you in your efforts, any more than anyone else is required to give you stuff for free.

Ciara

"Ninety-nine times out of a hundred," I said, voice cold, "nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, that act of faith would have killed dozens of thousands."

Yeah but anyone named Pascale making that kind of Wager is pretty much guaranteed to win

[Aranaya](#)

Yay, nonbinary rep 😊

Chapter 7: Approach

"Friend and foe know a different man."

– Helikean saying

The contents of my tent were one of the few splurges of luxury I'd ever allowed myself. The bed was from Orense, whose carpenters were famous even within the Principate, and though it could be folded in two for transport it was nothing like the cots the Legions of Terror used as their standard. It was large enough for two and topped by a good woolen mattress, as even now featherbeds were just too soft for me – I found it difficult to fall asleep in them. A pair of enchanted braziers and a set of

magelight lanterns saw to heat and light, while a small sculpted table flanked by a library-box and a few trunks held my personal affairs. That part of my tent was parted from the rest by a heavy curtain sown into the ceiling, keeping it separate from the larger segment where I received others.

The broad desk, which I'd had carved out of Ashuran cedar twice struck by lightning to my exact specifications, had been was the great expense there though I believed it worth ever copper. It'd been Akua that had told me about the cleansing and healing properties of the cedar trees that grew in the shade of Mount Tyro, the mountain where the mage-doctor schools of Ashur had first been raised centuries ago. Masego had added that a lightning strike would bring such properties to the surface, and Vivienne's people in the Free Cities had found cedar that'd been struck twice being sold by a broker in Mercantis. Whatever the magic behind it, sitting at that desk never seemed to pain my leg no matter how long I did and I tired measurably slower working on it.

The seat behind was naturally the same sinfully comfortable armchair I'd stolen from a Summer count during the Arcadian campaign, my perennial favourite. A pair of less comfortable but prettily sculpted – roaring lionheads for the arms – seats sent to me by Vivienne matched it on the other side. My personal desk was only a part of the large tent, however, as it'd become inevitable that I would have to frequently 'entertain' the kind of people who expected luxuries even when at war. The first wooden table I'd used was hacked straight through during either the fourth or fifth assassination attempt of last winter – I couldn't quite recall, they rather melded into the same general sense of unpleasantness after a while – and the replacement had only lasted two months before I put the Bandit Lord's head through it, but Archer had been sufficiently amused by that last setback she'd actually carved me one herself.

That oaken stretch was the single most beautiful thing I owned, as far as I was concerned. Though it was broadly rectangular and the surface was still only half-polished, Indrani must have put half a hundred hours into the carvings that adorned it. Four snakelike legs coiled their way up, jaws opened to swallow legionaries as had truly happened when Akua unleashed devils on the Fifteenth before the Battle of Marchford. From there Archer had carved scenes as her fancy struck, without rhyme or reason. The Woe's battle with the Princess of High Noon abutted depiction of the duelling scene from the Lay of Lothian's Passing she so enjoyed, the last moments of Larat's splendid escape were wedged in between the dying gasp of the Kingdom of Sephirah and the view of the Silver Lake from her favourite Laure tavern.

It wasn't finished, perhaps only two thirds of the sides having been carved and the wood atop the table still being prepared for

carvings of its own, and already it was one of the most precious possessions I'd ever owned. My officers and allies had quickly caught on to Indrani's habit of adding a few carvings whenever she passed through our camp, and it'd become a manner of entertainment for them to make a pretext to visit my tent and try to find the latest additions afterwards. The First Prince had sent a set of ten cushioned seats in matching oak as a gift, which given their delicate craftsmanship were likely worth a fortune, but coin couldn't buy what it had meant for someone as restless as Archer to have spent so many hours working on a piece meant for me.

There were other adornments to the tent, of course. Heavy tapestries hung from the sides, woven in the Callowan manner – the Hedges style, to be precise, since the thickness of those helped keep the heat in the tent during winter. My people's tapestries admittedly tended to only depict three things: hunting, the Book of All Things and war. Given that I had little taste for hunting or the Gods Above but more than a few wars under my belt, I'd settled for the last and matched that martial tendency with the grand maps I'd commissioned. Smaller ones of the fronts in Cleves and Twilight's Pass, larger ones of the Principality of Hainaut and the Kingdom of the Dead. Braziers, sprite-lanterns and a long commode that was admittedly mostly a dump for scroll and parchment stacks – as well as holding a pair of compartments filled with bottles of wine and liquor – finished the last of it.

It was a comfortable dwelling, as had been made necessary by the sheer amount of time I'd spent in it over the last two years.

I rose with dawn and broke my fast on the carved table, wolfing down eggs and rashers as I read through the damage reports from last night's troubles. Akua sat across from me and we shared a pot of tea in companionable silence as I busied myself frowning at the ink. Most of the damage was superficial but one of the wardstones from the Third Army's camp, which was where the Dead King's ghouls had found the most success, had cracked. This was not beyond our ability to fix, but the artefact the ghouls has used to try to contaminate the stone – some sort of sharp obsidian spike that just reeked of sorcery – was still stuck in it. It'd have to be either destroyed or extracted. In destroying it we'd improve our chances of repairing the wardstone, but to extract it we'd have to cut through the stone instead and effectively wreck it permanently. On the other hand, if we could figure out what the spike was we could prepare countermeasures for its next use.

Adjutant joined us just as I finished reading the last of the report, his timing as fatefully impeccable as always, and he claimed a seat at a table. He demurred when Akua offered him a cup of tea, as they'd both known he would. He hated the Nok

blends, insisted they made his fangs taste of herbs for days afterwards. Akua had not once, so far, missed an occasion to try to socially maneuver him into being forced to drink a cup regardless. It was easy to tell how well they were getting along on any given day simply by how playful the shade was being about that little game. This morning, though, I gave them no time to get into it.

"Thoughts?" I prompted.

"It's only the wardstone against scrying that was affected," Hakram calmly said. "The least important of the three. Carve it, send the spike to the Belfry and lean on the Arsenal to get a replacement sent as soon as possible."

My eyes moved to Akua.

"Destroy the spike," the dark-skinned woman replied. "It costs us more than weeks or months exposed to destroy a wardstone: it also costs us the hours spent realigning the array with the replacement stone. Hours that skilled mages would otherwise spend addressing current threats or preparing for those to come."

"The Dead King seemingly believed he could sink our full ward array with the spike, Lady Akua," Hakram pointed out. "If we do not learn the nature of the threat, that might just be the case when one is next used against us."

"The Dead King has millennia of such accumulated tricks and tools to wield whenever he so pleases, Lord Adjutant," Akua replied. "We cannot and indeed should not attempt to match every single blow with an exact parrying dagger. The superior approach would be tightening security around our wardstones and instead leaning our efforts towards innovations of our own."

"Our innovations spring from Jaquinite and Trismegistan sorcery," Adjutant gravelled. "One was forged in the Dead King's shadow and he is the founding practitioner of the other. We might as well try to drown a shark."

"However potent a practitioner of sorcery, the King of Death remains a single mage," the shade argued. "While he can have helpers and acquire the knowledge of others, it is highly improbable for the Dead King's mastery of the Gift to be so superior as to eclipse every advance come out of the Arsenal."

I drummed my fingers against the table, thinking in silence. The two of them were, through the locus of an ultimately minor tactical decision, coming to stand in for the two great currents of thought among the strategists of the Grand Alliance. One school of thought, of which the most prominent advocates were Princess Rozala Malanza and Prince Otto Reitzenberg, argued that the Alliance should fight aggressively on a tactical scale but

defensively on a strategic one. Stable defensive lines and regular sorties were to serve as way to grind down Keter's forces in Procer while the Empire Ever Dark held Serolen and raided through dwarven tunnels behind the lines of the dead. All of this was to serve as a method of weakening the Dead King until either the Arsenal created armaments capable of turning the tide or a strategic opportunity to strike at Keter itself was made. The ever-increasing amount of Named joining our ranks had, of late, been added to the arguments. Defence was their creed, until we took the King of Death's head in his seat of his power.

The other school of thought, which claimed Prince Klaus Papenheim and Lord Yannu Marave as leading lights, argued instead for full offensive war. Their belief was that the Grand Alliance would soon reach the peak of its capacity to wage war and would only be headed into a death spiral if it did not begin scoring decisive blows before that capacity was spent. The doctrine would begin with reclamation of northern Procer by three-pointed offensive, followed by a winter of preparation and then a joint all-fronts offensive into the Kingdom of the Dead while the Empire Ever Dark struck out from its position in Serolen. With enough victories to show for, we could bargain for open dwarven military support and offer them a clean strike at Keter while the Hidden Horror's armies were tied up on four different campaigns in other corners of his realm. There were half a dozen other variations on how the offensives should be waged, some of them not even involving the Kingdom Under, but the common tie was always the call for offensive campaigning.

Akua was, I knew, very much inclined to agree with the defensive school. Like most Praesi highborn she still saw mages at the most important part of warfare and was generally inclined to believe Named were best suited to creating the kind of breakthrough that'd deliver victory against Keter, either in a study or on the field. Hakram was not quite so clear-cut in his preferences, but for good reason his sympathies tended more the way of the offensive school. While Akua was hardly uninformed, she was not nearly as aware of how fragile the Grand Alliance's situation truly was as my second. The strain of the war against Keter was being felt across the entire coalition, but most keenly of all in Procer: high taxes, frequent requisitions and lasting restrictions on trade were causing mounting unrest. And that was without even mentioning the waves of refugees in need of settling, for whom sympathy tended to sour very quickly whenever food or room ran low and human nature took its usual course towards the ugly. Hakram tended to favour the aggressive approaches, including getting ready to fight the war *now*, because he was unsure how long we could keep waging it.

I leaned more towards the offensive school myself, as it happened, but only within limits. The Principality of Hainaut and the last stretches of Twilight's Pass ought to be reclaimed in

full and a proper defensive line raised across all shores that'd be able to prevent large-scale invasion by the dead. Then, and only then, could further aggressive campaigning be considered. Cordelia Hasenbach agreed, as it happened, at least when it came to the reclamation of Hainaut – she was less eager to try taking back the Pass once more, considering the lair of nightmares Neshamah had turned the last fortresses of it into. Regardless, the two of us agreeing and the Grey Pilgrim not opposing us meant that a summer offensive into northern Hainaut was a certainty unless disaster struck beforehand.

As it nearly had, with that seeded plague. We were not unexpected or unseen in our designs.

"Do either of you have anything else to add?" I finally said.

"Our armies will be headed north, to the warded fortresses of the defensive line," Hakram said. "We can afford the window of vulnerability while we replace the stone."

"Expanding the ritual repertoire of our mage cadres would be more efficient a use of their time, and the potential gains from breaking the wardstone are limited," Akua calmly replied.

I sharply nodded, fingers withdrawing from the table. As things currently stood the scrying ward was incontinent but not outright broken, so while the choice shouldn't be dragged out it did not need to be made immediately either.

"I'll have a decision by Evening Bell," I said. "Hakram, what have you got for me?"

"You intended on speaking with the soldiers and officers from the assault formation," the orc reminded me. "Assembly can be had at half an hour's notice. Reports will be coming in by the Alliance scrying network at Noon Bell, including Vivienne's. Lady Aquiline and Lord Razin seek an audience, as does the White Knight."

He paused for a beat.

"Nestor Ikaroi of the Secretariat arrived during the night as well," he added. "Along with his usual scribes. He requested audience as well, and mentioned he'd been charged with diplomatic correspondence meant for you."

My eyebrow rose. I did not ask from who – if he'd known, he would have told me – but it was not from lack of curiosity.

"I've the usual disciplinary action and assignment summaries for the Third Army for you to review," Hakram added, moving on to more mundane matters. "As well as the patrol and guard roster suggestions for the coming month."

The latter parchments could not be passed on to anyone else, since if they did not have my authority behind them those suggestions would be balked at by our rowdy collation of Proceran, Levantine and Callowan captains. They'd need another read, anyway, to see if someone had tried to favour their own again. The former, though...

"You don't need to bring me the Third Army summaries anymore," I grunted. "General Abigail doesn't need me looking over her shoulder."

He flicked a considering glance at Akua, whose face was serene as a pond as she drank from her cup of tea. I did not bother to hide my irritation at that when his gaze returned to me, and he clicked his fangs apologetically.

"I doubt she'd agree if asked," Adjutant said. "I'll see to it regardless."

I hummed, sipping at my own cup thoughtfully.

"Send for Secretary Nestor first," I decided.

The Blood could wait, it'd do them some good, and when Hanno came by for our chat I'd rather have it with a drink in hand. Past Noon Bell, then, which wasn't a bad idea anyway. Though the White Knight did not get reports the way I did, relying on the First Prince for information on that scale, he did correspond with a great many heroes who, as heroes were wont to, found out all sorts of hidden things. Often what he learned there was little better than gossip, but on occasion there was treasure buried among the dross. Akua took her leave without needing to be prompted, heading out to organize the repairs of the lesser damage on the wardstones. Though Senior Mage Dastardly was still the ranking mage of the Third Army, he was suborned to Akua's authority as the informal commander of our coalition's mage cadres. Both the Proceran wizards and the Levantine binders – those Abigail hadn't slaughtered like lambs, anyway – took orders from her as well, within certain limits.

From experience I knew Secretary Nestor Ikaroi would be awake even at this hour, as the Delosi *askretis* hardly ever slept even at his advanced age. I was, it had to be said, rather fond of the man. He was polite, useful and his dedication to recording history accurately bordered on being principled. It was therefore with a smile that I greeted him when Hakram ushered him into the tent, half-rising from the desk where I'd migrated before inviting him to sit across. He did so after a slight bow, the shallowness of it as much a reminder of his high status in Delos as the two stripes tattooed across each of his cheeks. One black and one blue, traditionally the highest rank one could rise to within the Secretariat.

"Queen Catherine," he greeted me. "I thank you for the audience, and twice over of your promptness in granting it."

Ikaroi's long white hair was kept in a clean ponytail and his grooming was impeccable even so early, something made clear by his turning back to gesture for an attendant scribe to approach. A scroll case was passed to the Secretary, who in turn passed it to Hakram. Considering the last time someone from the Free Cities had tried to hand me something directly it'd been an assassination attempt, that particular bit of decorum had grown on me.

"The Secretariat has proved a good friend, if not outright an ally," I replied. "It's my pleasure to return the courtesy."

I glanced at the scroll case Adjutant had taken in hand but not opened.

"Although it seems that this time we aren't to discuss the submission of questions," I added.

"In truth the Secretariat has also passed along a list of inquiries, along with making funds available to me," the blue-eyed man noted.

Good news, that. The Grand Alliance's war machine was ever hungry for coin.

"Anything interesting?" I idly asked.

"Secretary Thais stills seeks to prove her theories on the source of the Stygian Spring, so a perspective in attendance of the Violet Peace's signing has been requested," he replied.

I snorted. Secretary Thais remained convinced that a secret treaty had been signed between Nicae and Stygia beyond the officially recorded peacemaking, and that it was exactly such a secret that'd allowed the Magisterium to begin aggressive attacks against Delos and Atalante a few centuries back. That assertion had yet to have even a slight indication of being historically accurate but if the old woman was willing to sink a fortune in being proved wrong, I had no objection.

"A question on Callowan history as well, for the Annals," Nestor Ikaroi said. "Seeking to ascertain if Queen Yolanda the Stern's was a villain in metaphysical sense or a merely a political one."

I hummed thoughtfully.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind knowing that as well," I admitted.

Callowan historians still debated to this day if Yolanda the Wicked had truly been one of Below's or just Proceran-born and deeply despised, but I'd never cared much either way. It was

ancient history, and not the sort I need be concerned about. On the other hand, if she'd truly been a villainous Named then it occurred to me there was precedent for one of those reigning as Queen of Callow for more than a decade. While I didn't particularly want my reign to be painted with the same brush as a woman I'd once seen written of as 'barely more popular than the plague', it could serve as the foundation for a legal argument. One that lent my rule a little more legitimacy than that of a victorious warlord. That wasn't much of an issue for me, these days – not unless I started losing battles anyway – but if I didn't want Vivienne or her successors fighting a civil in twenty years then we needed a better arguments than brute force and wearing a fancy hat.

"Usual rates, you know the drill by now. I'll be speaking with the White Knight later this evening, so I'll see when it can be done," I told Nestor. "The list?"

"Timo, if you would?" the old man asked.

The young scribe passed a neatly folded parchment to Hakram. Usually the Secretariat only sent ten questions at a time, which I'd been informed by the Jacks were the subject of much internal politicking between the upper ranks of their bureaucratic ruling class. This entire affair had begun when Hanno, early into the first Hainaut offensive, had offered during an idle conversation to use his Recall aspect in order to settle a question about the size of the armies at the Battle of Lerna as recoded in the Annals. The askretis had gone wild at the potential resource that was having access to the memories of thousands of heroes going centuries back, the Secretariat even lodging a formal request with the Grand Alliance to consult with the White Knight over historical matters only to be reluctantly informed by Cordelia that the Sword of Judgement was not hers to 'lend'.

So they'd gone to Hanno himself, who like a complete chump would have simply answered their questions whenever time allowed and thought nothing more of it. Gods, *heroes*. It showed most of them had never had to handle a treasury, much less fund a war. So I'd had a private word with him and we'd emerged from that conversation with practical prices in coin if the Secretariat wanted to take advantage of an opportunity that might never come to them again. Most the gold went into the Grand Alliance's coffers, because Hanno was Hanno, but I'd insisted he take a cut even if he ended up spending it on other people. These days the Delosi tended to bring the questions to me, since I was often easier to find, and strangely enough he seemed to prefer it that way. Hakram set the parchment bearing the questions aside on my commode and returned to hand me the leather scroll case after having inspected it thoroughly.

"I don't suppose you know what's in that," I asked the Delosi.

"I have my suspicions," Secretary Nestor said, "but cannot know for certain. I know only that General Basilia meant it for your hand."

Yeah, I'd thought it might be from her. The woman who'd once been Kairos Theodosian's favourite general was arguably the closest thing I – and the Grand Alliance at large – had to an ally in the Free Cities, sad as it was to say. I broke open to seal and fished out the scroll, unfurling it carefully. Though the courtesies were curt they were still present, followed by a few matter of fact sentences about her latest victories on the field. The part that caught my attention, however, was right afterwards.

"Stygia's getting involved," I summarized. "One of the Helikean patrols caught some of the Magisterium's people bringing wagons of arms onto a ship whose captain was headed for Nicae."

Secretary Nestor dipped his head, seemingly unsurprised.

"It is the Secretariat's belief that the Magisterium seeks to prolong the war as much as possible," the old man said. "So long as Basileus Leo holds the city and Strategos Zenobia holds the countryside, Nicae remains divided. It is so with General Basilia's campaigns in Penthesian lands as well. Our archivist-oracles believe they will not hinder transport of supplies so long as no decisive victory is scored, but would begin sabotage immediately if General Basilia succeeded at forcing such an engagement."

Which she hadn't, and likely wouldn't. Exarch Prodocius still held on to the throne he'd won by virtue of being the last puppet standing, but his authority hardly went beyond the walls of Penthes itself. Many towns and tributary cities had declared him usurper and unfit – moved either by genuine outrage or by the very real chance of being sacked by Helike should they not – but his control on the city-state itself and a few key fortresses had not been shaken. Malicia was propping him up, if rumours of warlock 'diplomats' having joined his court were true, but for all that he was a pawn the man was not a complete fool. General Basilia's army had chewed through every Penthesian field army sent its way and taken lesser walls, but Helike did not have the siege weaponry or mages to take the city of Penthes itself. The Exarch would remain holed up behind his tall walls with the last of his armies, trying to wait out Basilia.

"For Stygia to interfere with a supply line that passes through Delosi territory might taken by some as an act of war," I mildly said.

"The Magisterium has not done such a thing," Secretary Nestor serenely replied. "The worse that can be laid at its feet is words."

I could read between the lines. The Magisters had spoken words so the Secretariat was being forthcoming with those as well, tacitly passing information to the Grand Alliance through me. It wasn't willing to escalate any further unless Stygia did first, though, their precious neutrality remaining in place. They could have gone to the First Prince with this instead, but by going to me they could better claim to have maintained an impartial approach: General Basilia was already sending me information, and Callow's openly hostile relations with Dread Empress Malicia meant I could be said to have a legitimate stake in the war. *They're not helping a foreigner against the League*, I sardonically thought, *they're helping Helike's almost-ally against Stygia's almost-ally. With a few added steps and tortured justifications, no doubt.*

"One would think that Malicia would advise against Stygian ambitions, given the civil war she's fighting," I complained. "But it's never that simple, is it?"

"Dread Empress Sepulchral has failed to gather support beyond the initial wave," the old man shrugged. "She is a threat, to be sure, but for all her clever maneuvering she has not beaten the Legions."

"The part of those that still fight for the Tower, anyway," I replied, bit bothering to hide my relish.

Though Malicia had seized the rebel old guard of Black loyalists that'd refused to bend the knee and even crucified a few, she'd underestimated both how popular my father was with the rank and file and how badly the revelation her sorcerous mind control would be received by greenskin officers. Nearly half of the former Legions-in-Exile had deserted her service at the first opportunity. A few of those joined up with Sepulchral's armies, but most had either thrown down their weapons or joined the ever-growing camp of disaffected soldiers on the edge of the Green Stretch. While Sepulchral's – once known as High Lady Abreha Mirembe – own High Seat of Aksum had followed her into rebellion and Nok had declared for her as well, most of Praes still remained in Malicia's hands.

She'd not managed to dislodge Sepulchral, though, despite Marshal Nim's best efforts, and knowledge that the Grand Alliance had opened negotiations with the rival claimant to the Tower ought to have curbed her willingness to provoke us even through surrogates. Evidently not, though. Now if only Black would come out of the woodworks – or acknowledge he was behind Dread Empress Sepulchral, as many suspected he might be – this entire nest of snakes could be put to rest. But for some reason he'd yet to tip his hand.

"Praesi will do as Praesi have always done," Secretary Nestor said, unconcerned. "It is nothing to Delos. Yet, Queen Catherine, if I might give a word of warning?"

My eyes sharpened. Not a word the man would use lightly, that.

"I'm listening," I said.

"There are strange undercurrents in Mercantis, these days," the old man warned. "Ones even the eyes and ears of the Secretariat cannot quite parse."

I kept my dismay off my face. The City of Bought and Sold was a pack of despicable profiteers, there was no denying that, yet so far they'd known how to toe the line of how much they should attempt to profit. The wealth of Mercantis' banks and merchant lords had been instrumental in keeping the Principate's industry from collapsing as the strain of curtailed trade and heavy taxes took its toll, but the city-state was almost as useful as broker capable of obtaining materials and rarities for the Arsenal. If they turned on us now, it'd be a crippling blow. Yet I couldn't quite believe even the famously avaricious merchant lords would be this foolish. What would their gold be worth, when the Dead King was at their gates? And if they pressed us now, they had to know that should we win the Grand Alliance's fury would be a black thing to behold.

"Thank you for the advice," I said, tone forcibly calm.

I'd have to speak with Cordelia, soon. She was the foremost diplomat of the Grand Alliance, by both talent and station, and I was still astounded she'd somehow managed to talk both Atalante and Delos into allowing the Helikean armies and supply train to pass their through territory. Last I'd heard from Vivienne the First Prince was looking into bringing Strategos Zenobia into the Grand Alliance's orbit without angering her current patron General Basilia in the process, so she ought to have been keeping an eye on the region. If something was going wrong with Mercantis it was Hasenbach that'd be noticing the signs, and likely she who'd have to fix it anyway. If this was a ploy from Malicia, though, that'd make two provocations from her: Stygia's growing interventionism and trying to strike at our finances. The Tower would be, to be blunt, picking a fight. If we didn't answer her in kind she'd only grow bolder, too, and that simply couldn't be allowed. On the other hand, we could hardly afford to send an army Praes' way could we?

There was no easy answer to this, as tended to be the way when dealing with Dread Empress Malicia.

"I trouble you no longer, then, Your Majesty," the old askretis said, rising only to offer another slight bow.

"Always a pleasure, Secretary Nestor," I simply replied.

I slumped into my seat, after the old man and his attendant had left. And this, I thought, had been meant to be the *pleasant* part of my day. Adjutant stood in silence at my side, close but not reaching out.

"All right," I sighed, opening my eyes. "Get me those rosters, Hakram. Let's get this done before some other looming disaster appears on the horizon."

One thing at a time. It could be done, if we did it one thing at a time.

I told myself I believed that, straightened my back and got to work.

Aston Whiteman

Good stuff EE!

J

"All right," I sighed, opening my eyes. "Get me that link, Hakram. Let's get this done before some other looming disaster appears on the horizon."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

adam

in before that one guy cries about a vote thread. He/she should really just stop reading and go away. I and many others only remember to vote bc someone says. thank you for the reminder

Big Brother

So, a (potentially) Amadeus-backed Dread Empress Sepulchral has been stirring up trouble in Praes for the past 2 years. I was wondering what had happened during the time skip.

[tkjarrah](#)

more of an intermediary chapter, but good shit nevertheless, catching up with the state of things.
the praesi situation is very interesting, especially considering how smug malicia was at the end of last book. ya done played yourself, idiot

Liliet

TBF, she's still alive.

My bar might be very low lmao

tkjarrah

The Bar Is Underground

NZPIEFACE

Man, I never really understood the breadth of her authority and the value of her opinion until now.

Huh, she's damn busy.

And I think it's hilarious how Hanno just hands the paperwork to her.

I'm pretty sure the next chapter will be the two Bloods then Hanno. I'm pretty sure Hanno will bring the Apostle with him, or at least talk about her.

Mammon

Hanno's still a hero. It's pretty typical for them to just hand off any paperwork to those trustworthy and capable that are willing to accept doing it for them one way or the other, even if those people are more overworked than the hero themselves. Such is the carefree and adventure-oriented way of the hero.

Jworks

I think Hanno likes going through Catherine because it forces a conversation between him and Catherine. Hanno was randomly putting up a rock wall for someone before the time skip, he doesn't seem the type to shove the small things at others.

Liliet

Yeah he probably just likes working with Catherine.

Who has forgotten that managers also get a cut, because of course she did.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Dang, that's a good money making scheme by Cat. Best use of a heroic aspect ever.

RoflCat

To paraphrase a certain merchant's teaching:
Take what you can when you can.

Said to a young girl who would casually reveal some new innovations on a whim to her 'friends'...
Let's just say the lesson sticks and quite a lot of people get shocked by what kind of things she'll charge money for...(though to be fair she also pay for quite a few things nobody ever thought of 'buying')

Halinn

What's that a reference to?

RoflCat

Ascendance of Bookworm

A series that start out similar to watamote in that it's not very enjoyable, but gets better if you can survive reading it. And yet it's these early parts that make you really appreciate how much the character change down the line.

delspaig

Eh, it's even older and simpler than all that. "If you're the best at what you do, never do it for free."

Cicero

Ascendance of A Bookworm.

Basically a librarian who loves books is killed when an earthquake buries her under books. Five years into her reincarnated life, a life threatening fever awakens memories of her past life. She immediately begins looking for books, only to discover that she now lives in a world that doesn't have the printing press, she is a peasant, and her father is considered highly literate for his status because he can read and write people's names. A sheet of paper and a bottle of ink cost months worth of salary, and to top it off there is no running water, the toilet is a chamber pot, and shampoo does not exist.

Thus of course she decides to try to recreate various medium for writing books while also trying to improve sanitation and food on the side. Which means she'll have to obtain an apprenticeship as a merchant, despite her father being a soldier, and her mother a dyer. In most reincarnation stories this would be a piece of cake, but poor Myne has reincarnated into a realist world, where things just are not that easy.

Think of it as a mashup between "Spice and Wolf" and "Dr. Stone," only where the protagonist is merely well read and has a lot of generalist knowledge, but no real specialized

knowledge and so has to figure things out by trial and error. A lot of trial and error.

More specifically, the writing is very good. The characterization is amazing, some of the very best I've ever read. Even supporting characters feel like they are real people living their own stories that happen to be interacting with our protagonist. Plot develops slowly, which puts off some people, but it always feels like the plot is developing very naturally and organically, without anything happening specifically for a plot purpose. One of my favorite light novel series, three volumes have been released in English so far.

RoflCat

>Five years into her reincarnated life, a life threatening fever awakens memories of her past life.

Actually, the implication given was that the five years old girl DIED from that fever and her soul came to inhabit the body and 'revive' her.

>her father is considered highly literate for his status because he can read and write people's names

Wasn't it the peddler-turned-soldier who was literate? I think most people can at least read numbers since they'd need to know that to know the price of things in the market.

Cicero

Well, I don't want to get into the debates on the subject of Myne's reincarnation, as it would require spoilers, but, actually as I described it is more accurate. Though, I suppose it may depend on your point of view.

Also, yes, the peddler turned soldier is literate, at the same time Myne's father is introduced to us as being able to read and write people's names, which in Myne's new world is considered literate for his position. Informing us that most of the general populace can read numbers, a few can read and write names, and only those that require it for their jobs (such as merchants) are literate according to our standards.

[TeK](#)

It's in non reading form for easier consumption now.

Juff

Typo Thread:

had been was > had been
worth ever > worth every
sculpted – roaring (should have seats before the dash imo)
fourth of fifth > fourth or fifth
abutted depiction > abutted a depiction
as way to > as a way to
mages at > mages as
stills seeks > still seeks
Stern's was > Stern was
a civil in > a civil war in
needed a better > needed better
recoded > recorded
Most the > Most of the
open to seal > open the seal
might taken > might be taken
wave," the > wave." The
bit bothering > not bothering
as broker > as a broker
I trouble > I shall trouble

[Mental Mouse](#)

> The broad desk, which I'd had carved out of Ashuran cedar twice struck by lightning to my exact specifications, had been was the great expense there though I believed it worth ever copper.

A clause in the first sentence at first looks mis-aimed, but turns out not to be. "That sounds like it was lightning-struck to her specifications... oh wait, it was". 😊 But it could be phrased to avoid the garden path: "... which I'd had carved to my specifications, from Ashuran cedar twice-struck by lightning...".

[Barthumphries](#)

she'd somehow managed to talk both Atalante and Delos into allowing the Helikean armies and supply train to pass their through territory.

Switch the order of their and through.

nick012000

If Amadeus is backing Sephulcral, it's only so that he can kill her, along with all the other Wasteland nobles. Remember, that's been the core of his plan to fix Praes from the beginning.

[Mammon](#)

So same old same old for Praes, no? Black planning to backstab her once she's no longer needed is hardly new for .

Mammon

Apparently the shift+comma shift+dot symbols result in not showing anything at all. I said,

hardly new for ..fill in any and every Praesi noble..

Mental Mouse

You need to use HTML entities where opening a tag would be possible:

<something> becomes <something>. Likewise > where *closing* a tag would be possible. And & where an ampersand could start an HTML entity.

superkeaton

Huh. Neat.

Javvies

Well, that's a nifty use of Recall.

Huh ... I wonder what happens if Hanno Recalls a Mage Named – can he use their magics?

Hmm.

Dread Empress Sepulchral. Interesting name.

Nah, Amadeus isn't particularly behind her. Though he might have informed her that he wasn't backing Malicia anymore. He's behind her to the extent that she can bleed Malicia and the remaining High Lords.

But this is Amadeus, who thinks all the High Lords would be improved by being made a head shorter, so I doubt he's going to help put an actual High Lord on top of the Tower.

Plus, he knows Cat heard the Tower's song – he might be trying to set things up such that the way will be clear for Cat to take charge of Praes in order to annex it into Callow.

Or maybe Malicia managed to capture Amadeus and he's been secretly disappeared into her custody.

Konstantin von Karstein

Hanno cannot use the magic he Recall, and cannot remember High Arcana either.

Wonder

I don't think Ranger will let Malicia get her hands on Black again.

Raved Thrad

I'm actually surprised that Black and Hye have been quiet for so long. Ranger doesn't strike me as the patient, plotting kind.

Raved Thrad

Ok this "your comment is awaiting moderation" shit is now just seriously pissing me off.

[Liliet](#)

You gotta wonder what the fuck would have happened, yeah 0.0

Sun Dog

Not exactly. Hanno doesn't have the gift for sorcery, but RECALL lets him gain some academic knowledge of its workings, and he can ape the Aspects of those he uses Recall on. Some of these Aspects might touch on Sorcery, like the Bumbling Conjuror's CAST or Warlock's IMBRICATE, which would theoretically make him a temporary caster. But he would lose that ability when he let it go.

At the end of last book, he and Cat were chatting about how to cheese RECALL, we didn't see the whole conversation, just when he admits that he forgets High Arcana pretty much instantly and Cat expressed envy for his ability to snoop, spy and learn long-dead languages.

[Liliet](#)

Any source on aping their Aspects? I got the impression it was JUST skills and knowledge, which includes generic Name tricks.

Aotrs Commander

"Senior Mage Dastardly."

I don't remember if he has been mentioned before, but... I cannot be the only one who read that and had an incredibly delightful mental image.

Please tell me that he and his immediate subordinates are specialists in attempting to disrupt enemy communications...

[Liliet](#)

Dastardly did come up before! In Sarcella, probably. The name delighted everyone back then too 😊

KageLupus

Every time he comes up it reminds me of the early books in the Malazan series. Everyone has heard stories of Nefarias Bredd, a heavy infantryman that killed fifty raiders in a single night and could carry a horse by himself. Nobody has ever actually met him though...

Shikkarasu

Once or twice, but only post-timejump. I'm looking forward to more details about them.

Shoddi

Senior Mage Dastardly was mentioned by General Abigail to Catherine in "Interlude: Beheld I".

[Liliet](#)

000000H I LIKE THIS CHAPTER VERY MUCH.

First: Catherine)= She's so good at all of this and doing so much and she's so *tired*. At least she's got that home for Indrani to come to that she'd wanted, even if it's portable and doesn't have a fireplace specifically, at the moment :3

God damn, that table. 'Drani's got a home and a family indeed ♥

Catherine as Hanno's agent in selling the mundane use of his Aspect is as beautiful as it is hilarious. They were truly made for one another.

Also: a border between eras. What was forgotten is being recalled, ancient knowledge being unearthed. Nothing that ever belonged to heroes is truly lost, for now. In a world defined by status quo, Recall signifies... a change.

The Free Cities situation is pleasantly only a little on fire! They're vaguely friendly and helping, which is quite excellent of them.

Praes has not in fact been eaten by a demon of absence! Although Amadeus is... that joke theory about him getting the Name of Bard and going around singing rebellion, to everyone's confusion, is no longer quite so joke-sounding. It sure is nice to know we missed nothing of import on that front for the two years :3

...but seriously, what the fuck. I'm not buying he's backing Abreha, except as a *very* temporary and local alliance. What the fuck is he planning / where the fuck is he stuck?

Interesting dynamics between Akua and Hakram. Drinking tea together (remember when Catherine was APPALED at how pricey it was? Yeah...), teasing, but odd undercurrents when Cat goes with Akua's suggestion about Abigail?

That said also, poor Abigail ;u; she's going to have to actually do her job and not have Catherine do it for her now! About fucking time, and her worst nightmare. RIP

Shikkarasu

Maddie is backing no-one. He doesn't have the station or the Name to do so from behind the scenes, he would need to announce his support for it to mean anything. I think he's waiting in the shadows and will assassinate someone later this book, declaring himself Dread Emperor something-or-other (please, please, *please* Benevolent)

Also, Hakram won't drink tea from Nok. Nauk loved tea (even if he thought that drinking leaf water was a particularly human thing to do). I don't know what the difference between the pronunciations are, but head-cannon mourning is confirmed.

Mental Mouse

"Head-canon": Enshrining it as scripture in your head.

"Head-cannon": BOOM!



MagnaMalusLupus

Excellent chapter, but I've got to wonder what's happening with the Hellhound and her scribe. We haven't gotten any mention of them in a long while unless I'm missing something.

Liliet

Juniper should be fine, considering Abigail's just in the Third Army again (and apparently refusing to even take responsibility for that much, rip ;u;)

Daniel E

Interesting stuff. Even if this book wasn't setup to showcase the climatic confrontation between Alliance & DK, the fact that everyone agrees that the Alliance is at or near its' peak potential would have me in favor of the all-out balls to the wall offensive. Coy defense is definitely the best way to start, but a war of attrition against a foe like Dead King is just silly. Human factors aside, Akua made the best point about him having a millennia of tricks, so trying to match him 1 to 1 is futile.

On a completely different note to start the weekend, still insanely curious about the thing that Dead King claims Kairos saved them from.

Frivolous

I wonder who Malicia crucified. i hope Grem is still alive. It would be a horrible waste if the greatest military mind in the Dread Empire got whacked.

I also agree with those above who have chortled at Malicia's civil war. I love that she's in trouble for all her arrogant assumptions that she'd pulled the Dread Empire from the brink of disaster.

I've been having dirty thoughts about Hanno's Ride aspect. Can Ride be used during sex?

As a corollary, I dearly hope that there is, somewhere out there, a hero (or more likely a villain) with an aspect of Fuck.

Burlyraven

I wonder what the odds are on that table becoming a true artifact? A bit harder to transport than a cloak, but it is a labor of love by a Named.

Mental Mouse

Eh – no mention of anyone using magic on it, and Archer's abilities don't seem relevant. The Cloak started out magical, then Cat added trophies from Arcadia, a soul, and possibly some Winter and/or Night mojo along the way. Let alone what Sve Noc might have done to it while she was reborn.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

What Mental Mouse mentioned plus ot really doesn't have any story weight nor a brand recognition to the public as the cloak.

It has been made for a specific purpose and it serves it well but untill now nothing more.

I thing the Yew stick she carries has much more of a potential.

- Offered by a Good King's spirit instead of a sword

- Death association

- More death association because it's carried by a (part)

Deothaine

- Quite visible to the masses

Burlyraven

Eh, the yew staff isn't going to last much longer. It was partially a symbol of her refusing to buy back in to the Name game, so if/when she's forced back in (which is looking like it's going to be soon), it's a goner. We've already seen hints of this in recent chapters.

And I don't remember it ever being said that artifacts needed magic to spark them. The proffered lore seemed to suggest

that they were just objects that had been dragged into a Name's story groove deep enough to gather some power of their own.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah. I'm onboard with the 'artifact table' theory. If Indrani can carve a table (that is, by implication, sturdier than the previous ones Catherine had?) she probably can extend it to some supernatural-adjacent craftsmanship too. Like how her woodcraft extended to finding paths into Arcadia.

Chapter 8: Stanchion

"Friendship is as a garden: taking years to flourish, unmade by a season's negligence."

– Proceran saying

Neat rows of legionaries in polished armour stood in resounding silence as Zombie passed in front of them at a trot.

The three hundred men and women making up the assault formation that'd performed so well against the zombies yesterday – for all that the small victory had since been drowned out by bitterer defeats – had already been praised by their commander, Tribune Algernon Beesbury, and even been commended by Adjutant earlier. Hakram had also taken care to speak with the rank and file, asking what about the assault formation they felt had functioned properly and not, then passed along their answers put to ink to consider. I'd taken a glance, and while I'd read it properly later my glimpse had mostly told me the legionaries were satisfied in most respects, save that they were clamouring for more hammers. The raven beaks, as they were called, tended to be better at putting down dead than the halberds even if they lacked the flexibility of the other polearms. Reconsidering the proportions of each might be in order, though if thinned by too much the halberds would lose much of their effectiveness.

I gazed at the legionaries as I rode past them, most of the helmeted faces unfamiliar to me even after holding command in Hainaut for so long. Perhaps I ought not to be surprised, as most of these soldiers came from General Hune's command and I did tend to stay with the Third Army rather than the Second. Its soldiers and officers were not as familiar to me, as much a single woman could ever be said to be familiar with an army. A few faces among

these I'd seen before, if not put a name to, but it was some time before I pulled the reins to end Zombie's stride. The leathery grey-green skin I was glimpsing through the lieutenant's open helm stirred my memory, as did the vivid red scar cutting across the face of the orc.

"I know you," I mused. "Second Liesse?"

"Yes, Warlord," she grinned, showing teeth. "I was only a legionary, then. Fresh to the Fifteenth."

I tapped a finger below my eye, mirroring the jagged bend of the red line under hers.

"Seasoned now," I replied approvingly. "That was made by wight teeth or I'll eat my hand, Lieutenant..."

"Gunborg," she proudly said, "of the Howling Wolves Clan."

Hakram's clan, that, and Marshal Grem One Eye's as well. She must have been in one of the last batches of recruits we got from the Steppes before the Empress stripped the Fifteenth of its recruitment rights.

"One of them slipped in below my shield and bit me, Warlord," Lieutenant Gunborg said, then grinned nastily. "But I bit *back*."

I couldn't help but grin in answer. There was something about that iron-cast martial pride that served as the backbone of the Clans that'd always rung true with me. There were parts of what came with being an orc that I'd never truly be able to understand, but the pride? I'd partaken of it eagerly, as a young girl. It'd done more to bind me to the Dread Empire than any conversation I'd ever had to Malicia.

"Looks like you got the better end of that trade, lieutenant," I laughed. "But polish your shieldwork a bit, would you? When I see you make captain, I'd prefer you not to be missing any bits."

"You have my oath, Warlord," she solemnly assured me.

With a last chuckle I set Zombie back to her walk, passing the rest of the full first rank without seeing another old comrade. At the end of the line Tribune Beesbury was waiting, a young dark-haired man with surprisingly gentle brown eyes. With the pretty curls and the delicate face, he looked more like a poet than an officer of my armies. Until one got a look at the callouses on his hands, anyway: those didn't come from quillwork.

"Tribune Beesbury," I said, pitching my voice so it could be heard as far as the back. "I appointed you to lead these assault companies while knowing little of you, because you were warmly

recommended to me by General Hune and endorsed by Hakram Deadhand."

I let a moment pass.

"You have lived up to every word spoken in your praise," I said.

Though he had good mastery of his face, for one his age, he was no courtier. The flush of pleasure and brightened eyes let me know of his thoughts even as he tried to keep them from showing.

"You do me honour, Your Majesty," Tribune Beesbury replied.

I shook my head.

"You do us all honour," I said, voice rising as I turned to the assembled legionaries. "Assault formations like yours were untested, until yesterday, but you fought with prowess that cannot be denied. *Not a single fatality!*"

I roared out the last sentence and got a roar back in return. It was not as great a victory as I was making it sound, in truth, since zombies were the least of the dead and numbers had only been slightly larger on Keter's side. There'd been a score wounded, and without the House Insurgent there would have been two dead, but the performance had still been very promising. Enough that I was willing to invest time and coin into training legionaries in this method of making war even if was not backed by another ruler in the effort. I raised a hand and the cacophony went down, leaving me free to speak again.

"As a reward for your conduct in yesterday's skirmish, I've ordered ale and meat rations be opened to all of you for supper," I called out. "You sent the dead back to their graves, legionaries – fill your bellies tonight, and dream of doing it again!"

Cheers filled the air again, even louder than last time, and my name was even called out by some. It wasn't my finest bit of speaking, truth be told, but I'd given so many of these speeches lately I couldn't even remember how many this made. They couldn't all be fresh and stirring. Besides, ale and meat would get people cheering even if they'd come with a sermon instead of the praise I'd freely doled out. A celebration, even a small one, ought to lift some of the pall of uncertainty that'd fallen over the camp since yesterday. Hanno had caught the Enemy in time, so spirits had not taken too hard a hit, but the revelation of the existence of shapeshifting ghouls had everyone distrustful and uneasy. I had a word with the senior officers of the formation, committing names and faces to memory, but did not linger long. Razin and Aquiline ought to have been sent for by now, unless Hakram had lost his touch, so I passed Zombie's reins to a legionary and limped back to my tent.

The first hint that something was off came in the shape of a full line of legionaries whose pauldrons bore a distinctive scorched mark in the shape of a skeletal hand. Adjutant's personal command, those, grown from a single tenth when I was still the Squire to a full cohort of two hundred now. The sight of them around camp was hardly unusual, but that twenty would be standing almost skittishly around my tent most definitely was. The lieutenant in charge saluted when I approached and I hobbled up to him, about to ask the reason for this reinforced guard when my tent's entrance curtain was parted open. Hakram strolled out, leathery face offering up only forced calm.

"There has been a misunderstanding, Catherine," Adjutant said. "If you'd only give me a few moments I'll-"

My pulse quickened. Not from danger, but from something else I couldn't quite parse yet. I'd been meant to sit with the Blood, hadn't I? There were only so many people from their corner of the world that my second be struggling to prevent my talking with.

"Hakram," I blandly interrupted. "Who's in the tent?"

His face fell into an apologetic grimace, head angling to the side in an unconscious display of apology. Without another word I passed by him, staff forcing aside the curtain, and I felt my fingers clench in a spasm. Around the table Indrani was still carving me, four people were seated. Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osen were those who'd requested audience of me, but the other two were uninvited guests. The Barrow Sword's presence I had no real issue with. Ishaq might insist on continuing to wear the ancient bronze scale suit for reasons dubious to me, but the equally bronze sword he'd stolen from an old barrow along with the armour was a vicious piece of work especially well-suited to dealing with Revenants. The way he was rather easy on the eyes – though I remained skeptical of beards, even well-groomed ones – and had been a solid partisan of mine since we'd established the pecking order meant I tended to be well-inclined towards him.

Oh, he was still a ruthless and largely amoral bastard who'd once tried to kill me just for the perks it'd earn him among his people. Yet, compared to some of the villains I had to deal with, he was agreeably straightforward in his intentions. It was the last of the four that had my lips thinning in barely mastered anger. The Valiant Champions' name was, I'd been told, Rafaella. I'd never used it before, and did not intend to ever start. Short and stocky with a long braid going down her back, the Champion was the savage sort of cheerful that I might have appreciated in someone who hadn't *fucking skinned Captain and worn her fur as a cape*. My eyes flicked towards the tanned 'heroine', who gazed back without either fear or embarrassment.

"Walk out of this tent," I ordered in Chantant, tone eerily calm.

Hakram entered behind me and I could almost feel him wincing as Lady Aquiline opened her mouth.

"Queen Catherine, she is here at our-"

I'd coddled those kids too much, hadn't I? I must have been for them to be so fucking *unafraid*. Night flooded my veins, singing back eagerly to the call of my boiling anger. The sprite-lanterns hanging from the strips of cloth crisscrossing my tent's ceiling shone bright in the deepening shadows that swallowed everything between them, the enchanted braziers flickering as if touched by wind. A small ball of air formed above my palm, spinning, and Aquiline Osená gasped at the absence of the breath I'd just taken from her. My eyes never left the Champion.

"Walk," I softly repeated, "out of this tent."

She did not want to. Anyone with eyes could have seen that. I'd not been deft or delicate in my dismissal, and for a woman as proud as she it would rankle to have to obey. But she was in my tent, and an uninvited guest, so with a scowl the Valiant Champion got to her feet. She strode out, heading to my right since to my left Adjutant was silently standing. As she passed me, I spoke up again.

"Don't forget my warning," I murmured without looking at her. "If you ever wear that cloak again, even far from this camp, *I'll know.*"

She left the tent without giving reply, showing she was not entirely a fool. The Barrow Sword's soft, pleased laughter escorted her out. I loosened my grip on my anger, the shadows that'd swallowed up the tent fading, and crushed the ball of breath within my fist. Lady Aquiline gasped out, her voice returned to her. Razin eyed me with open anger, hands falling to his sword, and whatever ire might have been found in his gaze was matched twice over by what lay in Aquiline's.

"You struck at-" she began.

"Bring Named into my tent uninvited again, Osená," I softly interrupted, "and you'll have to crawl on your belly to wherever Tariq's hiding for healing, your severed feet hanging around neck. Do you understand me?"

They both looked at me with fear and surprise. I'd been too soft on the pair of them, I thought, and now familiarity had bred contempt. They were in dire need of a reminder of who exactly they were dealing with.

"I asked," I hissed out, "*do you understand me?*"

The Lady of Tartessos' tanned face paled, as much from humiliation as fear.

"I understand, Queen Catherine," she replied through gritted teeth.

But the point hadn't quite sunk in, I mused. Maybe being made to stand for the rest of the audience would do them some good, or –

"Catherine," Hakram murmured in Kharsum. "There is discipline, and there is insult. Only one is warranted."

I breathed out shallowly. He was right, of course he was right. There was no point to further turning the knife in the wound save that vicious little twinge of satisfaction it'd give me. And that was no reason to do anything at all. I let the sudden fury that'd seized me flow out and limped around the table, going towards the head. Hakram pulled out my seat for me and I sat with my staff propped up against my shoulder, eyeing the lot of them a tad more calmly.

"Ishaq," I said, turning my steady stare to the Barrow Sword. "You, at least, ought to have known better than to bring Named uninvited into the quarters of a villain."

"I was unaware until the last moment," the bearded warrior replied, grinning crookedly. "Could have warned them, true, but then I wouldn't have gotten to see *that*."

He gestured a calloused hand the direction the Champion had left. Considering the Barrow Sword and Levantine heroes fought like cats and dogs whenever they were in the each other's vicinity, I had no trouble whatsoever believing he'd kept silent just to see me expel the other woman from my tent. I grunted, unamused, and turned my gaze back to the two Dominion aristocrats. They were both glaring at the villain, though that rolled off like water from a duck's back.

"You asked for an audience," I said, tone still clipped. "You have it. Speak."

"We come today to speak of the Barrow Sword," Lord Razin said, not bothering to hide his irritation towards the man in question. "Who has, once more, petitioned the Majilis and the Holy Seljun for his deeds to be recorded by the rolls."

The rolls were one of those peculiarities in the way the Dominion of Levant treated its Named. While there were highborn among the Levantines who were aristocrats purely because of their ancestry, they were ultimately all descended from Named and to their people that was the very source of being highborn. Coming into a Name would see one immediately raised to nobility, though like everywhere else on Calernia there were nobles and then there were

nobles. There wasn't a lot of difference between someone like the Painted Knife and, say, a Callowan landed knight or a baronet. Often merchants were wealthier in everything but largely decorative privileges.

Bestowed, as they called their Named, were always either associated to one of the already existing lineages or, when unprecedented, entered in the rolls as the founder of their own line of the Blood. The rolls themselves, aside from serving as records of such lineages in 'Blood and Bestowal', held records of all the great deeds of Levantine Named. Those who were not villains, anyway, at least in theory. I personally believed that a few villains had slipped through the cracks by virtue of not openly keeping to Below or being tied to an originally heroic lineage in some way. It might even go deeper than that: some of the things I'd read had been done by the Vengeful Brigand, one of their founding heroes, had been genuinely nasty in a way not often seen out of the Wasteland.

The issue here, though, was that Ishaq was *openly* a villain. While undeniably Bestowed, he was effectively demanding he be made a noble by a country keeping to Above, one where men like him were expected to be the proving grounds of more honourable lines and nothing else. In other times he'd be laughed out of the room or ignored, should he not instead find the Grey Pilgrim politely knocking at his door one evening, but times were changing. The Llesse Accords stipulated that being a villain was not inherently a crime and, though the members of the Grand Alliance had not yet signed the Accords, the Truce and the Terms were widely seen as prelude and trial to their implementation.

It had been Cordelia Hasenbach's own notion to keep the two separate so that mistakes in one would not taint the other before it was implemented. I suspected I might have come to resent how damnably clever that woman was, if it weren't so damnably useful.

"Interesting," I mildly said. "Yet also a matter for the Dominion of Levant to resolve."

I mostly liked the Barrow Sword but I wasn't going to meddle in the brutal debacle that was Levantine politics on his behalf, much less to try to force the raising of a villain to nobility. The backlash to such an act from, well, most everyone was likely to be spectacular.

"We came to request a clarification about the Truce and the Terms," Lady Aquiline said, visibly still fuming. "And how they would apply against a decree of the Majilis."

"The Majilis voted unanimously for the Dominion to sign onto the Truce and Terms," I pointed out, frowning. "There is no conflict to be had."

"There's the trouble, Black Queen. I have been given amnesty for grave-robbing by the Terms, and my Bestowal is not itself an offence against the laws of Levant," the Barrow Sword smiled. "So by the ancient laws of the Dominion, I must be added to the rolls as the founder of the Barrow's Blood."

"Those laws were written with the understand that Below's servants would be hunted by the righteous without protection," Aquiline flatly said.

I sucked in a breath.

"The Terms bend the meaning of your laws so that you no longer have grounds to refuse him," Adjutant said, voicing my realization.

The two of the Blood nodded, while the villain leaned back in his seat with a smirk. Hence the *clarification* that was being requested here. They wanted me, as speaker for the villain Named of the Grand Alliance, to make it clear that the Terms couldn't force their hand.

"The Holy Seljun has expressed his intention to call the Majilis to session and change the laws to reflect the will of the Heavens," Lord Razin said. "When informed of this, the Barrow Sword-"

"The Barrow Sword told them he'd have to lodge a complaint with his representative under the Terms should the Majilis, seated halfway across the continent, try to fuck him up the ass while he's fighting in the thick of the melee against the Dead King," Ishaq said, tone hardening.

Fuck, I grimly thought. So that was why they'd come to me even though this was a Dominion matter: I'd sworn oaths under the Terms to defend the Barrow Sword and settle complaints on his behalf. It was a thorny little predicament they were bringing to me, too. On one hand, if I twisted arms for Ishaq over this then the Black Queen was intervening in the Dominion's own affairs. That was the kind of overstep that shattered coalitions. On the other hand, if I just looked away and did nothing then I was telling villains that I'd throw them under the horse the moment living up to my oaths became slightly inconvenient. That, and afterwards what Levantine villain would want to lend their power to the war if back home they were being forbidden by law the rights and privileges of other Named? Even those already fighting would think twice about keeping their oaths, if the Dominion scorned them so openly. That was the trouble, with making continent-spanning treaties: afterwards you had to deal with a continent's worth of trouble.

"To clarify," Hakram intervened, "no such complaint has been made, and no law was changed?"

"No," the Barrow Sword smilingly agreed.

"The Majilis has not yet been called," Lord Razin said. "Before the matter is to be debated, we meant to seek the insight of the Black Queen on this matter."

Meaning they wanted to know how hard I'd come out swinging for Ishaq before they made a decision that couldn't be easily walked back.

"I've also requested that a record of my deeds in Hainaut be sent to the Blood for consideration," the Barrow Sword added.

That much, at least, I had no qualms promising. Whatever the rest I'd not deny the man acknowledgement of the fierceness he'd fought against Keter with.

"That will have been put to ink and bear personal seal by dawn tomorrow," I said, flicking a meaningful glance at Hakram.

He'd be the one to write it, after all. From the rueful look in his eyes he'd understood my meaning perfectly.

"The Valiant Champion was meant to speak on this matter for Bestowed of the Dominion," Lady Aquiline told me, defiantly. "Before she was so unreasonably sent away."

"If Levantine heroes are to have a say in this dispute, that is a Dominion matter," I coldly replied. "Under the Terms, my interlocutor is the White Knight. I owe not an inch beyond that."

"How pettily you complain of another's trophy, while wearing many yourself," the Lady of Tartessos mocked.

Razin threw her an anguished look but said nothing. Trophies? Oh, I did wear those. Banners on my back and once, only once, I'd snatched the soul of a fallen foe who'd butchered an entire city in her folly. What I'd not done was mutilate the corpse of a fallen foe, made a *wolf fur cloak* of the woman who'd first taught me how to use a shield and – I breathed out. Sabah, Sabah had deserved better. Of all the Calamities, she'd deserved better.

"You get one warning, Osená," I quietly said. "Test me on this again and you will not enjoy what follows."

I met her gaze, the dark eyes so defiant, and did not blink. They'd been allowed too much leash, these two, and I'd be glad to see the back of them when next I met Tariq. But until then, they'd learn meekness again even if it had to be beaten back into their bones. Razin said something in one of the Levantine languages, tone flat, and only then did Aquiline of the Slayer's Blood look away.

"Your audience is at an end," I said.

Razin, often the deftest of the two when it came to matters like this, simply inclined his head.

"We can resume the discussion when a record of deeds has been written and the White Knight's insight has been sought," the Lord of Malaga replied.

In the same sentence establishing that nothing had been settled and that under the Terms they had someone to bring into this as well if I came out too hard on the Barrow Sword's side. He was turning into a decent hand at that, I mused. Being surrounded by people who usually dwarfed him in power and influence had taught him something of subtlety, smoothed away some his rawness.

"A good day to you, Lord Razin, Lady Aquiline," Hakram gravelled, standing at my side.

I blandly smiled and said nothing, letting them speak their own courtesies before leaving. The Barrow Sword made to do the same but I discreetly shook my head. I took a long look at Ishaq Deathless when he sat back down, allowing the silence to linger. With that tanned skin, strong brow and a thick – if well-maintained – beard he was a fine instance of what I'd been told was classic Alavan looks. He was broad-shouldered as an orc and not much taller than me, with for sole warpaint two long streaks of ash grey just below pale brown eyes. I'd seen him in a shirt, where the muscles under that armour had been well-moulded instead of tucked away, and I was honest enough with myself to admit I might have taken him to bed once or twice by now if he'd not been under my command and so brazenly ambitious. From his occasional lingering look I doubted it would have been all that difficult to talk him into it either.

"Your people have this saying, you told me," I said. "Kick a barrow, die stupid?"

He looked highly amused.

"Kick a barrow, die a fool," the dark-haired villain replied, half-grinning.

"That's the one," I agreeably said, then narrowed my eyes. "Ishaq, don't go around kicking barrows when we're in the middle of a war for the right to keep breathing."

"You swore oaths, Black Queen," he reminded me, carefully.

"The Truce and Terms are a vessel to help gather Named to fight the Dead King," I said. "If the ambitions one of those Named threaten that cause, the Terms have failed in that purpose."

"I'm not asking them for land, or for right of rule," the Barrow Sword protested. "I ask that my deeds not fall into obscurity simply because I do not kneel at the altar of the Ashen Gods."

"And I think that's fair," I told him. "I really do."

All else aside, if a villain was rendering a service to Grand Alliance they were due the same recognition a hero would get for those deeds. Of course, fair only went so far in this world.

"So because I've grown passing fond of you, Ishaq," I continued, tone casual, "I'll tell you right now: if I have to choose between you and eighty thousand Dominion soldiers, you are going die tragically fighting Keter."

I'd not raised my voice in the slightest, yet the hardened killer almost flinched. I smiled amicably at him.

"Ambition is a virtue, when tempered by restraint," I said. "We understand each other, yes?"

"We do, Black Queen," the Barrow Sword soberly replied.

Vinegar had been served, so the other hand must offer honey.

"Good," I nodded. "Then I'll have the record of your laudable efforts in Hainaut written up and lean on the White Knight to have it confirmed independently by heroes. If it still looks like they're being unreasonable, I'll personally take this to the Grey Pilgrim."

His expression brightened, and I could only think of the way Wasteland villains would eat the poor bastard alive. Ishaq wasn't stupid by any means, he was just... uncomplicated. He took what he could, retreated in the face of superior force and saw absolutely nothing wrong in either thing. There was a soothing clarity to that way of living I sometimes envied.

"Then I take my leave, Black Queen," the Barrow Sword smiled. "I thank you for your time."

"Keep putting down Revenants and my door's always open," I smiled back. "Fair days, Ishaq."

"Fair nights, Black Queen," the villain replied.

I waited until he'd left before letting out a long sigh. I slumped back into my seat and closed my eyes.

"So?" I asked Hakram.

"You went too hard on Aquiline," Adjutant assessed. "I know why you did, but now she'll feel she's been dishonoured until she

gets some sort of victory over you. We both know that your patience is going to run out on that."

It would, which meant I'd probably have to serve her up a meaningless win over something to soothe her wounded pride. Considering I was less than well-inclined towards Aquiline Osenia at the moment, that prospect did not fill me with enthusiasm. What had she done, to deserve this from me?

"It's not the same, Hakram," I said. "The Mantle, and that abomination the Champion wore."

A beat of silence.

"Levantine take trophies," the orc said. "Especially from famous foes. It is part of who they are as a people. I expect if she could have taken armour instead of fur, she would have."

I opened my eyes, stirred to anger once more.

"But she didn't," I hissed back. "And you know that's entirely-"

He sat at my side, around the corner of the table. The chair did not creak under his weight, as Cordelia Hasenbach was not one to forget such details.

"I know, Catherine," the orc told me. "Of course I know. But I also understand that to *them* there is no difference, and so your anger seems frivolous to their eyes."

"Praesi highborn murder each other at the drop of a hat, Stygians practice slavery," I flatly replied. "Am I to pretend their ways are just some quaint local custom as well?"

"My people eat corpses, and sometimes the living," Hakram frankly said. "Goblins take oaths about as seriously as porridge. I would be bitterly disappointed if you only took us in because those things have yet to prick you too sharply."

That actually stung to hear, and I drew back in surprise.

"That's different," I said, "it's not..."

"It's not one of the two Calamities you've loved," Adjutant kindly finished for me. "It's not the woman who taught you to keep your shield up when you swing a sword, worn on some stranger's back."

A long moment of silence passed as I struggled with my words.

"It's not wrong, to be furious about that," I quietly replied.

"No," he agreed, "it isn't. You can carry that grudge until you die, should you want to, and you'll not be wrong."

"But the Black Queen can't?" I bitterly asked. "I don't agree with that, Hakram. Akua said something once, about wants of the woman and the needs of the queen, but no one cuts it that clean. The Praesi have tried, and it's sickened them perhaps beyond mending. I'll have no part of it."

Adjutant set against the oak the hand of bone he'd earned in my service, along with near every other wound that rent his body. It was, I thought, a statement powerful enough that it need not be spoken at all to be heard.

"I am not Akua Sahelian," Hakram said, tone almost chiding. "I swore myself to Catherine Foundling, not a Name or a crown. I've no interest in splitting my oath between your and your shadow, seen by Wasteland eyes. But I will say, Warlord, that the moment you let hate choose your path for you at last fetters were clasped around your wrist."

He bared long fangs, sharp and pale as bone.

"If you cannot tolerate the way of the world, change it," Hakram Deadhand said, sounding even now like he did not doubt for a moment that I could. "If you will not take up those arms, though, do not keep clutching them in your grasp. Creation has no patience for the half-hearted."

I leaned forward, elbows on the table as I passed tired hands through my hair.

"I'm tired, Hakram," I admitted, looking down at the half-polished wood. "I'm tired and I slipped up and just... the moment I did, the *single fucking moment*, a kid died. Just like that. And I'd like to think I'm not the kind of monster that would wish a fourteen-year-old kid would die just because another one did, but..."

The tall orc leaned his head against mine, softly, and said nothing. It was one of the kindest things anyone had ever done for me.

"I understand him, now," I said.

And though the anger was not on my tongue, it was even worse than that. It'd settled in my bones, in the marrow of them, and now it was a part of me. One that would never leave.

"Who?" Hakram softly asked.

"Black," I murmured. "Why even knowing he was wrong he still wanted to win. To beat them. A single breath blown on the balance of Creation, so that for just a moment you could look at it and say: this is fair. This is equal. And know that it wasn't but you *made* it that way."

"There's nothing at the end of that road, Catherine," Adjutant said.

"I know," I said. "Gods, I know. But every time I see their kid survives and ours dies, every time I see they get to walk around in the skin mother of three and we're in the wrong for *daring* to be offended by that? I understand him a little better."

In the end, though Black had wanted to even the scales by pushing down on Good. And that wasn't a victory, not really, but for all his pale skin and cold steel mind there was something about my father that was utterly Praesi: the Wasteland only ever knew victory by triumph over others. The other way, the hard way, was pushing up the other scale. And I would walk that road, that was the choice I'd made. But, I thought as my forehead pressed against the cool oak and Hakram's hand lay on my shoulder, before my feet began moving again I could... wait a while. Catch my breath. I closed my eyes, alone in my tent with the person I loved most in this world, and it was the closest I'd felt to peace in years.

It would pass, I knew. So I enjoyed it, for the little while it lasted.

epokki

Please help EE out, and vote for PGTE at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> . The series also has a pretty active Discord server, <https://discord.gg/Ad3D63W>

[ErraticErrata](#)

First update of the month, which means extra chapter in the tab of the same name. This one is the first of a two-parter called "Kingfisher I", from the POV of Prince Frederic Goethal.

Aston Whiteman

Thanks EE!

Insanenoodlyguy

"If you cannot tolerate the way of the world, change it," Hakram Deadhand said, sounding even now like he did not doubt for a moment that I could. "If you will not take up those arms, though, do not keep clutching them in your grasp. Voting has no patience for the half-hearted."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Frivolous

I wonder and suspect that one day Catherine will simply challenge the Valiant Champion to an honor duel and exterminate her.

In other news: Really happy that Catherine is lusting after the Barrow Sword. I feel it's a pity that so far she's only had affairs with women, considering she's surrounded by so many muscular hunks of man-flesh.

Javvies

Eh, Cat isn't that big on the Levantine honour duels herself.

I suspect it's more likely that one of her allies will stab and rob Valiant Champion for her.

Sylfa

She isn't no, but she also used the words "Justification matters only to the just" for a while. When the "heroes" disregarded words of peace she dropped a lake on them. If they can't see how wearing someone's skin would be offensive then she would be okay with using the means she has at hand to teach them a lesson.

I doubt it'll get to that though, she has too much support from diplomats and schemers to need to go down that road. Also, I doubt she would actually have to skin and stuff Valiant Champion for people to realise how wearing the skin of someone could be considered disrespectful, she could just ask Razin if he would be okay with her making a cloak out of Aquiline for Barrow to wear after winning a honor duel against her. The anger he wouldn't be able to stop from welling up should be enough of a hint of why she's so angry with Champy.

Decius

The Valiant Champion has way too much power in that story. "I killed a monster, and the monster's kin challenged me to a duel over it, so I killed her too."

Better to put her in a situation where she opposes the remaining Calamities and faces a draw.

Josh

One of the things that I've noticed and is bothering me more and more, is that I don't understand what stories there are in this universe. I thought from the sword and the stone from book one that we were going to use real world stories as a

baseline, but then really specific names started popping up that made me doubt that.

Names are supposed to be, from what I remember, “grooves carved into creation from repeated stories.” So how many times has someone done a “mirror knight” or a “scorched apostate.” They seem really esoteric for there to be stories about them carved into creation that they rely on. That's not to say that in universe there aren't stories that they use that we aren't privy to, but if that's the case then we are in the dark on what sorts of tropes we could be working with.

All that to say, I think the story dynamics of a duel like that can't really be known at this point. Even using our tropes as a baseline, it's entirely possible for Cat to win and it become a “student gets revenge for master” story, or a “daughter of the wolf comes back to avenge father and both kill each other” one, or even a “bloodfued/cycle of revenge” thing. There's too many tropes to pull from to make any sort of definite statement. And the longer the this story goes on, despite how well written and interesting it is, the more it becomes obvious to me that you can find an old trope from our stories to justify any outcome you want, and I don't understand why some work and others don't.

Ryan

Remember it's not about the Names it's about the Roles. The Names can change to fit the circumstances of the person who receives them But the Roles are what get carved into creation. For example these might very well be the first Scorched Apostate & Stalwart Apostle the Names would be new but the Roles would be familiar. The Role of one person in a dire situation who betrayed their faith and was punished and the one about the person who stayed faithful and was rewarded. There have probably been tons of different names who have pulled their power from a story similar to that. Sure a few Named like the Black Knight and the Grey Pilgrim get some continuity with their Names but that's only cause their specific Role kind of requires it.

You are right can pull from a large pool of Tropes when crafting your story so there is a lot of ways a duel between Catherine and VC could go but it all depends on how well they nudge those tropes to forefront that will decide what kind of story it is. The fact that Catherine is a leader in a massive coalition and VC is a valuable asset means that allowing her emotions to control her if she challenged VC to a duel would be a huge mark against her. Nudging the story in a bad direction for her.

Black Spiral Dancer

The ones that work most are the ones where a hero wins, because those stories are repeated most often by the people.

I see the outcomes as percentages (%), where the higher percentages go to those tropes more dear or most often repeated. That means in countries where evil is more culturally accepted and praised, the Evil Names would sprout more often and Good names less, because the common people usually repeat, listen or know better the tropes where evil has won. On the other hand, places like Procer only allow Evil names to sprout usually as a part of a greater story where good wins in the end.

etc, etc.

[Liliet](#)

From my understanding, Names are made from pre-existing cultural archetypes like puzzle pieces. Every story is different, and that's fine; we still understand that the Prince in Cinderella story is *basically* the same role as in Snow White's story, even if the specific things they do are different. So that, metaphorically speaking, gives us a Cinderella Prince Role and a Snow White Prince Role; they're both Princes but there's hair-splitting going on.

A Role can be new as a specific Role; as long as people say 'oh yeah she's the black queen / oh yeah she's a black queen' and understand *exactly* what they mean (and it's a conclusion from what's actually happening, as opposed to being simply inaccurate) – it's Name-generating.

ninegardens

I'm going to agree on the Name thing.

The feel I got in books 1-3 is that the names EE used really felt... well like Names carved into creation. "Black Knight" "Warlock" "The Shining Prince" "Tyrant" "Thief" "Grey Pilgrim" etc.

Every time I look at those I nod and think "Yes, this makes sense."

"The Valiant Champion" "The bumbling conjurer", okay, yes, sure, this also seems pretty legit. Not as legit, but close enough.

And then... "The Mirror knight", "The painted knife" "The kingfisher prince" "The bitter blacksmith" and (admittedly) "Adjutant" I go....

Ummm... okay? I guess that's a thing?

Basically, it feels like the essentially sensible premise has been stretched so as to accommodate a story which needs more super heroes. Which is... well, fair enough. If that's what the story needs, I'm happy for EE to do what's needed. But it still feels like a stretch.

(To be fair, "Scorched Apostate" probably falls in category two for me. Its not in the A+ story pile, but still seems pretty legit).

therealgridlock

Well the point of it is not the names, which of course are going to be silly, they're all latin and french, but the stories.

The story of the adjutant is someone so good at their job they almost have a... You could call it... Supernatural ability? 😊

The point is it takes the trope of naruto characters fighting so fast no one else can see it and turn it on its head.

For every fantasy book that describes someone as being almost supernaturally fast, or reflexes faster than humans, etc etc, that's one more slice through the narrative fabric for those people having those powers. If throughout all of time (for untold millennia) people are so good at fighting, and play out the same stories, that it's almost uncanny? Well the next one is just that much closer to actually *being* supernatural.

We just see the end result of this system, where everything has been codified into common rules.

"Oh yeah, they started a pattern of three, win, draw, loss, always goes like that, don't you read, like, books, man?"

"They have three aspects, three things they're good at" etc etc. (This is probably just DM limitations for balance tbh)

Every time a right hand man is really good at **FIND** ing things (and i have no idea whether that html tag worked or not) it adds to the narrative weight of that "find" aspect.

It's why Cat starts off with Learn as the squire, their first job is usually just to learn how to do their job, and how many books have you read where main character doofus learns so fast, or catches on with preternatural

speed, or they're a natural talent at whatever? That's literally adding narrative weight to the power.

You can almost completely ignore the "name" of the name, and look entirely at what story they play out, what story created them, what stories they create, and what they do with their time.

Masego was just an apprentice warlock, good at studying, pretty alright with magic, right? Except they kept having him do harder and harder stuff, he kept having to dissect more and more miracles, he kept seeing more and more stuff showing him the other side of the veil, until finally he literally glimpsed the bits beyond and the sheer story weight burned out his eyes (also, summer fairies) and also allowed him to make cool new ones with dark vision and 360 vision. Bet he can't be flanked. His aspects all revolve around Witnessing events that show great truths about stuff, Ruining the best laid plans of the enemy, and Wrestling their tools away from them to be used by someone better at the craft. In some ways he might be better than warlock simply because he can do pantheon magic that the warlock couldn't really come close to. Shoot, his own dad became a god briefly, and his other dad became a real boy briefly. Masego has enough story weight to craft any kind of story out of that he wants. He's absolutely brimming with protagonist energy, and that's what this world runs on.

They talked about it a lot with the grey pilgrim, he is literally the party DMNPC, always swooping in to save the idiot who got in over his head and fought 15 bugbears at level 1, the weight of his passage through the story is both a representation of the cumulative weight and power of the "protective old guy" and his own actions in saving so many lives.

I for one wanna know what Kairos saw. I hope it was the audience.

Sylfa

As others have said: it's the story that matters most, not the name. But also I think it's only part of the name that matches the "groove". So not "mirror knight" but "knight", not "bumbling sorcerer" but "bumbling", not "scorched apostate" but "apostate". The other half of the name is important as well but has more to do with how the named see themselves and in what way they are unique. There are exceptions though since "gray pilgrim" always appear to be "gray", for instance.

It's also worth noting that Adjutant is quite powerful as a named even though it's a new name and both Thief and Black Knight were quite weak in their name powers despite having old names. Both had strong points but were overall quite weak compared to other named.

I think it's both a matter of how strongly they fit their role as well as how much faith or belief they have: Adjutant practically lives for his role, but Black Knight was more of a Emperor/Chancellor in behaviour, or even a General. Thief lost her faith quite early on in her role and Gray Pilgrim has never stopped believing in his role, even during the worst time of his life. Gray Pilgrim also has an entire country believing in him, along with a choir – if that matters. Adjutant has Cat's absolute faith and the admiration of all the tribes for being the first orc Named in ages.

Earl of Purple

Played right, that story might kill the Champion. "You killed my relative. I'm here to avenge her." The story that heroes always use, when a villain kills their loved one(s).

But Cat's not the one who could pull that story effectively- she's too far removed from the narrative weight, as the adopted daughter of Sabah's best friend. One of Sabah's children, though? A new person taking up the mantle of the Cursed? They might be able to pull it off.

caoimhinh

I would think it's rather more likely that Raphaella challenges Catherine to a duel, once she is fed up with this situation.

And yeah, Cat has mentioned a lot that she is bisexual and is constantly ogling at men too, despite her only sexual partners in the last seven years been women (and only 2, in fact). But I guess the matter that's more important is that, despite Catherine liking to leer, she actually only beds people who she truly likes, hence her few partners so far (and Indrani had to insist *a lot* plus have her in a dark cave for months before she managed to bed Cat).

Personally, I would prefer it if she just went back with Kirian. Their break up was absurd in my opinion, and Cat should have long been over her initial apprehension towards what Kirian wanted to do (and as far we know never did, because she valued Cat's opinion on the matter, despite Cat breaking up with her for just suggesting it). It's also a waste of such good character to have her simply disappear after she is no longer girlfriend of the MC.

Liliet

The problem with Cat/Killian was that Killian wanted simply *more attention* from Catherine. Killian was willing to put Cat above other things in her life, and *wanted* to; she wanted a primary relationship. And Catherine did not have space for one and wasn't willing to make space.

So no, I don't think they should get back together. Killian deserves someone who'll give her what she wants, not being relegated to secondary while she wants to be primary.

It's not actually about Cat.

therealgridlock

I for one am saddened she didn't try the obvious solution: communication and talking about your problems.

I mean, all it would take to heal the divide between Cat and Raf would be Cat sitting down with Raf over a nice cuppa and telling her about the mother of three, the best friend, her first swords teacher, the loyal companion,

Because once Rafaella sees her as a person? She will admit that she was a human, and not a monster, and that she was wrong. Not to kill her, she had her job, but to disgrace her, and disrespect the person she had been to so many people.

Once Rafaella sees what she did was wrong, was bad, not Evil, but bad, she will feel sorry and then Cat and Raf can make up. Hell, she might even apologize to black and Raf's husband and kids. I dunno.

I feel like pointing at akua and saying "tu coque" isn't quite the same thing, because captain was a human who occasionally turned into a monster, had the misfortune of being on the wrong side in a war, and occasionally did monstrous things. Akua has no such benefit, she was a monster, trained psychopath, who took **dying** to realize what it means to have a friend. Let that sink in. A human with a bit of monster, vs a monster with a tiny, itty bitty speck of human that took literal nose-rubbing in morality to find.

Not to mention akua is still alive and wasn't skinned for the cape. Captain gets no such benefits.

Anyone with the intelligence to outsmart the Bard should have enough intelligence to be able to talk about their feelings.

Earl of Purple

I don't think this would work. The reason why Rafaella skinned Captain was to take a trophy of the hardest fight

she'd had to that point. The fact Captain was human doesn't matter, really. Rafaella sees it as a compliment to her foe- 'You were so hard to beat I'm going to skin you so I can remember the fight'.

A lesser reason is 'You were my hardest fight, now I'll wear a trophy from you so everyone I meet in the future knows that if they aren't as good as you are, they should fear me'.

Javvies

Hmm.

I get where Barrow Sword is coming from. And I suspect that Hanno is probably going to be of the opinion that the Dominion changing its laws to block Barrow and those like him from the bare minimum granted to other Levantine Named is not acceptable.

Yeah ... the kids have forgotten that Mom has rules, and the rules matter.

And Valiant Champion is going to get knifed and robbed one of these days. Especially if it comes to the attention of Robber that Cat wants the trophy Valiant took of Sabah, and Robber has the opportunity or can make one.

Tom

Would love to see Razin and Osen start calling Cat and Hakram "Mom and Dad" at some point. I don't see Cat and Hakram as a romantic thing, but other than that I think it works really well 😊

Hakram: "Cat, go easy on them. They're just kids!"

Razorfloss razor

That is going to be a hot button until the day she dies and probably even after. This was a powerful chapter and a nice show of the women instead of the black queen. God it must hurt her to admit that she finally understand why black is the way she is.

It sucks having to be the person to change an entire faction all by herself when all she wants to do is tear into the heros for the injustice of the situation.

RubberBandMan

I wonder if Cat is going to do something terribly clever and use Hanno to prove that villains were already on the rolls, and thus barrow sword should be listed, because what if his name spawns a heroic version later?

Either way, this is very back-room politicking issue, everyone in the room was discussing hypotheticals before taking this to Cat,

to speak more hypotheticals. Something will be hammered out in private, or there will be a sneak political move to make the outcome forgone.

panic

Well It's been foreshadowed if nothing less. Previous chapter with questions being asked of the White Knight so he could go back and take a peak in old lives, which was pretty central to that chapter. And here today, Cat talking about how some of the heroes where not all that heroic, and some where downright nasty. It's not entirely unreasonable to assume, based on that, that Cat would go to her new boy toy and ask if there are any Levant "Heroes" he can't recall with his ability.

[Adrian_V](#)

No battle or roundbreaking revelation but i still loved this chapter, a little of world building and character development or rather construction in the case of Ishaq, something i am happy with just how much he has been mentioned, he would make an interesting POV, something to see how the villains think and react to everything Cat is doing, plus i wanna know if people are realizing just how much she needs (and wants) to get laid, i bet there are already jokes about it and how she is restraining herself xD

Also is funny how Cat doesn't realize how she stablishing that thread or not thread she will indeed defend her people (villains in this case), at least those who earn it. As for captain's fur cloak maybe she should point out that no loved ones are going to come for her neck due to hers (like seriously i am just waiting to see if one of Sabah's children to stumble into a avenger role/story, one not even 100% villainy).

Decius

"None of the people in my cloak have anyone left to avenge them" is intimidate, not diplomacy.

Trying to intimidate someone named Valiant Champion will not work.

Juff

Typo Thread:

as much a > as much as a
had to Malicia > had with Malicia
if was not > if I was not
second be > second would be
I must have been > I must have
in the each > in each

associated to > associated with
hand not yet > had not yet
Levant," the > Levant." The
the understand > the understanding
some his rawness > some of his rawness
her sat back > he sat back
with for sole > his sole
ambitions one > ambitions of one
to Grand > to the Grand
So because > So, because
passing fond > passingly fond
going die > going to die
your and your > you and your
at last fetters (something seems off about this phrasing)
skin mother > skin of a mother

Exec

soother her wounded
soothe*

In the end, though Black
though,* I think? sentence doesn't work without another comma

[Liliet](#)

God, wow.

I wonder what Hanno thinks about the cloak. He's been pretty neutral on it when it was mentioned briefly in his POV, so now that Catherine with her opinions is around?

I think it's a shame she didn't attempt to explain to Aquiline, but then, vulnerability, political bullshit, etc. Shame)=

Just... doing better, huh.

masterofbones

Are there really no laws against skinning people and wearing the skin? I really doubt any of the villains would be given that kind of free reign,

Heh, Catherine should do that with some noble, point out that there's precedent.

[Liliet](#)

All Named were pardoned for all crimes. This applies to heroes and villains both.

[Walter](#)

It's always so weird to read about Cat saying stuff like ""Praesi highborn murder each other at the drop of a hat, Stygians practice slavery," I flatly replied. "Am I to pretend their ways are just some quaint local custom as well?"". She is literally, obviously, a murderer and a slaver, and probably the greatest and most ambitious of such in the known world. The Gallowborn. The Mantle. The thing she's so proud of where she compelled the Angel to her will. The entire plan with the Drow. Larat's whole arc. Like, making people do what she wants them to do by threat of violence is the thing at the spine of her, the core of her character.

I get that the hypocrisy is supposed to be a big point of the story, how the world everybody wants to change is made out of people trying to change it, but Cat is so clearsighted the rest of the time that the contrast keeps bopping me in the nose. I guess it is one of those 'darkest under the lighthouse' things, but she keeps on creeping right up to the point of realization and then zooming off in another direction.

She tells the dude that he better obey her or she'll murder him literally less than an hour before she sneers at the thought of tolerating a city full of people who make people obey them or they will murder them. She is outraged at the woman who wears a cloak of stolen skin while wearing one of stolen souls. Like, at some point the pin has to drop, right?

-->"It's not wrong, to be furious about that," I quietly replied.

What does Cat actually mean by 'wrong' in this statement? Maybe that's an easier way to get at the issue. Is she asking if she has a justification for being furious? Because I seem to recall those only matter to...I forget the rest. Maybe I should look it up somewhere, say on something that absolutely everyone has seen and taken into account when they try to figure out what kind of a person our protagonist is.

I worry that the greatest hope for the continent's victory against the dead is waging the war entirely bereft of self consciousness. "Why is Malicia able to make everyone think I can compel the Pilgrim? That would be ridiculous. By the by, Doom of Liesse, make me coffee, Angel, raise me from the dead. Entire Drow nation, launch an attack on Keter...".

KageLupus

The Gallowborn doesn't really count as slavery, in my mind. I get where you are coming from with it but there is a pretty big difference. They were criminals and deserters who would normally be killed. Turning them into a fighting regiment and making that execution by via battle instead of the noose isn't quite the same thing as outright slavery.

Day to day the Gallowborn were not treated any differently than the other soldiers. They were even afforded a kind of grim pride, since they were often led by Cat herself into the middle of fights that no one should have walked away from. From the time they were created until the last of them were wiped out, the Gallowborn had months or years longer to be alive compared to if Cat had dispensed the usual justice and just killed them. It isn't a great spot to be in by any means, but I really don't see it matching up with full on slavery.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm not seeing the parallels so much. The Gallowborne not so much slaves as a sentence. We've seen the Legion and then the army of Callow is not mandatory, those troops who were abandoning signed up and then betrayed their oaths. Treason in the military has long been a capital punishment, one could argue such a deferred sentence is a mercy. Akua is a bit less clear cut but something similar. Considering they are not bought, sold, and there's been no talk of their children having any penalties, it's a far cry from slavery. Similarly, the Fey signed on for this shit. When they signed off, she made no effort to keep them beyond their terms.

The more relevant example is the Drow. Now that was slavery, even if she intended to free them some time later. But In fairness, the entire plan with the Drow is something she backpedaled on as soon as she became mortal again. The fact is though, that Grey Pilgrim was initially RIGHT until that pivot. The Cat of the day was tolerable. The Winter Queen in a few decades would have been a terrible monster he'd be right to smother in the crib as he is wont to do. But the Sovereign of Moonless nights is dead and gone, eaten by the night. The Woman bitching about fucked up Dominion practices isn't her.

Murderer, she is one of those of course. but still not a hypocrite on this I think. Her complaint is not that murder is a thing, it's that Praesi nobility murder for NO GOOD REASON. Obviously this can be debated based on moral values and all, but I think it could be argued at the least that cat feels "There was no point to further turning the knife in the wound save that vicious little twinge of satisfaction it'd give me". And that was no reason to do anything at all." is not a perspective said highborn would share, that that was a perfectly good reason to do something you could get away with.

I will agree with your last point though. She really has no cause to bitch at why people think she could have a leash on the pilgrim. Especially when she's already kinda leashed the pilgrim.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed lol

except the 'compel the Pilgrim' thing comes with 'do you want the full list of what it took for me to do before he started listening to me, because it includes the 'fought him for the right to DIE' point' which imho is emotionally valid lol

Liliet

Compelling people to do what you tell them to do – through threat or violence or otherwise – is not inherently slavery. By that logic, all government ever is slavery, laws are slavery, simple rules of courtesy are slavery.

Slavery refers to something far more specific, and even that specific concept gets universally acknowledged exceptions for *criminal punishment*. Which was literally the case with Gallowborne and was *effectively* the case with Akua – Catherine didn't exactly snatch a random soul off the street to attach to her mantle. Akua's serving a life sentence.

The drow thing horrified Catherine herself once she went back to mortal senses and values – you don't have to have never done the thing to consider it wrong and not be hypocritical about it, you just have to acknowledge it's just as wrong when you do it. Which Catherine did, even though what she did was indeed, as Indrani acknowledged, 'a little north of slavery' (the distinctions are fine but *important* in this case).

As for what 'right' and 'wrong' mean... Well, that's a pretty philosophical question. Ethical philosophy, specifically, I think, in this case.

Walter

I dunno why you care so much about the label. Like, these guys have a job where they:

1. Can't quit.
2. Don't get to choose what to do.
3. Don't get paid.

And it is slavery if beforehand the dictator says they broke the law that she makes? Once these words get said, the people in bondage and laboring are not slaves, but, to steal a line from a funny movie recently prisoners-with-jobs?

Draey

Gallowborn were treated no differently than any other member of the army. The only thing here is that they got reassigned, and their contracts for time in service were increased from x amount of years to 'till you drop dead holding my line'. They weren't treated like property, nor

were their families. Let me ask you a question, do you consider prisoners of any kind 'slaves'?

Also compelling angels to do what you want thing is more like beating the angels at their own game. Hardly close to wearing the skin of someone.

The drow plan fell in shambles and that one was pretty close. However she clearly has a deal with Bird Goddesses, and the drow follow of their own volition (though are heavily encouraged).

Akua is paying for her a city of souls. Its not the same as wearing the skin of Captain, because Captain can't pay for her crimes whilst being a cape.

[Liliet](#)

...Yes, prison is widely considered to not be equivalent to slavery as an institution. The inherent point of slavery is the lack of freedom; that is also the *intended* point of prison. Ethics of how specific prison systems are run are beside the point of the specific ethical issue of *depriving a person of their freedom* being slotted in as "that's what you get when you do crimes".

Which guys are you talking about specifically, here?

[Walter](#)

Like, the fact that you can't tell whether I'm referring to Stygian prisoners or Callowan ones is kind of the point, yeah? The descriptors I gave refer to both.

I don't think Cat agrees with you about the bit where if you say legal stuff before you make someone serve you at the point of a spear it is not slavery. Presumably the Stygian slaves were found guilty of something or other, yeah? If the NonRepentent Magistrate showed up tomorrow and let her know that her property were all Gallowborn-equivalents you think Cat would change her mind?

The above is perhaps not as clear as it ought to be, let me try again. You posit that she's a legalist, slavery is ok if beforehand you set the laws in place to make it so. Stygia's slaver soldiers and her Gallowborn are different in this model in that (the ruling authority) she found her victims guilty beforehand and they did not bother to.

I posit instead that she's making the fundamental attribution error, where "I'm indiscrete, you leak, she is being investigated for breaching the Official Secrets Act.". When she enslaves people they get what's coming to

them. When other people do it they are horrible monsters. The dif is not in the nature of the act or the legal justification, but who does it.

A fairly strong argument in favor is that when Cat visited Kether and Dead King gave her a person she was unconditionally and utterly horrified. She didn't ask whether he was serving a sentence, she full stop was skeeved out. This was even the version of Cat who was about to go and try and enslave the Drow.

I feel pretty good about this theory because it ties into the 'my cloak of souls is fine and your cloak of skin is barbaric' thing. It feels like the author is beating the 'Cat's morality is person/tribe based' drum pretty hard, where when an enemy does an atrocity it is unforgivable and when we do it is 'long prices'.

Javvies

Cat only ever had the one soul on her cloak – Akua, who was a special case in that Akua had basically put her soul into a phalactery and killing her body would just mean her soul was going to go off and possess someone else (a baby, I think it was). Also, a special case because Cat was making an example out of her for the rest of Praes. Also, I believe/think Akua's soul was originally supposed to be more or less inert and basically in state of stasis, she was supposed to be entirely unaware of what was going on around her. Every other trophy was from a defeated enemy's standard, cloak, or other piece of cloth. There's a substantive difference between trophies made of cloth or to make a point, and making trophies out of people just because.

Stygians don't use prisoners. They use slaves born of slaves. They're more or lured this universe's equivalent of the Unsullied of AGoT/ASoIaF. Also, when the Stygian slave soldiers have served 20 years, they get summarily executed.

The Gallowborne (or most of them) first entered the Legions as an alternative sentence to crimes they committed. This is a historically common practice, and one that continues to this day, though military service as an alternative sentence is admittedly less common these days and is available for fewer crimes. They then attempted to desert during wartime, practically just off the battlefield. That's something that gets you a high automatic death sentence anywhere, anytime, and usually not a clean one – that's the kind of thing that usually gets you turned into an example or

disappeared. Cat commuted that automatic execution to service in a penal unit for their full term of service in the Legions and if they survived their full term their records would be cleared.

There is a substantive difference.

As for the Drow ... Cat's original plan was an alliance with their leadership. She then realized that the Drow had no national organization. In addition, she realized that the Drow didn't have a cultural imperative around personal integrity, and their only cultural goals involved gaining personal power at the expense of everyone else. Her (admittedly imperfect) solution was to attempt crude social reengineering by tethering the gain of personal power amongst her drow followers to voluntarily defined finite duration binding oaths of loyalty – and those personal power gains were both permanent and granted up front – attempting to redefine what constitutes behaviour worthy of gaining power. How all that would have played out in the long run is unclear.

Liliet

Okay first of all a cloak of skin and a cloak of banners are very different things.

Second, so is slavery and incarceration, and Catherine did not assume the guy she was offered was a criminal because that's not how slavery usually works where it's normalized.

Third, no, I don't think the Stygian spears were found guilty of something beforehand and I have no idea why you'd think that.

Javvies

Hell, I'm not sure I'd call the drow thing slavery or even all that horrible either.

Sure, she was extracting magically binding oaths from them, including oaths of obedience and loyalty ... but they were explicitly limited in duration, and the greater duration and more demanding oaths were voluntarily taken by the drow in exchange for permanently increasing their power, under her auspices, mostly using the Night of foes that she had killed. And let's not forget that the drow are functionally biologically immortal – even a few decades of not particularly onerous (by drow standards) service in exchange for significant permanent and up front power increases is a pretty good deal – and that's not including the potential for gaining power while serving.

There isn't exactly a good real world analogue for that ... but it wouldn't be overly dissimilar to a hypothetical Winter!Cat permanently granting Fae Titles to people in exchange for binding oaths of finite duration – and I don't think anybody would have called that slavery.

[Liliet](#)

TBF, Cat was also implicitly condoning the drow's existing practices that are basically slavery of the nisi... but that goes down too deep a rabbit hole lmao.

Arguably she was looking to enslave them as a culture which is more diluted because of how abstract it is but still kind of in the same category?

Basically I p much agree with you.

Decius

If you force one person to do your will, you are a kidnapper.

If you force a hundred people to do your will, you are a slaver.

If you force ten million people to do your will, you are a statesman.

[Liliet](#)

> If you force a hundred people to do your will, you are a slaver.

Or a clever marketer.

Depending on what exactly you mean by 'force' and 'your will', yes?

Zgggt

I don't get how nobody told Rafaela to stop. It's not insane so much as it requires everyone in that society to be sociopaths. Are people really going to watch people play the "we don't understand why wearing the skin of someone dear to you is making you angry" card and say "this isn't a clear sign of disrespect"?

Insanenoodlyguy

Not really sociopathy, just different standards. As said, their culture collects trophies of WORTHY foes. A bit morbid considering that this was a woman with a family, but I believe the Valiant Champion earnestly believes she is displaying her victory in a way that's showing appropriate respect to her fallen foe. Why would acknowledging Captain as one of the greatest foes she's ever faced be a sign of disrespect for the

Captain? Not taking a trophy, that'd be what would be fucking disrespectful. That'd be implying she wasn't worth the trouble of remembering, that there was no glory to such an epic conquest. It's not that far-fetched there'd be a society that agreed. Especially because of where said foe came down on the man-monster scale from the perspective of people who didn't know her like Cat did. Hercules wore the coat of the Nemean Lion after slaying him, it's basically that.

Rafaela's problem, of course, is that even if she doesn't understand what Cat would feel so upset about this, she does know that Cat is upset about this and has done nothing to be diplomatic about it. Sure, being bold, brash and more than a little confrontational has WORKED for her 99 times out of 100. Leaning into this attitude, as Hanno has noted in Winter, tends to find everything working out a lot of the time, and it'd go against her type and her role to be considerate of the feelings of the bad guys on this sort of thing. Of course, that's probably not going to give her the kind of inertia she'd need to avoid a brutal ass-kicking if she pushes Cat too far, but even then the perspective would be less "Wow I got my ass kicked for being dumb" and more "Wow I got my ass kicked she is being really petty about this." same as presented in this chapter.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I wish Cat would explain specifically to the Levantines what makes her so upset about this.

Zggt

You think someone like Cordelia Hasenbach or Gray Pilgrim or whoever hasn't already told them, and the Valiant Champion specifically, to *not do that specific thing*? Hanno, with his experiences of many lifetimes, would have obviously told her not to do that. No one? Not in all those years? Bringing her was there also a direct jab to Cat, and they knew it just as Cat knew that it happened because they were trying to push her. And they did that because they could hide behind culture as an excuse.

Cat would have no problems with trophies. But for this specifically to happen, to assume the Valiant Champion hadn't been asked not to do this and ignored that is unbelievably generous.

[Liliet](#)

No, I mean explain to Aquiline the difference between her mantle and Raphaella's cloak.

Zgggt

Cat is a hypocrite of the worst kind: she is violently protective of friends, and viciously violent towards enemies. Aquiline can pretend her culture doesn't differentiate, but Cat's behavior being mysterious to her is silly, because after three years under Cat's direct command and protection not only does everyone in Levant understand that specific "quirk" of hers, but quite possibly the entire continent... But if you think Cat's extreme meekness and introversion are the reason they pretended to not know, then we have been reading very different stories.

[Liliet](#)

I think Catherine never bothered to explain because she thought it was obvious.

Zggt

She. Is. Wearing. The. Skin. Of. A. Friend. She. Personally. Skinned.

There's trophies, and then there's that.

Please tell me you see the difference?

Insanenoodlyguy

It's not about me seeing the difference. Its about if VC does.

zgggt

She does, or at the very least she has been told and explained in great detail the difference by people like the White Knight or Gray Pilgrim, Cordelia Hasenbach or really any of the heroic leadership. Not only was she obviously told this many times in the past years, because not being told that by anyone over years is downright ridiculous, she probably (as we see her in the interlude) played dumb to just continue doing what she wanted despite everyone knowing she understands. And Aquiline knew that.

These are not stupid people who bask in their own ignorance, and let's not pretend that accomadating their ignorance should be the default behavior any more than we don't expect heroes to watch their dead used as meat for Orcs.

[Liliet](#)

> She does, or at the very least she has been told and explained in great detail the difference by people like

the White Knight or Gray Pilgrim, Cordelia Hasenbach or really any of the heroic leadership.

Yathink?

I have a different opinion on what any of the above would prioritize doing with their time. They're not her parents or her teachers, it's not their job to explain to her what went wrong.

PhadosZahn

It's becoming increasingly apparent to me that Cat will actually fall apart without Hakram, I'm really hoping that EE isn't propping that up so she can lose him. He is her rock and her compass. We all need an Adjutant in our lives 😊

superkeaton

BB is reminding me very much of the warlock I made for a recent dnd campaign. Maybe that's why I'm so fond of him.

Looking forward to seeing the Heroic side of this exchange, I always love knowing the other side of the conflict.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Man i will miss Hakram when he dies towards the end of this book.

Barrendur

My understanding was that Raphaella (the Valiant Champion) skinned the body of a monstrous *wolf*, not a *woman*. Captain was literally a raging wolf-monster when she was in combat, and Raphaella killed her as a great, shaggy WOLF. Raphaella then skinned the wolf and made a cloak of the fur, and no, I really *don't* think Raphaella carved the skin off a human-appearing dead woman to wear THAT as a trophy. WERE-WOLF, people... my only query is whether werewolves in Calernia turn back into humans when they're killed.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Does it matter? She fought with her when she was a human as well as a monster. She is fully aware that the big wolf is a human. This is the kind of stuff that would get you hunted if the treaty had been in place.

Zaddek

Ugh, doesn't look like my previous reply went through. Not gonna retype it since most people have already covered most of the points I was going to.

One new thing I will add was a great point I read on the subreddit from Allian42: "To be fair, she is quite consistent in this. For her, taking the skin of someone and fashioning it as a coat is a very grave insult to the person and to everyone that cares for that person.

And she wanted very much to insult Skein and every one that cared for him."

Catherine's doesn't lack from self-consciousness in her perceived parallels to the Stygians or Praesi. She just doesn't view those traits as positive like they do. She tries to limit those impulses. Her cloak is in part a warning as much as it is a trophy. Especially with Akua. Taking her soul was her warning to the wasteland. "Come to Callow and pull this shit and this is your fate."

Not saying I agree with all of Catherine's choices, but I think calling her a slaver is quite disingenuous. Also, I viewed it less threatening to murder the Barrow Sword and more informing him where the line was. If he continued to push, he wouldn't have her support and she wouldn't let him endanger the continent when keeping the Dominion in the fight could mean the difference between everyone else living or dying. There are stakes and consequences to people's actions.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed on all counts.

Frivolous

I wonder if Catherine has decided to tell Tariq that she is no longer interested in keeping Aquiline Osen and Razin Tanja alive. She is doing it only as a favor to the Pilgrim, after all. It's difficult enough to keep someone as obstreperous as a Dominion noble alive throughout a war, but it's even harder when you don't like them and vice versa.

Tariq may have to choose between A and R's dignity and their lives. Because Catherine could keep them alive without having to tolerate their behavior, but they wouldn't enjoy it. For instance, she could have one of the Crows sit on their shoulder at all times.

[Liliet](#)

No, I don't think Catherine is going to do that. I mean, she's only responsible for their lives for as long as they're under her command and only to a limited degree (they ARE in a war). And she's planning to hand them off as she heads south, either way.

So there isn't really a reason for her to spoil the relationship with the Grey Pilgrim there.

Asterix

Six years and change, and this chapter still stuck with me.

I **really** want to see Rafaella get it. Understand that she would cheerfully parade the skin of a mother in front of her children and think nothing of it.

Not gonna happen, since the story is about to end and there is no room for it in the few chapters that are leff...But still.

Good job EE. Good job.

Asterix

(Reply, since I cannot edit)

Okay, so it's not six years, it's more like two, give or take a couple of weeks. Blame wordpress for linking chapters from 2015 like they were "previous" and "next". I have no idea why it would do that: I'm sure it's some clever algorithm thing that I care nought about, but... I care nought about it.

Ask me in five years if this chapter stuck with me: I don't think I'll change my answer.

Good job EE.

Chapter 9: Acceleration

"As sage in Nicae is a fool in Stygia."

– Free Cities saying

Afternoon Bell came and went before Hanno made his way into my tent. The bundle of reports that inevitably accompanied contact with Salia had eaten up even more of my time than I'd anticipated it would. Vivienne had been enthusiastic in her account of the progress in the talks over the Accords, writing that giving ground over whether or not scrying a foreign country could be considered an act of aggression – which both Procer very much wanted it to be, considering its massive deficiencies in both city-warding and scrying rituals compared to Callow and Levant – had allowed her to get concessions over what we'd termed 'civil diabolism', the summoning and binding of devils for purposes

other than war. The rest had been more disparate a pack of news than a cohesive, though no less useful for it.

Archer had apparently been seen in the Proceran heartlands with a sixth member to her band, which meant a fresh Named had been added to our roster and would be in touch soon. The First Prince had passed along a note on the state of the Grand Alliance treasury – which remained surprisingly good, all things considered – but also cautioned that the Principality of Brabant's harvests seemed headed for catastrophe. She went on to write me that feeding this territory, and its massive numbers of refugees, would put us squarely back in the red before winter came. Pickler had sent a refinement on the rotating siege harpoon ballistae schematics she'd made up in Twilight's Pass. She also mentioned in a separate letter, sounding somewhat flattered, that Prince Otto Reitzenberg had extended a formal invitation for her to found and settle a tribe in Lycaonese lands after the war.

It was a grave misreading of my Sapper-General's interest in leadership duties so I wasn't worried about poaching, but I doubted this would be the last of it. Even the Iron Prince had expressed interest in goblin engineering and, considering that Hannover was yet in the hands of the Dead King, his people had a great deal of rebuilding ahead of them. Still, maybe a strongly worded letter to Otto Redcrown might serve as a helpful reminder that trying to recruit from my sapper corps was, at the very least, a slight to the crown of Callow. Moving on to less grounded matters, the rumours gathered in the south and east by the Jacks remained wild as ever.

The dead were said to walk the streets of Nicae, General Basilia had supposedly eaten the heart of a holy oracle and could now see the future. A band of pale spectres was haunting the Green Stretch, all the while Dread Empress Sepulchral had turned into a black-scaled dragon and ravaged the outskirts of Wolof's territory. That last one might in truth be the reappearance of General Nekheb of the Tenth Legion, though I'd also heard it said they were nesting among the ruins of the Red Flower Vales so I was less than sure. Somewhat amusingly, it was also quite a popular tale that I'd apparently brought down the sky on Refuge so that I could steal its Named away into my service.

More important than the wild stories, though was the hastily tacked-on addition from Vivienne that Duchess Kegan had passed forward Dread Empress Sepulchral's request to open formal diplomatic talks with the Grand Alliance. So far the diplomacy there had been informal and half a secret, and I'd gladly left it to my successor and Hasenbach. This, though, would require my personal attention. Joy. At least we might get enough leverage from that I might be able to wheedle out whether Sepulchral was a genuine claimant or just a horse for Black to ride. I'd better bring Akua into this as well, though that wasn't unlike asking a

wolf about their opinion of the hunt. Still, even years away from the Wasteland she had a better grasp of the way functioned there than anyone else under my command.

Aisha's family was old and well-connected, after all, but ultimately minor nobility. The Sahelians lived and breathed intrigued at the very highest levels of Praes, and Akua hadn't just been any one of the lot: she'd been the heiress to Wolof, groomed for either rule of the High Seat or the claiming the Tower itself. Short of kidnapping an actual High Lord there was just no beating that. I was considering who else to bring into this – Hakram, naturally, but it might be worth bringing in some of the high-ranking officers I'd inherited from the Legions of Terror as well – when one of my guards popped in to inform me Hanno had arrived. I thank the man and rose to my feet, limping my way to the commode even as the White Knight entered.

He looked at me then sighed.

"Let it be brandy, at least," Hanno haggled.

I tapped the top of the commode, jostling a lock, and the door to left compartment popped open. I snatched out a bottle of Creusens brandy and two small silver cups. I'd been prepared. Amusingly enough it was easier to get him to drink liquor than wine, and he drank quick – if only to get it over with. He waited until my nonchalant gesture to take a seat, though I'd long told him not to bother anymore.

"Well bargained, White Knight," I solemnly said.

"You only ever say that when I've been had, Black Queen," he drily replied.

I limped back to the table, using his momentary distraction as he felt out one of Indrani's latest carvings to take a closer look at him. Even after two years of facing one brutal horror after another, the Sword of Judgement had little changed in appearance. His fuzzy hair was so closely cropped as to seem almost shaved, leaving the eye to linger instead on a plain but well-formed face. He was built like someone who worked for a living, which I'd always found appealing, and the long-sleeved grey tunic he tended to wear when out of armour had earned a few more stitches since I last saw it but still framed those muscled arms rather nicely. He wasn't a looker, not the way Ratface had been or Akua was, but he wasn't without his charms either. Not that I'd ever seriously consider going there, Crows, though apparently Tariq still suspected we were somehow secretly engaging in torrid trysts.

You'd think that after trying to mentor me into the grave the man would have a better appreciation of how much I had no intention of coming anywhere close to something that could, even vaguely

while in dim light, pass for a tragic love story. Dismissing the thought I idly noted that he'd brought a small leather satchel – papers, maybe? He shouldn't need to, his memory was unusually sharp. It was a side-effect of his aspect of Recall, he'd told me, which I'd found fascinating. How many aspects had little quirks like this one, barely noticeable boons tucked away in the shade of the more prominent use? Looking back, after getting Struggle as the Squire I'd gotten rather good at assessing the skill and power of my opponents compared to me. How much of that had been my gaining experience, and how much an ancillary benefit? It was an interesting bit to consider, if at this point largely academic.

"Is that the Saint of Swords that the Archer depicted herself fighting?" Hanno asked.

I set the two silver cups on the table and went to work on the bottle's cork.

"Battle of the Camps, it was," I agreed. "They had a scrap while Masego and I were dreaming."

"Impressive," Hanno said even as I finally got the cork out with a pop. "There were not many capable of facing Laurence de Montfort's sword up close and live to tell the tale."

Indrani had privately admitted to me that she'd waited until the Saint was tired out from the battle and it'd still been a damned close thing, but I wouldn't disagree with Hanno's assessment even knowing that. Archer's talent in close quarters was only slightly helped by her Name, while the Saint had been sharpening her skills in this regard for decades. Considering how much of a terror the woman had been in her old age, I often thought we'd been damned lucky not to fight her in her prime. I poured out two cups of brandy, quirked a brow at the dark-skinned man.

"Wouldn't have you been able to check with Recall, anyway?" I asked.

He grimaced.

"The fresher the death and the stronger the personality the more it... lingers after use," the White Knight admitted. "I would not call on the Saint of Swords's life without great need."

"Lots of her tricks came from her domain, anyway," I mused. "Which you can't mimic, as far as I know."

He shot me an amused look, well used by now to the way I went about digging up everything I could about his abilities. Well, it was no mystery I'd not been raised by angels. He touched his fingers to the brandy cup, brow rising.

"Two," he said.

"Five," I replied without missing a beat.

"Three," he compromised.

Ah, an opening.

"Twelve," I boldly tried.

"Four and I'll not tell Tariq you tried to get me drunk," he suggested.

Oh Gods was I not in the market for another hesitant, indirect conversation about not 'casting doubts on the nature of the Truce and Terms through unwise indulgence'. On the other hand, apparently the Witch of the Woods had heard about those and thought the whole thing was fucking hilarious – she kept making fun of Hanno in that nonverbal Gigantes language they used with each other, with all the poses and shifts. He had a stake in this as well, I figured.

"Five and I'll stop implying in front of Secretary Nestor that your tunic's grey because you don't wash it," I retorted.

As something said by the Black Queen about the White Knight, it went into the Annals every time. Every single time.

"Four and I'll share the Workshop gossip I received with you," Hanno offered.

You shit, I thought, not without fondness. He would definitely have shared that before, but he'd hold it back now for sure just so that when we next negotiated he'd have this to point back to.

"Fine," I mercifully allowed. "Four."

I set down the bottle on the table and took my cup, offering a toast.

"May you live to bury your enemies," I said.

"Fair winds and slow rivals," Hanno replied.

We clinked our cups and drank deep, setting down in unison. It took the edge off enough I barely felt the sting when I seated myself across from him.

"Dare I ask what's in the bag?" I probed.

"It is not meant to be a mystery," he said, leaning down to take the satchel before setting it in front of me. "It is a gift, Catherine. Your twenty-third nameday happened while I was away, no?"

I blinked in surprise.

"Oh," I said. "Yes. Thank you? I'm an orphan, so I don't really have one of those – just the foundling day late in the spring."

It also didn't explain why he'd given me a gift, though I wasn't complaining.

"From your polite confusion, I take it nameday gift-giving is not a Callowan tradition," Hanno noted.

"Not really," I admitted. "For nobles sometimes, I think, but for most people gifts are given at the solstices and when you reach fifteen."

The dark-skinned man cocked his head to the side, curious.

"Fifteen?" he asked.

"Age of enrollment," I told him. "Used to be, anyway. It was kept for private noble armies under the Empire but I kicked it up to seventeen all around when I took the throne."

Keeping it at fifteen would have helped fill the ranks after our losses more quickly but, as both Ratface and Governess-General Kendal had pointed out back then, if we kept pressing the young into service there'd be no one left to practice trades and tend to the fields. A large army was no help when it was busy starving.

"How interesting," Hanno said, sounding genuine. "Ashurans are expected to give yearly nameday gifts to those they are tied to – family, friends or close collaborators. All within the same tier, naturally. For a citizen to court favour from a higher tier or display favour to a lower one would be frowned upon."

The Thalassocracy of Ashur sounded like a deeply unpleasant place to live in, as usual. Weren't there families with citizens of different tiers in them? Still, the implications there were a little flattering: I was being called both an equal and close collaborator.

"Thank you," I said again, and took the satchel this time.

It was easy to unmake the bronze buckles, and within I found in neat little cloth packets what must have been at least half a years' worth of wakeleaf.

"You know, when I told you to keep some of the Delosi coin I didn't mean for you to blow it all on enabling my worst habit," I drily said.

It'd been, though, a rather touching gesture.

"I have also been considering buying another tunic," the White Knight calmly replied. "I've been told it passes as unclean to the unskilled eye."

I swallowed a grin and clasped his wrist in appreciation. He smoothly returned the gesture.

"So when should I be looking to return a gift in kind?" I asked.

"Two days past winter solstice," he smiled.

Ought to bring him to twenty-nine, that. As I recalled he had more or less five years on me, not that it showed: he had one of those faces which would look much the same age until he started greying. I set down the satchel to the side.

"So," I said. "Business?"

"To business," he agreed.

I poured him another cup, then myself, and we knocked them back without a toast. I gestured for him to begin as soon as the burn had faded from my throat.

"The Titanomachy reached out to us through Levant," Hanno began. "They are sending an envoy north."

I sucked in a surprised breath. The Gigantes were notoriously isolationist, and though they had longstanding ties to the Dominion it'd been my understanding those were limited to exchanges of gifts and the occasional favour. They didn't even trade with humans in the traditional sense, as far as I knew.

"You don't sound all that thrilled," I noted.

His body gave what might have seemed like a twitch at first glance but I'd learned to recognize as him beginning to use that silent language he used with the Witch before stopping himself.

"It will be a complicated matter to handle," he admitted. "I am told it is Ykines Silver-on-Clouds that was sent."

"Which is," I slowly said, "... bad?"

"When I left the Titanomachy, Ykines was *skope* for Hushed Absence," Hanno told me. "It is... hard to describe in human terms. A *skope* is one charged with a message, speaking for others, but it is not exactly a position of authority. It does denote respect, however, and the Hushed Absence is the chorus that most prizes retiring from the affairs of Calernia."

"So they sent us a lesser noble from the isolationist faction at court as the envoy," I tried.

"That is untrue in every single specific yet broadly accurate in essence," the White Knight said, sounding impressed. "You have to understand, Catherine, that since Triumphant and the Seven Slayings the Gigantes have only ever spoken of ties outside their borders in terms of loss."

"The Seven Slayings," I repeated curiously. "That's the Humbling of Titans, right?"

"I would not recommend using that name around any of their kind," Hanno advised. "The Slayings soured most of their kind on humans, though the tendency had been there for ages before."

"I never did get why they're still so viscerally furious about the Hum- the Slayings," I said. "Procer struck by surprise, sure, but that's hardly a first for them. Their armies still got savaged when they got deeper in, and all the Principate got to show for those deaths was a modest stripe of land added to southern Valencis."

They'd also gotten the Titanomachy to unofficially back down from its defence pacts with the Levantine petty kingdoms, which had allowed Procer to eventually keep pushing into Levant after its conquest of Vaccei. Yet the amount of losses taken during the Humbling had supposedly kicked back that conquest by at least a decade, so in a sense the Gigantes *had* fulfilled their treaty obligations.

"It is not the treachery itself but what was committed through it," the brown-eyed man said. "When the Principate called for talks, it was some of the greatest left among the Gigantes who went. Three of the last elder spellsingers, the *amphore* for the Sublime Auspice chorus and two candidates for the Name of Stone Shaper."

My brow rose.

"Choruses are court factions," I guessed.

"Gigantes are not social in the way humans are," Hanno admitted. "You would find their cities to be empty things, and there'd be no court to be found. A chorus is more akin to an ideology, though even within a chorus there will be differing songs. The Hushed Absence, for example, will call to both those who advocate for isolation and those who curtail wonder-making by all Gigantes. Yet some will speak to one over the other or speak of both these in relative moderation. A *skope* will be messenger for one of the shades of belief, should it gain enough adherents within the chorus."

"So what does the Sublime Auspice sing about?" I asked.

"Guidance of younger peoples and intervention beyond the borders," the White Knight said. "In the past they were also the foremost slavers among the Titan Lords."

I grimaced. Proceran history wasn't something I'd studied in great depth, especially not when it came to the south – which had barely ever crossed Callow's path before the Principate was founded – but I had learned some broad strokes back at the orphanage. *Arlesites are passionate and romantic people, fond of poetry and duels*, Douglas Robinson's much maligned yet still widely used 'Peoples of East and West' described them. *Their name comes from the ancient Arlesen Confederacy, which rebelled against the slaving giants*. There were stories to be found there, to be sure, but I'd always had a hundred other things to attend to and never had the Titanomachy seemed likely to become relevant to my affairs. It wasn't the first time I'd been wrong and was unlikely to be the last.

"They never recovered from losing their *amphore* to human Named while under truce banner," Hanno continued. "And though the killing of the candidates was a grave insult in the eyes of the Gigantes – not unlike killing a Fairfax prince would be to your people – it was the death of the spellsingers that incited outright hatred. The magnitude of that loss for them as a people is not easily put into words, so I will simply say it was worth great grief and grief often turns to matching enmity."

My brow rose.

"Named did that?" I asked. "I'd heard it was just assassins."

"All were Arlesite heroes save for the White Knight of the time, who was of the Cantalii," Hanno said. "Most of those Names are dead and gone now. Of the twelve assassins to strike only the Drake Knight survived, and not even that potent blood allowed him to grow back the arm he lost."

He had that distant look on his face as he spoke, the one that told me he was drawing on memories he'd obtained through Recall.

"So you're saying that since they're sending us the isolationist *skope* as an envoy, we shouldn't get our hopes up about the Titanomachy entering the war," I said, drawing him back to the here and now.

"To an extent," he replied, brow creased. "From what I can remember, Ykines was of the Hushed over the Absent – that is to say, his isolationism came as consequence of his desire to restrict wonder-making. It might be he is meant to haggle down contributions, not obstruct involvement."

"I've seen the wardstones the Blood use, Hanno," I said, hands tightening with want. "They have no fucking idea of how those

even work and they're still better in most regards than anything my people can make. Hells, even if they don't want to enter the war I'd take a hundred of them joining the ranks of the Arsenal and still lick their boots clean in thanks."

Metaphorically speaking, anyway. Considering their probable boot size, it seemed like a bit of hassle to get done otherwise.

"That is the complication, Catherine," he admitted. "In some ways, entering the war might be more popular. What I tell you now, I would have your oath no to repeat."

I let out a whistle. That was rare. He wasn't one to ask oaths without a reason, and I perhaps still a little charmed even now that the Sword of Judgement considered my oaths to have worth, so I gave it without argument.

"Gigantes are not ageless in the way of the elves or the drow," Hanno said.

To this day I was still uncertain as to whether he actually knew that Winter had done away with the mortal lifespan of the Firstborn or he'd simply, like most, assumed that drow were effectively immortal if not taken by strife or sickness.

"They gather power unto themselves by bathing in the light of moon and star in sacred places, by songs and patience, and this power lends them vitality," the White Knight said. "To be a spellsinger is to be born with the gift of power, to come to weave a second soul and through it be able to pluck at the chords of Creation. These are rare, and prized, as for most Gigantes to make a wonder is to craft with the very stuff of what keeps them alive."

My eyes narrowed.

"The Seven Slayings," I said. "They came after that tussle with Triumphant that's said to have made the Titan's Pond out of what used to be plains. How much of their lives did they spend to take her on?"

I'd always counted it passing odd, that a people capable of playing rough with the greatest monster to ever come out of the Wasteland had taken hits from an infant Principate without any great retaliation save for the building of the Red Snake Wall much later, after the Dominion freed itself. It made a little more sense now, especially if heroes were thrown into the mix. I knew better than most how dangerous those could be when properly motivated. Sisters bless, these days I'd come to rely on it.

"A fifth of their people died outright," Hanno frankly said. "Centuries of accumulated power were spent in an hour, and many left themselves only enough to live until they could fill

themselves again – yet, even now, a great many of the Gigantes are but a decade away from death should they not observe the old rituals.”

“So they’re not going to want to spend themselves close to the grave to save Proceran lives,” I grimaced. “Harsh. The spellsingers, though, if they’re born with the Gift wouldn’t they be effectively immortal?”

“In a sense,” Hanno conceded. “Yet most of them are young, by the reckoning of the Gigantes, and so have spent but a century or two accumulating power after forging their second soul – through both celestial rituals and their own gift folded onto itself, true, but even so it remains a delicate and time-consuming process. The trouble, here, is that the Titanomachy’s greatest wonders all require the stewardship of spellsingers to some extent.”

Of course they did, because those would have been made before good ol’ Triumphant swaggered in, butchered most of their spellsingers and emptied out the vitality-power reserves of a significant chunk of their population. Much like the Firstborn after Sve Noc first bargained for survival, they must have felt like rats scuttling in the ruins of their own empire, forced to choose between their lives and seeing their greatest works fall apart. Shit, no wonder they hated the Principate like poison: to them it must have felt like Procer savagely kicked them when they were down and just starting to consider how to get back up from the last kick.

“So if they’re with us they’re not keeping their own cities functional, which is going to be less than popular at home,” I sighed. “That’s great. If they’re that tied up, Hanno, why even bother sending an envoy?”

“Because inconvenience and hatred of Procer does not mean they are willing to surrender Calernia to Keter’s grasp without having lifted a finger to fight the encroaching doom,” the White Knight said. “I imagine that our failure to drive back the Dead King has them justly worried, given the scope of the efforts employed by the Great Alliance. I fully expect the Titanomachy will try to gift us old wonders instead of agreeing to craft new ones, and strictly limit the numbers they sent north. Yet even that much would be godsent, let’s not pretend otherwise.”

It’ll be fear that got them moving too, I mused, now that the initial disappointment had passed. Procer alone and surrounded by foes, the way it’d been before the Grand Alliance steadied, that’d be acceptable to them. But Procer as the heart of a great continental alliance that included even their old allies the Levantines? They couldn’t let that happen without keeping an eye on it. I imagined the great developments of the last few years would have attracted the attention as well. It was one thing to play the hermit kingdom when your magic was beyond the wildest

dreams of your neighbours, but what happened if the Arsenal put Procer on even footing in even just *some* regards? A Principate with a few war-making artefacts like that under its belt might not be so inclined to let it go when the Gigantes killed its people on sight near the border.

And given that the Twilight Ways were without precedent, I imagined a lot of their defensive wards would need reworking to adapt to their existence. That had to be keeping them up at night. While they might be able to access the Ways on their own, they'd need deep study before they could feel safely walled up again – and the quickest way to achieve that was sending people to the Arsenal to look through what we'd already found out. No, there were decent reasons for them to reach out even though Hanno had already succeeded at weaning me off the hope that the Titans would come in at this late hour and turn the tide of the war. Hells, if nothing else just seeing how fragile the situation on the fronts was might motivate them to send more than crumbs our way.

"I'll take what we can get," I fervently agreed. "I'm guessing this was kicked up to you because we can't use Cordelia as our diplomatic workhorse this once?"

"It would be unwise to ask the First Prince of Procer to meet Ykines Silver-on-Clouds on behalf of the Grand Alliance," he mildly agreed. "The Holy Seljun noted that Antigone and I were both mentioned by name, as even to the Hushed Absence we are known."

"Might have to be you, if they want a familiar face. Haven't heard of the Witch in a month," I said. "Not since she went up to have that gander in northern Cleves."

"From there she struck at the Enemy," Hanno informed me. "I expect you'll be getting the message from Princess Rozala late tonight. Antigone put together a band of five and intercepted a turtle-ship before it could land."

A savage grin split my lips. The Dead King marched his skeletons at the bottom of the Tomb and the Grave regularly, but it wasn't without effects on the equipment of his soldiers: you couldn't keep chain mail or a sword underwater for a month without it rusting. For the fodder that was all fine and good, but when Neshamah went to the trouble of arming a few thousand Binds in good steel he didn't then proceed to scrap it by sending them on an underwater march. For those he used ship transports, in his own horrible manner: massive turtle-barges made of bone and wood with a hollow shell protecting his elites from the elements. As tended to be the way with him, the turtle-ships were made to move by a necromantic flesh construct that was more lizard than turtle and boasted both massive claws and bags of liquid poison it could spew out in a stream.

"Godsdamn," I whistled. "Now that's something to brag about. They sunk it? I thought he'd hardened the shells to magic after Akua ripped one open last summer."

"It had the cold iron linings," Hanno confirmed. "Antigone made the tactical decision to use her available assets according to methods that had previously proved successful."

A beat passed and I cocked an unimpressed eyebrow at the hero.

"She threw the Mirror Knight real hard at it," I deadpanned.

The slightest twitch of the hero's lips was the most openly he allowed himself to be amused.

"I honestly can't remember a time where that didn't work," I pondered out loud. "Maybe she's onto something."

The Mirror Knight was, admittedly, the closest thing to unkillable I'd ever seen even amongst the distinctly hard to kill company that was heroes. During the Dead King's winter offensive, he'd lasted alone against three Revenants for an hour at Duchesne until Ishaq and I arrived. Though he'd put none of them down it was still utterly absurd that they'd not managed to put a serious wound on him either. Regardless, it was impressive he had a hard enough head that it had sent a few thousand of Neshamah's finest troops at the bottom of the Tomb. I poured us each another cup of brandy and offered another toast.

"To the Mirror Knight living to be thrown another day," I said.

"To success against the Enemy, whatever the shape of it," Hanno said, almost reproachfully.

I wasn't fooled, he found the whole thing just as hilarious as I did. The drinks went down, and the cups hit the table. A grimmer look passed across his face, afterwards, which immediately had my hackles rising.

"They did more than simply break a turtle-ship," the White Knight said. "When out there they found a hollow where the scrying disruptions didn't reach. They got a glimpse of northern Hainaut, before Keter adjusted to block them."

"Tell me," I said.

"The Hidden Horror is making a bridge across the tributary river to the Tomb," he told me, tone calm. "We'll be facing a full-on offensive within six months, and the numbers..."

I grimaced at his hesitation.

"How bad?"

"At least two hundred thousand of his finest foot is preparing to cross," Hanno replied. "He's building from both shores and building in stone – if we don't break it while unfinished, it will be warded and enchanted so thoroughly as to be near indestructible."

Fuck, I feelingly thought. On parchment a bridge wasn't much of an issue, considering Keter could walk its troops at the bottom of the lakes and ferry them across with turtle-ships, but in practice it might be a deathblow to our hopes of retaking Hainaut. The Tomb and the river limited how quickly the Hidden Horror could send his soldiers from the Kingdom of the Dead, especially considering the strong current of the tributary, and the turtle-ships were vulnerable to heroic raids. A bridge, though, meant he could just keep pouring troops into Hainaut day and night: and that wasn't a metaphor, it wasn't like the dead *tired*. So far we'd been keeping our edge against the massively larger numbers through superior troop quality: even a Proceran conscript could handle a few mindless zombies alone, or a pair of skeletons if their arms and armour were rusted through. Once we got full battalions of Binds to deal with, though, we'd be facing a well-armed and fully intelligent army.

If we gave them room to manoeuvre, let the Dead King deploy his full array of tricks against us, then this was the death knell of the Grand Alliance.

"Do you have dimensions for the bridge?" I said. "A notion of the timeline on its completion?"

"Antigone used one of the Repentant Magister's artefacts to capture an illusory image," he said. "And sent it south to me by a trusted hand."

Who did he – ah, and that would be why the Valiant Champion was in my camp. The three of them were supposed to be close.

"Shit," I cursed. "We need to bring this to the Alliance's high command as soon as possible. This changes our schedule for the offensive into northern Hainaut, at the very least. If we can grab it back fast enough we could put this entire mess to rest, or at least take the southern end of the bridge and defend it."

"Antigone went east to blunt another offensive against the western coast of Cleves," Hanno said. "Which means I will have to move south to speak with the Gigantes envoy myself."

"We're due a proper council anyway," I pointed out. "And a visit to the Arsenal couldn't hurt. Hells, the Painted Knife is due back soon as well, the way I hear it, and I'm curious to hear what she has to say."

"We gather it all at the Arsenal, then," Hanno agreed. "It ought not to be impossible, given the facilities there."

"It can be done in the other senses as well," I grunted. "We have the pull to ensure it."

Though the mood had grown more somber, I poured out another two cups. Hanno's eyebrow rose questioningly.

"Surrendering the last cup so soon?" he said.

"Well, if we're to have the conversation I suspect we're about to have we might as well finish the drinks first," I said. "Argument does tend to spoil the taste."

"Ah," Hanno exhaled.

He took the cup in hand and we drank. Because he was a polite sort, he waited a few heartbeats before speaking.

"You have lashed out at two heroes in two days, Black Queen," the White Knight said. "I would know why, and what happened to the Named you meant to bring back to camp."

epokki

Please help EE out, and vote for PGTE at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .
The series also has a pretty active Discord server, <https://discord.gg/Ad3D63W>

"help" bleh.

how about this instead:

"You have lashed out at two heroes in two days, Black Queen," the White Knight said. "I would know why, and I would have you vote for PGTE on topwebfiction."

[tkjarrah](#)

Hanno continues to be Hanbro
Cat/Hanno BrOTP 4 life

[Liliet](#)

yessssss

NerfContessa

Indeed.

Javvies

There's no plausible way that the fact that Valiant Champion skinned and is wearing Captain as a cloak is offensive to Cat is news.

Hell, Hanno was in the immediate vicinity (and an active Band of Five, less casualties, with her) when Valiant Champion first did that. And Captain was one of the Calamities, and therefore close to Cat's first mentor and father figure ... it doesn't take much thought to get to the point that Cat might dislike someone wearing a person she knew as a cloak.

Throwing the Mirror Knight at enemies. That's a classic in the making.

And it's not like most of the rest of the Named will feel a personal loss when the asshat finally gets thrown into something that he doesn't walk away from.

caoimhinh

I think it's more along the lines of "Are you ok? Stress seems to have piled up and it's taking a toll on you" rather than "why did you treat Raphaella that way?".

Hanno is concerned for Cat's mental and emotional state. He's not there to reprimand her, but to listen to her.

Liliet

Yeah, that's the impression I got as well.

Catherine is usually more diplomatic =x

Agent J

And that she snapped on the little kid is definitely questionable. I mean, we get why, but he still has no idea about Tancred. And it wasn't right to do, even knowing about Tancred.

He's noticing what Akua, Hakram, and maybe even Indrani already have. Cat's slipping and he's worried about her.

Insanenoodlyguy

Clearly the best solution to this is sex. Sex with Hanno. Since, as she pointed out, tragic love story comes from a relationship, it has to be sex devoid of meaning beyond the act itself. I'd have said invite Akua but that clearly is becoming it's own story, so lets go with that one flirty Mercenary captain for a threesome. That should do it.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is not capable of having sex without meaningful attachment, and being possibly aromantic means sex is exactly the one thing standing between her already existing friendship with Hanno and a tragic love story.

Of course, it doesn't have to be tragic in the first place...

Insanenoodlyguy

That's why you have to throw in at least 1 third party and make it smutty lust. It's the only way. For the sake of the friendship!

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah and is mostly for the new kid that raised his concerns, and lets be honest Cat was harsh with her, i actually feel sorry for the kid, so sorry in fact i want them to become closer now xD

[kdarkdiamond](#)

He's not surprised she's offended by the Champion. He's surprised she let her composure slip enough to act out on it. She's normally more self-controlled than that in the face of people she despises.

TAP_M113

"You have lashed out at two heroes in two days, Black Queen," the White Knight said.

Two out of three... Is a pattern of three. Either Cat & Hanno cotton on, or it strikes home.

A sneaky Necromancer Skynet, our dear Neshamah is.

[Liliet](#)

That's not how patterns of three work, and to make a more broad rule of three a lot more initially provided narrative weight is required.

Scribe of Astor

So everyone is going to skip over the fact that Malicia has been dethroned and that there is a new Dread Empress? How did the master schemer finally fail? Who is the new Empress who did it? Was Black involved?

Earl of Purple

Dread Empress Sepulchral doesn't have the Name Dread Empress yet- she's a Claimant, nothing more. Malicia still sits in the Tower, weaving her webs and gathering her allies. Sepulchral only has a third of Praes, I believe, so Malicia isn't out of the game yet.

Nobody knows where Black is or what he's doing, though it's suspected (by Cat, with no evidence) that he's sitting behind Sepulchral and using her to focus attention away from himself, as he's also a Claimant.

Liliet

She was not dethroned. There is a civil war (if not one that is currently being actively fought by large armies). Malicia still holds the Tower, Sepulchral is a claimant operating out of IIRC Blessed Isle.

Javvies

Sepulchral is based out of Aksum, her own seat; Nok has declared for her.

The Blessed Isle would, I think, fall behind the lines of the breakaway legionnaires that are Black loyalists and really didn't like the revelations about Malicia planting mind control hooks all over the place, they're said to be camping on the edges of the Green Stretch. Those positions got started as the Legions being a de facto buffer zone between Callow and the rest of the Praes.

Also, the Blessed Isle wasn't a fortified position anymore – it never got rebuilt after it got trashed and the Paladins exterminated during the Conquest.

Liliet

Sepulchral was based out of the Blessed Isle when last we checked, Malicia had sent her there to hopefully get the Callowans to clean her up.

Javvies

Abreha got the Governorship of Blessed Isle and its environs.

She never lost her core and actual home powerbase of Aksum.

Aksum is a lot more useful than Blessed Isle for internal Praesi politics. Especially when you're the High Lady of Aksum.

Even more so when you're kicking off rebellion and civil war against someone currently sitting in the Tower as Dread Empress.

Plus, when it came up in Chapter 7 ... Aksum and Nok were mentioned as being for Sepulchral. Blessed Isle wasn't, and Blessed Isle is on the Callowan side of the Green Stretch, which is where the Black-loyalist legionaries that didn't like Malicia's mind control over their leadership are camping out – and they are described as a separate faction.

TAP_M113

Does the narrative weight restriction really apply if you only wish for a very small/subtle effect?

Patterns of three are repeated and visible on subtle little tidbits of lore, not only in the big, climatic adversarial relationships between named. In general, a pattern of three thematically relevant events seems to leave a small groove in creation, no matter how shallow.

Giving a subtle nudge to a named character flaws (anger response against fairly broad sets of maed hero behavior), amplifying something that was already here, is plausible and workable... and Neshamah is on par on age and power with the Bard.

And last time Cat interacted with the Bard, she saw how she nearly got her by subtly placing 3 overlapping losing stories, ones that would have got her killed if she hadn't took a really unorthodox action course. I would say that Neshamah isn't as terrifyingly canny when it comes to narrative, but his knack for collecting Revenants and inflicting cruelly ironic demises on them means he is a VERY fair hand at psychologically breaking people.

This is what I see here: a fair bit of preemptive assassination of a troublesome, nascent name, with some psychological and narrative warfare of opportunity, to twist the knife.

Neshamah has spoken a suspicious amount of times with Cat since the whole "War on Keter" deal, and I think he has a "meta-narrative" plot in mind when he does that.

I get the impression that tends to get the Pappenheim and other named by being conversationally "Affably Evil" and intimate with them, so that when the time comes, they are narratively easier to kill – at this point, when he comes to meet them, alone and surrounded, it is like a naked man surrendering to his inevitable death at winter's cold, welcoming embrace.

Underestimate not Old Bones – I doubt that such a canny Necromancer does any action that does not further his plans, after so many millenia. Given that he operates a

fair amount of forks in parallel, does not sleep, tire or forget, at this point he is more akin to Skynet or a Seed AI than anything remotely human. Ignore this at your peril.

[Liliet](#)

A subtle nudge to get a subtle effect only works when there's not enough noise of other cause-effect chains interfering. I can see Neshamah wanting to rattle Cat *period* but (1) I do not believe he'd be able to predict that she would specifically "lash out against two heroes in two days", (2) Hanno interfering here will disrupt that (potential) effect before it's really begun.

To be worthwhile, narrative effects have to be strong enough to work against regular probability of events.

Halinn

The more he survives getting thrown at things, the stronger that story becomes.

ruduen

Honestly, that's fair. Cat's definitely been more temperamental after dealing with the fallout, and for better or worse, it probably helps to have someone on the Heavens' side who's not completely unreasonable to air things out with.

Death Knight

Of course he ends it there. Goddamn it EE it was just getting good 😭

[Burlyraven](#)

Well, now we're getting to a pivot. This next chapter is probably going to set the tone for the entire remainder of the book; everything else was just prelude.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Why the fuck has Triumphant just terribly ruined everything she conquered/tried to conquer. Seriously, pretty much everything bad that has happened in Creation can be traced back to Triumphant.

[Javvies](#)

Not quite everything can be blamed on Triumphant. I'd pin a lot of the Praesi bullshit on ... the second Emperor of Praes – the one who assassinated the first Emperor of Praes, and started the pattern of succession and promotion via murdering your predecessors.

Plus, both the Dead King and Bard predate Triumphant by significant factors.

[Liliet](#)

Because she wasn't out to build, she was out to show she was the toughest girl around.

TwilightGlimmer

The Bard used her as a catspaw to kill an angel to create a weapon capable of destroying the Dead King (with a side of doom worse than what the Dead King is bringing

caoimhinh

I had always thought that the Humbling of Titans (now known to us as the Seven Slayings) had been what Triumphant had made, not a Proceran betrayal of the Titanomachy after the battle against Praes. It was the impression I got from every time it was mentioned.

What's the name of the battle against Triumphant then?

Also, the Gigantes Spell singers are kind of the equivalent of Cultivators at Nascent Soul Stage in a Xianxia story. *Fascinating*

nick012000

Are they really Nascent Soul cultivators? They sound more like they're stuck on Foundation Establishment, to me.

caoimhinh

Well, kind of.

A Foundation Establishment one wouldn't live past a hundred years without aging, nor would be able to perform great workings of magic. Plus the Gigantes explicitly make a second soul out of the energies of the Cosmos, so I would count it as a Nascent Soul.

Although their particular brand of magic sacrifices their Nascent Soul, so there's that big difference.

Konstantin von Karstein

I wonder if the flaw in the anti-scrying spells was involuntary or not. It would completely be in Neshamah's style to reveal a plan that could make his enemies lose, and when they are busy countering it doing something else even more dangerous. But I am maybe too paranoid.

[Liliet](#)

I think that's overthinking it a bit. Heroes get more providence the worse the foe is. This current situation is as providence-full as it gets.

AceOfSword

But Neshamah is good with stories, wouldn't he expect providence to pull some stuff like this? He adjusted the anti-scrying afterward, maybe he intentionally left the flaw to influence providence, that way he knows what his opponents know and can plan accordingly.

Or maybe he set up a target that can't be ignored, knowing that providence would focus on warning the heroes about it and that makes it less likely for his other plans to be revealed.

[Liliet](#)

True, he might be throwing resources away on affecting providence.

TAP_M113

I concur. This bridge is a single, BIG point of failure akin to flying fortresses – for someone as lore-savy as Neshamah, a plan that relies on such a flagrant narrative vulnerability doesn't parse.

Neshamah, as the biggest bad ever, WILL get rekt by narrative at the first opportunity, and the success of his career is mostly credited to his ability to mitigate villain narrative handicaps.

I suspect that this bridge is a Stalingrad, or the battle of Kursk – a strategic trap, in the military and Heroic/Villain sense.

1º) In the Military sense: the Grand Alliance army is rushed into an all-out offensive into a surrounding, entrenched defensive position. If Neshamah has a reputation, it is to be the Calernia's "General Winter" – certain doom to an entangled, surrounded foe, brutally punishing such military mistakes with absolute annihilation.

If he envelops them and cuts their retreat (what happened in Kursk), he can annihilate them.

He also is the agressed party, an unexplored tale – a more favourable one than the "Lest Dawn Falls" tale for when he is the attacker.

2º) In the Narrative sense: the Heroes get dangled a "Nefarious Plot" they can't ignore, then blunder into a "Demise of their own Making" and the Villains get thrown

into an unforgiving, grinding environment where "Any Mistake is repaid with Death" and "With No Clever Escape".

3º) In the Meta-narrative sense: deathtraps are always averted by "Comic Relief" heroes... and Neshamah has been steadily killing ALL of them. Remember how the "Fortunate Fool" constantly saved the Procerans from encirclement deathtraps? He and all of his kind were forced onto "Heroic Sacrifices" these last years. By killing them, he is steadily shifting the story's tone into a "Grim, Dark Tale" where even providence can't save you, and Plot Armor has no place.

4º) In Catherine's tale sense: I think that the fact that Cat is slipping and angry is intentional on the Death King's part – he has intentionally been manouvering her (and likely others) in losing stories with soft touches via his agents. He talks a lot to his foes via Ghouls, and it doesn't make sense to fall into the risk of possible "Villain Monologue" if he wasn't doing something like that. The Tancred situation and Cat getting suddenly "Black-like Unreasonable angst at the World" are REALLY too well engineered against her background to be a coincidence. Something is up.

If the Grand Alliance retreat is dumb enough to lean into the big, fat single point of failure that is the Twilight ways, I bet you that the "Kursk trap" will pay off. Admiral Ackbar screams so.

LarsBlitzer

I can understand the narrative weight there. The bridge does scream trap to me, and it would be one of the very best kinds of traps: one that cannot be ignored. I can't see Cat or Hanno marching a full force out using the Twilight Ways though. Taking out the bridge would be on a tight schedule, and the logistics of moving an army are slow as molasses. No, my bet would be on sending a team of Named heroes and villains, volunteers all, to sabotage the bridge. In using a WWII analogy, even one based on movies, think less Stalingrad or Operation Market Garden, and more Dirty Dozen or The Guns of Navarone. Cat would be blind not to see the opportunity of narrative weight there either: Once enemies turned comrades in arms by circumstance, heroic band united by a clear objective, underdog gambling on a faint hope to destroy a Big Bad Thing (she even noted that while it isn't a floating fortress it is pretty awful,) throw in a redemption arc for one of the more dastardly villains and that'll likely kick off a Heroic Sacrifice to blow the thing to pieces. Send along a few Goblin and Orc Sappers to set the

explosives and Hell, one of those might even get a name out of it.

[sengachi](#)

A trap is begging for a heroic or tragic reversal. But it doesn't have to be a trap.

An unignorable war-changing construction which forces a response still forces a response and takes attention away from other fronts, whether reacting to it is a trap or not. And even if it and a misdirection play are noticed and thwarted, the Dead King will have still forced the Alliance to commit a massive chunk of resources outside their secure supply network where their logistics can be harried and their troops bled, on terrain he'll have had a chance to prepare, against his fortified position. He'll be able to inflict worse losses than he takes, even if he loses.

And even if he loses the bridge project, it's not like he'd be handing over a tactical or strategic advantage. He'd still be able to send over troops as he is now, the Alliance won't have gained anything they can use cus the bridge either won't be built or will be his enchanted structure, and the location will still be outside the alliance's secure support network with no nearby castles.

This is what the Dead King does. He makes a move which allows for trickery, but doesn't depend on it. He makes a move which would hit hardest if unnoticed, but still works if Providence bungles that. He makes a move where when if he loses at every single step, he still bleeds his enemy harder than he gets bled. And he does so with troops he's spent centuries building up so he has spares to throw away without personal worry.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

[TAP_M113](#)

I mean, as you said, there are clear advantages for Neshamah if the bridge plan works... but it also doubles as a trap, because even if the bridge is destroyed, it is pulling, and likely destroying, critical Grand Alliance resources at multiple levels as they are thrown against a fully prepared killzone.

It is like a Chess grandmaster aperture – it positions their pieces to occupy all of the optimal paths

available, expanding his options, losing none key peices, and denying the enemy moves.

Even the key element – the fact that Neshamah has the intitiative and dictates the battlefield and flow of the war by forcing his foes to react – is a massive strategic benefit in and on itself.

Initiative in warfare is only ceded when you are weak enough to be forced to drop it.

TAP_M113

I like the cut of your jib, but Catherine has noted that it is such a solid target – stone-built, surrounded and guarded by entire army corps – that it needs at least a “Market Garden” degree of commitment, and spoke at marching the entire army by land in a “Kursk offensive” level to get it destroyed.

“Built in stone” means no easy way to completely demolish it – if you bring down sections, the hard work on the bridge foundations remains, and it would be relatively easy to rebuild from them. For me that implicates hundreds of people on deck, at least, to bring it down for good.

But assuming that this is NOT the case, and a stealth mission to bring it down is possible, you are going to need a LOT of Named firepower, which again obviously benefits Neshamah.

As you said, it is then a “Dirty Dozen” scenario... and could the Grand Alliance afford to lose a full dozen named if things go wrong? I doubt it.

Even if not, a LOT of Names would be tied away from fronts where they are needed. Named may be more powerful than Revenants, but they are significantly outnumbered by them. Imagine multiple bullshit plans like the magical plague seeds simultaneously succeeding on several critical locations – this is the kind of thing that may allow Neshamah to spill his forces onto the highly populated Procer hearthlands, and reach criticality for necromancy reinforcement rates.

So Neshamah is proving himself quite clever – no matter the way things go, he will get a windfall out of it. Condition the entire Grand Alliance Army on a land offensive in a ground of his own choosing (“Kursk”), commit a valuable army corps through the Twilight Ways (“Market Garden”), or put an uncomfortable amount of her named eggs in a single basket (“Guns of Navarone/ Dirty Dozen”)

He may yet be defeated, but this forces again the Grand Alliance to react instead of act, and allows him to keep the initiative and choose the terrain – the historical hallmarks of a Victorious Commander.

That is what I like so much – there is magic-ruled world and a VERY imaginative, yet sensible Necromancer running an WWII-sized undead army, and EE still finds logistic and military challenges fettering it that seem like they always belonged here, and makes this as tense, yet understandable, as the Russian front situation in WWII. Kudos, EE.

Rainemetel40

See this entire war and all of the Dead Kings plans read, to me at least, like the set up for a “Too Clever for their own good” scenario.

Wherein the DK unwittingly gives the heroes the keys to his defeat. I don’t know why I feel like this but, it seems pretty likely.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Ciara

I think you’re overthinking it. The bridge is just *one* way that Nessie can win. Contrast that to a flying fortress which is supposed to be *the* way you win. The narrative weight here is more of a scheme-of-the-week than ultimate weapon. If they stop it, the status remains quo.

I mean, he’s got to assume any given plan has a massive chance of being foiled, but you don’t become a villain on the level of “setting element” by NOT trying plans that give your army a massive advantage at zero risk to yourself.

[Liliet](#)

This.

Patrick Herke

I’m not so sure. The idea that it was deliberate was actually my first thought when it came up. It’s one of those things that’s so bad you almost can’t ignore it which makes it more suspicious. But at the same time, if it’s that bad you kinda have to do something.

[Liliet](#)

I like the point that it's a Scheme of the Week. If the heroes decide it's a trap and don't come, you win, because you actually for real were investing into it. If the heroes do come, why, you have a trap prepared just for that!

It's resource intensive – you have to fully invest into both possibilities for both to be effective – but if you have as many resources as the Dead King has, you can safely set up Xanatos Gambits like this.

[Liliet](#)

CATHERINE'S BIRTHDAY IS IN LATE SPRIIIIING -skips around happily, giving people random hugs-

Also, Hanno's 28! Seems like he's approximately of age with Cordelia. ALSO BLESS THE BIRTHDAY CLARIFICATION

SO much lore about the Gigantes, I LOVE IT

but the best part of course... is the promise of the conversation to come 😊

(and throwing Mirror Knight at enemies. poor guy)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Not just throwing MK, but throwing him *real hard.*

Juff

Typo Thread:

"As sage > "A sage
a cohesive > cohesive
Nicae, General > Nicae. General
from that I > from it that I (or remove the "from")
intrigued > intrigue
the claiming > claiming
thank the > thanked the
is be > it be
to left > to the left
shouldn't need > shouldn't have needed
live to tell > living to tell
years' > year's
recognize as > recognize it as
oath no > oath not
perhaps still > was perhaps still
sent north > send north
the attention > their attention

[Barthumphries](#)

Still, even years away from the Wasteland she had a better grasp of the way functioned there than anyone else under my command.

Add "things" after way.

Thanatoss

I got today egzam and couldn't last minute study due to new chapter XD
Great lore, great relationship between White and Black Queen.

Also I was almost sure that Black is not involved with *fake new Dread Emperor.... Hmm now I am not so sure, Cat said she doesn't know. Maybe just maybe Black himself is claimant to the Tower but how does he keep it a secret?

[Liliet](#)

First it's not a secret, he kind of said it during a continent wide conference.

Second, what he's keeping secret is *where the fuck he is and what the fuck he is doing*. Who'd be able to tell if he is or isn't a claimant to some Name if they have no idea what his current story is at all?

Captain Amazing

I hope Hanno suggests necromancy here. He has an impressive realist streak and putting pieces back on the board is the prerogative of the head villain after all. Besides, Masego said necromancy isn't a strictly evil branch of magic.

[Liliet](#)

How exactly is necromancy supposed to help here?

TAP_M113

One of the things that I believe has been stealthily elaborated by EE, but rarely commented in depth, is at which extent Neshamah has been manipulating the culture of all nations of the Grand Alliance to subvert the narrative convention of "All Villains eventually Fall" that forms the staple of Heroic and Above's dominance.

And, by extension, how Neshamah, Catherine, Black and Triumphant work alike.

For any Villain to successfully affect the world, they must navigate a cultural substrate and belief system than extols following Above-ordained divine authority, conservative tendencies and, above all, that the actions of the individual to change the world to his liking against the majority, the root of

"Villainy", is always doomed to fail. This is the basic narrative "fact" that any successful Villain must somehow navigate well enough to be able to enact a lasting impact on the world.

This begs the question of what is the Narrative.

The first answer would be "people's beliefs of what is possible for an individual/nation to achieve & what are the driving forces of history", codified by legend, historical account and folk tale.

A second, more general answer would be "Above, Below & the Unaligned Wants of Individuals", rooted in some biological substrate common to all species that drives an individual's preference for collectivism (Above-Hanno), the individual Vs Society (Below-Catherine), or the autonomous fulfillment of the self's desires (Unaligned-Archer), and his own interpretation of what "makes the world tick" across the course of history.

Of course, this means that a conflict between all individual views of "how the world works" is wont to happen, and needs to be arbitrated – which inevitable leads to demographics.

"Above" stories and Heroes tend to win in most of Calernia because the most POPULATED countries are Above-aligned; conversely, "Below" stories and Villains lose everywhere except in Praes, Bellephoron-Stygia and the Serenity, because there a VERY significant population is culturally "Below"-aligned. But there is also a long-standing tradition of "Archers", "BeastMasters" and "Rangers" everywhere, because those are universal, unaligned tales of exploration, adventure and hermit self-sufficiency that are common to all of human experience that do not map into the moral axis.

This explains why narrative tends to favour Heroes worldwide, but Villains have some narrative niche advantages in even Above-aligned countries, while Praes and other Below-aligned places were tiger papers that turn into unassailable "Afghanistans" when invaded – the cultural demographics provide a significant "home turf" advantage that can only be wiped by wholesale cultural engineering.

Orcs were only conquered by toppling their cultural milestones in a cultural genocide; Praes only held Callow when a militarily hyper-competent occupation aware of narrative coincided with the cultural acceptance of a Callow-born, overwhelmingly popular Villain (Cat) was acclaimed to the throne; Neshamah only got apotheosis when an entire civilization unflinchingly thrust him with their own very life as a savior...and later on, as a god.

Neshamah, Black and Triumphant share the common trait of having managed the most successful instances of cultural engineering. Neshamah created a populous nation that worships him as a God (granting apotheosis and a nifty buff) and convinced the entire Calernia to see him as an unbeatable bogeyman, the "death that

cannot be denied". "A single man cannot vanquish the World" is the only narrative convention left standing, and has already hit "godhood", with lowercase "g"

Triumphant MADE Praes, and is its cultural staple. She overturned every opponent, defiled every temple, belief and convention that opposed her, and only run afoul of the "A single woman cannot vanquish the World" trope, which is the last narrative brake left before the metaphorical rape-train hits the GODHOOD station, with capital G.

Black & Malicia became sharply aware of the narrative weight against Praes, and how it was ultimately anchored in reality & a resources problem. They did not only be clever enough to overcome the narrative gradient with organizational davantages, they also did the long-term cultural engineering that made Callow an allied state from an ACCEPTABLE cultural, and hence narrative, standpoint.

Catherine, sweet Catherine, is onto something that may dwarf all of them. She is LEGITIMIZING and REDEFINING the very concept of "Villainy". Instead of being a classic "Villain" as someone who "rages against society and will take what is their due", she is a new Villain that "Only trusts Her Own Hands to do what needs to be done". And she is spearheading the Kantian, universallly acceptable, "ethical" Villain – the one that can have an universal appeal, to any and every demographic across Calernia.

In short? No wonder that EVERY single major narrative player across the "Above-Below" and political spectrum, from Grey Pilgrim to Neshamah, considers her a very serious threat. She is creating the biggest demographic consensus block across the entirety of history and Calernia; one in which a "Villain" tale scan be sung, its deeds cheered on as worthy of emulation, across any and every fireplace.

Catherine may well change culture, and hence narrative, across the entire Creation – and that is why both Neshamah & the Intercessor agree on trying to kill her.

She is building a new game, instead of playing the old one – and this is something that even Above & Below cannot tolerate. For at the end, they may be nothing but self-aware narrative conventions themselves.

[Liliet](#)

Since when is Bard confirmed to be trying to kill her?

(As of lately – I'm not counting First Liesse even if she wasn't lying to William because baby Cat had not had these ideas yet)

[Tohron](#)

There was her chat with Catherine immediately before she talked to the Grey Pilgrim about the Bard. In that, she first tried to persuade Catherine to follow a route she considered acceptable, but when that failed, she subtly tried to push Catherine into working against her in a manner where the Bard would have a deadly, decisive advantage.

[Liliet](#)

And Tariq pointed out it could just as easily be read as a test that Catherine passed (and that it was fairly predictable she would).

Catherine was still pissed because she did not fucking sign up for testing, but the fact remains that Bard's intentions are ambiguous.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I love how even how much they drink is a negotiation.

TAP_M113

"You have lashed out at two heroes in two days, Black Queen," the White Knight said.

Two out of three.....

SHIT, pattern of 3 incoming! So that was what Neshamah was about with the Tancred affair, making lashing against Heroes an established narrative convention about Cat!

This would be a lethal wedge to drive against the Grand Alliance. Good catch, Hanno... hope your pep-talk skills are sharp, we are going to need them for surgery.

Neshamah / narrative was a sneaky, brilliant bastard in there. Kudos to you, EE.

[Liliet](#)

I... what? I cannot tell if this is a parody of the way the fandom treats the rule of 3 or a genuine example.

TAP_M113

A Genuine example. It would make for a small impact, but subtlety is the name of the game.

Arguably, Catherine greatest strength is how she manages to make every named cooperate into a well-oiled warmachine regardless of their place in the Hero-Villain alignment axis. At this point, ingraining a short temper and a dislike for certain key heroes is a subtle narrative pivot that Neshamah could exploit to his advantage, small enough to pass

unnoticed, but targeted enough to weaken Cat, and the Grand Alliance, by extension.

Never forget, the current shape of the Grand Alliance in this operation theater is a feudal coalition that critically relies on a large set of Named and troops freely gifting their loyalty to Catherine, in a feudal fashion. Impair her diplomatic abilities, and it significantly impairs the army.

"Lashed at two heroes, in two days"... This implies to me that lashing against one a third time, on the third day, makes for a rule of three.

Taking into account that this would be the kind of subtle "narrative assassination" that Bard has pulled in the past, and Neshamah is stated to be her equal, I wouldn't be surprised if this is what we are seeing here.

[Liliet](#)

I think 'two make the third follow' is too broad a rule and so only really works when the narrative weight is overwhelming – like assimilation of Fae courts. Lashing out at people after being upset is... just not on the same level. Like five people even know that Cat did that at all, you know? And out of them like two care. So no, narrative pull won't even be noticable (like how gravity strictly speaking works between all objects, but you do not notice being pulled towards the ceiling and walls).

[Liliet](#)

Another problem is that this is too specific. If Neshamah had the pull / predictive power to make it specifically two heroes in two days, this war wouldn't even be a fight at all.

What you're ignoring is that this is a result of the blanket effect – Neshamah is *fucking with Catherine's head*. He's making her upset, sloppy, taunting her about capitalizing on her weaknesses. This works in his favor period, whatever the exact flavor of mistake / lashing out it results in. And it works even if Hanno disrupts this particular "pattern", since at the very least it ties up resources / takes time to deal with.

Remember, a plan with more than two steps is not a plan, it's wishful thinking. This plan has just one step: 'rattle Catherine'. That's all it needs to accomplish, and that's all that Neshamah has to have predicted.

KageLupus

That is not really how the Pattern of Three works, though. It is not just "A Named does the same thing three times", and it doesn't transfer across different Named.

The Pattern happens when two Named which are narratively connected clash multiple times, and dictates what those clashes look like. The first time someone loses but survives, the second is a draw, and in the third clash the winners/losers are reversed but the losers die.

Cat had a Pattern contest with the Lone Swordsman and came out on top in the end. Akua purposefully maneuvered herself into having a Pattern with Cat early on specifically so she could leverage it when it mattered (she did end up winning the final contest, but Black and Assassin interfered afterwards). Tariq tries to trick Cat into a Pattern but she used her genre-savvy superpower to sidestep the whole thing.

None of which even kind of resembles what has happened in the last few chapters with Cat and the Champion, or the Apostle. There was no fight, not even in a subtle narrative way like Tariq. And even if there were, there wasn't a second clash where both sides took a draw. Cat yelled at a kid for being chosen by Above, and then yelled at the Champion for (when you break it down) killing someone she cared about.

There is no deeper narrative fight going on, no big clash of fate being promised or resolved. This is just Named posturing and normal social dynamics.

Earl of Purple

The loser of the third confrontation doesn't have to die. Dread Emperor Irritant used this to his advantage by confronting every hero on the continent, in such a way that he had eight or more patterns going at once. And when he ran out of patterns, he abdicated and made very good shoes, which we know worked three times.

[Liliet](#)

> Akua purposefully maneuvered herself into having a Pattern with Cat early on specifically so she could leverage it when it mattered (she did end up winning the final contest, but Black and Assassin interfered afterwards).

That's not what happened. The last confrontation of the three that Akua was fated to win was the one against Chider, and the victory was that Chider successfully ambushed Cat and took away her Name.

It just, uh, didn't stick, because of the whole 'undead' thing.

Tom

> The Mirror Knight was, admittedly, the closest thing to unkillable I'd ever seen even amongst the distinctly hard to kill company that was heroes.

Death flag

Daniel E

Drama aside, my favorite part of this chapter is that Cat completely seriously countered an offer of 3 shots of brandy with 12.

Miles

"You have lashed out at two heroes in two days, Black Queen," the White Knight said. "I would know why, and what happened to the Votes you meant to bring in to APGTE."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

On another note, all things considered Hanno is being very polite about this.

[Liliet](#)

I think Hanno's worried about Catherine, not about Raphaella.

Frivolous

Does Hanno only manage heroes and do diplomacy with notable non-Named figures, or does he manage soldiers as well?

I don't recall ever seeing Hanno command a host, or do paperwork, or other administrative duties.

Because if Hanno only manages heroes then it occurs to me that one reason why Catherine might be deteriorating (or at least more quickly than Hanno has been deteriorating) is that she manages an entire army in addition to standing for the villains under the Truce and Terms. Cat does a lot more work.

[Liliet](#)

Yes. Yes, she is.

On the other hand, Catherine doesn't make excursions to fight herself like Hanno does. Technically there's things he does that she doesn't.

The load is obviously uneven, though, yeah.

[Mammon](#)

"Engaging in torrid trysts."

Isn't that just the most horny and romantic way to put it? A forbidden love, a couple of day and night, adversaries that should be exchanging blows instead engage in torrid trysts. The Black Queen's Bedchambers III: White Knighting, in stores now.

Frivolous

The phrase is rather Harlequin Romance, yes.

One of these days Robber is going to ask Cat what Hanno's favorite position is, or vice versa, just like he once asked Masego whether Wekesa was a top or aa bottom.

Cat's answer will probably be "Missionary, of course."

Dread Emperor Ridiculous

Calling it now: It's too astoundingly obvious that Dread Empress Sepulchral is Hye, so Sepulchral is someone *other* than Hye.

[Javvies](#)

You, ah, do realize that Sepulchral was explicitly identified as one High Lady Abreha, right? She was one of the ... "Moderates", IIRC.

Dread Emperor Ridiculous

Which chapter was this? I must have missed it.

[Javvies](#)

Chapter 7.

It's background information in the discussion with Secretary Nestor. Specifically background information in the section where the Praesi Civil War that Malicia is fighting comes up.

WeeMadCanuck

Oh god the cliffhanger. What a time to finally be caught up. Hanno is great, and his friendship with cat is such a refreshing change to her interactions with most heroes. Looking forward to more!

[Javvies](#)

The good news is that the next chapter should be out fairly soon as of my writing this.

The bad news is that you'll be caught up again right away. And then you'll have to suffer and wait like the rest of us.

Chapter 10: Reflections

"Men pray only to angels because their devils need no summons."
– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

"See, I thought that too at first," I mused. "That I owed you some sort of explanation. But then I had another think, looked back at what I actually did. And, really, what's the worse you can put on me? I was curt with a kid. I told a Named who came in my tent uninvited to get the Hells out before I tossed her out."

I shrugged.

"I hurt a heroine's feelings," I said. "Twice. Ah, what utter perfidy."

The last sentence I uttered with a cocked brow and the driest tone I could muster.

"I suppose we'll have to get through this the usual way," I announced. "I'll bring the hammer and nails if you bring the cross, White Knight: if I'm going to be crucified over a trifle, the least you could do is go halvesies on the materials."

Hanno's face betrayed no reaction to my words as he studied me, calm as ever. No, perhaps calm was the wrong word, for it implied a degree of peace. Indolence, when at its worst. The White Knight was a creature of *certainly*, which leant him the appearance of calm, but there was nothing peaceful about certainty. Especially in the hands of a hero, who could so often weave from it either death or salvation.

"You've not often had an equal, have you Catherine?" the dark-skinned man pensively said. "A few superiors, I imagine: most of them unkind or untrustworthy, more marks in the making than someone whose lead was worth following. And followers by the thousands, that one is beyond denial. Not all of them truly beneath you in skill and strength, either. You might insist that the Woe are more allies than subordinates, but when has one of them ever tried to give *you* an order?"

I rather hoped this wasn't about to segue into a little speech about the nature of the Woe. I'd had quite a few people try their hand at those over the years, most with knowledge of the individuals involved about as deep as Keteran grave. Usually it was some sort of hackneyed comparison with the Calamities. I'd

even once asked it of Black, out of morbid curiosity, to which he'd mildly answered that given the way even individuals who'd borne the same Names could vary so wildly in motivation and disposition any attempt to force precedent in groups of Named was, at best, misguided. Which had essentially been an elaborate way of telling me the Calamities were the Calamities and the Woe were the Woe, and anyone trying to hack at the truth of either to fit both into the mold of legacy was a fool. There were good reasons I remained fond of the man to this day.

"I will assume that this is meant to, eventually, reach something baring vague resemblance to a point," I said.

"If you perceive me as being subordinate to you, or allied, then you have a rather sweet temper," Hanno said, sounding rather fascinated. "Yet the moment I am seen as demanding answers from you or being set above you in some manner, you bare your fangs without hesitation. I have never seen it so neatly displayed in sequence as it was today, which I'll chalk up to exhaustion on your part. You are rarely so easy to parse."

I pushed down the toothy, slightly nasty smile I'd been about to send his way. No need to feed the metaphor.

"Most people don't enjoy being described to themselves, Hanno," I said.

Might be there was some part of truth to what he'd said, though. Adjutant saw more of me than anyone, so he'd be able to tell me – from there, it'd just be a question of how to smooth away that wrinkle. I couldn't afford to have obvious levers on my temper in my position, especially when I had a nascent Name. Mantles tended to put the best and worst of you in sharp relief, so it was all the more important to know what those were.

"You are not most people," Hanno calmly replied. "Already the measured part considers adjustment, while the one forged by your teachers begins to ponder if this is not a manner manipulation."

It wasn't difficult to manipulate who respected you, I knew. I did it all the time. His vocalization of that fact did nothing to put out the ever-burning embers of suspicion that seemed to fall asleep around fewer people every year.

"We've strayed far from whatever grievances you might want to bring to me," I said. "Which I've yet to hear, regardless."

"You were unkind to a scared and tired child of fourteen, for reasons which had little to do with her," the White Knight said. "If you could offer an apology or a reassurance so that she does not believe the foremost villain of our age had personal enmity towards her, I would appreciate it. I am, however, aware I have neither right nor means to compel this of you."

"Would you, if you did?"

I almost wondered who it was that'd asked that, before I recognize my own fool voice. The question had slipped out of me before it could be put away in the back of my mind, my lips moving of their own accord. Some part of me had expected some classical answer to come out of the White Knight's mouth before a heartbeat had passed, but that was doing Hanno disservice. The Ashuran hero considered the matter seriously, only answering when he was certain of his answer. I trusted his words more for that, twisted as the thought might be. It was one thing to say you would never but we both knew it was different when you actually *had* that power. I'd come up the ranks of the Empire talking of reason and compromise but later in my career, when I'd had the strength to dictate terms, how many times had I refrained from doing so? People always found it easy to dismiss the thought of drink before sweet wine was pressed to their lips.

"No," he said. "It is not a crime to be uncivil. Regardless, it is not my place to give such orders."

"You give orders to your heroes all the time," I retorted, and raised a hand to quiet him when he began to answer, "You don't get to call them *requests* when people listen to them every single time, Hanno."

"That is only the use of my authority as a representative under the Truce and the Terms," the White Knight told me. "It is not a personal matter."

"Yeah, so that's nonsense," I said. "We dressed it up real good, put it in ink and slapped some impressive seals onto the parchment, but pretending even for a moment that our authority isn't *personal* is ridiculous. Heroes don't listen to you because you're a high officer of the Grand Alliance, they listen to you because you personally command their respect – either because of your record, your Name or your character."

"That sounded almost like a compliment," Hanno said, sounding amused.

I rolled my eyes.

"Look, to keep my side in line I have to show I'm powerful, ruthless and I'm willing to send a few plumb opportunities their way should they toe the line," I said. "For you it's more like a virtue pissing match paired with your war record – and on top of that you've got just a dash of divine right to lead, since this whole mess is somewhat crusade-shaped and you're the White Knight."

"I would ask how a virtue pissing match would take place in practice, but I've learned better than to provoke your talent for the descriptive," the White Knight noted.

"I'm serious," I flatly told him. "Tariq was everyone's favourite grandfather, until he made a deal with me once. He's still digging himself out of that hole. If he pulled out the same kind of tricks right now he used to catch my teacher, I'm not sure he wouldn't get a hero after him for it. Why? 'cause he made a truce with a villain. His virtue bragging rights were put in doubt, his heroic 'reputation', so now he couldn't do the job you do even if he wanted to."

"Trust in the Peregrine ebbed because a villain was instrumental in his resurrection," Hanno corrected. "There is long precedent in corrupting magics and even necromancy being used on heroes, which means those with only glancing knowledge of those events have reason to worry about him being unduly influenced."

He paused.

"Heroes who learn of even surface details of the affair tend to dismiss such concerns entirely," he noted. "I would argue you overestimate how deeply the Princes' Graveyard affected his reputation, at least as far as faith in his judgement is concerned."

"And you don't think it's grotesque," I said, "that butchering an entire village by plague didn't get people wondering about that, but that evening *did*?"

"I do not judge," the White Knight replied. "Now less than ever."

"But you do, Hanno," I hissed out. "Because you chose to be part of a structure, and that structure doles out judgement all the time. It judged that your kid, the one whose answer to fucking death on the march was to *get down on her knees and pray*, she's the good one. She gets to live. Mine, the one who actually tried to bloody well do something? Well, he was bad. He gets to die."

His dark eyes were kind, which only strengthened the streak of anger that'd torn through me.

"How close was the mirroring?" Hanno quietly asked.

"The Scorched Apostate," I said, baring teeth. "A mage too. His sorcery mimicked Light, with a tinge of fire to it."

Tancred was the greater loss here, damn me twice for it. Healers were useful, but most were mediocre in fight against other Named unless they were part of a band of five. The Scorched Apostate would have been useful in half a dozen ways, from his eyes to his sorcery to the potential contribution to the Arsenal. What was the Stalwart Apostle going to do, except dole out Light? If the

Heavens were going to pick the children they saved, they could at least pick them *better*.

"I take it he is dead," the White Knight asked.

"The Dead King got the drop on me," I straightforwardly said.

"Kid fell asleep, the new ghouls ate and replaced my escort while I was studying the remains of the village and turned him into a Revenant."

I saw him, saw the cast of his face and his mind as he almost asked why a village had become remains, but then he thought better of it. He had a knack for knowing when to advance and when to retreat, this one.

"I'm sorry," Hanno said. "It would have been a blow, and Pascale's survival would have been salting the wound."

"I shouldn't have been curt with your kid," I conceded. "But I will not apologize for speaking the truth to her, either."

The sooner she learned that providence was not a panacea for poor decisions, the better.

"That," the White Knight calmly said, "is where we disagree. You did not speak the truth to her, you simply spoke in anger and dismay."

"They've got it all handled, then? How lovely," I scathingly replied. "If the Heavens have it all under control, forgive me for meddling. I'll march my armies home and leave you lot to the business of *winning*."

"Ninety-nine times out of a hundred," Hanno quoted, "nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, that act of faith would have killed dozens of thousands. That is what you said, word for word. Regardless of your sarcasm, I disagree."

"How many little villages did the zombies eat, to make up an army whose numbers warranted three heroes and a fourth forming to fight?" I said. "Five, ten, twenty? You really think none of the people there ever thought to pray their way out of it? They still died, White."

"You take helplessness for negligence," the dark-skinned man flatly replied. "Do you sincerely believe that, if the Heavens had been able to empower a champion during those tragedies instead, they would have stood by and done nothing? There are *rules*, Black. What you condemn as apathy, I mourn instead as inability."

"Gods should not need to be *excused*," I harshly said. "If you're to claim yourself as the source of all that is Good, then either

triumph or stop strutting about. If faith is a wager, then at the very least they should have the fucking decency to acknowledge it."

"Below are deities as well," Hanno said. "While deploring that the Heavens are not omnipotent, in the same breath you rage only at the half of the Gods trying to mend-"

"I've seen the work of Choirs," I softly interrupted. "And I do not call that *mending*. I'll say this for the Gods Below: utter bastards that they are, they always grant the precise measure of what was bargained for. And they don't ask you to kiss their feet for it first."

"Because Below does not have agents or servants," the White Knight sharply said. "It has horses, and they are ridden 'til they *break*. Or are you so enamoured of the Hellgods you will not acknowledge that by the time hero's blade bites into the flesh the villain is long dead? That whatever beauty, whatever decency there might have been in what drove them at first, it ever transmutes into deaths and red madness?"

"I find it rich of you to argue this, given that before the Graveyard the two oldest heroes were the Saint and the Pilgrim," I snorted. "Which of them did not have a body count to match those of the greatest villains of their age? Above warps you just as much as Below does us, except we're supposed to pretend in your case it's a good thing. It's almost like wielding great power and rubbing elbows with unearthly entities for decades has consequences no matter what direction your prayers are headed."

Vivienne had made it plainly clear that the Dominion of Levant would rather leave the Grand Alliance than sign onto the clause I'd pushed to be added against named rulers, but I still believed in the principle: Names affected you, everyone knew that. It was just that the side dressing in white had convinced itself into believing for them it was never a bad thing.

"Would you have balked at comforting a child you scared, in the days before you became the Squire?" Hanno simply asked.

That stung, though half the sting came from the surprise. I hardly ever thought about those times, nowadays. In every way that mattered the girl Catherine Foundling had been died when I chose to take the knife Black had offered me.

"I some ways I was even worse of an ass at sixteen," I replied, unsure what the true answer to his question would be. "And you're falling into that old heroic trap, White: looking back at olden times and thinking they were a golden age instead of an age just like this one, with troubles and joys both."

"Or perhaps you are falling into that old villainous trap, Black," Hanno said, "of refusing to look back at who you were in fear of what it might make you question now."

"Funny thing, about fear," I said. "I'd wager I know it a lot better than you, *Sword of Judgement*. I don't get to kick my decisions upstairs when I have to make them."

"And you believe this to be easy?" Hanno said, cocking his head to the side. "That restraint, patience, faith – they are somehow easier paths to follow than those you tread?"

I bit my tongue, because even angry as I was I would not descend into petty insults. That beat of silence let him take the initiative in speaking again.

"The child you so disdain," the White Knight said, "had magic to call on. Enough she could have fled or fought the undead. Yet when death swallowed her little corner of the world, she did neither. She sought a way to *heal* the people who doubted her, and when all she knew failed her she still did not give up. She threw away what she was to help others, Black, and I will not let you even *imply* that such a decision was cowardice or laziness. It was courage, and a refusal to compromise over what she held dearest."

"And if her story had been just a little off," I said. "To the side, and it just didn't quite settle into the proper groove for a Name – would you still be praising her then? Because she would have made for a courageous corpse, true enough, but we'd have a rampant plague on our hands."

More corpses, and those would not be the sort inclined to stay in the ground. It was all nice and good to be principled, until those principles started applying mostly to the way the world should be and not the way it actually was.

"Yet that is not what happened," Hanno said.

My frustration mounted.

"But it could have-"

"It did not, nor will it," the White Knight said, sounding the faintest bit irritated as well. "She is the Stalwart Apostle, a story of faith in the dark rewarded. You were advising her to act in a manner that goes against her Role, Catherine. If she takes the wager, she'll win every time."

"She couldn't have known that in advance, Hanno," I said. "Or you, for that matter. Are you telling me we should give advice to kids that'll get them killed most of the time?"

"I believe we should advise people according to who and what they are," he replied. "Yet your objection, I see, is not with the advice some young Named benefit from being given."

"You can't tell people that praying will solve things," I flatly said. "It won't, except in one in a hundred thousand occurrences like this. If that's what you put out as a story, that's what people will do instead of acting to save themselves. People can't rely on the Heavens for that, they'll just *die*."

If prayer somehow summoner heroes to the peril, or called forth angels or really anything useful at all this wouldn't get stuck in my throat so much but it wasn't like attending fucking sermons at the House made you able to use the Light.

"People rely on the Heavens for more than just intervention," Hanno chided me. "Faith in Above guides a soul both on Creation and beyond; simply because it does not call a storm of fire does not make it worthless. Besides, prayer does not preclude action."

"If you've got time to kneel and mutter, you've got time to raise a palisade," I bluntly replied. "One of them's a lot more useful than the other."

"I understand that you do not keep to Above," the White Knight said, frowning. "Nor would I expect you to. Yet your insistence that faith and ability are mutually exclusive is, to say the least, insulting."

"Faith doesn't keep the dead out," I said.

"Most the time," Hanno gently said, "neither does the palisade."

But there was the gap, I thought. He was phrasing as prayer, faith, making it some grand old thing. But what it was, in practice, was sitting and hoping someone else would solve your problems for you. And I couldn't abide that, not in people I was supposed to respect, not even if it *worked*. Because for most people it didn't, and you couldn't call it a solution if it worked one time in a thousand. But there was no point in arguing this with him, was there? This was a man who'd embraced the role of champion for the Choir of Judgement and never looked back – he'd been able to call on the judgement of the Seraphim with the flip of a coin for years. There was no questioning that kind of closeness with the divine and telling him the only two gods I'd ever liked were the ones I'd helped make would only amuse him.

"Nothing more to be said on this, I don't think," I sighed.

"Agreed," the White Knight replied. "I do enjoy our talks, Catherine, though I doubt we'll ever change each other's mind. If your own philosophy is to be the face and method Evil takes in the decades to come, it is one I can make my peace with."

I grunted, not replying outright. Of all the heroes I'd met he was one I had most affinity for, but sweet as that could be sometimes on other it only served to bring into relief the things we deeply disagreed on. None of them, though, we worth parting ways over. I'd tolerated worst of people I respected less.

"You're not bringing me an official complaint under the Terms, am I understanding correctly?" I asked instead.

"Neither Rafaela nor Pascale sought me out for one, that is true," Hanno confirmed

I might despise the Champion, but I'd at least admit she didn't seem like the kind of woman who'd run to the White Knight after getting her pride bruised.

"I am not demanding answers of you," the dark-skinned man continued. "I am simply noting your rather famous sense of diplomacy had lapsed of late."

I rolled my eyes at that. I wasn't a diplomat, I was just good at maneuvering myself into a position where people had to listen to me or the consequences to them would be horrid. As for handling villains, that wasn't diplomacy: I was pretty sure you stopped being able to call it that after the first two times you dropped someone at the bottom of an Arcadian lake and left them there for thirty beats before taking back them out to... emphasize the importance of keeping a civil tongue.

"It has been made clear to me I've been taking on too much," I admitted. "It's taking its toll in a lot of ways, some of them more subtle than others."

Some were not subtle at all, like the fact that the White Knight had brought back to camp a recruit while I'd brought back a corpse. Hanno grimaced, the expression odd to see on his face. While he was not solemn, neither was he prone to strong expressions. I watched his arm coil as he closed his hand, reaching for something against his palm. A coin, I thought. *The* coin.

"I have contributed to this, Catherine, and I apologize for it," Hanno said as my brow rose in surprise. "In many matters I have deferred to you and relied on you to express to the Grand Alliance our shared opinions."

"It's not like you've been sleeping in," I drily said. "You've been either out there, training heroes or here with me since the war got going."

"You have duties I do not," he frankly said. "As a queen and a general. I have known this yet often allowed you to take the lead on shared responsibilities whenever you offered."

He slowed, looking uncomfortable for a passing beat.

"It was comfortable for me, deferring," the White Knight admitted. "In the wake of the silence left by the Hierarch's folly it was pleasant to let someone else take charge and rely on the sharpness of their vision until I got my bearings. And, after, I saw no harm in leaving matters as they were: you excelled, and I could contribute in ways that did not involve changing the way of things."

"You didn't force authority onto me," I said. "I took it, knowingly."

In those early days, even with our unsettling connection weighing on the scales I wasn't sure how much I would have trusted him anyway. By that point I'd hardly ever met a hero that hadn't tried to kill me, much less one who was actively trying to be *helpful*.

"And it has run you ragged, hasn't it?" Hanno murmured. "You nearly never allowed yourself to be this... raw around me. Even drunk you are guarded."

I clenched my teeth. This was starting to sound a lot like pity. *Save your pity for the kid who'll never reach fifteen*, I thought. *I'm just tired and wicked and wary*.

"I would begin handling the formal correspondence with the First Prince and Highest Assembly, if you've no objection," the White Knight firmly offered. "And, considering the many demands on your time, perhaps your end of the Origin Hunts could be passed to another villain."

"Beastmaster-" I began.

"Cannot afford to alienate the *both* of us," Hanno said. "And is well-aware of this. He'll collaborate with whoever you choose."

He said as much in the tone of someone who fully intended to make that prediction into a fact, blade bare if need be. The White Knight had taken to Ranger's wayward pupil even less than I had, which was how Beastmaster had ended up largely in my wheelhouse in the first place.

"I intend to withdraw from the front for some time," I admitted. "If necessity dictates that we begin preparing an all-out assault on northern Hainaut soon it'll not be as long or restful a withdrawal as I'd been considering, but as it is I'm considering heading to the Arsenal early."

Masego would be there, who I'd not seen in too long, and if I got lucky maybe Indrani would be as well – although in that sense the getting lucky would be coming after her presence was confirmed.

Gods, that'd do me some good as well. When shady, ambitious Levantine villains were starting to look tempting it meant it'd been too long. And, Hells, even if she wasn't odds were that Nephele would be there. That remained an enticing piece of unfinished business.

"You should," Hanno encouraged. "We've ended the immediate threat of the plague and the Grey Pilgrim is tracking down whatever remnants might have been seeded – he might come to take Pascale for a journey soon – so aside from military matters you should be able to hand off there's no pressing need for you to remain."

"The Blood might come to you with another beehive that got kicked," I told him.

"The Barrow Sword?" he asked.

I snorted.

"Guess," I said.

"I expect it will and in a compromise that pleases no one in particular," Hanno said. "Either separate rolls of the Blood for the villainous, or admission into the existing ones with most of the attendant privileges stripped out."

Which would be a massive gain for Ishaq anyway, though well shot of what he wanted. Much as he might protest otherwise, the Barrow Sword very much wanted a little corner of Levant to rule. One where he could begin gathering other Bestowed from our side of the fence, and began smashing his way into a degree of prominence at some other family's expense. He was not so much a fool as to think he had a chance of toppling the Isbili, but he was ambitious enough I would not put it beyond him to have an eye on taking one of the great cities belonging to another founding bloodline.

"Either way I can't let them simply bury the man," I said. "It'll close the door on any other Levantine villain joining us, and I swore oaths otherwise besides."

"I'll advise restraint and compromise, then," the White Knight replied. "Yet even that does not seem too pressing a need – scrying back and forth with Levante will take months."

"So long as the Holy Seljun and the rest of them know I'll frown on Ishaq being cheated," I said. "At the very least the man is owed recognition for the things he's actually doing."

"A sensible stance," Hanno nodded. "Is it him you'll be naming as your stand-in for the Origin Hunts?"

The Barrow Sword, serving as some poor freshly-risen Named's introduction to the Truce and the Terms? No, that had disaster written all over it. That'd need someone with a defter touch, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to spare Hakram.

"I'll probably pull the Rapacious Troubadour back from Brabant," I frowned. "He's certainly got the knack for finding hidden things."

Archer would probably have taken him into her band of five, compulsive killer or not, if she'd not already been full-up. I was rather happier with her trusting her back to the Harrowed Witch instead, even if she'd murdered her own brother – sometimes it could be slim pickings, when it came to recruiting 'trustworthy' villains. With his thirst for death and songs sated by the access the First Prince reluctantly had given him to death row prisoners, the Troubadour had nonetheless proved to be damned useful. He'd predicted the skirmishes between refugee camps and the Brabant locals months before they happened, even identifying the likely ringleaders for violence on both sides, which had allowed us to snuff that whole mess out in the crib. He'd also brought two other Named into the Truce and the Terms without there being violence involved, one of them even being a heroine, so between the instincts and the silvertongue he was probably my best bet around here.

I'd need someone to keep an eye on him, but that would also have been true if I named anyone outside the Woe.

"I don't suppose I could talk you into sending for the Hunted Magician instead," Hanno tried.

I snorted. The mage was much too useful in the Arsenal to be sent traipsing around the countryside.

"I'd thought not," the White Knight sighed. "I'd hoped it would be someone halfway respectable."

"I'll take that as a backhanded compliment," I said.

He smiled, surprised, and to my own surprise extended his arm to take the bottle of brandy in hand. He poured us each a cup with neat, measured spills that wasted not a drop.

"What are we drinking to?" I asked, taking my cup and raising it.

"Trouble waiting until tomorrow," he toasted.

Hells, I'd drink to that.

epokki

Please help EE out, and vote for PGTE at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .
The series also has a pretty active Discord server, <https://discord.gg/Ad3D63W>

Par

Hey everyone! Over on the PGTE Discord, we made a fan survey to get some info on the fanbase demographics out of curiosity. It's entirely optional and anonymous, and I'd love it if you filled it out.

Link to survey: <https://forms.gle/A2yjezXvCYT6s21W7>

Link to responses so far: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScmP83cYx3ts56wr8-APh80jfx18dv9_AQM0tUrZt3mwNmv-w/viewanalytics

And as always, don't forget to vote: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Thanks in advance!

also, join us on the discord here: <https://discord.gg/jeHRFXm> or the subreddit: <https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

[*tkjarrah*](#)

don't think there's anything particularly new in this conversation tbh, but it's always nice to see civil discussion (and less nice to see cat's still a stubborn ass with blinders but eh. she wouldn't be the cat we love if she wasn't)

[*Liliet*](#)

New things in this conversation:

- Catherine is slipping up;
- Catherine is FUCKING slipping up;
- Catherine is confusing pity and sympathy not just when it's from Akua;
- Catherine is slipping up BADLY;
- Hanno tries to be there for her as best he can;
- Hanno is capable of recognizing when he's being an ass on the meta level by deferring responsibilities -_-

NerfGlaistigUaine

While I agree with Cat that actions > prayer she's seriously lying to herself about her motives. She IS bitter she IS

angry She IS NOT just telling the truth. In previous books she would have apologized for lashing out unfairly, in private if not in public, or sought some way to make amends not justified it. I hope it's just a continuing bad mood but believing your own lies, letting unfairness and bitterness shape how you see things... that's not a good path for someone courting Below.

Also Gods know Saint was an asshole and extremist but (unpopular opinion here) she was a better person than the Calamities. For all that Black is a charismatic affably man, he is a monster. He doesn't have good goals he's working towards, no shred of remorse, no sense of empathy or compassion save for those few he holds dear. What I'm saying here is that even the worst of heroes looks better than the villains. The Gods Above are no saints and White Knight has too rosy a view, but dear lord I can see why ppl would keep to Good given the alternative.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

Uh, except for the Black part. He has good goals he's working towards, he has empathy for random people he's never met before and cares about morality, he's just a big numbers utilitarian about it =x

(I have citations on all of this)

NerfGlaistigUaine

Huh. I thought his ultimate goal was to beat the Gods and everything else was for that. Can I actually have the citations for the cares about random people and morality part? If that's true I need to reevaluate how I've been seeing him.

Alex Straughan

Caring for random people might be a bit of a stretch but he's never more cruel than he needs to be and he was certainly capable of friendship and kindness. Like the painless poison offered to the rebel nobels of Callow before he crucified them. He's not someone who ever enjoyed others pain.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Oh, very much agree. My headcanon of Black is someone who is very goal-oriented and efficient, but not cruel. He doesn't enjoy suffering, he's generous when he can and has no reason not to be, and has people he

genuinely cares for – but he can turn that off (mostly) too. Thing is, he's still a monster. His goal isn't nice – it's awesome maybe even laudable to rage against the Heavens but not nice – I don't think he's had a single on-screen moment of regret for the things he's done or the innocents he's killed, and maybe saying he's got no empathy or compassion is going too far, but it certainly seems quite limited.

Again, I'd be quite interested if there are scenes that prove me wrong. Characters with depth always have room for alternative interpretations and it's cool to take another look.

Shveiran

I don't think you are wrong per se, but I feel you are leaving out parts that give the whole a new meaning.

While it is true that Amadeus' ultimate goal is to spit in the eyes of the Gods Above, the path he has chosen to that end is not to lead some greenskinned horde to pillage Salia and salt the earth, nor to look for a crazy ritual that will allow him to ascend and grasp divine power.

What he does is using his monstrous energy to change the society around him. To reduce inequality, reduce conscription, reduce blood sacrifice use, reduce divisions, smother civil wars in Praes, and break the cycle of Praes-tries-to-conquer-Praes-and-eventually-fails.

And that massively saves and improves lives.

Granted, he doesn't do it because he is a good person; he does it because it works and it helps him move closer to his goal.

But then... so what? Black kills someone, saves a lot of lives.

Heroes kill someone, and save lives.

The results are not that different. Heck, the methods are not that different when you strip away the details: most heroes save folks spreading death to those they find deserving, not healing. Healers are a subset.

IN GENERAL, I agree the average Hero has a more positive impact than the average Villain.

IN PRACTICE, the idea that ALL heroes have a more positive an impact than ALL Villains is... untrue.

How much good did William ever do? Or Hunter? Or the Bumbling Conjuror? Or the Silver Prince? All they did was killing people. And those are just people we kind of know the story of.

If someone kills 100 people and saves 10000, you can call him a monster (heck, I would) but you can't really deny that they did more good than you or I will likely ever do, from an utilitarian point of view.

You'd have an hard convincing the families of those 10000 it would have been better if the monster was never born, is what I'm saying.

Granted, you might have an easier time convincing the families of the 100, but again, from an utilitarian point of view? That's a lot less families.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Everything you said is true or at least something I agree with. I would add that the difference between doing good and being good is that Black would kill those 10,000 to save 100 instead if that's what was efficient, and may do so in future circumstances. By "looks better" I do not necessarily mean their overall impact but rather who they are as a person, a far more nebulous concept, but I digress. I'm interested now in Black's character more than his impact. Liliet informed me that I'd gotten it wrong and has examples, which has piqued my interest. I do hope he/she responds.

Btw I know it sounds like I hate Black but he's actually my favorite character. I absolutely love his motives and reasoning. When Cat asks him why he's doing all this when he doesn't even like Praes or Praesi and when he launches into his Motive Rant still go into my top 5 moments.

Shveiran

Ah, I see. I'm not sure what Liliet meant, so I can't help you there.

However (and I'm just wondering out loud here) can we discuss someone's goodness of character in a vacuum?

Maybe this is my Martin Luther showing, but there is a showing in my parts that goes "if you do nothing, you do nothing wrong". Can someone's goodness be discussed without addressing the actions they choose to take? Is good something you are, or something you do?

[Liliet](#)

> Black would kill those 10,000 to save 100 instead if that's what was efficient

Efficient for what, though? The word "efficient" in a vacuum holds no meaning. What's the next step, what is he actually trying to achieve?

(Isn't it just such a miraculous coincidence that it's always fewer dead people that's a more "efficient" path in Black's calculations?)

Also, in my other reply I forgot to give a source on 'cares about morality'. It's mostly a lot of little things scattered here and there (I can round more up if you're interested) but one that particularly stuck with me is this:

> "A calculated measure meant to ensure the Principate could not continue waging war as it had," he said. "The morality of it I've no intention of debating, though I'll say that if the First Prince of Procer intends to use massed levies to fight wars then she marked her peasantry as a war asset by her own hand."

The morality of it I've no intention of debating, though I'll say that

(Book 5 Chapter 56: Reflections)

...and as long as I'm making a second reply I might as well link my analysis of that one Motive Rant (I love that chapter)

Hope you want to engage further :3

[Liliet](#)

> I don't think he's had a single on-screen moment of regret for the things he's done or the innocents he's killed.

Not regret, no. But between "It doesn't get easier" in Chapter 1, remembering the faces of people he killed (don't remember where that was mentioned), Sabah's commentary about him never allowing others to do his dirty work for him... and the Empress and him explicitly talking about how he's doing hers in Seed II – I can swear there's more little things here and there, these are all I know for a fact where to find...

He doesn't love what he's doing, that's for sure.

(Regret is something that I think he categorically doesn't allow in his framing – there are mistakes and there are necessities, and nothing to regret ever or ~~he'll break down completely~~) (this one's more speculative but it... tracks very well)

[Liliet](#)

> these are all I know for a fact where to find
(except for that one which I don't. Oops)

NerfGlaistigUaine

First of all, wow, thanks for putting so much time/effort into this. Second, thanks for gathering some of my favorite speeches/convo/quotes into a convenient reddit page. Now, I'm going to do my best to answer in this comment.

I think it's interesting how we look at same moments but get different interpretations. For example, you show Black doing little kindnesses and argue that it's empathy/compassion while I see the same and I see affable evil. To speak without troping, I see Black doing those kindnesses b/c there's no reason not to and b/c he doesn't get happiness from evil. Think he says something like being a villain is no reason to be rude when giving poison to the nobles and that's basically what I took those moments as. It's... it's like he likes being mannerly, in the same way he purposefully doesn't act smug. He finds gloating and card-carrying evil distasteful, but that doesn't mean he cares for being good or for other people. At least that's how I read it. I also think it's this rather than genuine compassion b/c we've seen Black with his loved ones and its leagues away from his other interactions. I feel that if Black actually cared then some hint of regret would get through, like Cat still shows, some morsel of pain about hurting/killing others that would show his kindness isn't just empty manners.

Now the interesting thing is you see it as Black having some sense of morality and compassion but not showing it b/c his whole efficient-machine thing which honestly, is very possible. I just don't find it as convincing b/c it feels like the simpler answer to his acts of kindness is just his manners/likes rather than emotions he suppresses. Does that make sense? Of course it's hard to be sure, b/c even if I say Black's never done any major good thing that impedes his goals, that would

still be in character with your interpretation of Black too. Black is complex, and complex character motives come with ambiguity. Now if there is an example of remorse or angst on the other hand and for regular ppl I'd be very interested

Now your reddit motive rant dissection... oh dear god, that's a lot... ummm I kinda skimmed it to be honest, but... so basically I'd argue that Black's definition of winning may be different from yours. After all, he sees Triumphant as a total failure even though she kicked Good's ass for a solid decade. And the Dead King, for all his power, stayed alive so long by playing into the role of the Bigger Bad Leaking Evil in a Can role rather than fighting it. What I'm saying is that Black wants more than a temporary victory he wants to carve a groove into Creation that says Evil can win and not just temporarily win or become a looming threat, but permanently take over Good and break the usual Roles – hence what he tried to do with Callow. However, that's partly conjecture so feel free to disagree. Some other points of disagreement with your analysis of motives, other than my disagreement about what Evil victory entails and all that I've already said, is 1) Saying Black wants to fix Praes brings up the question – why would Black care about Praes? Cat actually asked this before which triggered the motive rant, but it's something that needs an answer if Rage Against Heavens isn't it. 2) Malicia seems to believe Black wants to fight against the Heavens. When she's arguing with Black about the Crusade and thinking about him later on too, she thinks that Black has a personal pissing match with the Heavens and wants to beat them even if it ruins everything, which doesn't really fit with fixing Praes as an end goal. Oh and I think it's childish to think the world is fair, but not to think it should be/want it to be. And for Black to see the unfairness and want to break it like villains do isn't something I think reeks of falsehood.

I wrote way more than I intended to. I also rambled on and digressed a lot so my apologies there. I hope it's all understandable; I didn't present my points very well, it was more stream of consciousness here, but I hope they at least make sense. I'd love to discuss this further with you, but if we're going to go real in-depth mind if I hold off for two weeks or so? It's midterm season for me and even this reply is me procrastinating on

writing my report... even though this is legit >1/2 the length my report needs to be, jesus...

Liliet

> so basically I'd argue that Black's definition of winning may be different from yours. After all, he sees Triumphant as a total failure even though she kicked Good's ass for a solid decade.

That's literally my point though. What IS his definition of victory?

> Malicia seems to believe Black wants to fight against the Heavens. When she's arguing with Black about the Crusade and thinking about him later on too, she thinks that Black has a personal pissing match with the Heavens and wants to beat them even if it ruins everything, which doesn't really fit with fixing Praes as an end goal.

Blah, I wish we weren't talking on wordpress. You wouldn't happen to have a reddit account and feel like taking it to the comments on one of my posts, would you? WordPress comments cannot even be EDITED for god's sake...

Anyway, there was this one fun chapter called Starlight.

> "He cannot conceive of a word where he does not win, you said," the Peregrine reminded me.

[...]

> "Yet I have lost," Black said. "Undeniably so."

[blah blah did he lose or not]

> "You bleed," Tariq acknowledged. "You rage, frozen and bitter as that poison is. But you are not cowed. You have ruled, but what do you know of rules? Am I to believe you will now put a yoke around your neck out of sentiment?"

> The old hero eyed the aging villain with disdain.

> "There is only so much of that in you," the Pilgrim said. "And it never bore more than a feather's weight on the scales, Lord of Carrion. I have seen the laws that would be the fabric of the Accords, and I see good in them for even if the children of Above will find their hands bound in

some ways it is but a pittance to what it will cost Below's favoured monsters. You will be stripped of manners of terror and brutality in myriad, forced to measure your wickedness and moderate your cruelties. You will be bound by fetters and told at the edge of the blade that ambitions cannot be without restraint. I see nothing, have seen nothing, in you that would take any of this as more than wasted ink."

> "It must be a pleasant world to live in, where any that stand opposite of you must be either grasping or grasped," Black smiled. "Either the creature of the Gods Below or their apostle in wickedness – either way, what sin can there be in breaking us?"

Thoughts on that last line of Amadeus's?

(Please, please let's take this to reddit or discord or skype or ANYWHERE that's more suited to longer discussions lmao)

(not presenting my points well immediately is a problem I struggle with too so yeah I'd prefer a format that didnt expect you to just make a single uneditable thesis statement and limit the depth of nesting)

And yeah later is fine! I'd like it if we coordinated the 'location' first though ^^;

[Liliet](#)

...I've been told recently that I should ask questions less and explain my point more, so to elaborate on the Starlight quote: Black's saying that the 'pissing match with Heavens' part of his career is over because lovely as that would have been he's lost and trying wasn't worth it – and his core goal is absolutely not mutually exclusive with Good benefitting too and being allies with Good and he's honestly kind of offended at the implication that it isn't.

And Tariq's reading of his willingness to do that as 'sentiment' is nonsense, it's fueled by his core drive, not anything surface.

[Tek](#)

By the way, it is a little annoying that noone (as far as archived reddit goes) did not point out that

Tower, in fact, did not stand since Miezens, and was brought down twice by good guiz, although I can't find a direct quote. One of those was Triumphant, who did it mostly out of spite though.

[*Liliet*](#)

Caring for random people evidence: the girl in Chapter 1: Knife, whom he checked on and gave his cloak to before he so much as met eyes with Catherine for the first time.

Sure, it's a little thing. But it's from the little things that casual kindness is built.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Did you know I can't reply to your last comment b/c wordpress doesn't allow replies after a certain number on a thread? Seriously, wth? And yeah, I have a reddit account, same username. I have midterms this week and a Europe tour next week (hell yeah!) but would love to discuss further in March.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah.

There's a way to reply anyway if you read the comments through the notifications. Which is even more inconvenient.

Reddit it is. Good luck with your midterms (and your trip!)

Cicero

His primary goal seems to be to create a Praes that doesn't have to choose between starvation and war with Callow every decade or so.

He also believes that the only way to truly achieve that requires killing most/all of the Praes High Lords, eliminating the very concept of High Lords, and the negotiating some sort of peaceful coexistence with Callow.

Furthermore he shares the common feeling among villains that achieving his goal means defeating the Gods. Thus he delights in sticking it to them when he can (without messing up his own goals).

[*Liliet*](#)

I do mean the 'I have citations' part, yeah.

Citation #1:

> I gulped in a mouthful of air greedily, coughing a handful of times before I was finally self-possessed enough to look around me. The girl was still cowering in a corner, looking catatonic, and a man was kneeling next to her. He wrapped a thick dark cloak around her shoulders before rising back to his feet, eerie pale green eyes meeting my own.

(Book 1 Chapter 1: Knife. If I put more than one link in the post it'll be flagged for moderation so not linking even though I would have preferred to)

Citation #2: https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/exka5d/amadeuss_motivations_a_brief_summary/

There's actually more but see: more than 1 link. Basically I also want to link another reddit post I made that details my analysis of the whole 'beat the Gods' thing, it's pinned to my profile on reddit if you want to look.

Or just ask me again ^^;

Thoughts, comments, objections?

luminiousblu

The question is whether or not actions actually are more important than prayers, or exclusive. Historically speaking one of the most important factors in every battle was morale, and this includes more than literal sword-swinging battles and extends to things like long voyages, business deals, or even works of art. Prayer can be seen as both a show of hope (when praying for something) and an effort at self reflection (when praying to something), and many of the more famous battles in history began with prayers on both sides (and I don't mean just in the Abrahamic world). People need something to cling to, and providing that rock, or being the one who doesn't let go of the rock, is not necessarily a bad thing, nor does it stop you from acting. Cat has this weirdly childish view of the world on a metaphysical level where she basically refuses to understand basic human nature as it relates to being 'pragmatic', despite clearly knowing all the principles behind it. It's especially dubious when she, like Black, has this way of ignoring the way Names work, and work very well, for everyone else, even if they make it their personal philosophy to try to bypass its workings.

As for good people, the reason Black is the Black Knight instead of the Zealous Reformer or the High Minister or something is because his goal has fuckall to do with actually helping the empire and everything to do with giving the finger to Above and proving to himself and his own ego that he can win, or at least force them to lose. It's quite possible he once really did care much more about the whole breadbasket problem or similar issues, but that was when he was the Squire, a Neutral name, not an Evil one.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Re: Black's Name: Zealous Reformer isn't a Name. The reason it isn't a Name (aside of course from simple authorial intent) is that it doesn't have the cultural traction to be (and why would it, in Praes? How many major, culturally significant reforms spearheaded by single individuals could it have had?). His having the Name he most recently had doesn't conclusively prove anything about him other than that he was considered by an unfeeling natural force to fit the description adequately. Moreover, Cat branded his Name and gave him an ultimatum about moral self-improvement, and it seemed to take; he subsequently lost his Name.

[Liliet](#)

> the reason Black is the Black Knight instead of the Zealous Reformer or the High Minister or something is because his goal has fuckall to do with actually helping the empire and everything to do with giving the finger to Above

Not how Names work. He was the Black Knight because he specifically set out to claim the Name. Cat wasn't The National Savior either, and Hanno isn't The Heroic Representative.

erebus42

Well yeah that's Cat for ya. And well you'd be hard pressed to find someone without blinders of some kind. Hanno's own were on good display here too.

[Liliet](#)

Ooo?

[Javvies](#)

Hmm.

Cat's not wrong that depending on prayer to solve physical problems is doomed folly barring extremely rare exceptions. Mental conundrums or philosophical uncertainty, sure, that can sometimes benefit from prayer and contemplation, but that's not what she's talking about.

I'm just not entirely sure that she's making the best presentation of her position, though.

Not that it particularly matters, since she's probably not going to be convincing Hanno anytime soon that turning to the Heavens for everything is a bad plan.

Liliet

I mean, it's a plan that works when you do it right, which also applies to every other kind of plan.

Catherine is kidding herself when she says 'not working most of the time' is what she doesn't like about prayer.

andr

>I mean, it's a plan that works when you do it right, which also applies to every other kind of plan.

What does 'do it right' mean in this context? I don't think the people who are praying successfully in PGtE are doing anything different to those who just die.

TeK

Evidently, they do. For example, they choose to not engage in practices they consider abhorrent for a chance at survival. They would rather die, but not cross arbitrary moral line, and yes, they would rather everyone died, if the price is said crossing of a semi-arbitrary line. Praying does not stop you from building the palisade. But if the palisade is breached, throwing your mother to zombies so that you and your wife can escape and procreate and continue the human line, is not about praying anymore. It's about whether you can live with certain actions, or not. And hell, I don't know what is the right decision. But Heavens don't view it as a character trait they desire to see in the populace. And Cat is outraged because she never really got on her knees properly, and so she can't help but wonder if all the death that followed couldn't be averted by one bending of a neck. She wonders if it was a practicality that drives her, saying that risking thousands of lives on a gamble with unknown odds is pure stupidity, or her own pride and hubris and unwillingness to let go of a degree (or an illusion) of control. Because arguments justifying your actions would always sound more convincing, even if you pretend to not care for those. And you have to carry on and bury those damned fears that maybe, just maybe, you are

fooling yourself, and you were wrong all along, because you just too far gone, and can't afford to hesitate, can't afford to stop and ponder.

[*Liliet*](#)

Mm.

There's also an element there of "I have 99 problems with Above; what Below, Below doesn't count, they're more like one huge problem – but Above, Above could be BETTER and I'm going to talk about it every time especially when a kid just died and I think he wouldn't have if Heavens had been more JUST so you saying that Heavens are wonderful PISSES ME OFF"

denimcurtain

Doing it right can mean only doing it with a story at your back in this world.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah. There isn't a judge up there seeing everything and making individual calls, there's just an impersonal force that acts when conditions are met.

Which admittedly makes the faith in Above as it is preached literally wrong.

[*Liliet*](#)

When the circumstances are right for it =x

Djinn O'Cide

Was that a typo, or did Hanno just call her Black? Foreshadowing her new name, perhaps?

Agent J

... she's the Black Queen.

[*Liliet*](#)

I thought it might be a typo too, at first, but he said it repeatedly.

It makes sense as a nickname but it just sounds so *weird* lmao

Shveiran

I mean, she calls him White. And they are peers in their official roles under the Truce and Terms, which are about the

relationships between Villains and Heroes when you get right down to it.

I kinda like the symmetry, tbh.

...But yeah, it is superweird still.

medailyfun

Usually she called him by name, and there she was calling him White, so it was a kind of retort.

caoimhinh

I notice that Hanno only called Cat "Black" in response to her calling him "White" in the sentence directly before. So it's more like he's just replying with a mirror of whatever he calls her.

Might be some Meta-story working there, as Hanno is genre-savvy and those two *are* equals in many senses. I don't know.

gnaruscat

Holy plotohook, I just clicked about how much of a mirror those two are.

Both were Named with divine patronage. Cat lost her Name, kept the patrons. Hanno kept the name, lost the patrons.

Artemii Semenov

And we just got a precedent of new names coming in pairs.

Shveiran

A precedent that proves things can happen in pairs does not suggest that things are likely to come in pairs, though

Darkening

Yeah, I had a very strong reaction to Hanno calling her Black lol. Especially with how the chapter thoroughly disabuses the notion that the Woe is a reflection of the Calamities. Just, I really want to see Amadeus react to her being called Black by people. It's hilarious. Congratulations Catherine, you have become your father.

[Mammon](#)

Might just be a hint that their story wasn't between people but between Named with significant Story weight and grooves to it. While they don't seem to notice it too much, aided by the fact that Cat said something villain-y before she could even stop herself there's hints that this conversation was at least in

part providence or Narrative forcing a direction and progression vs practical compromise or stalemate by omission of speaking one's mind.

JRogue

I think it speaks to just how worn thin she is that she does not recognize it herself. This is providence lobbing a softball over the plate, she would normally avoid that sort of thing.

Liliet

Cat saying things before she can stop herself has been a staple of her existence before she ever had a Name, she's just managed to get more of a handle of it. Until she got this exhausted, defensive and uncontrolled, which is a theme that's been building up and exactly what Hanno came to talk about.

(ADHD she's ADHD)

ohJohn

He calls her Black 3 times. The first 2 occur immediately after she calls him White, which could be explained away as him mirroring her.

The third comes pretty soon after the second but, notably, after she speaks again without calling him White, and as part of some of the harshest words he has for Cat all chapter ("She threw away what she was to help others, Black, and I will not let you even /imply/ that such a decision was cowardice or laziness."). I'd wager this is something he calls her with some sort of regularity.

It could just be informal titles they use during arguments about the Gods, Good/Evil, or as opposing representatives under the Terms, but with Cat mentioning her "nascent Name" earlier in the chapter, my money's on it being the first part of that Name. She already explicitly rejected Black Queen, so I doubt it'd be offered again (though the moniker has certainly stuck, so it might have some traction). With Amadeus no longer having a claim to Black Knight, that seems a strong contender, but it doesn't quite fit with her decision to take the staff instead of the sword at the Princes' Graveyard. Maybe something new, or at least unseen in recent history?

(I'm still curious about the specifics of why she keeps hearing The Girl Who Climbed The Tower, but with Cat halfway across the continent from Praes and uninvolved in the civil war, Dread Empress seems very unlikely. And doesn't even have "Black" in it.)

[Liliet](#)

I think Black Queen is it, version 2.0: the story changed as her reputation did.

A different Name now than it would have been then.

Shveiran

This. I've been calling it since book 4 and by the gods I'll see it claimed or die posting.

Juff

Typo Thread:

you part > your part
answer, "You > answer. "You
time hero's > time a hero's
"I some > "In some
summoner > summoned
phrasing as > phrasing it as
sometimes on other > sometimes, on others
we worth > were worth
worst of people > worse of people
"I many will end in
well shot > well short
began smashing > begin smashing

JJR

Troubadour: one of a class of lyric poets and poet-musicians.

Is this the Wandering Bard?

[Liliet](#)

No, she goes by her own Name.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

She's also consistently presented as a woman in her various guises whereas the Troubadour's a man, but the Name itself is already enough to tell as you pointed out.

[TeK](#)

I feel like Bard's gender is one of those rules you invent and keep to, so you can break it later and catch someone by surprise.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Entirely possible. We'll see.

Liliet

She has also been consistently obviously recognizable by her props and Cat has actually interacted with the Troubadour. She also does not have any kind of 'songs and death' affinity that requires access to death row prisoners. And

...yeah, the Name's enough -_-

Darkening

I'm reasonably certain the Bard can't kill people personally and the Troubadour sounds like he's been slaughtering death row inmates.

Sun Dog

We know from very early on that there are other Bards. Cat had a whole spiel about how as default comic relief they're just the worst. I doubt all of them are body-hopping immortal referees in the battle between good and evil.

Liliet

Catherine and Hanno are cute in how they both fish from compliments from each other, bless them.

This was Hanno's attempt at the reverse of Cloaks, but unfortunately he is not as close with Cat as Cat was with Indrani. Still, he got what he wanted ♥

CATHERINE GO APOLOGIZE TO THE KID

Shveiran

That conversation will be a treasure. I so want her to bring Stalwart along instead of Tancred, there would be so much tears just waiting around the corner.

And Cat kinda needs a relationship with a fledging hero that is sweet and kind, in my opinion, especially to deal with her current hang ups.

Liliet

Yes.

Frivolous

Cat won't apologize. She doesn't like to apologize under most circumstances. Apologizing to a teenage heroine would be highly out of character for her.

It might also be dangerous, because if she ever gets into a friendly relationship with that young heroine, the Apostle might be the Luke Skywalker to her Darth Vader, i.e. a redemption story. Not a wise choice, and I think Cat would be sensitive to such nuances after Tariq tried to mentor her to death in the past.

Shveiran

There are a lot of steps between antagonizing a heroine and turning them into your personal skywalker.

I agree that Cat needs to step real light with her actions now that she is once more a claimant, but I refute the assumption that "being a dick" is somewhat required not to fall into a redemption story.

If anything, Cat chewing up the new guy was more out of character, and being the unapologetic bastard can lead to bad stories as well.

Ones where you realize the error of your ways lying in a bloody ditch, just in time to finally apologize to the heroine with your final breath and give her hope for the future.

Fixing it now makes the episode irrelevant: just a symptom of Cat's tiredness.

Doing nothing makes that interaction the one thing that connects her story to that of Stalwart; inconsequential if she remains a nobody, possibly dangerous otherwise.

Cat is not big on apologies, but is not above admitting she let her mouth run wild after a long day.

She has done it before, I hope she'll do it again.

[Liliet](#)

All of this, thank you!

luminiousblu

Being a determined prick is a fast track to narrative death anyway, since it slots you into the designated asshole character type. Combined with being one of the most powerful and important members of the army, who outranks Stalwart and is constantly butting heads with her benevolent mentor who is the only one who can stand up to her, that puts her in the role of the asshole victim who gets worked in order to show us how big of a threat Nessie is.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

Keys to surviving the story:

- be crucial to it in a way that does not block the path to advancement of newer characters;
(Amadeus managed exactly that while trying to achieve the exact opposite result, good job)
- don't be a spotlight hog;
- don't be a fucking asshole.

(It helps to also have a writer who doesn't think killing characters off for shock value is best done in such a manner as to leave the audience as angry, confused and bewildered as possible)

Liliet

Catherine's refusal to mentor Tancred directly led to his death.

She needs to stop being a wiseass and start actually doing shit, with a new kid sidekick or not.

Also, to apologize.

Shveiran

She is doing shit. A lot of shit. Too much shit. That's kind of her problem, or at least part of it.

Though yeah, I second the apologize part. Let's not bully the new kid on the block because she resembles your dead nephew, people.

Frivolous

Thoughts:

It's really funny that Hanno is now calling Catherine 'Black', just as she calls Hanno 'White'. Even more surprising that she isn't flinching at being called by the name she used to call her virtual father Amadeus.

Really surprised that Hanno didn't lambast Catherine for threatening the Valiant Champion or Aquiline Osen. I was expecting him to press Cat to treat the VC better, given that she is a hero who was once in a 5-person band with him.

Rapacious is a nasty adjective. Also: Interesting that he, the Troubadour, is probably a bardic name, and that he has a degree of foresight.

Happy to see that Hanno is acknowledging that Cat has been doing more work than he has, as I noted in the previous chapter.

caoimhinh

I agree.

Although, I would have expected Hanno to ask Catherine to moderate herself for threatening Aquiline. He knows perfectly well her reasons for hating Raphaella, but threatening one of the Heads of the Dominion seemed to me like something more relevant, yet Hanno focused only on the two Heroes.

Oshi

Hanno is aware she knows what to do (or that Hakram will) when it comes to politics. He doesn't need to tell her anything. He is bringing up an issue and trying to determine who or what would get Catherine's goat enough that she would break her usual discipline.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno didn't even focus on Raphaella. He wanted to point out a pattern, not quibble over individual instances.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno is well aware of the reasons Cat had to talk to Raphaella like he did, and he's not a diplomat and the relationship with Bloods is not his problem – and as they established, Raphaella did not actually complain. She probably knows Cat was within her rights too.

This was a “oh shit you're not okay and I need to help more” visit, Cat just assumed he'd be scolding her because she feels bad about being Like That herself and... yeah. Took them a long sequence of tangents before Hanno actually got to his original point.

Agent J

Mommy and Daddy are fighting, but they're such Healthy Adults about it. I wonder if Ranger and Black argued like this. Nah. Ranger seems too aloof for that.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Ranger seems like the sort of person whose reason for not murdering her own friends is that she isn't bored of them (with an implicit “yet”). I imagine she'd just tell him to piss off about whatever it'd be and then wander off to harass Neshamah 'til Amadeus calmed down.

Rum0ur

I really want to know when the white knight got taken and made into a revenant, or at least my guts telling me he has..

Isi Arnott-Campbell

They have a means of detecting the undead. It's disrupted by the Order of Broken Bells' blessed armor but otherwise seems reliable. Also, I feel that White's behavior is entirely in character here.

[TeK](#)

Practical guide to healthy adult

Decius

"Usually it was some sort of hackneyed comparison with the Calamities."

Wow... easy on the fourth wall there, no need to call out the comments section

[TeK](#)

This entire chapter is.

ninegardens

Hanno:

As ever a chill dude.

Dealing with Cat sounds like a pain in the ass.

ninegardens

To be clear- dealing with Cat is a pain in the Ass, but Cat is in a tricky position and has been working hard for way too long. Is understandable. Just tricky.

joie01

I'm really really loving the Hanno Catherine duo. Its rare seeing someone who Catherine can talk to as an equal. The honest conversation today is such a breath of fresh air from the scheming and facades we're all used to seeing

[Liliet](#)

Actually, this dynamic is very reminiscent of the one Cat has with the Woe, only with the added nuance that Hanno doesn't know her as well.

Vivienne has extracted oaths from her, Hakram has forced her to promise not to drink on campaign, Indrani and Masego treat orders like polite fiction (and Indrani specifically has gone against Cat's instructions before and not given a rat's ass about it).

And Cat's defensiveness is how she would have reacted to one of them approaching her to scold her – if she acknowledged they had the right to do so in that situation.

(When she doesn't, she goes cold and harsh, not on wild tangents about crucifixion and source of one's authority that end with her blurting out what had been bothering her)

(Kind of like that line she led with, only she wouldn't then immediately cave and keep talking)

I think part of the reason Hanno didn't realize that was because he didn't approach her to scold her in the first place – he wanted to check in with her, make sure she knows to take care of herself better, offer her more help and apologize that he hadn't before.

Burlyraven

I don't know whether to be happy or disappointed that this didn't end with Cat drunkenly demanding the Sisters demonstrate they're actually gods in some way.

A thought I had: Pascale is a healer. What if she's been designated as the new bearer of a resurrection power? Might really be in Cat's favor to go apologize, and maybe give her an explanation about the dead boy's corpse she's supposedly still lugging around.

Frivolous

Forgive was one of the Pilgrim's aspects; he couldn't resurrect the dead otherwise. It might take weeks or even months for the Apostle's 3 aspects to emerge. Could even Cat keep around the Apostate's corpse for that long?

Also, not sure if you were aware, Burlyraven, but there is a Zen koan asking who is it that is dragging this corpse around. Pretty sure that the koan was not meant as a practical question, but even so....

Burlyraven

Yeah, there's definitely a lot of things that would have to come true for a resurrection to be in the cards at this point (Tancred's probably just worth an interesting autopsy scene at this point, if those are a thing in universe), but it's become somewhat of a tradition for me to present a potential theory on how he could be revived with the information presented in the chapter, and I hate to disappoint.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Please continue this tradition for the rest of the book if possible.

Mammon

Jup, and I think Pilgrim's ress was limited both in once a day and dead for no longer than a day. For completely understandable and recommendable reasons EE is making sure death reversal isn't too common and easily attained/made basic equipment in this story.

Darkening

He could rez people that had been dead longer than a day, there was one point where several heroes had died and were backlogged for resurrection during the Battle of Camps, though I think the priests might have had to prep the bodies some way to preserve them? I think his corpse being turned into a Revenant might be the bigger obstacle to raising him from the dead.

Liliet

Yeah, it took an additional miracle for them to be preserved for later resurrection.

Shveiran

Might be I'm late to the party, but I must say that this book is off to a great start.

In my opinion, it takes guts to do a time skip this long in a story that has mostly followed the protagonist through her whole voyage. Sure, there have been time-jump before, especially between books, but nothing on this scale. And it's easy to imagine some readers going "but I wanted to see that" and feel cheated.

But me, I'm loving it. This solution allowed EE to deliver on the "war against Keter is a long shitshow" premise with under ten chapters (which delivered on other things besides) rather than Book after Book of horrors unleashed.

It allowed him to show us how all the things Cat has positioned herself to achieve in Books 4 and 5 were accomplished and to what extent, to introduce a plethora of new characters, to portray the "war front" setting and give us a feel for it, and to set up the rest of the novel so godsdamn neatly.

And the truth is, if he tried to do it in another way? I'm not sure it would have worked.

All those things sound awesome to read, and yet, if he had tried to show them to us one by one? It would have been a drag with little payoff.

There would have been no upping the ante, because we would have known none of it really mattered when Keter was so far on the horizon still, and so it would have been a bad picture made of beautiful strokes.

I'm loving it. And this neat, elegant solution on how to deliver on these many, many promises and narrative needs?

This is the mark of an amazing writer, in my opinion. EE's solution is downright inspiring.

[Liliet](#)

I agree incredibly.

There are right and wrong ways to do timeskips. This? This was the exact right way to do it, and the only solution that could work this well.

Now if only the timeline didn't suddenly sprout an extra unassigned year in the middle of it sometime between Book 1 and Book 5.

(To quite outline the magnitude of catastrophe, the solution that currently works best is to assert that there was an extra year in the Liesse Rebellion between William starting it in Epilogue 1 and Cat getting deployed in Chapter 1 – it contradicts no more than three or four statements about timeline made somewhere in the books, none of them plot-critical!)

[Liliet](#)

(This isn't related to the timeskip – but without the recent chapters establishing both Cat's age and the exact length of the stretch between Books 5 and 6 it became impossible to fix it by boldly asserting Cat was 19 in Everdark and said she wasn't 21 yet because she cannot count)

(This is the result of research into Books 2 and 3 done on discord and I'm just whining)

NoryNory

Am I the only one who's curious about Cat having some "enticing piece of unfinished business" with Nephele (who, if I remember correctly, is the Repentant Magister)?

[Liliet](#)

YOU ARE DEFINITELY NOT THE ONLY ONE 😊д😊😊

[Mammon](#)

One of the biggest ironies here is that Cat's argument would be mostly the same if she were a Hero, this being an argument as much of cultural differences as religious but because she's evil she's wrong. I mean, she's Callowan where the very things she says now are accepted realities and principles because people die when they expect salvation.

White Knight Catherine Foundling: No, you listen here you entitled Ashuran prick. I'm from Callow, where our people have been dealing with the constant, organised and rich threat of the fucking Wasteland. We don't have to worry about some freaking upstart Named messing up our rigid peace for a week, we deal with people that summon devils on a daily basis and see floating fortresses as classic. We deal with people led by demigods at a generation frequency.

When the orcs enter our country, we don't fall to our knees. When the devils knock on our doors, we don't pray. We take our swords from the attic and start chopping down trees. We leave the fucking prayer to those that can no longer work, while we mutter our prayers to the Heavens while we build palisades.

I don't know who and how, but for this scene I really wished there was a Callowan Hero that would've appeared and made it clear to Hanno that Cat's words are the words of a culture that knows from practice that her 999/1000 people dying when praying is the answer is not an answer from Below but from a country set in reality.

[Liliet](#)

Of course, White Knight Cat would likely have not lashed out at a kid whose big crime was praying and getting answered in a situation that was NOT time-sensitive... in the first place...

ambitionsofadequacy

Reminds me of a quote from one of the King's of Callow. Something like "Trust in the gods, but saddle your horse."

Konstantin von Karstein

Except that statistically speaking, Callow had to have a lot of Heroes who appeared after praying, given the number of Villains that attacked them throughout the centuries. And the Apostle prayed only when she saw no other solution, not right away. So you cannot say she did not try by herself.

Shveiran

Yeah, I agree with Konstantin.

Sure, Callowans deal with problems by "holding the line in the mud". But willingness to get your hands dirty to deal with a problem and prayer are not mutually exclusive, as Hanno pointed out.

You can work yourself raw fighting the uphill battle, doing anything and everything to improve your odds, and still know that unless a miracle happens, it won't be enough. So you also pray and hope to see an allied banner appear at the horizon, dreaming of the downhill charge of the Winged Hussars that will break the siege of Wien.

There is nothing not Callowan about it, or really much to condemn. Otto Redcrown is another example: he was ready to go down tooth and nail, fighting for every inch he had to give, but I don't think he complained when salvation appeared out of nowhere. And I doubt ALL his soldiers were beyond hoping, deep down, that a miracle would deliver them from the onslaught. They were willing to face that bleak demise; I doubt that means a part of them was not hoping for a miracle still, if only a small one. It is... simply human to do so. Most of us can't really work without at least some hope that we'll survive the tide.

Cat, because she is tired and depressed and has a very checkered history with heroes, is portraying praying as "handling the mess off to someone else", but that is not how praying HAS to work.

Imagine a storm is headed your way: you can try to gather people in the protected areas, do what you can to prepare shelters and resources for those that will need them after they are wounded or made homeless, but at the end of the day, when the storm does hit, won't you be hoping that it moves on quickly, or that it doesn't hit as strongly as it could? If you believe in a higher power, won't you pray that you and yours are sheltered in this time of hardship, and have the courage to see it through?

After the storm has passed, you get up and get back to the work of fixing it. That moment where you clenched your eyes and begged for the storm not being a catastrophe in no way detracts from your determination to see it done right.

I think Cat's point – the one that has merit, and that she isn't quite ready to vocalize – is a bit more nuanced.

Scorched and Stalwart found themselves facing a choice with no good answer; before them lies either monstrous action or a risky gambit. Lesser evil, or uncertain greater good.

Catherine, because of her history, is physically incapable of looking at the latter with anything but contempt: if it fails, it is a despicable loss of lives; if it works, it is a slap to the face to all the times she had to choke her own conscience to save as many as she (believed she) could.

To look at Stalwart, or any hero that gets away with it PAINS

her, because then she has to wonder if all the bodies she left on her trail were actually needed. If things would have come out alright, if only she had took a chance rather than doubling down in her certainty that no help would come.

She has to wonder if the fact that help didn't come means it wouldn't have, or if it is a result of the narrative she embraced.

She has to wonder if killing Saint was actually necessary. And there is no action Above could take that she wouldn't look at in contempt: if they didn't answer the prayer, she would damn their silence; if they did, she would hate that someone else's reckless gambit paid off when she had to go through so much to and wound herself so viciously to achieve a lesser prize.

And... though Cat's vision and reasoning is muddled, I LIKE that she is like this now.

The last parts of Book 5 saw her swallow a LOT of grievances against her newfound allies that were never really acknowledged, let alone mended.

Cordelia pushing her into a corner, two choirs putting their seal of approval on a crusade that would see her people bleed, heroes killing soldiers that were just defending their homeland... that was brushed to the side, because it was either that or putting the bigger picture at risk.

Two years under this heavy a strain has seen it festering.

It's beautiful. It's relatable.

And I'll sit here giddy with anticipation, waiting for the cathartic moments that are being seeded here.

Mammon

Funny you mention the hussards, as that's pretty much showing that Callow is as I suggested it to be. They've got prayers. They carved them upon their freaking plate armour, and then charge through whatever horrors Praes threw at them relying on those prayers but also their Callowan steel and well-bred warhorses.

For the rest, that's kinda arguing against a point I nor Cat ever made. That you bare steel and then pray while defending yourself as Callow or Redcrown did is not at all something that Cat critisized or at all what I referred to. It's what you should do both in likely her opinion and my Hero Cat expression. So you're kinda just adding to my point having misread what I said as the opposite. But what seems to be Cat's issue and what I argue that even proper Heroes would know is stupid, is prostrating yourself and completely unprotected or even trying to flee/fight as you pray expecting this to lead to salvation.

Like the Stalward apostate did, exactly like that. Do nothing, not even something that a non-Named can do to save themselves or turn the tides, and expect a miracle without your efforts granting it more time to swoop in. Stalward Apostle prayed expecting everything to be resolved, Callowans fight praying until they hear the cavalry charge horns and take as many of those bastards with them as they can if no salvation shows up. That's what Good Cat would've argued for too if you ask me.

Konstantin von Karstein

Except that she didn't do nothing. She saw the plague, and tried to warn everyone. And when she failed, she didn't thought of slaughtering everyone. Can you fault her for that? She also said she was not good at fighting, so even if she had tried it would have probably failed.

Shveiran

Aside from the fact that I was replying to you as well as arguing my own points, my apologies if it seemed like it was all aimed at your own comment...

... I don't think that's the point she is making? Hypothetical HeroCat, I don't know, but VillainCat considers praying as, at best, a waste of time. Hanno is the one arguing that you can act AND pray:

"People rely on the Heavens for more than just intervention," Hanno chided me. "Faith in Above guides a soul both on Creation and beyond; simply because it does not call a storm of fire does not make it worthless. Besides, prayer does not preclude action."

And

"I understand that you do not keep to Above," the White Knight said, frowning. "Nor would I expect you to. Yet your insistence that faith and ability are mutually exclusive is, to say the least, insulting."

Whereas Cat argues it is always just wasted time, and detrimental to your efforts:

"You can't tell people that praying will solve things," I flatly said. "It won't, except in one in a hundred thousand occurrences like this. If that's what you put out as a story, that's what people will do instead of acting to save themselves. People can't rely on the Heavens for that, they'll just die."

And

"If you've got time to kneel and mutter, you've got time to raise a palisade," I bluntly replied. "One of them's a lot more useful than the other."

Cat's argument is... flawed, plain and simple.

When some of the kids I take care about fell down a bad road, I did my utmost to try to help them.

When my granny fell sick and we thought she didn't have much longer, I tried to spend as much time with her as my job would allow.

That didn't make me any less likely to pray for them in the morning.

I suppose if you don't believe in a higher power, your perspective could be that I was just wasting minutes of my day whispering to the air.

Yet if whispering to the air got me to stand up and go do the shit I had to that day, was it really wasted time?

Even if the sky was empty and my faith a scam, I'd argue it was not.

Mammon

It doesn't matter what Hanno said, he's adding standpoints that Cat wouldn't have raised arguments about. Had this been about people praying while doing something productive, then Cat wouldn't have criticized anyone. That's Hanno trying to pull the argument into a broader spectrum that he can win, because he knows that a fight only on the specific topic that Cat is arguing about is a lost cause to all that don't fully believe in Above's absolute goodness that wins even when they lose because slaughtered people go to the Heavens.

Pretty standard, and for a fictional story underhanded, means of arguing. Like FOX trying to make western companies actively keeping African countries poor to cheaply mine their natural resources about capitalism and free market. If Cat argues about there being no free market when those white colonists bought the land, then she's Evil and arguing about something that isn't part of this argument, but when Hanno talks about these companies under an umbrella term that also includes other companies that aren't extortionists and then focussing on the sob stories and more defensible situation of some small white man companies in Africa or even charity organisations somehow reeled into this argument, that's totally a good point.

This is of course an exaggeration to make the point clear, not meant to be exactly taken as it is. The point is, Cat

is arguing not against all Heroes and all prayers, Hanno is making it about that to win the argument when he couldn't with the specific argument of the Stalward Apostle praying instead of acting completely and irresponsibly. If there were one Hero in that tent to interject against that umbrella argument that puts their readiness to act in the same wheelhouse as a girl that did nothing but pray while people got killed, then Hanno's whole Good vs Evil argument would've fallen apart.

And lets not make this about real religion, whether it is true or not is an argument for other forums. If you're religious then that's your choice. Here in this story it is verifiably real and with defined limitations and parameters. These gods aren't fully in power, so we're not talking about a calvinistic religion; that everything and everyone's fate is predetermined regardless of their actions/their actions too were predetermined. The people have already been proven to be in control of their own fate to an extend, being able to defy the narrative even if Named and Story can make it difficult to do so.

When there's no such Story afoot, then their own actions and abilities matter solely. To what extend we don't know as this is off-camera events which thus haven't been included in the story due to irrelevance. As Cat's argument includes, if someone were to pray during such an event, which would be the other 999 times they pray expecting salvation, then no Hero will show up and no miracle will occur. For every time the Named can intervene and praying pays off (or is a placebo because those Named would've saved the day regardless), if the people believe in prayer saving them then those prayers will see them killed more often. Without prayer solely instead of action, the amount of people dying who could've saved themselves outweighs the amount of people being saved.

And that's without assuming that as many people would be saved by Named if no one prayed during crisis at all because Named seem to be a matter of faith and stories rather than prayer.

Shveiran

I feel like you just chastised Hanno for trying to "pull the argument into a broader spectrum", while also bringing in colonialism yourself.
I'm not sure I follow.

Regardless, if we are arguing the specific case, like you suggested?

The specific case is about a 14 year old.

I don't know about your teen years, but if that had been 14-years old me? I don't know what I could have done in that situation except hoping real hard something would fix it.

Comparing it to Tancred is a false analogy: Tancred is ANOTHER 1 in 10000 occurrences, because he got a Name too and was able to carry out his slaughter only because of it.

The rest of the 9999 14 years old that tried to wipe out a village and didn't get a Name?

They died accomplishing nothing as well as the 9999 that prayed real hard but didn't get a Name like Stalwart.

She is a goddamn 14 years old, for pity's sake.

What kind of standard are you holding her up to that this is somehow her mess to clean up?

Mammon

The colonialism was a comparison, and as said afterwards not to be taken too literal. I meant it as in, people especially in extremely polarised camps like Republicans vs Democrats or Good vs Evil will always seek to twist the argument in their favour or even blatantly lie by omission or twisted presentation. They probably don't even notice it if the polarisation is strong enough. Hanno probably doesn't notice the hypocrisy that Above's words have since inbred themselves into, same as how Pilgrim didn't see the irony of himself being a Role villain trying to so stubbornly doing what he thought was Good because Cat is Evil.

I same as Cat wasn't talking about this one specific occassion, but this one specific facet of Good vs Evil. Not about a 14 year old girl, because the moment we're talking fiction and Names such an age hardly matters. There are shows where 10-year olds are scheming plans at a 3D chess level just because the writer wants to. This is about White and Black arguing about a philosophical issue in Creation, not about Hanno and Cat arguing about the specifics especially if those specifics are case-specific when they wouldn't be the other 999/1000 times.

This is about anyone, regardless of age or having a Name, doing something about it themselves (Below) vs praying and expecting salvation to be sent their way to repay their virtue (Above). Which in reality is so obviously in Below's favour this time that Above tries to make it about virtue in general instead of virtue over action at all.

Black criticizes the system that will make people that aren't just the 14 year olds but also the adults and the real priests and the real warriors pray *instead* of fighting because it worked for them a scarce few times, while White tries to salvage it and the fact that many Heroes too wouldn't sit still and pray while people died by trying to broaden the scope to something he can win. Hanno probably doesn't even notice it, same as how Cat right now doesn't notice her tongue having Story strings tugging it.

Shveiran

If you want to debate the implications of what happened to these two teens faced with something larger than them, I'm game.

If you want to debate Good and Evil in a vacuum, I don't see the point.

They are not an observable phenomenon, they are concepts that we see in the actions of specific characters. If we ignore those, there is nothing meaningful we can tell to each other that is more than our own opinions projected onto the issue. No data means no common ground, and thus no satisfying end to the discussion.

You want me to admit that sitting pretty and hoping someone fixes your mess for you is not productive? Done.

But that was never my argument, or Hanno's, or Above.

Mammon

It's indeed not your argument, or Hanno's, but it is Above's. Below expects its people to take action to attain what they want and earn it, Above expects its people to be virtuous to be granted their boons by virtue.

Above: Right makes Might
Below: Might makes Right

That's in the simplest form exactly and precisely what separates the two camps in this story. This is the philosophy of Good vs Evil in essence in this story. This is indirectly what Black and White have been arguing about, even if Cat and Hanno didn't. And while with providence one can make a case for Above for itself, it doesn't work when there are powerful and even providence-defying people like the Dead King about.

For Callow it doesn't even work if there are partisans of Below who'll capitalise on indecisiveness and lack of action in the first two acts before being beaten in the third act. When the country is already in shambles and the population decimated before the Hero beats the Villain. And while Procer and Ashur can usually survive a pure Above philosophy and approach vs their villains for a week schemes like those Villains that are now appearing or the enemies that we saw in f.e. Pilgrim's origins like the Barrow King, for a large organised foe like DK the philosophy has to be changed in Cat's eyes lest it sees to too many people dying by waiting for salvation. Too little salvation to go around right now, too much bad for the good to show up for even half the prayers. Time for some Callowan praying, as in holding a sword and go out swinging while you pray.

Shveiran

Also, I was not bringing my faith in as a way to win the argument.

I was just bringing in a personal exemple to show that there is no real incompatibility between praying for a solution to a problem you can't solve and still doing all you can to try to solve it yourself.

Like Hanno is arguing.

[Mammon](#)

Oh no, that's not what I meant. Reading it back a day later I see my tone is a bit aggressively defensive there, not intended but I cannot edit my posts to fix it. My intent which was lost in the version I wrote is

"I have no issue with you being religious and praying in real life, but in real life there's so many facets of uncertainty and A LOT of polarised and downright de-civilised religious argumenting that this topic would color everything we'd discuss. Let's not make this about real world religion because, even if no third party that takes it too seriously jumps in and makes it all about real religion, this is a kind of topic that is bound to end as an unproductive stalemate even if not turning into a dung-flinging match."

As is unfortunately my experience with religious discussion on the internet even when it starts between two respectful and civilised people.

Shveiran

It's ok, I didn't find your tone offensive.

I was just pointing out that I brought it up to try and illustrate a point.

To show that really, when Hanno says people pray to Above for reasons different than intervention? He has a point, one I feel you and Cat are dismissing.

If "kneeling in the mud" is what gives you the courage to defend that palisade, so to say, is it really such a bad thing?

I can see how someone would be more inclined to praise the one capable of going through it all without relying on something external. Yet the fact is that most people, faced with bleak, certain demise? They break.

If some of those are able to pull through because praying and hoping in a salvation that maybe will never come gives them strength... are we saying that's bad? Because... the alternative isn't them relying on themselves, the alternative is them having nothing to rely on when their resolve falters.

Liliet

> Had this been about people praying while doing something productive, then Cat wouldn't have criticized anyone.

Was it not, though? We don't know Pascale's backup plan in case prayer didn't work was "sit down and cry". She was not on such a tight timescale that she couldn't afford several minutes to center herself and make a rhetorical request.

Cat's problem was not "Pascale, specifically, failed those people" (even though that's what she actually said out loud – what she said out loud was nonsense that did not follow from anything and she's not even arguing that point specifically, I suspect because she forgot the exact phrasing). Cat's problem, ultimately, is "Praising Heavens is wrong because Heavens suck actually". That's the point she's actually arguing.

She never did get to clarifying that from "people I respect don't ask for help" (which is nonsensical by itself, Catherine knows better than that)

Mammon

Cat dislikes Talbot for his etiquette and expected manners of his Queen. I haven't caught a whiff of Cat having any distaste towards these very Above knights or the Callowan priests. Or really any priests that

contribute to the fight on the front lines. It's not about praying to the above, which they do very literally, it's prayer instead of action. We've practically seen that those that solve a problem they can solve themselves while asking aid in the problems they cannot solve don't incur her wrath or annoyance.

Liliet

Mm, Cat very rarely has problems with Above -it's just irrelevant, and being pleasant with people is a bigger priority. Cat IS a natural diplomat, and this doesn't really bother her particularly much.

It just... bubbled to the surface in this story in particular.

Liliet

I would suggest that another point buried somewhere in Cat's angry confusion is this:

If the Above – the part that answers prayers – is a sentient, omnipotent force that makes an individual decision to answer, or not, each prayer, their judgement sucks and they are either stupid or not benevolent.

If the Above is not one of the above (either not omnipotent as Hanno suggests, or not sentient as I would argue – the part that answers prayers is an automated system, not Gods making personal decisions), *people really should stop talking as if they are.*

If the Above is a sentient, omnipotent, benevolent and wise force, there is no justification for acting like Tancred did (I think this is still more about him than about Cat herself – Cat's a lot more willing to see the other point of view on her own actions than this). If the Above is a sentient, omnipotent, benevolent and wise force, the Apostate *is* a villain in the lowercase sense.

And Pascale, with her bright eyed bushy tailed exuberance about her prayer being answered, was, to Cat, a representative and proponent of that point of view. *You should pray, and if it doesn't work, well – clearly it's for the best, as Above is wise and if it lets someone die that's what **should** happen.*

Nevermind that Pascale never uttered that exact sentence and was just ecstatic from her one in a million chance coming true, that's what Cat *heard*, not just from her statement but from the entire implication of that story that she'd have heard a million times before: the good girl and the bad boy,

a teaching example of the righteous getting rewarded and those who stray from the path dying.

To her, the story itself is a vile lie, and she forgot that Pascale was a character in it, not the storyteller.

Mammon

Even before being Named, the Stalward Apostle has (suggested at least) priestly powers. She wasn't a helpless girl, she was a priest who could've done more than others. She was one of the most capable people in that village to deal with this threat most likely, yet she chose to pray for salvation instead of doing something more statistically likely productive. And that's just irresponsible.

Remember, no one gets a Name without the skills for it. William was already a great swordfighter, Vivienne learned and honed thieving skills, Hakram was already a great secretary who also knew how to handle an axe. So the argument that all Heroes get their powers through prayer actually goes directly against already established lore of this world.

They have events that aren't necessarily heroic or action packed, such as William's murder of his sibling and hiding the body, but I don't recall anyone shying away from the call to arms or doing the direct proper thing to instead pray first. We know not how the Saint of Swords came into her Name, but it's nigh certain that this happened mid-swing after she stormed evil without hesitation. Not after she let a devil kill three people whilst she said her hail Mary before attacking.

As much as this conversation is meant to symbolise Good vs Evil philosophy, ironically with a White Knight whose origins are pretty mundane action-wise and involved him running away and signing away his own insight to fully submit to someone else's judgements, practically it falls apart when you look that had this system actually been implemented as they said, then Evil would've won a long time ago. Most Heroes would balk at the Stalward Apostate's indecisiveness too if they wouldn't be hypocrits believing in the complete goodness of their side and methods.

Konstantin von Karstein

"Did they listen to you?" I quietly asked. "When you warned them about the plague?"[...]

"They did not," Pascale sadly said. "But the Heavens did, when I knelt and asked for guidance. And through the Light, I found the way to dissolve the plague."

She was a mage, not a priest. She gained Light after her Choosing. And she first tried to convince others of the existence of that plague. Only after it failed did she prayed. She did try something more productive first. The Apostate slaughtered the entire village, but you cannot fault the Apostle for not thinking to do that, she is only 14. Would you have killed dozens of people like that at her age?

Valla

"It was too late," he snarled. "The disease was in them, same as it was in Maman. And I told them, told them I could see it and they needed to send for a real priest, but they just wouldn't listen-"

So did Tancred they didn't listen to him either and they were both 14. The only real difference between the two stories is the ending. Tancred had the means to do something so he did, you can argue till day grows cold about weather it was the right thing to do or not.

As for the whole Praying thing, I think the bigger question, at least for me, isn't weather what she did was right or wrong but, what would she have done if the gods hand't answered her prayers?

[Liliet](#)

Note: we don't actually have that answer.

[Mammon](#)

She didn't do anything, and instead of Pilgrim who probably killed a thousand ghouls by Cat's reckoning because the old man is that much of a powerhouse, a different Named showed up. Or she became Named without back-up. Sheer numbers and the Dead King's influence would've killed her and quite likely the other Named.

Hanno might've successfully fled, but not save the day by himself. He's not the kind of aoe fighter to deal with large groups, or prevent ghouls to fan out in all directions while others bog him down. While he'd fight while losing due to no perfect containment, the Apostate would've likely been a new Revenant added to the fight or DK's collection. The ghouls would rampage uncontrolled with every missed group slipping through causing hundreds of more deaths and requiring dozens more Named interventions which could've been situated elsewhere to further defeat DK.

If it weren't for Pilgrim, then DK would've seen to the Alliance having to rebuild, regroup and recover instead of having any offensive potential. All the lands conquered

could've been fortified by then, the bridge built and all a for him very profitable investment. If it weren't for the right Named to have been there, this would've been DK's moment of the darkest day event making victory seem impossible. Meanwhile Below was messier and not as pretty in how they resolved it, but they resolved it without massive risks and losses. They kept the casualties to a minimum and without these souls first being bound in undead before going to the heavens.

Good is to be praised because they stopped a situation that already got waaaay out of hand with ghouls so numerous that had they not been stopped by literal pilgrim Choir Ex Machina they would've dealt a blow to the campaign that could've seen to DK's victory or at least years of setback. They stopped a situation after it got out of control, after it should've been stopped. But they're totally just for letting it get that far.

Evil is bad, because by decisive and pragmatic action, they slaughtered a whole village before it turned into ghouls and ran out of control. Evil took control of its own destiny, resulting in a tightly maintained outbreak that didn't spread to several villages before being stopped. Less people died, but they died to the hand of their protector before they turned into absolute evil undead. And therefore it is Evil, for not waiting for Above to aid them by letting these ghouls grow more numerous but being slain after they're clearly morally just to be smitten down.

Shveiran

You need to decide who you are criticizing here: Above or Stalwart.

Above empowered a 14 year old that fixed a mess; Below empowered another 14 years old and he fixed another mess. The gods pretty much double-timed the Dead King like this was a tag match, so I don't get what Above did that was so horrible here.

THEY made no gamble; they handed someone the precise power needed to fix a mess. The mess was fixed. Same as with Tancred and Below.

What did they do wrong again?

As for Stalwart... well, as soon as she WAS Stalwart, she acted as her Roel allowed her to and fixed the mess. I don't see any slack there.

Before becoming Stalwart? She was a pious teen with some mage powers and a mess she had no way to solve, no responsibility for creating, no back up, no emotional maturity, no training, no Name, no nothing that justifies

EXPECTING her to fix the mess.
She did... what wrong, exactly?

[Liliet](#)

Pascale – nothing, IMHO.

But regarding what “Above” “did wrong”...

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/02/11/chapter-10reflections/comment-page-1/#comment-62441>

Shveiran

That’s a reconstruction of Catherine’s possible angry thoughts, not a critique to Above’s actions in this instance. They are a nice reconstruction and fit her emotional state, but from a logical point of view they aren’t very...on point.

It isn’t quite saying Above did something wrong, but rather saying that Above should have acted in thousands of other instances as well. Without proving that it was an option, what it boils down is “I wish you took action in this instance and not that other one”.
“I wish Apostle was left to die and Scorched survived.”

If we are discussing right or wrong, I think this doesn’t really add much.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, *I* don’t think there was a conscious decision on part of the Gods Above involved at any stage of the process, it was an automated process. Praying to it is like trying to shove a coin in a rickety ticket selling machine: maybe it’ll work and maybe it’ll roll back out. Nothing much to praise, though it’s certainly better than Below’s (which works every time but will chop off your finger along with the coin).

Konstantin von Karstein

Above and Below use different methods but the plague was stopped in both case. Except that thanks to Below’s method an entire village was slaughtered for it and Tancred died, while Above’s ensured less deaths. So yes, I think we can praise Above more than Below. It is unfair to criticise Tancred for what he did, he had no choice, but you can criticise Below’s methods.

[Mammon](#)

Thousands of ghouls. The village was at most a hundred and some, while Pilgrim apparently took down a lot more. Above got more people killed, by allowing the infected to turn into ghouls first and infect more before turning. Tancred never allowed the infected to spread out to new villages and thus effectively saved more lives. He even saved two or three people of that village who weren't infected yet.

A bit similar to back in (I think) book 1 the demon of Corruption. Good would've tried to save the corrupted folk and let corruption fester because of it, Evil made the hard call of dragging any affected soldiers aside and killing them. Grimdark, but there's no greater amount of corruption and a few more being infected by waiting for things to grow enough out of hand that fighting it would be the just and kind thing to do.

Shveiran

I'm sorry, but this is... all over the map.

Above killed none of those people. The Dead King did. You know, the one making ghouls?

Unless you can prove that Above could snap their fingers and make Keter disappear, I'm not sure what your argument is.

Do you believe there are omnipotent beings sitting in petty indifference while the story unfolds, that could fix it all but can't be bothered? I'm not sure that makes for a good story, frankly.

You do realize that if that premise holds the only thing that allows us to have a story in the first place is that indifference? That if your premise holds, at any moment Above could step up, wave their metaphorical, nonexistant hands and make all problems ever disappear?

I don't know WHY or to WHAT POINT, but it's clear there are limits to what they can do, or we wouldn't have a story. We wouldn't have CAT, incidentally; I doubt they would not have splattered her on the countryside after she mugged an angel. Why wouldn't they? Why would Triumphant have ever been a thing?

Maybe you are arguing Above could have fixed this mess in particular, but not the other ones. But I'm not sure why you'd think that, and if it had a cost why they'd pay it. This mess was no more risky than the ones the Dead King attempted in the last month. Also... they kind of fixed it. They empowered someone to fix it in time.

The bit about the demons, I don't even know what to say except... no?

Why would you think that?

The only instance we know of demons being fought by heroes ended with no collateral damage (Book 4, the Absence Hell Egg).

I strongly doubt either Saint or Tariq would have balked at containing the corruption through whatever means necessary. Some maybe would have... but most Villains would have run rather than took a stand like Cat did, so this is really more about single characters than the side they are on.

Heck, Archer was planning on running away and only stayed because Catherine shamed her into doing so; Heiress let the demon out in the first place, for crying out loud. Cat and Black are not the only Villains.

I was mad at the heroes for not recognizing they weren't like the rest, but let's not swing the pendulum too far the other way, shall we? Not all Villains are willing to take a stand to protect lives.

Liliet

You seem to be assuming the people in Pascale's village turned? That's not what happened. Pascale's Gift allowed her to *heal* the infected, and they all survived, except for those killed by the ghouls *that came from elsewhere*. Tariq came in time to ensure Pascale's safety as she healed the locals.

Shveiran

Stalwart was a MAGE, not a PRIEST.

And considering she was a PROCERAN, FOURTEEN YEARS OLD mage, she was likely a very poor mage, unlikely to have any great power or schooling in the gift.

What could she have done, precisely?

Tried and murder a few? Probably, yeah.

But aside from the fact that unless she got a Name out of it like Tancred she was unlikely to succeed in wiping out all the village and the plague with it, are we really saying the fourteen years old is somewhat GUILTY because she didn't think of exterminating all she knew and loved rather than trying to bargain with the gods Above?

I mean, it's not like she isn't certain they actually EXIST and CAN HELP.

So, when faced with a problem she couldn't possibly solve on her own (and I mean that, because even if she considered killing them all an untrained, unnamed mage from Procer did not have the power to kill a village. Tancred would have

failed too if he didn't get a Name from Below) she got on her knees and begged for help: I'll do anything, I'll give you anything, just please, please let me fix this. And Above answered.

It could have failed. Yeah, big times. But so what? She didn't cause the problem, and it was not her responsibility to fix it. She tried her goddamn best and THIS was her best. And yeah, she got lucky whereas Tancred would have had to live disfigured and heartbroken because he had been unwilling to take the gamble.

But that poor boy's fate is no fault of Stalwart.

[Liliet](#)

Note: if the Above DIDN'T answer, there was nothing stopping her from THEN turning to more extreme solutions. She was not actually pressed for time on the timescale of seconds (or minutes, or honestly even hours).

[TeK](#)

Comment section: the chapter. And ended about the same. The importance of civil discussion struck me as quite pointed. Am guilty.

[TeK](#)

"Devils need no summons"
Sounds like a convenient excuse.

erebus42

The Rapacious Troubadour has me picturing a Buster Scruggs-esque character.
Yeah that's pretty much how I expected that conversation to go though.

stevenneiman

Something I think Cat should have brought up: The last time Cat argued for caution and Hanno argued for faith, Hanno got the last word and then proceeded to break a Choir because he was wrong and he should have been more careful than faithful.

iLissuin

While she certainly could have brought that up, I understand why she did not. She could have smirked at Hanno in that way that makes people want to punch her in the face and said that the last time he chose prayer over her decisive plan, he lost the Choir. However, Cat and Hanno treated this conversation

more civilly. Neither went for low blows, and it's because this was a conversation between equals. Neither was trying to "win." Which for Cat is exceptionally rare. Even talking to other members of the Woe, Cat always tries to be right and to bind them more closely to her. This is one of many reasons why I love their dynamic.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

69th comment. Nice.

Pantokrator

"What you condemn as apathy I mourn as inability" So Hanno does not disagree with Catherine that 999/1000 the Gods Above would not intervene by answering prayers, he disagrees as to the reason it happens.

"If faith is a wager [...] they should acknowledge it" Catherine's argument is that Good claims to offer protection to the 'worthy' that ask for it, and that it is a lie, since the Gods Above had not intervened to stop the zombie horde from forming when villages that probably prayed to them were added to the horde. She later adds that this lie is detrimental to the war effort since instead of praying, people under attack could be putting up palisades.

"Below are deities as well" Hanno does not deny the previous argument but instead uses whataboutism, turning the topic to the Gods Below, whom he sees as the reason Catherine is arguing against Good.

"Below has horses that they ride until they break" He considers Below worse because they harm the recipient of their 'assistance' by warping their every aspect.

"The work of Above [...] is not 'mending'" Catherine on the other hand says that Above is just as bad judging by their means of conduct, but that Above is hypocritically claiming to be better. "The Saint and the Pilgrim [...] have body counts to match the greatest villains" Catherine is again condemning the means of the heroes, focusing on body count instead of reasoning or ends. "Above warps you just as much as Below does" responding to a previous argument, Catherine claims that it is not the Evil nature of Below that is responsible for the warping of a Named's personality, but their divine nature, which is also a characteristic of Above and that heroes are warped the same.

Catherine up to this point does not so much try to argue that Below is good as that Above is just as bad. Which is why most of her arguments are some form of whataboutism.

"Would you [act this way], in the days before you became the Squire?" Hanno then appeals to emotion and uses an example that

will sting Catherine. This is done to make her better understand his position and maybe realise that Below changes a person for worse in a way she has to concede to.

"In some ways I was worse [back then]" Catherine argues that change is not always for the worse and then accuses heroes of considering change itself bad, attacking the opposition's credibility since she offers no basis for her claim.

Hanno retorts that villains fear looking back because they know deep down they will not like the whole objective view of the path they have chosen, also indirectly attacking the opposition's credibility since he himself offers no basis.

"I'd wager I know [fear] a lot better than you" Catherine grabs onto a single word in that argument and changes the subject to something she despises about heroes; that they surrender choice to a greater power.

"And you believe that restraint, patience, faith are somehow easier?" Hanno denies the accusation by claiming that faith is not an easy path to take; that surrendering choice might be simpler but not what an individual would want on their own. "She could have fled or fought", "She gave up what she was", "She sought a way to heal the people who doubted her" Hanno ties his argument to the Apostle by using her as an example; he claims she never lost faith even in the most extreme adversities, that she asked Above for an altruistic sacrifice of her magic and that this was an action that required courage, not laziness as Catherine claims.

"If her story had been just a little off, [...] we'd have a rampant plague on our hands." Catherine does not rebuke Hanno's claim but argues that prayer is a less reliable measure than action, since the requirements for its success are more complex; that not expecting salvation from Above but instead erecting palisades would be better since Above is extremely picky about interfering.

"It did not [happen], nor will it" Hanno says that regardless of how things came to be Above is lending its help through the Apostle in a way that makes prayer a reliable means to an end. He does not make any comment on whether the choice really could have turned out as Catherine hypothesised or on whether it was a choice to be replicated.

"She couldn't have known that in advance" Catherine insists on an unanswered argument that due to the unreliable nature of Above prayer is not a reliable enough defence as to be encouraged. She argues that this lesson of asking Above for assistance cannot apply universally and thus should not be taught.

"I believe we should advise people according to who and what they are" Hanno states that a lesson does not have to be universally

applicable to be worth teaching.

"People rely on the Heavens for more than just intervention"

Hanno points out that Catherine has considered prayer only as a means to a strategic end, and so her arguments have only addressed part of a prayer's function while saying nothing against prayer as a guide to Good and good behaviour. While not countering her arguments for the strategic application of prayer he defends praying as a whole. This point of view sees prayer and by extension the surrender to a greater power as more than a means to an end, it considers prayer by itself beneficial due to the positive guidance it provides, both passively and actively. "Prayer does not preclude action" Hanno, again, points out that Catherine's arguments have taken for granted things that are objectively not true in general situations; a person who regularly prays does not necessarily remain inactive during a crisis.

"If you've got time to kneel and mutter, you've got time to raise a palisade" Catherine condemns praying in the specific case of a crisis, where praying most of the time is equivalent to inaction.

"Faith and ability are [not] mutually exclusive" Hanno talks about the general concepts of faith and ability instead of the specific prayer and palisade. He expresses again that one does not preclude the other, but expands the discussion to two general characteristics of a person instead of two stances in a specific situation. This is not necessarily derailing the conversation since the specific case was used throughout the conversation to thinly veil the greater conflict created by villains assigning more value in ability and heroes in faith.

"Faith doesn't keep the dead out"

"Most the time, neither does the palisade."

This is more clearly showcasing the aforementioned conflict, and in the following thoughts of Catherine the argument is shown to have boiled down to the most fundamental differences in Cat and Hanno's views and thus no further argument could be made. She also contemplates that her base reason to hate the faith approach is not that faith is not useful or that palisades work more often, as Hanno refutes, but that a person has to act on their own in order to be deserving of salvation.

During the argument Catherine condemns the means of Good, a stance to which Hanno does not voice any clear disagreement. But her main focus is either the difference in judgement each side suffers or the unworthiness of Good people due to having surrendered their choice to a greater power. Her main opinions are that Good is hypocritical and that faith is not only lesser to ability and action but detrimental in nature.

Hanno has, throughout this conversation, appealed to emotion and showed a great degree of loyalty to Above. His entire stance is legitimised only if one considers emotion and virtue to be acceptable motive for any action. This is not inherently a bad opinion, especially if you are a hero, since it is basically their main drive to do Good and good; to act in a way that benefits Above and to act in a way that benefits the most and brings the least harm to others.

This argument brings to mind some arguments from our world that it is only through Faith in God that a person can be good. While I definitely disagree with that, it is true that believing in a good greater power inspires someone to be good. My point is that though Hanno lacks objective reasoning and is far too vague in the benefits of faith, he acts and argues in accordance with religious dogmas, which themselves generally have a beneficial influence on a person's morality if followed properly. Though I don't argue that the effects of religion on morality can vary greatly depending on which aspects of religion one is subjected to.

Catherine on the other hand is generally objective and pragmatic in her opinions, arguing with specific examples and making a solid case against faith instead of appealing to emotion even though she is herself emotional throughout the conversation. However I feel she has a few contradicting opinions. Specifically on the means of operation. She considers the heroes' "ends justify the means" morally wrong but this does not fit with her general personality. Not that it's bad writing, everyone has some conflicting beliefs they are blind to. But she has always shown a stern acceptance to the ugliness of doing good which she does not tolerate for people who do ugly things in the name of Good and who do not differentiate between the two. She also is obviously driven to some opinions by emotion alone, without that impacting her ability to argue objectively. Faith in particular is something I don't think she would condemn so absolutely if she was not in such an emotional state.

So as I was reading this I knew that it was one of those chapters I would be reading multiple times before the next update. Then I read some of the comments stating one or the other was wrong and disagreeing.

I made this post to hopefully facilitate conversation by breaking down the points of the argument as objectively as I could. And then I added my view.

I do not personally fully support one or the other, I agree with some approaches by either character and disagree with others while I mostly find both general stances acceptable. Pardon any poor English.

Please post your disagreements.

Liliet

Holy shit. God bless your work (with full irony on the phrasing)

> She also contemplates that her base reason to hate the faith approach is not that faith is not useful or that palisades work more often, as Hanno refutes, but that a person has to act on their own in order to be deserving of salvation.

This is certainly what she says sounds like, but I would say Catherine did not follow this thought through properly. She doesn't actually think that specifically – that to be worthy of salvation, a person has to act on their own. She's out to save people who don't, too.

The issue is just slightly off to the side – it's with asking *Above specifically* for salvation, and not just the asking itself (again, Catherine did not follow this thought through), but the argument that it is the only virtuous and correct action to take and anything else is extraneous – oh, and if you didn't do it and just went for another course of action, you're evil and damned and wrong.

Which is not a statement either Pascale or Hanno made, but – it's a story often repeated in our world and it sounds like it is in Guide's world too.

The more despicable form is Just World Fallacy, only actually literally articulated as religion: if Above didn't help you, you weren't worthy of help – and there is a shade of that in Tancred's story, too, since he prayed to have Light instead of sorcery and his request was not considered worthy of being granted... which led directly to what happened.

The milder form is a gotcha – if Tancred didn't pray, clearly that is sufficient reason for him to be damned. The story itself does not imply it, but the mirroring Names, Apostle and Apostate... well, if there's a conscious entity being a storyteller for this story, that's what they're saying.

Whether it's one or the other depends on whether Tancred did pray before doing what he did – we don't actually know that. Catherine's argument is that either is nonsense, and *one cannot be condemned for not praying*.

Which is not what Pascale or Hanno said, and not what Catherine *explicitly* argued against either.

But I'd argue this is the actual source of her indignation.

Shveiran

There is a problem with that: Tancred was not Damned because he didn't pray.

Aside from the fact that he seemed to have been a pious boy (he prayed to have light until the pivot came) a lot of people don't pray to Above in the guide. Since most still aren't Named, that equivalence is false.

The point is that when the hour grew darkest, when all seemed lost, one kept to Above, remained strong in her faith that someone was watching over her and would help these people, and believed it so strongly she was able to become the STALWART APOSTLE, a Name rooted in holding on to your faith when everything screams it's stupid and pointless. She is stalwart in being an apostle, it's in the goddamn Name.

Tancred, at that same pivot, went "screw you guys, if you won't do anything I'll do it myself! Even if it is awful!" and so he became the Scrched Apostate, because he renounced his faith, renounced waiting for salvation, and instead decided to claim for himself the strength to do what he felt was needed.

But that is what a Villain is.

And the real point is... Above and Below have little to do with Tancred's fate.

Scorched and Stalwart both survived their first crucible. And Tancred's was terrible and unfair and crippling, but they both survived.

Afterwards?

After that, ghouls came for them both.

The heroine was protected by a hero.

The villain was not protected by the Villainess.

We can rage at the Heavens, we can say the two stories are bullshit, we can say a lot of stuff. But a boy was turned to a Revenant because Cat screwed up, and a girl wasn't because Tariq was on the ball.

At the end of the day, Above and Below have little to do with it. Catherine can't even rage at providence, because she was forewarned and got there in time.

Then she simply made a mistake, for no fault of the gods Above.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but that's not what the in-universe memes say.

The in-universe memes say that the villains are Damned and the heroes are Chosen; that one is inherently morally superior to the other...

...and Tancred and Pascale's story matches 1:1 the kind of horrible preachy tale for children that matches up a good child who did things right and was rewarded by providence, with a bad child who did things wrong and was punished by providence.

You gotta understand, too, what providence is. It's coincidences. Catherine just so happened to lapse in the exact minute she was supposed to be protecting Tancred. That she lapsed at all was on her shoulders, but she did not specifically choose to not protect Tancred (I have a hypothesis that actually she did, but has yet to come up in-universe). Providence is not literal light shining from Above, it's the right person being in the right place at the right time.

And a lot of it is just on people – Catherine failed to be that right person.

But at the same time...

That story is a popular one, judging from how Catherine recoiled from seeing the other half.

Shveiran

If I understand your point correctly, are you saying that Catherine wants to believe Tancred's death is the Meme's fault, because that way it is not her own?

I mean... I could buy that, actually.

[Liliet](#)

No, the same thing can be equally the fault of multiple people. Catherine was at fault, she does not deny that and she would not deny that. But there was another factor.

It's kind of like Second Llesse is the fault of, in order of decreasing relevance, Akua, all the Truebloods, Malicia, Cordelia Hasenbach, and a little bit Cat for failing to prevent it.

Tancred's death was, in order of decreasing relevance, the fault of the Dead King, Catherine herself, then the narrative, then everyone who failed to stop Catherine from overworking herself.

Or narrative before Catherine, it's kind of hard to gauge at that point.

[Liliet](#)

P.S. Black's on the list for Second Llesse too, both for trusting Alaya and for conquering Callow in the first place, btw.

fbt

No one really mentioned that while Cat's overall POV has a certain ideological justification to it (at least in terms of it twisting her tail), her arguments here seem to be a mix of strawmen, red herrings, and so on. Crazy people talk like that; exaggeration, aggression, distraction, attacks to avoid a point, etc. She's not only been messing up, she's messing up right here right now; being less civil than usual to a major ally that she likes and respects while butchering her representation of her own POV. This is very very far from the clever, often kind, fundamentally decent, subtle, funny, clever, and successfully manipulative Cat to date. This looks a lot like Cat crashing and burning to me, idk. She's never shied away from hard choices, but lately she's just angrily thrashing. The stress and fatigue may be turning her into an a-hole unable to lead. It's well written, ofc. This arc bothers me as I really like Cat. Over time behavior like this...well, folks that got on board rooting for the plucky gal doing the villian gig for good reasons may have trouble continuing to relate to her as a protag (both IRL and in the story). Just a random though, I may ofc be completely wrong.

Shveiran

I get what you are coming from, but I feel this was necessary: it shows us how frayed Cat's burden has made her. It's necessary to compensate for all the victory she had and make the battle uphill again. She'll get her shit back together, you and I will both read through pretending we are not crying, and then we'll get to see her stride back into ass-kicking territory. And it will be all the more awesome for it.

[Liliet](#)

This whole conversation is a masterpiece of "two very different conversations going on at the same time".

Hanno came to check on Catherine. Both Pascale and Raphaella are examples to point to, not actual issues – although he'd like Catherine to apologize to Pascale, that's incidental to his central point.

His central point is “Catherine, holy shit, are you okay? What happened? I’m so sorry; how can I help?”

Meanwhile what Catherine hears from the start, from the line in the previous chapter, is: “Catherine, you’re awful and terrible and not living up to your responsibilities. Not only did you fail Tancred, you kept on making it worse by being an ass to heroes, too. I despise your inability to handle your responsibilities.”

No, that’s not what Hanno said or intended to say. But see the crucifix line? That’s what Catherine was *responding* to.

Notably, Hanno said that in her brain because she actually sees him as a valid authority – an equal, like the Woe, who has the right to scold and judge her. She was defensive; when people she doesn’t consider worthy of judging her try to, she’s not defensive, she goes on the attack.

So yeah Catherine sent the conversation on every tangent she could find, because she actually cares about Hanno’s opinion and didn’t want to hear [the thing he never intended to say but Catherine’s jerkbrain insisted he would] from him.

(She did not shut down the conversation though – when Hanno pivoted into “do you have authority issues, Catherine?” she did not tell him off and tell him to get out of her tent, she answered properly and let the conversation continue, eventually segueing from one of her tangents into what the actual issue was)

Incidentally, I don’t think Hanno actually getting to the “holy shit, are you okay, how can I help?” point is going to shut down Catherine’s jerkbrain on this. It’s just going to insist he thinks [the thing she felt like she was saying] and is just being nice about it because that’s just how nice he is.

This whole conversation is a beautiful dance of insecurities, failure to *quite* figure out your broader philosophical points, and a whole lot of patience (on Hanno’s part), trust (on Catherine’s) and mutual respect.

[Liliet](#)

* the thing she felt like HE was saying
wordpress comment edit function when?

superkeaton

Hanno calling Cat “Black” gives me a pleasant feeling.

Danica Bihlmaier

Wondering if we should consider the three times “Black” not as in “Black Queen”, but what kind of Name she might be a claimant to... It’s open again, after all... and she was the Squire, not so long ago (even though it might feel very long indeed, storywise).

Morgenstern

...or maybe bc she sounded so much like her ‘father’ in another famous “rant” – but I dunno if that would work out... Has Hanno heard it at all?

Anyway, it was highly disturbing to suddenly have those nicknames introduced here, when all the while they had been calling each other just by their normal names so far.

Morgenstern

‘Black Knight’ / ‘White Knight’ pair in my understanding being warped into the two protectores of the Accords (Truce and Terms, was it?), which would be ... regent to them, so to speak. Although, there are some parallels in her shunting off more and more of the political stuff to her successor Queen-to-be, as Black did to Alaya, thus refusing the Emperor title, both mainly retaining warfare as their shtick.

Chapter 11: Veer

“A dog to the brave, a wolf to the craven.”

– Arlesite saying

I would head for the Arsenal tomorrow, I decided after the White Knight left.

There were still decisions to be made and responsibilities to discharge, so I put my back into it instead of leaning backing into my seat and sleeping for a few months the way I wanted to. It was tempting to simply say I could take the bundle of reports and letters with me, but if I wanted to keep a decent pace while on the move I couldn’t afford to have wagons of affairs and a crowd of attendants with me. That meant answering every bit of correspondence I’d received – or left to languish, honesty compelled me to admit – over an afternoon’s span, Hakram flitting in and out of my tent like some big green bureaucratic butterfly after I’d told him of my intention. I’d left Baron Henry Darlington’s complaint about the continued Deoraithe presence in

the northern baronies unanswered for two months, considering the shit knew very well it'd been at Vivienne's order that Duchess Kegan had sent her soldiers to hold our end of the Passage. He was just trying to extract concessions for the supply convoys passing through his territory to feed the host there, the rapacious prick.

I penned an amicable reply inviting him to propose a plan to field a force apt to replace Kegan's, if his objections to the Deoraithe were so deeply felt. No doubt he'd enjoy that, it was the kind of thing that could be used to muster up some support and influence among the few remaining nobles of Callow. I added that he should forward such a plan to 'Heiress-Designate to the Crown Vivienne Dartwick' as soon as it was done, which he'd enjoy a great deal less. Did he really think I'd not noticed he was trying to go over Vivienne's head by calling directly on me over something she'd already ordered? I might be the Queen of Callow, but I wasn't fool enough to start undermining my own chosen successor's authority. The invitation from the Closed Circle of Mercantis to attend one of their auctions had already expired by the time I got it, in a practical sense, given that the auction had already been held when I got the letter. I'd been meant a mark of honour than a real expectation I'd leave the front, though, so I wrote a polite refusal anyways.

It always paid to be polite to people you owed money to, even if the 'you' here was the Grand Alliance and not me personally.

The offer by the Holy Seljun of Levant, one Wazim Isbili – who was, to my understanding, Tariq's grand-nephew – to formally send an ambassador to the Callowan court and receive one from us in Levante in turn was rather more pressing. It was heartening to see that the Dominion was willing to establish closer ties with my kingdom, and to an extent rarely sought given the distance between the two realms, but there were... complications. For one, I didn't really have anyone to send as an ambassador. In the Old Kingdom that'd been a role for the highest ranks of nobility, which had been quite thoroughly exterminated in the decades since the Conquest. My father being the viciously meticulous bastard that he was, he'd also done all he could to stamp out what one might call diplomatic apprenticeships. Almost like he'd wanted to make sure Callow was isolated and incapable of properly reaching out. It was a sad but undeniable fact that most 'diplomats' I could send would be Praesi officers of noble birth from my army, with as other option maybe Brandon Talbot. Who I needed in command of the Order of Broken Bells anyway, making him highly unsuitable for the task.

I kicked that decision back to Vivienne, after pondering the matter a bit, along with a note outlining that she'd be in charge of finding a suitable ambassador if she decided to accept. I also suggested that a potential Levantine ambassador should be

received by her in Salia rather than at my 'court' in Laure, and lastly stipulated that no ambassador of ours could be related to Duchess Kegan. There was already enough discontent at the way the Duchess of Daoine kept naming kin and vassals to key court and bureaucratic positions, she needed no encouragement. Especially if a decade from now the Duchy of Daoine was to be independent, complicating the loyalties of all such appointees by a great deal. More recently, the Iron Prince had sent a missive describing the way the dead beyond the defensive lines had massed for assault before suddenly withdrawing and asking if I had an explanation.

I spent the better part of an hour describing the Dead King's latest plot to tie us here down south while he went on the offensive again. Klaus Papenheim had added a note that his envoy had spoken glowingly of the results of the assault formation on the field – somewhat to my surprise, given that she'd not expressed such enthusiasm before me – and that he would want to pit a formation against a more traditional mixed force of Bones and Binds before committing to that doctrine but he was definitely interested. Amusing enough, he also warned me that Otto Redcrown had extended an offer of settling in Lycaonese land to Sapper-General Pickler but that no offence should be taken by it. Any such offers made in the future would pass by me first. It was enough for me to soften my language when I wrote to the Prince of Bremen over the matter, mentioning that I was willing to serve as intermediary between the Lycaonese and the Confederation of the Grey Eyries if they wanted to extend that offer to the Tribes instead of to troops sworn to my service.

The rest was minor correspondence, mostly from my commanders on other fronts, including the usual letter written in Crepuscular from General Rumena that turned out to bear some insulting nuance to a native speaker I wouldn't get without asking for help. Hence getting me insulted in front of an audience every single time. The old bastard never actually bothered to send me proper reports, given that Sve Noc saw to it we spoke in 'person' regularly. I'd be due that tonight, I thought. Not necessarily a conversation with Rumena, but communion with my patronesses. Last time they'd brought me in for a waking dream it'd been to show me the sigils of the Exodus raising the foundations of a hidden city in the depths of Serolen, though also to make a point that warfare around the edges of the Gloom reborn was growing... rougher. The Dead King was getting serious about dislodging them from their positions, not just trying to erode them one corpse at a time. I set those drifting thoughts – a sure sign I'd been going through these chores for a while – aside when Hakram flitted back in, wasting no time to bring another folded parchment to me. I took it with a sigh.

"What am I looking at?" I asked, eyes begin to scan the cramped lines.

"The proposed numbers and composition of our escort to the Arsenal," he said.

I frowned.

"I don't need knights," I said. "They're a lot more useful out here."

"You're the Queen of Callow," Hakram pointed out. "Knights are expected. They expect is as well, Catherine."

"I've no personal guard," I said. "There will be no second Gallowborne. If the Order of Broken Bells understands this differently, Talbot is in need of being disciplined."

These days I was not quite so prone to leaping into the fire, but what mortal guard could possibly be expected to survive the kind of messes I got into? No, there would be no revisiting that old blunder under a different name.

"And cut that number in half," I added. "I want us riding briskly."

"Wagons don't ride briskly, Catherine," Adjutant gravelled.

"Then they can catch up at the Arsenal," I said. "I'll not double the length of the trip for comfort."

"Let me requisition packhorses, at least," the orc said.

I waved my hand.

"So long as we don't slow," I said. "And send for Akua, will you?"

He nodded.

"You'll also need to personally write to the Rapacious Troubadour, if you want him to take up Origin Hunting without feeling slighted," he reminded me before leaving.

Ugh, and I'd been just about done too. That letter I took my time in writing, since he was a prickly thing for a bandier of words and not half-bad with a knife. Mind you, when he'd admitted he stole songs from those he killed I probably shouldn't have replied 'surely you mean souls' in a dry tone. He hadn't taken that well. Still, vicious bastard or not he'd sniff out any Named popping out in this neck of the woods and ease them into the Truce – and I'd make it clear that Hanno was in the area too, which ought to keep him honest when it came to his more unsavoury tendencies. I was up and limping about looking for my seal when my right hand and my left arrived. I waved in their direction, pushing aside sheaths of parchment with a frown.

"It's in your desk," Hakram said.

"I looked in my desk, thank you very much," I waspishly replied.
"It's not in-"

Having stepped around my desk and opened one of the drawers even as I spoke, he produced my personal seal – the Crown and Sword, as it'd come to be known – and said nothing. His silence was, admittedly, quite damning enough on its own.

"Must have been under something," I weakly said.

"Walnut shells, mostly," the orc reproached.

I winced.

"Look, sometimes it's late and I'm not hungry enough for a meal," I defended.

"And so the Black Queen so spoke to her dark legions," Akua intoned. "Bring me walnuts, my wicked servants. But don't tell Adjutant, for he gets snippy about the mess."

I flipped a finger at her and hobbled to the side of the desk, picking up the bar of grey wax I'd set next to the letter before forming black flames against the side. Wax dripped and I dismissed the fire, extending my free hand and receiving my seal from Hakram. With a firm push the seal was affixed and I set the letter aside.

"Right," I said. "So I considered it, and we'll be scrapping the wardstone to get the obsidian spike."

I gave a heartbeat of room for Akua to protest, but of course she'd been taught better than that.

"I'm not comfortable going on campaign against Keter with a repaired wardstone anyway," I told the shade. "So we might as well get another weapon to study out of it."

"You no longer speak in the theoretical," Akua noted.

When it came to a summer campaign? No, no I did not. That little revelation about the bridge had ensured as much. We couldn't afford to ignore that.

"Talks with the White Knight were fruitful," I grunted. "I'll need to speak with the rest of the Grand Alliance leaders, but an offensive campaign in Hainaut is now a certainty – the only thing up in the air is the timing of it."

"I'll see to extracting the spike immediately, then," Akua decisively said. "If you'll excuse me?"

I nodded my thanks, she returned them with a smile and just as quick as she'd come she was gone. The tent flap closed behind her, cutting through the slice of dusk it'd bared. She must have appreciated the courtesy of being told in person, I supposed, even if ultimately I'd not taken her advice.

"Tell me when it's done," I said, eyes turning to the tent flap. "I'll have a look at it myself."

"And until then?" Hakram asked, sounding curious.

"It's getting dark out," I said. "Time to speak with the Crows."

—

At the exact moment night fell, I was seated alone in the dark of my tent.

The sprite-lanterns had been hooded, the braziers put out, and I'd dragged my fae seat away from the desk so that there'd be more room around. I'd long grown familiar with weaving silencing strands of Night around my tent that would prevent eavesdropping, be it physical or otherwise, and even my guards had been told to step further away. My pipe in hand, breathing in the wakeleaf I'd been gifted, I watched the burning red brand that was the only light inside and spat out a long stream of acrid smoke. The only sign that Sve Noc had deigned to join me was a slight breath of breeze, almost like an exhale, and then they were there. Perched on either side of me, on the back of the seat, great crows feathered in darkness so deep and even the dark of the tent seemed bright in comparison. Long, sharp talons dug into the wood of the armchair with a sound like steel scraping bone.

"First Under the Night," Andronike said, voice cool.

Like stone far below where the sun never shone, like a deep lake whose waters were as a veil.

"Losara Queen," Komena said, voice sharp.

Like the ring of steel against steel, like pride and hate and all the things that made men go mad.

"Sve Noc," I replied, dipping my head in respect.

Two years was perhaps not so long a span, as gods would have it, but it had made a world of difference with these two. They were no longer taking their first stumbling steps past the threshold of apotheosis: these were goddesses in all the arrogant vigour of their youth, casting a covetous eye upon the world. And I was, on most days, the closest thing they possessed to restraint. I breathed in the smoke, held it in my throat and blew it back out. I ought, perhaps, to be afraid of those sharp-clawed patronesses

of mine. I'd never quite managed, though. That might just be the reason they took my advice still.

"General Rumena brings ill tidings back to the Night," Komena croaked.

"Do they?" I mused. "I've not had the displeasure to hear them."

"Watch," Andronike ordered. "Listen."

The darkness within shifted as the Sisters seized the darkness for their own, made it as a domain forced onto Creation. It was one of their lesser tricks – a paltry thing, compared to the waking dreams that saw me tread grounds halfway across the continent and speak with others as if I were there – but it was still a casual display of power. Similar end could be achieved with sorcery, true. But it would be the work of years, not *moments*. I saw now, from my seat, two different fractured memories given unto the Night by willing Firstborn.

—

A human, a prince, an Alamans. All three and no longer young, seated with another crowned head: Rozala Malanza, vulgar in form to drow eye yet respected for its mettle. Not so its companion, this Prince of Cleves who could not preserve its sigil yet had not seen it stripped from its grasp.

"- this talk of leaving all conquered lands to the dark elves," Prince Gaspard of Cleves snorted. "A kingdom's worth, for a paltry few thousand raiders? It is madness, Princess Rozala."

"The greater might of the Empire Ever Dark fights in the deep north," Princess Rozala replied.

"And let them keep it, by all means," Prince Gaspard dismissed. "But the lands south of Hannover's height should be brought into the fold: some of them would make good farmland, after a proper cleansing. It would be a waste to surrender them to these lesser elven cousins."

—

A human, a killer, the Dawnstride: Mirror Knight, humans called it. Unsettling, its power like the sting of morning, and harder to kill than Savanov Hundred-Lives. But like most cattle, its guard lowered when it was busy mating with another of its kind. The other one in the bed: human, the daughter of a prince, Langevin. Carine, daughter of the Gaspard. They spoke after spending themselves.

"You really should consider it, Christophe," Carine Langevin said, fingers trailing naked flesh.

"The war's not won, Carine," the Mirror Knight replied.

"But when it is, all those lands will need proper stewardship," Carine Langevin insisted. "And who better than one of the Chosen who fought to reclaim it?"

"I wouldn't know the first thing about ruling," the Mirror Knight said.

"It would be my honour to help you, of course," Carine Langevin smiled.

—

I let out a shallow gasp, closing my eyes. How very Proceran, I thought, to begin divvying the spoils of victory before the end of a war we were currently losing. Malanza had seemed lukewarm at the notion, at least, so I didn't have to revise my opinion of her by too much. That she'd not stamped out this petty scheming immediately, though, got stuck in my throat. Hadn't they learned by now that it was exactly this sort of habitual treachery that'd nearly seen them stand against the Dead King alone? What exactly did they think was going to happen next time a calamity like this struck and Procer had a record of backstabbing *even the people who fought to save it*? I brought the pipe to my lips and breathed in the wakeleaf, ordering my thoughts as I let the burn in my throat sharpen my attention, and spat it out.

"That's one prince," I finally said. "It would have been too much to ask for that *all* of that lot be kept honest by even the looming prospect of annihilation."

And if it'd been going to happen anywhere, it was going to be Cleves. Between the Firstborn forces under Rumena, the veteran Dominion reinforcements under Lord Yannu Marave and Rozala Malanza's practiced hand guiding the fight, it was the front that'd arguably least suffered. While the Dead King's raiding parties frequently slipped the coastal defences and warfare around the lakeside fortresses was an almost permanent fixture, it was the most 'stable' of the fronts. The city of Cleves had not suffered a third siege, the supply lines remained wide open and the Named there were proving capable of dealing with Revenants – at least defensively, as the Stormcaller still had the run of all western Lake Pavin and we had no one that could touch her in the water. No, if anyone was going to start getting ideas it was the royals in Cleves. They'd not been afraid for their lives in too long.

"Does it go any further up?" I asked. "If they can't even bring Malanza into the plot, it's dead in the water."

"If they continued down this path," Komena said, "they will be as well."

"More sinister than humorous, but not half bad," I absent-mindedly praised.

Yeah, that the literal goddesses of murder and theft that were my patronesses would not look kindly upon their so-called allies planning to turn on them had been a given. I was not unaware, either, that they were in no way above calling back the forces under Rumena from Cleves and leaving the Procerans high to dry. It'd be a disaster both militarily and diplomatically speaking, but the Crows had no interest in playing nice with people sizing them up for a knife in the back. They'd cut ties with the Principate without batting an eye, if it came to that.

"The First Prince was told," Andronike said.

My fingers clenched around the arms of my chair.

"You're sure?" I asked.

The shadows shifted once more.

—

Humans, bearing the emblem of a red lion. Magelings, surrounding the Princess Malanza. They speak into the scrying bowl, believing themselves safe behind their wards. They are not, for the Lord of Silent Steps has brought great knowledge into the Night as to treading through without tripping.

"Gaspard is pushing hard, Your Highness," Princess Rozala said. "But he's toed the line carefully so I've no grounds to come down him. He's still gathering support but the notion is a popular one."

"It would permanently alienate the Empire Ever Dark," the First Prince of Procer's voice replied. "And perhaps Callow as well. If the Black Queen did not slaughter everyone involved first, that is. I do not suppose he spoke to this?"

"There's a lot of heroes who don't believe she'll survive the war," Princess Rozala said. "And with his daughter in the Mirror Knight's bed, he gets to hear every rumour going around the Chosen. Callow under Vivienne Dartwick is a beast with a lot less bite, Gaspard argues."

A long silence.

"I cannot step in," the First Prince said. "Already the heartlands are chafing under the taxes and levies, there will be accusations of tyranny if I begin imprisoning princes over mere words. Let them plot, Princess Rozala. It will be seen to at a time of our choosing."

—

It took a moment to gather my bearings. That turned to anger quickly enough, that Hasenbach was once more failing as an ally because of the Principate's fucking internal politics. I mastered myself, though, and took a calming drag from my pipe. Procer was, undeniably, bearing the worst of the weight of the fight against the Dead King. It was its lands being ravaged, its people being conscripted and its traders being taxed into poverty. It was even its princes falling into debt. Callow and Levant, meanwhile, had sent north largely professional armies and while we'd felt the burden of war neither had suffered attacks from Keter. Procer, I then silently corrected, was bearing the worst of the weight among *human* nations. The Firstborn had been fighting against Keter in earnest for two years, and they'd had no reinforcements for any of it. But they were also fighting very far away, and people were people.

Sacrifices earned less gratitude when you didn't get to see them happening.

"The two most prominent women in Procer don't back the plot," I said. "And it's years away, besides. You've reason to be angry, and I'll be taking up the issue when I next see Hasenbach, but it's hardly a crisis."

"An undeniable and weighty precedent for the Firstborn being reasonable, restrained actors," Andronike said, mimicking my voice perfectly as I repeated words I'd once spoken to the Sisters.

"When we refrained from taking Twilight, you promised us our restraint would bring forth results," Komena croaked.

"I'd have you fight this war in a manner that doesn't guarantee having to fight another one in twenty years with your current allies," Andronike said, eerily imitating my every intonation from back then without flaw.

"And yet," the youngest of the sisters said.

They were questioning the value of playing nice when faced with allies like these, whose actions might very well lead to that war in a few decades regardless of what the drow did. It went back to the lessons they'd been taught while still mortals: that restraint would always be seen as weakness, that only the strong were bargained with and strength came without mercy. Of course, they were wrong in this.

"You did get that," I pointed out without hesitation. "Sure, we might need to arrange an accident for Gaspard of Cleves in a way that can't be traced back to us a few years from now, but you're missing the point: the two most powerful people in Procer want to shut him down and will at the first good opportunity. The Empire Ever Dark is seen as *valuable*, something not to antagonize

without reason. Considering the general amoral ruthlessness of Proceran diplomacy over the last centuries, that's basically weaving you a crown of flowers and asking if you're going to the fair with anyone."

I'd, uh, maybe gotten a little too enthusiastic with that last metaphor.

"Were you going to the fair with anyone?" Andronike asked, tone too serene for her not to be fucking with me.

Great, they were still missing the mark half the time with sarcasm but *naturally* they'd be the finest of students when it came to learning how to pull my leg.

"I had a shift at the Rat's Nest anyway," I said.

I felt Komena's gaze descend on me, somehow coming across as skeptical even coming from a bird.

"Fine," I grumpily admitted, "Duncan Brech did not, in fact, ask me to the fair."

He'd asked Lily from one of the other rooms at the orphanage, whose... charms had developed quicker and more amply than mine. Mind you if I'd had my pick of the litter I might have chosen Lily as well, so I could hardly blame him.

"Procer has not asked us to the fair either," Andronike comfortingly said.

See, if it'd been her sister I might have thought that halfway genuine but coming from her I just knew she was just having me on.

"Very droll," I said. "Thank you for passing this along, then. I'll be seeking out Hasenbach to bury it for good."

Preferably without dead bodies being involved, but that depended on how reasonable Prince Gaspard intended to be. If he was willing to bend his neck and make reparations for overreaching in this way, I'd leave it at that. Otherwise I was going to have to take some measures to express my irritation, less than subtly. If even *that* didn't make the point sink in, then I'd have to put some thought into how best to have him disappear without entangling the Mirror Knight into this mess. Tricky but not impossible, if I leaned on the White Knight to get him moved to another front and he'd not confused sleeping with the pretty Langevin girl for true love. Hells, though, why couldn't he just have stayed out of this mess? The prince would not have been so bold without a Chosen to back him. Why was it that the only Proceran hero to have any degree of sense was Roland and he was

the one I *couldn't* have on the field? The Gods were pricks, as usual.

"How's Serolen?" I asked.

There really wasn't a proper, commonly accepted name for the massive forest in between Lake Netzach and the Chalice. Most maps ended at the bottom of the Kingdom of the Dead, and few people had an interest in what went on north of the human nations of Calernia. I'd seen it called the – inventively-named – Dead Wilds, the Forest of Ghosts and rather more poetically the Bleak Weald. Mapmakers tended to call it whatever they felt like, and there was no one to contradict them: it wasn't like the Dead King's legions had shared their name for it, if they even had one. Serolen was what the Firstborn had come to name the forest, and in Crepuscular it more or less meant the Duskwood. The Firstborn had fought nine battles and a hundred skirmishes before claiming the greater span of the woods, securing them enough that Sve Noc could bring down the Gloom around the edges and plunge the territory in permanent dusk.

Neshamah was perhaps the greatest sorcerer Calernia had ever known, so of course he'd found ways to pierce through the Gloom. They weren't perfect, though, and it'd enabled the Firstborn to secure their frontline and begin settling in the depths of Serolen. The first drow city on the surface still shared its name with the Duskwood, for now, but I expected that would change with time. I'd already filled the ears of the Crows with rants about why Proceran principalities and capitals sharing their name was highly inconvenient in half a dozen senses, so you might even say it'd be a religious obligation. I'd shove that in the holy book if I had to, they knew damn well.

"See for yourself," Komena said, open pride in her voice.

The shadows shifted, but this time it was not a memory that was offered up for me to tear through. I dragged myself up to my feet, teeth keeping my pipe in place, and walked over what had been made to seem like the evening sky. Below me, misty woods shrouded in shadow spread out as far as the eye could see. The ground fell beneath my feet as we closed in on the Duskwood, my old calcified fear of heights sending a familiar pang up my leg. What I found beneath the mists had me smiling, though. The sigils of the Everdark had come together under the Ten Generals and their great cabal of the Exodus, whose founders were Sve Noc themselves, and the results were a wonder. An empire's worth of looted wealth had been made into a city at the heart of the gloomy woods, temples of stone and millennia-old steles held up by trees coaxed through Night to serve as stairs and roads and a hundred other things. Within the bark had been nestled precious stones and obsidian, while leaves around the sacred places were painted with colourful prayers and poems.

It was a city like none I'd ever seen, like *no one* had ever seen, made up from the stolen parts of half a dozen cities who'd once been among the most glorious of this land. And everywhere among the labyrinthine lay of its 'streets' the Firstborn were living. Sleeping and haggling and brewing their horrid drinks, making lizardscale clothes and harvesting the mushrooms from the deeps that'd spread like the plague. Waters had been diverted from half a dozen streams, and stolen lakes brought from their ancient homes, making the entire span richly watered and leading into an artificial lake at the heart of Serolen. There the great temple that had once been the soul of the Empire Ever Dark, the seat of the Twilight Sages and where Sve Noc had struck their ill-fated bargain with Below, stood tall. Entire flocks of crows like the ones on my shoulders perched there, ever-hungry and ever-watchful shards of godhood. I let out a low, impressed whistle after taking my pipe in hand.

"That's new," I said, pointing towards the great temple. "I didn't know you'd looted that."

"All of Holy Tvarigu is within us," Andronike replied.

"It's coming along nicely," I approved. "Do you intend to keep a strong presence up here even after the war?"

"There would be advantages," Komena said. "Like the nearness of the Chain of Hunger."

Words to make a Lycaonese choke, that, but it made sense. To the drow, yearly ratling raids would be like a fresh harvest of Night coming over and asking to be scythed through.

"We've got time yet," I said. "Might be worth speaking with the First Prince when you decide on where you'll raise your cities. She'll be better placed than I to point out the northern trade arteries of Procer."

I received no acknowledgement of my words save for the two of them taking flight and landing on my shoulders, sharp talons digging into my flesh. I put my pipe back into my mouth and took a drag, spewing the smoke upwards just to spite them. It was time, it seemed.

"All right," I said afterward. "Show me the war."

I steeled myself and the shadows spun.

Horror swallowed me whole.

epokki

Please help EE out, and vote for PGTE at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .
The series also has a pretty active Discord server, <https://discord.gg/Ad3D63W>

Insanenoodlyguy

He'd asked PGTE from one of the other sites at the topwebfiction, whose... votes had developed quicker and more amply than mine. Mind you if I'd had my pick of the litter I might have voted for PGTE as well, so I could hardly blame him.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .

[Javvies](#)

Idiot Procerans.

And they might need to find something particularly unpleasant to throw Mirror Knight into.

Hanno will not be pleased to hear that some of the Procerans are planning to betray their allies, especially with the involvement of another Hero. Neither will Tariq. And neither will Antigone – she'll definitely beat the stupid out of Mirror Knight, or at least give it a solid try.

Zggt

Call me a conspiracy theorist, but as you've pointed out this isn't a very Heroic line of thought, then perhaps it originated elsewhere. I feel like Malicia is involved somehow. The focus on the aftermath rather than the war and creating strife between Cat and Procer really advances her agenda.

[Javvies](#)

Eh ... it's a classically Proceran move, though.

I mean, Malicia could be connected to it, sure, but it could very easily be entirely homegrown and have nothing to do with Malicia whatsoever.

[Adrian_V](#)

I agree with Jav, i doubt Malicia created this....but if Cat found out then it sure as hell is posible for Malicia to find out and use wich is much worse than if it was fabricated.

Shikkarasu

It's perfectly in line with the "Good Guys"

"See, Catherine, there was nothing to it," he smiled, sharp and cold. "The ordeal would only have stung were you a heretic, which makes wanton use of it perfectly permissible. Indeed, how dare any of us question the Wandering Bard's right to pursue our demise whenever the whim takes her? How very impious."

-Book 4, Chapter 69: Repute

Drow are evil, therefore why shouldn't we do terrible things to them? They don't deserve the rewards like we do.

Shveiran

If you want to bring in quotes to sustain your view on how heroes, Above and good-aligned nations think, may I suggest quoting them and not Amadeus during one of his unventing phases?

I love the guy, but he is not, shall we say, impartial. What he says shouldn't be taken for gospel, especially not when he is explicitly trying to pull an Hero's pigtaileds with his words.

Shikkarasu

Fair point. I am definitely being petty, not witty.

flashburn283

Do not attribute to Malicia what can be explained by stupidity

[sengachi](#)

But also watch for Malicia funding the stupid and their idiotic, coalition-destroying plans. She likes to that.

Frivolous

It's the Mirror Knight's glory that his body becomes better with time, stronger, swifter, tougher.

It's the Mirror Knight's tragedy that his mind remains the same, stupid and closed and gullible.

Shveiran

Though he never struck me as particularly smart, it might be he isn't quite planning on betraying anyone. Aside from the fact that he hasn't quite agreed yet (though granted, "I'd make for a poor ruler" kind of implies he is debating the practicalities rather than the moral side of things) he might just be thinking of a small change of plans.

Like, say, a few lands close to Cleves being annexed, in exchange for other concessions.
It would be a plot, and it would be a betrayal, but not quite “thanks for helping us out, now go die in a ditch somewhere before we conquer you, bye!” treachery.

What I’m saying is, it reflects poorly on his judgment, but... it might not amount to much. Maybe.

[Liliet](#)

It’s also possible he has no idea that the lands were supposed to go to the drow. He’s not a politician and not a strategist. I’ll assume he has no idea what the fuck is going on before I assume he’s being malicious, here.

Frivolous

Ah, I neglected to clarify: If the Mirror Knight is openly disdainful towards Levantines, how much more disdainful can he be towards an Evil non-human race?

It’s pretty logical that the MK would favor Procerans over the Empire Ever Dark.

AbraKadabra

The guy wants practically half of The kingdom of The dead.

hakureireimu

To be fair MK tried to refuse both times, without even a “I’ll think about it” polite refusal.

luminiousblu

Mirror Knight strikes me as a Lawrence of Arabia type, not as a Balfour type. He’s the boots on the ground doing what he can to get things sorted out. He’s not aware of the plots back home, or at least not the depths of them and likely doesn’t understand the political situation, because he’s a combat-focused hero who gets stronger and stronger and apparently is indestructible. Politicians back home make things messy for him, but that doesn’t make him part of it.

caoimhinh

It’s good that they are finally taking notice of the Mirror Knight as a potential threat. I find it weird that no one in the story has Mirror Knight’s abilities oppose those of the Night. Catherine at least should have noticed.

This might relate to the “great future threat” that Christophe is meant to face, which Hanno had predicted after observing how

Dawn made Mirror Knight grow stronger every day. Hanno said that the Heavens had made him to fight something strong, and horrific. My theory: he is meant to fight the Drow. And this thing of tying Christophe to the Cleves Principality might be the first step towards turning him to that story, with the next being -of course- Cleves starting war against the Drow near its lands.

Cat must be very careful and veer Sve Noc away from Story Traps. Making war against a Hero so seemingly tailor-made against their powers would be very dangerous. They must, at the very least, avoid falling into the role of the bad guys in that story.

caoimhinh

I skipped a word.

I find it weird that no one in the story has **noticed** Mirror Knight's abilities oppose those of the Night.

Shveiran

Would that story be on Mirror's side though?

I mean, if he was the plotter and the inciting incident, then... he is the story's villain. An heroic mighty would liberate his people from the threat of Proceran greed. It doesn't look like the grove would help Cristophe.

He isn't, though, his would-be father in law is. Add to that the standard heroic coincidences and the combination of procerans' attitude with drow's idea of politics, and the tragedy might just write itself for him to avenge.

caoimhinh

Yeah, and with Cat already plotting to have Prince Gaspard "have an accident" she might just make a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Killing the guy to avoid his intentions of war only to have his Hero son-in-law go on a quest for revenge. I would expect Catherine to be more Genre Savvy than to think that such assassination wouldn't be find out by the Hero later and probably at the most crucial and inconvenient time

Shveiran

A revenge story kind of requires a deep connection to the one you are avenging, IMO.
It might work if his daughter stumbles into the

incident and is murdered, but unless that happens it sounds kind of weak.

Unless Cristophe starts raving about how the Prince is like the father he never had and also make amazing muffins, I'd say Cat is in the clear.

caoimhinh

There's also the matter that it would be the Queen of Callow and High Priestess of the Empire Ever Dark having one of the Princes of Procer murdered.

A lot can go wrong right there. It would be a political mess unchaining a war, and Heroes need much less than that to have the Story helping them.

delspaig

He's definitely been enjoying his daughter's "muffins" for a while :v

caoimhinh

The problem is that even the slightest pretense can serve as help for the Heroes, as we have seen so far.

The crusade against Callow was a purely political thing that aimed at killing Catherine just for being a Villain (even without the Name) while the Procerans were already thinking how to divide the land of Callow among themselves. The Heroes were an invading force, yet the story was on their side because they were part of a Crusade that after beating Callow would fight against Praes. Catherine won, but not thanks to help of Providence.

When the Saint of Swords decided that she would rather risk everything by destroying the Twilight Crown than let someone use it, she was losing and about to be restrained by the combined efforts of Cat, Tariq, Indrani, and Roland, yet Kairos simply said "we are invincible!" and that was enough to turn the tables and empower the Saint.

That's why Providence is mostly seen helping Heroes, they don't need much to have it on their side, a Villain like Catherine needs a lot of planning and careful steps, a Hero just trust their instincts and needs the smallest pretense on being the good guy to have a boost.

Hence what I said: Cat needs to be very careful in how she handles this. They can't afford to leave even the smallest doubt that they are the ones on the right.

Shveiran

I'm not sure I agree with your analysis, not completely.

The Heroic crusaders were infuriatingly turning a blind eye to the practicalities of their involvement, and the very use of the word hero loses all meaning when applied to them IMO, yet they got no help from providence.

Cat may have played her hand smart and done her homework, but when you get down to it she was facing an invading force more than twice her numbers, with more mages if less skilled, a shitton of priests, and three times her Named, among which two of the oldest beasts in the continent.

She still won, didn't she? And it isn't like the opposition played like morons on the field.

I'm game for throwing shade on the crusaders, but from my point of view Providence sat that one out.

As for Saint, sure, that happened.

Yet I'd argue it happened as the third betrayal of Kairos fucking Theodosian, who leaned in the pattern, something he was able to do thanks to the involvement of the Bard in the first place.

That's a lot of tropes to add to the "invincible until you aren't" cliché.

Hero Bulshit was not the only culprit, IMO.

[Liliet](#)

> The Heroes were an invading force, yet the story was on their side because they were part of a Crusade that after beating Callow would fight against Praes. Catherine won, but not thanks to help of Providence.

Not true. Tariq and Laurence spell out at Camps that actually Providence is audibly (to them) favoring Catherine in that battle.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It may suffice to let Cordelia know, that the Black Queen *knows* exactly what certain Proceran lords are plotting against their allies....

Shveiran

I was thinking Cat might want to test Cordelia on this, in her current frame of mind. You know, give her a chance to inform her of the problem herself, pretending she doesn't know.

Just a thought.

Jeremy Cliff Armstrong

Cordelia would need to be a raving lunatic to even think of sharing this with Cat. Sure, we know that Cat already knows and would see the reveal as laudable. But Cordelia doesn't know Cat knows... else why would she be sharing knowledge of the plot with Cat?

The problem, is that Cordelia can't know with certainty how Cat will react. The possibility that Cat would be infuriated by it and lash out cannot be dismissed. Not when the lives of tens of thousands of Proceran soldiers and the shattering of the grand alliance (and, by extension, the annihilation of Procer) might be the butcher's bill. Cordelia thinks she can handle this in-house and is actively pursuing that end. Without the knowledge that Cat already knows, it's just too big a gamble for her to tell Cat.

Unfortunately... both Cat and Cordelia are going to end up being wrong. The Drow will be betrayed and the crows will lose faith in Cat... and it will be costly all around. The shape of that story is clear to me.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ahem? When has Cat been the first one to "lash out" during negotiations, or punished truth? She's certainly walked away from negotiations when the other party was trying to jerk her around, and when faced with attack has given as good as she's gotten.

Also, she can open with a hint: "The Sisters of Night have brought me *troubling* reports of Prince Gaspard... anything you want to tell me there?" You know, play the "spooky goddesses tell me stuff, without revealing just how much she knows....

She can also mention that the Drow have already settled into the forest, and are *looking forward* to chewing on the Ratlings....

Sun Dog

My thoughts near exactly. I imagine Cat popping in and saying something like "the drow are pitching a fit, wanting to bow out of the war. Seems Rumena got the idea Procer, in particular Prince Gaspard, is preparing to betray them and take their new homeland. Before I go assure them there's nothing to it, it would sure help if I knew there was actually nothing to it."

Par

Hey everyone! Over on the PGTE Discord, we made a fan survey to get some info on the fanbase demographics out of curiosity. It's

entirely optional and anonymous, and I'd love it if you filled it out.

Link to survey: <https://forms.gle/A2yjezXvCYT6s21W7>

Link to responses so far: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScmP83cYx3ts56wr8-APh80jfx18dv9_AQM0tUrZt3mwNmv-w/viewanalytics

Survey closes on Sunday, so if you wanna take part, do it this weekend!

And as always, don't forget to vote: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Thanks in advance!

also, join us on the discord here: <https://discord.gg/jeHRFXm> or the subreddit: <https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

Frivolous

I can't see the later responses and answers. How do we view those?

nick012000

Given how powerful the Mighty are, I wonder how the Dead King's legions of zombies could possibly hold out against them. Diabolism? I wonder if the usage of Night would let them pilfer traits from demons and devils without getting corrupted.

[Javvies](#)

Sheer numbers.

Plus the undead aren't hindered by sunlight or the dawn. Or, if they are, they aren't affected anywhere near as much as the drow are.

Remember, Cat said something about the Dead King tossing fifty thousand Binds away as a distraction against the drow, just a couple chapters ago.

Also, monsters.

Plus, the Night doesn't grant the drow the inherent advantages that Light-wielders have (priests and Heroes) against the Dead King's forces.

Konstantin von Karstein

Revenants could be useful too.

Shikkarasu

Sod the devils, what kind of Night can they drain from the *Revenants*? They can steal from other races as shown by their plan to harvest the Chain of Hunger, they can steal from corpses, and even if corpses normally lose their night over

time the ones who retain their memories should keep their Secrets at least.

The northern front is bleeding numbers, but the overall strength of the army might be *growing*.

Shveiran

fearless numbers have a quality of their own, though. Plus, Cat's Everdark Adventures showed that you need a body to take Night: I bet Neshamah is capitalizing on that, trying to destroy undead and drow bodies so that the Night itself slowly weakens as well. It sounds like his style.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from what javvies says below. Nessie clearly has magic to argue directly with the Night.

suika

"And so the Black Queen so spoke to her dark legions," Akua intoned. "Vote for PGTE, my wicked servants. But don't tell Adjutant, for he gets snippy about the reminders."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .

[Liliet](#)

okay wow THIS one is good ♥

Shveiran

I regret I have only one like to give. You made my day.

Juff

Typo Thread:

leaning backing > leaning back
enjoy that, it > enjoy that; it
I'd been meant > It'd been meant as more
with as other (should be "with maybe brandon talbot as another option")
positions, she > positions; she
Amusing enough > Amusingly enough
time to bring > time in bringing
eyes begin > eyes beginning
expect is > expect it
so the Black Queen so spoke (maybe remove one "so")
deep and even > deep that even
Similar end > Similar ends
it sigil > its sigil

high to dry > high and dry
come down him > come down on him

Barthumphries

They expect is as well, Catherine.
Change is to it.

Adrian V

So first (literally writing this as i read so i don't forget to ask) the Rapacious Trobadour felt insulted and attacked Cat when snarked about him stealing songs?

And procer being procer of course, never mind everything Cat said, having that out is like asking for Malicia or someone to use it to seed discord among the alliance.

Personally i think Cat should find a way to record some of those conversations and the Drow front of the war, the first can be used as evidence and the second to show just how a bad idea it is.

danh3107

Great chapter, good way to do exposition. Now on to what's bugging me (lol)

I love Crows, I did research on corvids for three years, but I really dislike that they're being associated with night here, capital Night too. Corvids are entirely Diurnal birds, they have almost 0 nightvision and are most active when the sun is high in the sky. They also don't have talons, those are claws, they mostly use them to perch on things and walk on the ground. They aren't very sharp.

Now I know all of this literally doesn't matter, I just needed to get it off my chest. Now I'll never have to complain about it to myself ever again!

Bladesmith

Yeah, I've had some of the same thoughts. I justify it by telling myself that that is what you get when crows are imitated by goddesses who've been underground for the last few thousand years.

Wonder

I also justify it by saying this is an alternate universe, Fantasyland , something like that and not everything will be the same.

Mental Mouse

Alas, the way of the Guideverse is that Story matters more than Reality. 😊

Shikkarasu

As a fellow Corvid enthusiast I agree. Bats would make more sense; nightvision not much better, but still a nocturnal creature.

As a Mythology enthusiast, however, I'm loving Cat's whole Odin thing. Magic spear staff, Unnaturally awesome mount, ~~lost~~-eye crippled leg, and a pair of crows that grant wisdom.

Mith

I think they are crows because they are carrion eaters and clever tricksters, more than being nocturnal birds. Sve Noc is seizing power through might and trickery.

Just thinking that since all Drow are hallowed priests (all Drow are born with Night), I wonder if Sve Noc could make all drow Night be returned to Them upon death, meaning that you could only get zombies out of the corpses.

Frivolous

I wonder why many heroes are believing that Cat won't survive the war. Why is that? Wishful thinking, or something more?

Also, I wish there was less use of the double negative. Classy but so confusing especially if used so often.

ninegardens

They are probably running on story logic. Either as a Redemption story, or a heroic sacrifice- from the point of view of "Heroic" stories, Black Queen is ill placed to survive.

They might not even be thinking "Story logic" the way Black or Grey do- just looking at the situation, and looking at history and going "Oh, great dark generals seldom get to retire. That's interesting"

Zee

Been asking this myself. I think some heroes say that about Cat because of her nascent Name. We don't know if it's public knowledge, but I bet it is amongst the heroes and princes. They probably have a clue of what the Name is about and feel they can tie a story where Cat dies in it.

[Liliet](#)

Story logic yeah. I mean in Book 5 Cat herself admitted she doesn't have great odds of *not* having to make a heroic sacrifice to tie the whole thing together and ensure its success before the war is over.

ninegardens

Do you remember what chapter this was in? Or even which Arc? I'd be tempted to go check it out.

Cicero

Well, discussions about yearly harvesting of the Ratlings is certainly a way to get a Lycaonese First Prince thinking that permanent friendship with the Drow might be a good idea.

caoimhinh

It has always seemed to me like the Lycaonese would be the most welcoming to both Callow and the Drow. Many instances have confirmed it through their interactions, they respect people with backbone and are willing to fight to the bitter end against the Enemy.

Adding now that the Empire Ever Dark wishes to help against the Rattlings and even looks at it positively, would be a very good thing for the Lycaonese.

Stuart Hemming

Hell a few years of being sieged by Rattlings then being rescued by Drow raiders eager to fight and the Lycaonese will treat them like blood kin

[308924810a](#)

So one problem is that the Drow are fairly likely to raid everyone around them, including the Lycaonese and other bordering principalities.

On the other hand, while both Drow and the Dead King Want corpses out of the Procerans, the Drow don't want live children, and would be willing to give the bodies back after they've extracted the Night.

So it might be that they form a mercenary relationship with the Lycaonese, selling mercenaries against the Chain of Hunger in exchange for Night, while simultaneously having a more hostile raiding relationship with the southern principalities.

[Liliet](#)

I'll note there's clear natural borders between DK and DK's neighbours – raiding isn't as easy as crossing an arbitrary principality border.

And if the crows take Cat's advice, they'll, ah, limit that, if not ban it altogether.

Shveiran

The like could be somewhat effective, but mountains and fortresses on the passes won't. Drow climb like geckos.

Agreed on the rest though

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, this is probably one of my favorite recent chapters. And the concept of Cat manipulating the Sisters into reviving Tancred is still on the table, although I do doubt she'll take the opportunity. It'd be damnably easy for them, though.

caoimhinh

It's impossible at this point. Tancred was a fledgling Villain who was killed before his story got strong, and then was raised as an undead, and *then* was destroyed by Night sorceries wielded by Cat. Nothing can revive him. Even Angels would be hard-pressed to do it, as a resurrection doesn't just happen, it needs to have the weight of a story behind it. There are rules and conditions that apply.

That said, I agree with you that this is one of the best recent chapters.

[Burlyraven](#)

See, it amazes me that people still don't seem to realize that I'm essentially just meming at this point (at the request of others that frequent the comics). It also amazes (and this one is totally serious) me that most people that try to shut me down have weak arguments like this.

We're still getting in chapter discussions of a dead character, from an emotionally exhausted villain with the bent ears of two fledgling gods with a strong desire to exercise their power. The story is there; it's just not a happy one.

[Burlyraven](#)

*comments, not comics

caoimhinh

"I set those drifting thoughts – a sure sign I'd been going through these chores for a while – aside when Hakram flitted back in"

Don't worry Cat, that's caused by the misplaced 2-year timeskip which forces you to recollect events of the recent past each time you look at something and muse over stuff every time you meet people.

It will pass, eventually, when we are caught up with all the info we missed.

[Liliet](#)

No, I'm pretty sure that's ACTUALLY in-character, and it's also convenient for us to catch up with because Erratic is a good writer.

Like 5 events happened during those 2 years, which is entirely realistic because this war is a long and horrible slog and that's the entire point. Putting them into actual books would make for a HORRIBLE story.

And really, Cat no longer going off on random tangents mid-thought? In what world would that happen?

caoimhinh

No, it isn't.

Catherine has spent these last 11 chapters recollecting events of the past 2 years through musings that get triggered by things like meeting someone, instead of describing what's happening in the present through the narration. There's a *big* difference.

The latter is what Cat usually did in previous books (and what happens in Chapter 12, for example, with Cat describing what's happening around her), while the first is what the 2-year timeskip forces her to do in order to provide the readers with the info we are missing. It's not in Cat's character to go into flashbacks and reminiscence over everything someone has done in the past 2 years, that's only happening *in this book* because there's a gap of information that needs to be filled.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat remembered old things triggered by random shit in-universe in previous books too, we the readers just didn't get treated to it much like how we don't get treated to the narration of her going to pee.

Tailoring what you show to what the audience has to be told about is like writer 101

Frivolous

Not sure if a lot of people have noted this section:

Humans, bearing the emblem of a red lion. Magelings, surrounding the Princess Malanza. They speak into the scrying bowl, believing themselves safe behind their wards. They are not, for the Lord of Silent Steps has brought great knowledge into the Night as to treading through without tripping.

Especially in contrast with this section:

"- this talk of leaving all conquered lands to the dark elves," Prince Gaspard of Cleves snorted. "A kingdom's worth, for a paltry few thousand raiders? It is madness, Princess Rozala."

Analysis: Gaspard and probably many other people believe the might of the Empire Ever Dark can be defined by their numbers alone.

In contrast, Ivah the Lord of Silent Steps has apparently taught numerous other Firstborn how to bypass wards (at least the Proceran ones) and spy on people invisibly, giving the Empire Ever Dark matchless supernatural spies and assassins.

Could that be why Cat isn't bothered by Rozala saying that many heroes don't believe Cat will survive the war – because she is hiding the greater part of her actual strength?

Certainly Cat probably hasn't told many people (maybe not even Hakram) about Serolen, or that Sve Noc has become more powerful and experienced since her/their apotheosis, or that she's been spying on her allies.

Last but not least: Sve Noc apparently teleported their entire temple to the surface. Amazing and probably horrifying to anyone who isn't drow.

hakureireimu

It does seem like the allies know about Serolen from chapter 7.

Earl ofPurple

I don't think it was teleportation, technically. I think it was put in an extradimensional space, moved to the surface, and taken out again. Still an impressive feat, but something many Named and mages can do on a much smaller scale.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Size matters... It's one thing to stash corpses and handy items in a personal domain, but keeping entire cities and lakes in there? It's comparable to when Thief yolked Arcadia's sun... and *that* stunt could only have been made possible by riding a major story, and *then* only in Arcadia.

"Exiles we may be, but we did not abandon our cities. We brought them with us...". Those Procerans definitely need "another think coming" about the wisdom of backstabbing the people of Night.

[Liliet](#)

It's also kind of hilarious how 'fifty' is now 'few'.

(As in, thousand raiders)

Shveiran

I know right? And they all see in the dark, and several are basically Named with less story bullshit!
What kind of world does one need to live in to say something like that?

[Liliet](#)

A very convenient world that reshapes itself to fit whatever sentiment you would like to express at the time! Lots of people in that one.

Wonder

I think it was more of pocket dimensions (or is it night dimensions?) Shenanigans like how Cat said Black has many weapons in Name shadows.

Konstantin von Karstein

Let's be realistic, every member of the Grand Alliance is spying (or trying) on all the others.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, but for most of them it's a matter of trying to intercept communications and eavesdrop on meetings, and occasionally succeeding. Not listening in on a top Chosen's *pillow talk*!

[Barthumphries](#)

Bard plans to remove the White Knight temporarily so that the Black Queen is seen going after the Mirror Knight's lover and family, sundering the Alliance.

laguz24

No, the bard wants the dead king dead. This is her best opportunity to do so and her manipulations won't get far with cat around.

Insanenoodlyguy

This. Now that the truce has gotten through, infighting will only weaken a story she no longer has full control over. Oh sure, if Cat just goes full Kairos and betrays the rest at a critical moment, seemingly removing all hope, she could work with that, but there's no value in sundering the alliance over infighting. There's already at least two people on the top that would know exactly why Cat went after the Prince, which will blunt a "unite against the betrayer and then win despite all hope being lost" story. Now it's best to ride this horse. Once Nessie is gone, might be a different story, but first thing first

[308924810a](#)

What the bard really needs is a way of uniting all of the fence-sitting countries to participate in this war. Titanomachy seems to be joining in, now we just need the elves and the Chain of hunger somehow.

Shikkarasu

Anyone else low-key worried that Liliet still hasn't commented yet? At this point they're practically a part of the Practical brand.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Seen a few comments with Liliet's like on 'em. They're present and accounted for, though the lack of direct commentary is unusual. I still fondly recall insinuating that they'd end up in Cat's position due to a handful of shared traits.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, who what? 0.o

[Liliet](#)

I was late to work yesterday)=

..well, just two minutes late and the first one to come anyway, but normally I come half an hour early and have said half an hour to comment...

Also, aww thank you ^^

Frivolous

Realized this yesterday: If the Levantines ever find out that the Mirror Knight is having sex with someone?

They're going to make dirty jokes about Proceran stuffing.

The best part of it is that it works no matter what gender Christpohe is boinking with. It's Proceran stuffing either way.

[Liliet](#)

BEAUTIFUL

Wonder

Sovereign under the moonless night gave Mighty titles that allowed increased power and very potent Secrets like Lord of Silent Steps being top assassin scout spy and basically drow Adjutant , Lord of Shallow Graves(?) Can Save Noc do the same?

How powerful is the Losara Sigil compared to the rest? Is Mighty Jindrich the Battering Vanguard of Drow might a member of Losara Cabal?

I sure hope that Catherine's name have an aspect for title buffing people.

Satan

Interesting, mirror knight was that weirdo who gets stronger every day. Definitely seems like some confrontation will happen there.

Chapter 12: Contest

"The enemy's come to die on this field, my friends, for an awful prince and terrible pay. We, on the other hand, have come to die on this field for a terrible prince and awful pay. That the Heavens are on our side ought to be evident."

– Captain Thierry the Acerbic, addressing his company before the infamously bloody Battle of Motte-aux-Foins

Anticipation hung in the air like smoke.

The sigil of the Seventh General, Vesena Spear-Biter, was painted on thousands of stretches of dark cloth hanging from arms and armour and even hair: two jagged, monstrous fangs tearing at what looked like a thunderbolt of iron. Red and white set on black, it was eye-catching and when the breeze blew through the outskirts of Serolen a sea of pale teeth biting into iron stirred with it. These were not the drow from the Outer Rings I'd once fought, the dregs of the dreg-empire. No, the Vesena came armoured in iron and obsidian, bearing polished cuirasses and helmets shaped like

angled bat wings. Tough *tezkuze* leather, those massive hard-skinned blind lizards who could eat even Mighty should they prove reckless, had been fashioned into trousers and long-sleeved vests touched by tinkling bracelets and sculpted greaves of stone or dull iron. There was an order to this host of the Firstborn, unlike in most of their kind, for in the days of the old Empire Ever Dark the Mighty Vesena Spear-Biter had been known as the 'Relentless General Whose Victories Flow Like A River'.

The Vesena were not so much a sigil as they were the last field army of the ancient Empire Ever Dark, kept standing through the ages by sheer dint of the Spear-Biter's brutal murder of all rivals and naysayers. Time had taken its toll, and warriors now stood where once soldiers had, but there was no closer among the Firstborn to a professional army than the Vesena Sigil. It had occupied the whole of the city of Great Noglof, before leaving with the Exodus, and made the entire city into a bustling army camp – kept going by the plunder in Night and gifts and food that was brought back by the fighting drow of the sigil after every campaign. Even now, a discerning eye could make out what had been the components of a field army simply from the way the warriors were equipped.

First came long stretches of skirmishers, bearing hard bucklers of iron painted with their sigil while long barbed javelins hung from their backs and short blades were kept at their hips. Dzulu, most of them, but the Vesena were one of the rare sigils that *taught* Secrets to their own and so they all shared a deadly blackflame trick that allowed them to have quite the sting to them. Behind them came hunters, those that would have been infantry regulars in olden days. These stood in companies of nine times nine each led by the least of the Mighty, an ispe, and were armed as I had only ever seen the Watch be armed: though they bore long swords of Night-forged steel on the flanks, they also held horn bows. Short, stout and curved these little wonders were no match for a good Deoraithe longbow but they fired at surprising range – regular arrows would be next to useless against the dead, of course, so the Vesena had adapted by infusing obsidian arrowheads with Night in a way that made them burst on impact.

At heart of the army stood the finest warriors of the Vesena, three thousand hulking towering shapes whose shells of iron-joined obsidian left no opening at all from head to toe. The Ebonclad were a cabal of their own within the Vesena, each and everyone a jawor that drew on Night to breathe and see through the sealed armour and wield their large stone-and-steel maces. As another exotic addition, the Vesena Sigil also boasted no less than ten of the hulking things called *zanikzen*, the famed annihilation-engines that Mighty Ysengral had gone to war nine times to steal only to be driven back every time. House-sized and made entirely of bone and onyx, they looked like two-wheeled

carts holding up the fused bones of a hundred ancient drow whose wretched half-seen silhouettes ended up pointing their hands towards the horizon and forming a gaping maw filled with spear-like spikes of onyx. As field siege engines I deemed to be inferior to what the Empire and Callow used, but they'd been murderously proficient at defending tunnels.

And in the very middle of the army, seated atop a writhing living throne made of once-Mighty foes stripped of Night so thoroughly they became nisi, Mighty Vesena the Spear-Biter waited. Though it would have been as ravaged by age as Rumena in appearance, being its senior, the long stripe scars going down its face made it impossible to tell what it might once have looked like. It wore an armoured cuirass of obsidian over flowing pale cloth, needles of bone woven into its pale long hair to keep it in an elaborate bun. It claimed for only a weapon a long-handled axe – so long as to be half as tall as they – whose head was steel so deeply imbued with Night it flickered around it like smoke. Around it an honour guard of rylleh stood, clad in bright colours, but the lesser Mighty had been spread among the host as commanders of dzulu. The Sisters had once told me that most titles among the Mighty had once been military ranks in the Empire Ever Dark, for the soldiers had been among the first to thrive in the nights after the end of the Twilight Sages, and the Vesena in a way kept closest that that old truth.

There were twenty thousand, all in all: but a fifth of the might of the Vesena Sigil, but its sharpest fangs were all bared here, spread amongst the trees. Facing them was only deep darkness and the mists of the Gloom. Open grounds for six hundred feet after the end of the forest, which struck me as having been the Dead King's picked battlefield: the dead fared poorly in the woods. Against, drow, anyway.

"They haven't even dug ditches," I frowned. "Sloppy. Ysengral would have done better."

Mighty Ysengral, the Cradle of Steel, had distinguished themselves to my eye as the finest of the Firstborn generals even if they were towards the lower end of the Ten Generals when it came to raw power. Considering it was debatable where Rumena would rank second or third among them, though, that was still nothing to sneer at.

"Ysengral was defending the Wilting March from another breakthrough," Komena said, and I almost shivered.

Standing to my left, eyes silver-blue and form little more than flickering shadow, the image of what had once been a mortal woman was sharing the sights with me. Before I took my eye off her, every time I glimpsed a long-fanged skull beneath the shadows that was always gone if I tried to find it. There was a twang of something like iron and blood to her voice, something I could not

help but taste against the roof of my mouth. Komena wore armour, and a sword at her hip. She was the Youngest Night.

"We did not foresee the Hidden Horror until it was edging into the Gloom," Andronike said, her voice coming from my right.

Her eyes, too, burned pale blue. But over her face flickered the shape of the iron mask she had once worn as one of the Twilight Sages, and the thick billowing cloak she had decked herself in almost seemed like dark-feathered wings whenever she moved. There were strings twined among her fingers, which she ever twined. The affect to her words was subtler, like a drink thought harmless until your tongue was felt to be numb. She was the Oldest Night.

"You didn't get time to dig in," I put together. "Vesena was the closest?"

"Kurosiv," Komena replied, shaking her head. "But its horde was spread out. Vesena was ready for war."

"He's able to slip past your scouts with entire armies now," I whispered.

Shit. If they could only tell that the Dead King was attacking when he was beginning to breach the Gloom, then that gave them what – half a day to mobilize at most? They'd either have to permanently garrison a significant portion of their forces to defend all the southern stretches of Serolen, which would cripple their ability raid into Keter's territory, or start breaking through whatever means he used to obscure the movements of his armies on this front. I would have pursued the matter in conversation, but was robbed of the opportunity: the battle was beginning. It started with a sound like the whistle of a falling arrow, though utterly deafening. Then flashes of blinding light scythed through the mist in five places, like a titan's raking claws, and for a moment the passage between Keter and Serolen was forced open by the sorceries of the Dead King. In that heartbeat, long ladders of steel with spiked ends fell through the open space and buried deep in the ground, the runes carved on the glowing bright. Like a steel road, one meant to keep the gap open.

"Second through sixth," Mighty Vesena said, voice ringing out. "Wail."

The Crows and I were standing by its side and so we'd seen its eyes had not blinked, not even when the light had been at its brightest. Five of the massive *zanikzen* lit up, thousands of glyphs in Crepuscular craved into the bones unveiled, and as crews attended to the large engines I saw heat waft of the surface and half the body of a *nisi* too close to the maw turn to ash. Heat shimmered between the onyx spikes, near-invisible lances of impossibly hot air shooting out and lashing out at the

ladders in a lazy, low arc. The needles went abruptly still afterwards, forcing out a strange sound like a hundred inhuman wails. The first to get hit dented, and its front melted like summer snow, but the dead had moved quick enough to contest three of the remaining four. Ghouls who'd moved forward like lightning threw themselves in the way, embracing annihilation to curb the blow, and though one of the lances tore through and broke a ladder's end in a spray of earth the other two held. The dead had three beachheads. Further down the line, another five bursts of light signaled that Keter was broadening its offensive.

"Two by breach," Mighty Vesena ordered.

Even as the drow annihilation-engines began hammering at the fresh beachheads, the Vesena Sigil began its advance without needing to be told.

"They're impressively disciplined, for a sigil," I admitted, eyes remaining on the battle.

"Vesena made of the old western army regulation a set of holy rites," Komena told me, sounding fond. "All who break them are said to have broken faith with the sigil and are free to be slain."

I'd gathered that Vesena Spear-Biter was a darling of hers, which didn't surprise me all that much. Komena did tend to favour the old warhorses who'd survived the collapse of the Empire Ever Dark.

The ever-relentless dead had wasted no time getting through their protection for the three ladders that'd landed: shield-soldiers the size of ogres in heavy plate, protecting in a ring the more vulnerable mages putting up translucent shields of sorcery preventing repeating fire from the engines from getting through. With the second wave, if Keter's usual northern doctrine held, would come another circle of corpse-mages to attempt to raise rough but swiftly functional wards that'd make it hard work dislodging the dead from that position. The Firstborn were well aware of that, of course. Even as the first rank of a shield wall formed beyond the beachheads the drow skirmishers finished closing in the distance. Javelins flew whistling, the drow never breaking stride or slowing as they threw, the barbed ends hitting the shields of the dead with dull thumps before exploding in black flames of Night.

The shield walls broke, shattered like overripe fruits as the the first line of skirmishers unsheathed swords and wading into close combat. The lines behind disrupted the gathering dead with further throws, enabling the nimble drow to slip through the gaps in the defences of the dead. Mighty Vesena had been, I gathered, one of the few Firstborn generals to win victories against the dwarves during the war that broke the Empire Ever Dark. It had

typically won those victories by hitting the heavy-armoured but slow-moving dwarven armies with crippling blows while they were in movement, never allowing them to deploy the siege engines and harsh sorceries that'd shattered so many drow armies. Traces of that mindset could still be seen here I decided as I watched the drow skirmishers of what the expanding assault of the Dead King had made the right wing slink their way deeper behind the lines of Keter.

Their objective here was clear: hitting the dead mages putting up shields before a second wave could set up wards, then prying away the Dead King's breaches from him one after another. It was a much more aggressive defence than Ysengral was prone to waging, or even the other general I was most familiar with: Radosa. The Hushing Dread actually preferred letting the greater strength of the dead past the Gloom before striking at the weakened defences of the breaches, picking off the enemies at its leisure within the forest. Its battles lasted twice as long as everyone else's, but then it also counted about a third of the casualties most the time.

"He's fought Vesena before," I grimaced. "And no one else uses the blackflame skirmishers. If you use the same tricks against the Hidden Horror too many times..."

In the distance another set of blinding lights shone. And again. And again. *You're going to run out of skirmishers before he runs out of cabals capable of making those, Vesena*, I grimaced. And I would give the Spear-Biter its due, the first three breaches the Dead King had forced through were swept back. The skirmishers were just a little too slow, a flow of reinforcing armoured Binds pulling them down and slaughtering them to the last, but, a second wave of longsword bearing warriors carved their way to the mages before the second wave could put up wards, helped through by the focused arrow-fire of their brethren. They slipped into shadow and danced around the bone-giants, artists at their work, but what was three beachheads when another ten had just dropped in the span it took to clear them? The right flank had gone quiet, but the wailing of the *zanikzen* was the herald of strife spreading to the left and the centre. The Vesena redeployed with impressive swiftness, as a well-oiled machine, but this time when the skirmishers hit the first wave of beachheads they found they were expected.

Through the black flames leapt out slender, almost insect-like silhouettes.

"Hexenghouls," I whispered.

Shit, Neshamah really wasn't pulling punches here. Those nasty little things weren't like most ghouls: swift and passingly intelligent in a way that allowed them serve as both harassers and a sort of replacement for the Dead King's general lack of

cavalry. No, these were almost as smart as people. Hexenghoul, named by the Lycaonese, were good at two things only: killing, and disrupting magic by their mere presence. They had hardened bronze rods instead of bones, enchanted in a way that Masego told me destabilized the structure of spell formulas when they got close enough. Those vicious beasts were the reason Lycaonese mages were relatively rare while as a people they had much reason to keep magical bloodlines going. Every year, scaling through passes and mountains, those monsters made it into the lowlands and went *hunting*. Tonight, deployed in numbers I'd rarely before seen, they went through the skirmishers like a sickle through wheat. The few dzulu who were quick enough to call on Night found they couldn't focus it properly and were massacred within moments.

Night was not sorcery, but evidently the Dead King had been adjusting what he ordered carved onto those bronze rods.

The second wave of longswords drove them back, even if they destroyed but a handful, but by the time the hexenghoul retreated behind them stood a heavy shield wall of skeletons. Too heavy to punch through in time: valiantly the warriors threw themselves against it, but Neshamah's second wave of mages came through. Wards came up and then, with a position finally secure, the dead began unleashing their real offensives. Beorns tumbled through, carelessly stamping through the skeletons, and spat out the corpses they held within them in the middle of drow ranks. Dzulu could do nothing against the likes of those, much less the even more heavily armoured 'tusks'. Those were a recent addition to Keter's arsenal, rarely seen on my front: catapult-sized necromantic constructs shaped rather like boards, unlike many of the Hidden Horror's creations they held within then no lesser dead. They were instead filled with *rocks*, and in front of them jagged tusks of steel were meant to make them into moving battering rams designed to crack open shield walls.

Going against drow foot? They trampled straight through those lines like they weren't even there.

"Now," I murmured, "for the tug-of-war."

With a slew of fresh casualties, Night and necromancy came out. Even as the officers-Mighty destroyed the war-constructs or died trying, the mage cadres of Keter competed with drow as to whether corpses would get up as undead or be emptied of Night first. The undead drow could not use Night, but they *would* explode with what they'd held when their corpses were shattered. It wreaked havoc on the attempt to keep a battle line going to have your own dead blow up on you when you drove them back. Not that there was much of a battle line: at best it could be said that there was a line where the Vesena and the dead met. And where half a hundred Firstborn must have died with every passing beat. Behind it was an ugly chaos of Mighty and war-constructs tangling in duels that

paid no heed to the warriors around them. For all that Vesena Spear-Biter had mimicked the ways of the old armies of the Empire Ever Dark, it was only that: a mimicry. The Mighty were not true officers, they were chieftains who ceased paying mind to their own companies the moment there was a great foe for them to fight.

"Using the Mighty as construct-killers instead of officers works better," I noted, brow creasing at the sight. "If the Spear-Biter sent packs of pravnat and jawor after the beorns and the tusks they could be put down much quicker. Instead they keep running into isolated ispe and pravnat and overwhelming them."

Vesena's strategy being a success had depended on breaking through the initial defence of the breaches and shutting them down before casualties could mount, but that'd failed. Now the attempt by its sigil to push through the dead was turning into the sort of meat grinder that could utterly destroy an army if a general got stubborn. With the centre and the left wing taking such a beating, the Vesena were forced to thin their right flank to reinforce the lines that'd been devastated by constructs. And even then, the remaining skirmishers were now pointless going around through the woods in a far-flung circle that might allow them to eventually flank the left wing of the dead but practically speaking would just take them out of the battle for the rest of its span. Mistake, that. They'd have been more useful kept anchoring the thinning right flank in my opinion.

"The Vesena are inflicting great losses on the dead," Andronike replied.

"Sure," I dismissed. "Those officer-Mighty are pure slaughter against Keter's Bones and Binds. No denying that."

It was hard to, when all it took was for even an ispe, the lowest of the Mighty, to reach the shield wall of the dead to contemptuously crack it open.

"And I don't mean to dismiss what's being achieved here," I continued. "At this point Mighty Vesena had lost what, three or four thousand?"

"Closer to four," Komena told me.

"And it's cost the Dead King more than three score of his finest war-constructs, on top of at least thrice that in foot," I said. "The problem here is that while Vesena's sigil is killing the enemy, it's not doing it in a way that wins the battle."

I pointed at the worst of the slaughter, where the lines were going back and forth.

"They've been gaining and losing the same thirty feet since the battle started in earnest," I pointed out. "Maybe this battle can

be won, at this exchange rate of lives for undead, but it'd be pissing away the war to keep fighting it this way. Packs of Mighty striking together allows for decisive blows in a way spreading them out cannot."

"General Rumena said much the same," Andronike said. "Though it did mention that Vesena's methods would function significantly better when on the offensive instead."

I narrowed my eyes. Yeah, I could maybe see that. As an offensive army they'd be smashing through whatever forces the Dead King could put in their way, which tended to be light on war-constructs, and if they ran into a few of those then the same rylleh that'd yet to move so much as an inch would be able to handle them.

"Might be," I muttered.

The battle was going badly for the Vesena, even a fool could have seen it, but to the Spear-Biter it must seem like it could still be turned around. The *zanikzen* had polished off every breach they could, leaving only the four whose wards had been raised, so they began pounding at the dead instead. Every burst of burning heat swatted down entire companies, and the crews prudently aimed them far behind the fighting so there'd be no risk of hitting their own. They wouldn't be able to handle that rate of fire for long, not without risking the engines blowing up, but then they'd didn't really need to. The superbly aimed hits slackened the pressure of the dead against the drow and, sensing an opening, Mighty Vesena sent in its finest. The Ebonclad advanced, flowing forward silently as if they were gliding over the ground. Signals went up in the sky, woven in Night, and a corridor was opened for them to strike cleanly at the dead. The sight of it was... I let out a sharp breath, genuinely impressed. It was like watching a hammer strike at an egg: clad in ebony armours sealed by melted iron, the Ebonclad were untouchable to the dead. Their large war maces, on the other hands, released waves of Night whenever they struck and so pulped the dead straight through their armour.

The tusks and beorns that'd not been handled were struck at in groups of then, methodically and cleanly if with little regard to the collateral damage against the dzulu. That armour did not seem to hinder them sinking into pools of shadows, and they even seemed to have greater control over the trick than most: they sometimes slunk up the beasts and let only the upper half of their body emerge from the shadow, striking at the necromantic constructs with impunity.

"Impressed?" Komena asked.

"They're exceptional," I acknowledged. "But Vesena just got played the fool."

It'd been baited into committing its finest troops before Keter slapped its last cards on the table.

"Oh?" Andronike hummed.

This battle had already taken place, so they knew what had taken place while I was left to guess. But while Akua might have pointed out to me that the Dead King had grown to learn my tricks, the opposite was true as well.

"We haven't seen Revenants yet," I said. "When we do, I wager things will swiftly proceed downhill."

The Ebonclad smashed their way through the dead on two of the breaches and began making serious assaults on two of the warded beachheads, but I bade my time and counted up to seventeen before my cynicism was 'rewarded'.

Like great raking claws, five lights burned again where the battle had begun. On the right flank that'd been so weakened reinforcing the others.

"Vesena just lost this battle," I grimly said.

Though the *zanikzen* were on the edge of breaking apart, they still fired unflinching at the fresh breaches. Two per breach, as Mighty Vesena had early ordered. Or so they attempted. Three of the annihilation-engines went up in storms of ashen heat, killing the crews instantly, and one aborted its shot. Still, every breach received a direct shot just as the rune-inscribed ladders came down and one even received two. That one broke. The other four held, protected by what looked like swarms of ghouls nailed to the ends as a grisly shield. With the army already too committed down the line, it would have been a disaster to try to redeploy. So instead Mighty Vesena sent into the breaches what few regulars it had left, and with them sent its hardest hitters: it sent out rylleh. Unfortunately, the Dead King had picked his timing exquisitely. Before the rylleh were halfway there, Revenants strode out of the warded breaches and tore into the Ebonclad. Half of the rylleh had to be recalled, which made a mess of things.

"So that's where the Stitcher went," I muttered.

A castle-sized abomination made from the bodies of half a dozen horrors put together – the scales and bones of a dragon, what looked like the heads of at least three sea snakes, the heavy fur and leather of rattling Ancient Ones – was butchering its way through the Ebonclad, even swatted down a rylleh that got too close. The Revenant was inside, and damnably hard to put down. We hadn't seen her in a year, so I'd hoped the Blade of Mercy had damaged her beyond use in their last tangle, but it seemed not. Hanno was convinced she'd been a healer before the Hidden Horror

got his hands on her, which somehow made it all even more horrifying. Even as I watched, Mighty Vesena tried to stabilize the situation by firing its remaining annihilation-engines directly into the Revenants, but that caught only one and killed a few hundred of the Ebonclad in the exchange. Bad trade, the Seventh General was losing its cool.

Even worse the rylleh who reached the fresh beachheads were not, to their surprise and mine, greeted by swarms of ghouls or skeletons. Awaiting them were dead mages and large pots of metal, heated and filled with two things: necromantic sorcery and steel scraps. Like sharpeners they blew, the cursed metals ignoring most defenses that could be put up by Night, and I winced when I saw not one but three rylleh go down. They got up shortly, of course: rylleh were harder to kill than that, and even if one had actually died that probably wouldn't have kept drow of that tier out of the battle for long. But the corpse-mages were bearing strange metal staffs, and though I could see no visible mark of sorcery being employed the three rylleh that'd been struck down... stayed down.

"Weeping Heavens," I murmured. "Has he found a way to shut down the Night?"

"Not quite," Andronike said, voice grown cold. "Those staffs were made of an alloy of tin and antimony, and strangely enchanted – they did not disrupt Night, or end it, which we could have fought. They directed it away from our warriors, down into the earth."

And moments later, petty ghouls they would otherwise have been able to slaughter by the hundreds began tearing into the downed rylleh. They devoured their flesh so that they would never recover from that death. Gods, I fucking hated fighting the Dead King. There was always another nasty trick just waiting to be unveiled. Binds began pouring of the breaches, forming up under arrow fire by the increasingly outnumbered and outflanked Vesena. This was going to turn from a defeat into a disaster, if something wasn't done soon, and I wasn't the only one to see it.

The Seventh General, Vesena Spear-Biter, took the field personally.

I did not even seen them move until they were standing before the Stitcher, long axe resting against the shoulder.

"Sa vrede?" Mighty Vesena asked of the Revenant.

Are you worthy? I shivered to hear my words spoken by one of the ancient monsters of the Firstborn, taken as writ of faith. Whether in fear or thrill – or perhaps both – I could not be certain. Vesena received no answer, and as the stitched up necks and heads of sea snakes struck out at it the Seventh General

vanished into shadows and emerged atop the monster. The axe came down, head biting into the dragon scales, and inside the beast a sea of Night cut through. Split in two, the Stitcher's monster poured out blood, guts and strange liquids of many colours. Inside a dead young woman screamed and the corpses of the drow began gathering to her, forming another shell, but Mighty Vesena landed before the Revenant and stood knee-deep in guts and blood. Its shoulder twitched, once, twice and then it proved why it had earned the sobriquet of *Spear-Biter*. I'd thought it a reference to mere spears, once, but that was not the case. Vesena had once warred against an ancient sigil-holder that'd unearthed and partially repaired one of the ancient wonders of the Empire Ever Dark, a great tower of arcane-forged steel that gathered lightning into itself and spewed it in a constant storm around itself. The steel walls had been thirty feet deep, surrounded by constant death, and the way the tower jutted out from a deep pit in the Inner Ring had led Firstborn to call it the Spear.

Night pouring out of it as it twitched, Mighty Vesena screamed in pain and its mouth unhinged, revealing a bestial maw as large as the sigil-holder itself had been. Bat-like wings tore out of its back, and even as the Stitcher tried to form a grisly homunculus of drow corpses roiling with Night the horrid creature Vesena had turned itself onto unhinged its great jaw even further and revealed glinting fangs – before biting straight through the corpses and Revenant, as it once had through thirty feet of solid steel, and swallowed the Stitcher and a bloody swath of her work whole.

Officers began calling for a retreat, heeding some unseen order, and the Vesena obeyed in largely good order. Their sigil-holder continued to sow destruction left and right, covering the retreat along with the remaining rylleh, and I slowly breathed out.

"After?" I asked.

"They pulled back and Kurosiv drowned the invaders in violence, sweeping them back to the breaches, then broke the wards personally," Andronike said, her voice betraying little of her opinion of that Mighty.

Mighty Kurosiv the All-Knowing, the Second General. It rarely bothered with deeper tactics than throwing warriors at the enemy but given the absurd amount of those within its sigil that tended to work regardless. I found the way it benefited from the deaths of its own and so encouraged them to be rather disgusting, and I suspected the Sisters felt rather the same for different reasons: Kurosiv had found a way to grow fat as a parasite nestled in the heart of the Night, exploiting the system they had built as no one else had before or since. Rumena had allegedly taken it as enough of a threat it'd exterminated its first five sigils, earning the epithet of Tomb-maker in the process, but it was

telling that in the end it was not Kurosiv that'd settled in the Outer Rings.

"Three other battles were fought that very same night, Queen of Lost and Found," Komena said.

The images flickered quickly through my mind, almost a memory shared but not quite.

Ysengral the Cradle of Steel, the Eighth General: a lipless grin and tittering laughter hiding a mind like a steel trap. And traps did it wield, mazes and madness and traps behind which stood soldiers in steel and machine of war that worked on and fed of and spat out Night. Endless bands of dead slipping through the Gloom, testing the defences day and night.

Ishabog the Adversary, the Fourth General: ever-moving, ever-restless, a spear and song on the lip and a glint in its eye. Only Mighty may have the right to call themselves of the Ishabog, and mighty was their calling: always one against ten, ten against a hundred, a hundred against a thousand. Vicious creatures made of dead flesh hunting through darkened woods in packs, hunted in turn.

Radhoste the Dreamer, the Sixth General: a bed of stone like a sepulcher, carried by rigid in dread. Eyes closed but seeing, a mind that spans miles and sifts through the sleeping and the dead. A hundred battles fought with the Enemy like a fencer on the field, back and forth ever going for the throat as a thousand die with every hour.

All happening, all being fought.

"Remind Cordelia Hasenbach that she will be fighting *those* battles as well, if she does not leash her lackeys," Komena hissed in my ear.

And in the heartbeat that followed, they were gone. Dawn shyly peeked through the flaps of my tent, and I eyed my shaking hands before sighing.

So much for getting a good night's sleep before leaving.

Esryok

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[tkjarrah](#)

surely not EVERYBODY was kung-fu nighting

Exec

But those Mighty were fast as lightning.

MagnaMalusLupus

And Cat was amazed by their expert timing.

Lokesh Chandak

And the spear biter was expertly biting

NerfContessa

Vistas more than a little bit frightening...

caoimhinh

And the future is a little bit frightening.

[vwyx](#)

But Rhadoste was reclining.

sygerrik

Fuck yeah, more Drow being badassess. Loving how much we're getting characterization on these folks, they feel like none other in this story.

naturalnuke

I have so fucking missed these epic scenes, there's such history here as well and I LOVE IT!

Par

Hey everyone! The last couple of chapters I posted about a survey. The survey is now closed, and I'm working on writing up the results in a report. Expect that on the discord server and the subreddit soon, and in the comments here.

Meanwhile, you guys can look at the data here.

Link to responses: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/>

1FAIpQLScmP83cYx3ts56wr8-APh80jfx18dv9_AQM0tUrZt3mwNmV-w/viewanalytics

And as always, don't forget to vote: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Thanks in advance!

also, join us on the discord here: <https://discord.gg/jeHRFXm> or the subreddit: <https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

OneTwoThree

The Tiste Andii...I mean, the Drow are awesome!

Even ignoring plot, that was sheer brilliant writing... The words conveying perfectly the ebb and flow of the battle and hammering in just how much horror we haven't seen and how it still is being met.

superkeaton

Lovely look at the Empire Ever-dark at war, and just as horrifying as I'd expected.

[Javvies](#)

Shitballs. The Dead King is adapting to the drow way too much. That bodes poorly for the long term outlook on the drow front. Especially since I don't think the undead are useful as sources of Night.

And yeah ... that's not something the Procerans want to be fighting. Either side of that battle.

Frivolous

Undead do serve as sources of Night. Link here:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/09/07/chapter-53-gloom/>

Quote here:

"Killing undead," I said. "Would it also grow the Night?"

The drow paled.

"Speak not of the Hidden Horror," Ivah whispered. "For its crown is dawn, and that pale light is the end of all things. Only the mad would enter the eye of the Host of Death."

"It does, doesn't it," I said. "The necromancy that keeps its army walking, you can claim it for the Night."

"I say no more," Ivah insisted. "It sees all. It hears all."

Analysis: Therefore the reason why the drow don't drain Night from the destroyed undead of the DK must be because they aren't given the opportunity to. They have to flee the battlefield or something.

Thanatoss

No, draining Dead King's necromancy for Night would give HIM a degree of influence over Night and Sve Noc don't want that at any cost.

Shveiran

...source?

Thanatoss

That source above. It is literally said there.

erebus42

Godsdamn. The goblins may be the most fun of the Guide's races but the drow are definitely my favorite.

Juff

Typo Thread:

into a bustling (extra space)
them.Behind (missing space)
At heart of > At the heart of
I deemed to be > I deemed them to be
long stripe scars > long striped scars
claimed for only a weapon > claimed for a weapon only
but the lesser Mighty had been spread among the host as
commanders of dzulu. (stated already, so it's a bit repetitive)
all: but a fifth of the might of the Vesena Sigil, > all – but a
fifth of the might of the Vesena Sigil – (also consider rewording
"but" so it's not repeated)
ditches," > ditches."
where Rumena > whether Rumena
ability raid > ability to raid
craved > carved
waft of > waft off
them serve > them to serve
within then > within them
groups of then > groups of ten
time an counted > time and counted
itself onto > itself into
madness and traps (maybe remove traps here)
machine of war > machines of war

fed of and > fed off and
carried by rigid in dread (missing word here)
back and forth ever > back and forth, ever

Burlyraven

Now **this** is Evil v Evil. I'm not even going to meme about resurrection on this one; there was nothing but death here.

Frivolous

I'm guessing Kurosiv the All-Knowing has the power to automatically drain NIGT from anyone in its sigil who dies.

I'm also guessing Kurosiv's sigil has the most number of children, because it must have its followers breed constantly to replenish its numbers.

Radhoste the Dreamer is interesting. The power of near-omniscience in a wide radius around its body, I guess, and mass telepathy with its followers.

In other news: I dearly hope Robber gets some Night in his system soon. I really want Mighty Robber.

samshadar

I wonder if Robber's not actually achieved a Name by now and just... Slipped through

samshadar

* being recognized and recruited as such, that ks

Liliet

Probably not.

Walter

He doesn't Rob though. Like, Names stem from roles. Vivienne lost Thief when she stopped stealing. Amadeus lost Black Knight when he ducked the White Knight's challenge. If Robber wants to become his namesake he'd need to, minimum, quit his day job of being a soldier and start making his living by stealing stuff.

caoimhinh

While I agree with you that he doesn't have a Name, I must point out that Robber is, in fact, a robber. Both as a hobby and in his service to Catherine.

It has been said since the early chapters that he sneaked around and robbed people in Praes and Callow, his job as Special Tribune consisted mostly of raiding, ambushing and sabotaging operations.

And his cohort's motto is "Kill them, take their stuff", so... yeah, he *is* a robber, and an infamous one at that.

[Liliet](#)

We actually specifically have WoG that Robber is not enough of a robber to have that as a Name, as of Book 2 or 3 I think.

Razorfloss razor

This right here is why the dead king is fucking horrifying. Its one thing to be a necromancer but it is another thing entirely to be a necromancer that has lived so long to have seen everything and prepared for it.

danh3107

I'm not going to lie, this whole chapter while very cool and fun to read left me a bit, I dunno hollow feeling. The previous book spent chapters developing how badass and cool Rumena is, then showed us. These other 9 generals just feel like generic anime bosses that we're told are just as cool and badass, and they came out of thin air too with no forewarning. I guess this serves as that but the build up isn't really there.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, this isn't exactly the main plot. This is a glimpse of what is going on elsewhere out there. There's no buildup because it doesn't really concern Catherine and her front, except as a factor in what she can and cannot allow to happen.

Letouriste

Well, we knew what we have seen of the drows until then were merely the outer ring. a part of it actually. Make sense rumena is not the only one special among drows. I assume we will have more development for them later on. EE put this chapter right there because he could not delay it: relevant in the next arc.

Hardcore Heathen

This was an interesting chapter. There's a lot of cool imagery and moments. The battle itself was really cool, and all of the Drow Generals have interesting legends. But...

It falls flat. I don't feel like any of it properly hits home. We've introduced five (of ten!) new Generals here. It's happened

cold, and I have no recollection of the existence of any of these characters ever being mentioned before. So it's very jarring when you effectively conjure, from nowhere, *ten* characters and tell me that they're all on the level of Rumena. Rumena, who we spent numerous scenes building up, who is a figure of legend and renown, the military leader of the Firstborn (and their representative to the Grand Alliance). And apparently he's actually not even as strong as these new characters? To the point that his badass sobriquet 'Tomb-Maker' was earned in the process of *failing* to kill one of them?

Even separated from that, the introduction of Vesena's legend was underwhelming. I don't have a very good picture of what the Spear looked like, or why it was important, or who it belonged to. The description of the legend isn't written in a particularly stirring manner either; it lacks the poeticism that carries most of Guide's great moments. Compare it to the introduction of the Sixth Legion's cognomen, Ironsides, in Book One.

You're also trying to establish that these Generals are ultra-badasses and the cream of the Empire Ever Dark in the same scene that you have them job to an undead army that isn't personally led/accompanied by anyone we've ever heard of, which is not a recipe for success.

Finally, it's just... very strange to introduce new important characters at this point in the story. We're on (theoretically) the last Book of Practical Guide. All the pieces are supposed to already be in place, and I'm genuinely unsure what is gained by introducing this new degree of complexity. Lord of the Rings doesn't introduce the Rohirrim in Return of the King, though maybe the Nazgul are a better example, considering Cat's allegiance to Below.

I just really feel like every expository element of this chapter was a misstep.

[Liliet](#)

They're not new characters. They're like gnomes, in that we learn they exist just to get a sense of scale for how badly things can go if the equilibrium is broken, but they aren't going to actually be a part of the plot. We're not supposed to care.

Also, I think they were only specified to be above Rumena in sheer power, not in strategic skill. They definitely don't get as much political influence.

caoimhinh


There was a sentence there that said Rumena would be around 2nd or 3rd of the Generals if it were to be among their group

(it has a special position outside their ranks, as commander of the Southern Expedition).

Though I have always wondered what Rumena was doing living in the Outer Ring if it was so strong and ancient, plus being called "Komena's favorite General".
It's a bit weird.

[Liliet](#)

It was specifically in terms of raw Night power iirc.

And yeah, I do want to know more about, like, ALLLLL of that


hhesselmann

Maybe it'd be a good idea to insert a paragraph where Cat lays out her considerations of rumena, kindrich, ivah and herself in relation to these, to us readers, newly introduced generals in terms of power, influence and capabilities. Surely this was a topic Cat has thought about in depth. Maybe talked about with others, their perspective and derisive/respectful/sarcastic/calculating might help readers to regain a feeling of coherence. (is that the right word?)

Personally I, while feeling a slight disconnect from this (to me) issue, loved this chapter and will now reread it gladly to further digest the new information. (I'm slow like that^^)

Thank you author for another wonderful chapter.

Shveiran

We need an idea of what is happening on the other fronts of the war, or we'll end up at Keter's doors and wonder "wait, what were all these other people doing back then?"

The Empire Ever Dark has a lot of monsters, empowered by a lower-g goddesses, and several old strategists to lead its assault. It is fighting Keter on their own front and it is failing to win. Keter has ways to deal with Night, and is learning all their best tricks.

This information is what we need.

The flashy battle is a bonus, the legend is gravy for those like me that like that kind of stuff: the point is for the readers to get a glimpse of the war farther north, not to grow attached to the single generals.

We just need to know they are around, otherwise how is it possible that the Dead King can handle all these Named but doesn't prevail against the drows?

Mith

To me it's not as bad, because you had the encounter with the Longstrider Cabal, and a show of how Rumera had little concerns with walking among them even if those others displayed power that it did not. That was Cat disturbing the surface of what is now brought forth.

Thoughts:

Do the Sisters get all secrets of the Drow such that they know how the All Knowing has achieved it's power? I am wondering if drow Night is lost or is it is ceded to the Sisters if not claimed by another.

TeK

Sisters ARE the Night, all of it. And notion of Kurosiv is a simple one. I wondered back in the Everdark arc why noone tried to exploit a breeding loophole for a potentially unlimited power, and now I know that someone did. That is why Sisters view him as a parasite, this is why Rumena tried to kill him. I suspect he has a Secret that infuses part of his Night in others, and claims it as his own should they die. That means that his hordes are not just a convenient breeding fodder which provide an infinite amount of Night as long as food is had, they double as a savepoints for him. That is, unless every single drow he invested in had been killed, he will live on, his Night always coming back to him.

KageLupus

I'm with Liliet on this one. The new Generals don't feel like fully fleshed out characters because they aren't. What they are really doing is driving home a couple of important points, without having a direct impact on the main story with Cat.

1. Cat didn't really get that much of a view of the Drow in the last book. What we saw was the very dregs of their society and none of the VIPs other than Rumena. Since then there was a timeskip where Cat learned things that we didn't, and this chapter shows some of that.

2. The Drow are kind of bad at fighting. They have some very heavy hitters in their ranks, but this chapter really drives home why they didn't fight the Dead King earlier. Their tactics aren't much better than throwing bodies at the problem and fighting that kind of attrition war against Keter is a losing prospect. Even their "generals" are kind of crap at using tactics, as Cat points out during her commentary.

3. Fighting the Dead King sucks. This was established in previous interludes, but now that the war is in full swing this chapter helps to reinforce just how bad it is. Go back and read about the Stitcher revenant again. "A castle-sized abomination made from the bodies of half a dozen horrors..." The fact that DK

has something like that in his back pocket is absolutely horrifying. The fact that the Drow were able to take care of it instead of it rolling over an army in Procer crystalizes just how badly the Alliance needs to keep the Drow happy and in the war.

4. This is a stretch, but I feel like this chapter shows Sve Noc having a subtle influence on Cat's mind. Cat gets much more flowery in general when thinking about the Drow but this chapter she sounded like nearly poetic when talking about the different Generals. Considering that Sve Noc was inside of her mind showing her a high-def recording of the first fight and then flashes of the rest of them, I think it is at least possible that some of their mannerisms bled through that link. How important that is, or if I am reading too much into things, isn't clear yet.

caoimhinh

Hadn't you noticed that since the beginning of Book 5, Catherine now swears in Sve Noc's name?

She has been saying stuff like "Sisters grant it", "Sisters damn it", "For Sve Noc's sake", and other such phrases more and more often, both out loud and in her internal monologue. They are definitely affecting her mind.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say it's just Cat being a dork and leaning into the 'priestess' thing. I don't think it's subtle mind control any more than being around other people just... naturally is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It had previously been noted that her swearing by the Gods Above seems inappropriate, and swearing by the Gods Below makes her Villain friends... nervous. So she was basically looking for something to swear by...

[Walter](#)

Practiguide has always kind of marched to the beat of its own drum in that regard. Like, I get the substance of your grievance, but I feel like if you are still here at this point you kind of must enjoy this sort of thing? We are, as you say, in the last book.

Hardcore Heathen

I stuck around for Game of Thrones all the way to Season 8, and Season 8 was still a dumpster fire. Past quality does not guarantee current or future quality.

Shveiran

Past quality does not guarantee future quality, I agree with this.

With that said, I see no indication that EE has lost his stride. Like, at all.

To me, this whole flash-forward set up is brilliant. It neatly solves the issue on how to set the stage of the terrible draining war to the north without having to read about frustrating battle after battle.

It sets the stage magnificently for the finale.

This glimpse of the drow campaign is just that. It's not meant to create attachment to the Generals, it is not meant to make you tense at the stakes of this battle.

It's a way for you to see that there is more than one front in this war, to see how the DK adapts to the drow, that Cat is coordinating with the Sisters, how Sve Noc see the war, and all the rest of the little details you need to make sense of what is to come.

Is a set up, nothing more.

That's why it's flashy, and short.

To me, it is a nice example of the "Subtle art of the infodump" done right.

Some disagree, and that's perfectly fine; but even if someone feels like that, it is just one chapter. It's not a narrative arch or something like that.

I guarantee you this is not the end of the slippery slope, it's just a way to set up the rest of the book.

Point Point

[Very minor spoilers regarding the subject matter of the next chapter (no details or plot-relevant information).]

Once we have a few more chapters, I think this chapter will fit much better.

The first eleven chapters established how much time has passed, what Catherine and her associates have been up to, and introduced some new conflicts for the story to follow.

Now, with this chapter, we're establishing where the draw stand in the war and reinforcing how the Dead King fights. This could have been done as an interlude, but *Practical Guide* doesn't actually use all that many interludes outside of special sequences, and the next chapter's interlude is much more useful for setting up another side of the war effort than this chapter would have been as an interlude.

Besides the generally low number of interludes, I can think of a few other reasons this might be better as a regular chapter rather than an interlude. First, it keeps Catherine in focus, showing that she has this information and is well-apprised of the war in the north. Second, it means the author doesn't need to develop Vesena's personality beyond the bare minimum (or write the perspective of a high-ranking Mighty), freeing time to work on other things.

The biggest issue, I think, is that this chapter feels a bit like a weird half-interlude, with Catherine observing someone else's actions. She is primarily an observer, which leaves the chapter feeling somewhat unusual.

If I was editing the story for print publication, I might suggest making this chapter an interlude from the perspective of Vesena or a member of its Sigil, and moving much of Catherine's exposition about the other generals to the end of the previous chapter. The biggest downside to this is that we lose some of Catherine's observations during the battle, which provide a much more useful point of reference for us than a Drow's descriptions of the battle might have. Maybe having Akua as the point-of-view character would work, but it might be tricky to do without exposing whether she is or isn't plotting against Catherine (even if she's plotting to, for instance, break free of Catherine and serve Sve Noc).

caoimhinh

Kind of feels like an Interlude or one of those "Lycaonese Extra Chapters" of the previous books, right?

hakureireimu

I wonder why the sisters haven't done something about it.

[Liliet](#)

Because they'd have to make an explicit rule banning that specifically, and until they come up with something that does not restrict that which they DO want and also combines seamlessly with their other rules... They're pretty Lawful in their approach to managing their people, judging by how they've handled Catherine coming up with new scripture last book – applying it immediately right back to her and all.

hakureireimu

Murder Goddess needs to follow rules?

[Liliet](#)

They decided they're going to, and that's that. Up to them, you know?

Shveiran

Because the point of pre-winter Night was to combine powers in any way possible, brute forcing the research of a way to escape the twilight sages' mistakes and the need for continued slaughter as a sacrifice to Below.

Versatility was prized above morality, because morality would not save their people and versatility, through the discovery of an unforeseen application of Night, could.

Which is why, at the time, the Sisters didn't do anything; not for a self imposed limitation, but because they had other priorities.

Now the Sisters have achieved apotheosis and have been reminded of what they are about; they can afford to care once more. Yet I believe they value what this General can achieve for the empire above a few more drow death in this desperate war against Keter.

Walter

Hierophant, a Named of no particular power, was able to threaten to credibly threaten to mangle the sisters. He didn't have a story behind him, was literally cut off from his magic, and he was like "what if I used an aspect to annihilate you?".

The Crows are, appropriately enough for Cat's gods, mostly big talk and shadows on the wall. Named are above them. The only people that they can bully with impunity are the Drow/Cat, who partake fully of their power and can be stripped of it.

Consequently they have to be incredibly careful about killing these assets, particularly as the war with DK is rapidly grinding them down. They won't get rid of Kurosiv, they need him to keep them safe from the Saints of the world.

Draylen

Heiropant also has advantages in this regard most Named don't, though – Zeze's whole Name is about the Promethean, stealing the Divine and giving to Man. Yes, without his sorcery he is less dangerous, but to a God he can reach out and physically rip, he might be one of few things able to end their existence.

Heirarch was in a similar place, but is currently stuck in Heaven arguing the Seraphim to death, Judging the Judges. So he's kind of occupied.

Grey could probably fuck Sve Noc's shit right the fuck up, but that's because he is a ludicrously powerful priest with access to a thousand kinds of Holy that are their equal and opposite, with more power backing it than they have at their disposal.

And Saint could probably cleave them, but the only reason she couldn't cleave through reality was because she didn't want to? And I'm not sure she didn't cut things like Dimension, I'd have to reread the scenes she was in. She did cut a Domain, at least once.

I think that's about all the Named that we've seen with actual ability to truly harm Sve Noc as they are now? And even that last one is a possibility, not a certainty, and somewhat remote despite her power.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

IIRC Saint had a mobility trick where she'd slash empty air and use it as leverage as if it were solid. Sounds like cutting reality to me.

caoimhinh

Named are above pretty much anyone but the capital-G Gods. Choirs of Angels and Demons can be killed, imprisoned, and who knows what else by Named (and also by mages). Lower-G gods have been killed by Named plenty of times: Warlock kept a few of their corpses in his laboratory, Sabah killed one in her process to become Captain, the Sword of the Free killed one of the god birds of Stygia before founding Bellerophon, etc.

During the confrontation between Sve Noc and Hierophant, he explicitly told them that he had known Winter long before it became a part of them, and threatened to rip it out of "the stitches in their bellies" which hints to the fact they hadn't yet assimilated Winter completely into the Night (something that Catherine had already pointed out at that point), plus Masego's entire Role and Story as a Named is understanding and confronting gods, he had also just returned from being possessed by the Dead King and learning truths about how the gods are made, which taught him in turn how they can be *unmade*.

And if you think Masego is a Named of "no particular power" you need to check again, Witch of the Woods would disagree with that assessment. Masego's current lack of sorcery weakened him, but that doesn't mean he is weak. Who knows, maybe he even recovered his Gift during the timeskip.

Liliet

I'd say it's less that Named are above everything, and more that they can credibly kill anything. They're the top of the food chain, not the champion in strength. A lion is stronger than a human.

But... yeah. They're the top of the food chain. Masego being able to credibly threaten the crow goddesses doesn't tell us anything other than that his personal Role is still going strong.

Liliet

Masego's entire Role is the story behind him killing any lowercase g god he likes. It's what he DOES, what his Name is ABOUT.

And he's really, *really* high tier in power. He has more or less confirmed to Cat that he could achieve apotheosis any time he liked, and hasn't yet p much just because he prefers sticking with his family for the moment.

Mental Mouse

Cat could drain its Night, but that would deprive the Host of Night of one of their most powerful generals.

Liliet

Well, this was a nice and horrifying little chapter.

– a reminder that the drow ARE Evil and act like it, as a society;

– new characters around Rumena's level! Wish we got a clearer explanation of relative hierarchy and history there. At the very least Rumena seems to be the closest to the crows personally?

– a cool battle scene with Catherine's analysis! Love to remember she's a competent general, if not quite as into it as Rumena and its like are;

...and that's about it, actually. Not much this time!

A good glimpse of what's going on elsewhere though =x

Liliet

P.S. Dear Sisters,
what the fuck.

Do you two realize how much you're contributing to Catherine's exhaustion?

Shveiran

I'm going to need you to explain that to me.

is it that they don't let her sleep?

Because of all the possible duties, communing with the Sisters to coordinate the two battlefronts is one the First Under the Night really really really cannot delegate.

Liliet

She wasn't doing a lot of coordination there, was she?

They didn't let her sleep, and I wonder, uh, how often they do that. And how many of those are really necessary.

Shveiran

She doesn't coordinate the battles on the north front; she coordinates the ones on her own front, and to do that effectively she needs as much information as she can get her hands on about all that is going on pertaining the war.

This shows her DK's tactics against the drow, how much he is learning, how he is reacting to what the drow can bring to the table. It allows her to learn about him at a faster pace than just learning from the defeats he inflicts her and hers, and that is invaluable to someone like Cat that is de facto the loudest voice at the table that determines the Grand Alliance's deployment.

Draining? Yeah.

But unless someone trustworthy give themselves to the Night and can commune with goddesses far, far away from the battlefield, that is something only Cat can do.

Unlike being Abigail's training wheel, this is something she can't hand to someone else; nor something she can give up on.

Every battle allows her to study her enemy, and understanding Neshamah is how she'll win this.

Liliet

Note that Rumena can, and is, also doing this.

Shveiran

True, yet my point stands.

Rumena sits at the table, but the surface-dwellers don't listen to it very much. The strongest voice is Cat's, ergo everyone is served better by her seeing as much of the war as possible, because she is, if not the one making the decision, certainly the single most influencing person at that table.

She needs the data.

Of all the duties she had, this is a vital one that no one else can do (Rumena's existence forces me to rephrase in "no one else can do in a way that matters", because even if the drow General got her a report it is not the same as seeing for herself and looking for blind spots or hints in the DK strategy).

Going out to rescue young Named? That is something Heroes and Villains can do without her.
This is on Cat's desk, plain and simple.

Liliet

Yeah but I feel like this could still be organized better

like make an agreement with the Sisters beforehand 'ok this night we're gonna commune at length so I'm clearing my schedule for the morning and afternoon so I can sleep AFTER'

Admittedly I'm making it sound like it's on Cat and not on them, but LISTEN so MANY things are already on Cat and they are fucking GODDESSES they can handle making sure their priestess SLEEPS SOMETIMES

Petter

The charter itself was as usual well done and fun to read. Really cool seeing how the army of the dead is still a very deadly threat and even the drow and the night needs to be careful. Which matches nicely to the reaction Cat got when she mentioned having walked the street of Keeter way back when she was still in winter mode.

I do however find myself agreeing with what others have mentioned, it makes Rumena feel less important. Not because the Empire Everdark has more remnants of the old way or generals.

But that his moniker is based on actions he failed at. Sure he destroyed the sigls but failed and that's what gave him his moniker? The name really felt bigger, that he before the sisters took over had destroyed countless enemies, crushed armies etc on a much larger and more important scale.

I get a similar feeling to the mythos around Nick Furry and his ruined eye. It seemed like a huge thing and character moment but instead it was cheapened in a later movie. Clearly this chapter isn't on that level it just gives me similar vibes.

Liliet

IDK, if you think about it it's the kind of legendary action that makes myths and gods. Like how Hephaestus has a bad leg bc his parents threw him down from Olympus upon being born? Rumena got his moniker while fighting another one of THESE.

[Liliet](#)

*its

[Mental Mouse](#)

Quibble: Hera threw Hephaestus down *because* he was born with a clubfoot. He was supposed to be her proof that she could make a kid without any damn man involved (trying to trump Zeus's gestation of Dionysus), and when he came out imperfect, she was *pissed*...

[Liliet](#)

Ooh, thanks for the clarification!

I believe this supports my point.

JRogue

We talk about it a lot, but this right here is why The Dawn Knight exists.

These elder horrors need an opposite. Instead of 10 Hero's to oppose the 10 Generals of the Empire Ever Dark, we get 1 Hero that is ridiculously strong. Put him in a Band of Five and, well, it's a wrap.

WuseMajor

The Dead King is one of the few beings in this universe that could factually say "I am no mere GOD!" and then proceed to survive saying that. However, he's also way too canny to actually raise that kind of death flag.

Xinci

Well, this shows some more issues with Sve's visionary facsimile(though to be fair she was rather pressured when she made it). Other beings being able to steal from your power being a big risk in sticking to a "cannibalistic" style of power accumulation and then coming into an environment with multiple competing factions, all competing for resources. I seriously hope Cat will work with them or at least delegate some other people to work with them to help iterate some better large scale adaptations. Sve's back in the pit and her self-mutilation will only help so much versus someone like the Dead King, who has also been honing his ability to escape mortality for eons. I do wonder what kind of composition Kurosov's accumulation of

Night has that makes him not worth killing. Though given how the Night seems to be a microcosm of Below's practices it could be they generally couldn't interfere and what agents they could use (Rumena, the Longstrides) weren't good enough to beat his methods.

It is also interesting to see how the Night can bind souls or at least keep a semblance of them within specific formats. That it could indeed keep such information was already confirmed by the secret of many lives but good to see more on how it interacts with souls.

I do still wonder what kinds of glass the Drow could make or really rare metalloids given they may use the Night to forge. Could they store material in the Night to put it into a stasis like a state or change its temperature? Many possibilities there to be honest. It feels like they could be making far better materials than just iron for iron and such.

The DK using a Revenant to presumably bind herself through healing methods to a large number of bodies was pretty interesting. If such abilities may remain in a Revenant could the night be used to transpose such abilities into a another form through the use of modulated Night? Mainly I wonder how him destabilizing and usurping the information or properties of the Night could be applied to Revenants like that.

Liliet

I think the Revenant was *inside* the construct, piloting it like a mecha, not part of it.

Storm

this chapter was wayyyy to descriptive at the beginning. took a 6 month break because of just how much description there was.

gavgis

gavgis a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/c5C3Rq6EDrurf60Je0mQu>

Interlude: Truce

"Raise the price by a coin of gold and you make enemies; raise the price by a copper and you make losses. Profit lies in silver: moderation without timidity."

– Extract from 'Discourse on Nature and Man', by Merchant Princess Adorabella

Above the foyer of the royal quarters in Rhenia hung a painting – six feet long, four feet high – depicting the famous ancient Iron King Konrad wrestling with what the artist had deemed a personification of the concept of duty.

Cordelia sometimes thought of that painting, when the days grew long. At first, when she grew from girlhood into womanhood, she had remembered it for the stories her uncle had had told her about it. Of how her father, a man she'd never known, had despised it ever since he was a boy and had it taken down the same day he became Prince of Rhenia. He'd been known to claim he would sell it to some art-hungry Alamans princeling in the south and use the gold to buy a few more dwarven engines, though he'd never gotten around to it before his untimely death. Cordelia's mother had eventually ordered it put back up, being rather fond of it, though she'd called the motif 'Konrad Getting Beat By A Bald Bear' instead. Sometimes Cordelia thought she'd only ever truly known her parents through the stories of others, for even though she'd been fourteen when her mother passed away Cordelia had only been graced to know a meagre few facets of Margaret Papenheim.

Now that years had passed, though, she thought more of the motif. Not of Old King Konrad, whose stories told had let all eight of his children die rather than surrender Twilight's Pass, but of what lay at a heart of it: a prince, wrestling with duty. Was that not, in a way, what lay at the heart of rule? To bear a crown was to swear yourself to making order out of chaos, law out of anarchy, prosperity out of ruin. Cordelia had been orderly even as a little girl, for Mother had never been prone to coddling: it had been up to her to decide how her hours would be spent when she was not seeing to her duties. She'd taken on seneschal duties for the fortress-city by the age of twelve and extended her authority to Rhenia's dependencies by the age of thirteen, and as her writ ran further her hours became ever more precious and in need of careful parcelling. Those habits had followed her into adulthood, into the Salia and her rule as First Prince of Procer, and she was grateful for it.

There was simply so much to *do* and too little time for all of it. Cordelia would try anyway and parcel out ever ounce of her so that, at least, all that she could do was done. The First Prince of Procer delicately nibbled at the caramelized poultry she'd been served, then took a sip of no more than two beats from her cup of water – obeying court etiquette to the letter. The two men seated across from her, who had patiently been waiting for her to finish her bite and rinse it down, only then began speaking again.

"Merchant Prince Fabianus has signalled he will not involve himself in matters of Proceran debt," Louis of Sartrons told her.

"We've established this is a firm commitment, and not a bargaining position."

The old spy's face had always struck her as being rather skeletal, skin pulled taut against the bones of an aristocratic face and only topped by ever-receding tufts of hair. He was not a physically striking man, looking more like a well-born coin counter than what he truly was: the foremost patron of the Circle of Thorns, the secretive society whose agents were the eyes and ears of the Principate abroad. Louis of Sartons was not a close ally of hers, for the Circle preferred to maintain a degree of distance so that it would not be swept into internal struggles and so suffer in a way that blinded Procer to its enemies, but he had come out boldly to support her when a coup had been attempted against Cordelia. For this he'd earned a degree of trust, and a freer hand than she'd allowed him before. The news he was bringing, however, were not pleasant ones.

"That is a blade that bites both ways," Cordelia mused.

Most of the Merchant Princes and Princesses that ruled Mercantis were not Named, and rarely more than influential firsts among equals, yet their value as intermediaries with the banks and merchant houses of the city they ruled was priceless – if always priced. That Fabianus was had formally stepped back from intervening in the matter massive loans that Mercantis had extended both Procer and the Grand Alliance meant he would not demand that the sums, lenders and borrowers be made public within the Consortium as a growing number of merchants now demanded. It also meant, however, that he would no longer facilitate those arrangements as he had until now.

"The Circle believes he remains in favour of the arrangements but has grown to fear assassination by his opposition if he does not bend," Louis informed her. "Recusing himself allows him to give them an inch without slighting us outright."

Wiggling out was the mark of an eel, not a prince, Cordelia uncharitably thought, but what else was to be expected from Mercantis? Not that the merchants were entirely without reason to be worried of the loans extended, for the First Prince had woven there a maze to obscure exactly how badly the finances of the Principate were faring. By obtaining the permission of the Highest Assembly to seek loans in the name of its individuals princes and princesses – all marked down, and to be repaid by the Principate to the individuals in years to come – she'd been able to seek smaller loans from multiple royals in a shared 'bundle' from different banks and merchants, effectively spreading out debts in a way that made it nearly impossible to assess from the side of the lenders. The key to this had been requiring secrecy from the lenders in exchange of higher interest, something she'd had the Circle of Thorns strictly enforce.

The first two merchants who'd tried to break their written oaths had been promptly assassinated, using some of the most painful poisons the Circle knew of. None had tried after, not individually anyway: through the great merchant guild known as the Consortium, which Mercantis counted as both a court of law and ruling body second only to their Merchant Prince, pressured was being applied for the hidden information being made available not to individuals but to the Consortium 'itself'. It was a legal fiction, given that nearly all those who'd signed to secrecy were also members of the Consortium, but one that might hold up under the few treaties Mercantis kept with Procer. That even Merchant Prince Fabianus was beginning to give way was bad omen for the Grand Alliance's fortunes in the city. Possibly quite literally.

"This is no longer a purely Proceran matter," the First Prince eventually said.

The older man bowed his head in acknowledgement, and with a look Cordelia made for one of her attendants to approach. The young woman curtsied, then silently awaited instructions.

"Please request of Ingrid that she inquire whether Lady Dartwick would be amenable to having tea," she began, and for a heartbeat considered when she could first spare the time, "tomorrow, an hour past Noon Bell."

"Immediately, Your Most Serene Highness," her attendant replied.

Ghislaine, Cordelia suddenly remembered, repeating the name in her mind to better commit it to memory.

"Thank you, Ghislaine," she smiled, and the woman curtsied again.

Vivienne Dartwick would not have the authority or influence to settle such a matter herself, but needed to be brought into the issue as the first step into bringing in Catherine Foundling. The Black Queen, Cordelia thought a touch guiltily, really was such a useful large club to threaten people with. Where law and diplomacy failed to make a mark, Queen Catherine's scowls and fearsome reputation had a way of bringing out sweet reason from the most unreasonable of souls. Callow would, besides, need to be told of the developments regardless: its treasury was guarantor to some of the loans extended to the Grand Alliance and it was the second-largest contributor to the war chest besides. Not that Lady Dartwick had not ensured the kingdom would not benefit from the process. If anything, she'd proved frighteningly cunning in finding ways of seeing to that.

The notion of allowing repayment in nature for extended loans had, for one, effectively erased twenty years of damage to Callowan horse-rearing while simultaneously thinning the hordes of their traditional greatest rivals in the trade, the Arlesite princes of the south. If Queen Vivienne was to be her neighbour

to the east, one day, Cordelia would not make the mistake of taking her lightly. The former Chosen might in truth have better gifts for ruling in years of peace than the woman who'd chosen her for a successor. The blonde princess had another bite of poultry, savouring the subtle aftertaste of the sauce, and then a nibble of those perfectly steamed and spiced carrots. It was washed away with a sip of water, afterwards, and even as she dabbed her lips with an embroidered cloth the First Prince cleared her mind of unnecessary thoughts.

The matters that would be brought to her attention by Brother Simon of Gorgeault, formerly the head of the Holy Society and nowadays the Lord Inquisitor of Procer, would require her full attention as well. Though the well-formed man with the hair grown silver was no longer the leader of the society of highborn lay brothers and sisters, it was because at Cordelia's incitation the Highest Assembly had charged him instead to root out corruption and wickedness within the ranks of the House of Light, granting him worldly authority over the priests until his *inquisition* was at an end. It was reform at the edge of a sword, all knew this, but after so many of the Holies had been caught publicly backing her deposal the House had not had room to argue.

"The House of Light has formally decided to accept your latest set of suggestions," Brother Simon said, a tad drily. "The lands will be ceded to the throne, under condition that they are to be ceded in turn to the appropriate crowns."

Cordelia was too well-mannered to smile in triumph, so instead she drank a sip of water. With that last concession, it could be said that she had subdued the Holies and the uglier aspects of the House of Light they represented. Even after the public disgrace of the House during the Salian coup attempt, it would have been a grave overreach to come down too hard on it where the people could see: it would restore public sympathy, and feed into the perception that she had a tyrant's grip on the Principate. Instead, she had struck more subtly. First she'd abolished every ritual power the House had over the office of First Prince and the Highest Assembly itself, save for the right to directly petition the latter – one of the oldest and more importantly the most *well-known* of the House's privileges. Then, with the fetters of tradition removed, she'd gone after the coin. The House was invited to divest itself of all its merchant interests, donating such wealth to the feeding of the refugees in the heartlands. The House was invited to accept taxation on its holdings, if only while the Principate was at war. And now, the Lord Inquisitor had confirmed that all the lands of the House whose purpose was commercial in nature – vineyards, orchards, mines – were to be ceded to the throne of Procer, which itself would then cede them back to the appropriate princes and princesses.

For a price, which Cordelia would mercifully offer to be paid through writing off any debt the treasury of the Principate might owe any such royalty. In the same stroke she'd ensured that her office would not go bankrupt after the war, curried favour with her subjects by restoring lands to them and ensured the Holies would never again have the wealth to ensure the degree of influence they'd been boasting for the last century.

"The wisdom of the House illuminates the way in these dark times," Cordelia Hasenbach replied, long practice allowing her to keep even the faintest hint of irony out of her voice.

This would devour hours and hours of her days for weeks to come, but it was worth it: with a little inventiveness, she should be able to shuffle around debts and debtors to secure another round of loans abroad.

"It shines what light it can," the Lord Inquisitor agreed, both praise and warning in the same elegant turn of phrase.

Simon of Gorgeault, she sometimes thought, would have made a better prince than most if fate had deigned to grant him that birthright.

"Furthermore," Brother Simon continued, "though numbers will only arrive tomorrow, I can already tell you that another company of priests has volunteered for service on the fronts."

This, at least, Cordelia would give the honour it was due. Every Lycaonese child was taught that there could be no greater service to one's own than to put your life between them and the Enemy.

"If you have names for me, the lists can be read to the people again," Cordelia offered.

It was both a gesture of respect and a way to raise morale, which in turn tended to lead to volunteers.

"I will extend the offer to House," the Lord Inquisitor said, tone grown warmer.

That saw to the immediate matters, she grasped, and just in time. With one last touch of her fork, she brought a bite of poultry to her mouth and swallowed, washing it down with water just before the first ringing of Noon Bell in the distance. The two spies took their leave with the proper courtesies, which she duly returned, and only then did Cordelia allow her brow to crease as she looked down at her plate. There were still two mouthfuls of poultry left, and one of sides. Her timing had been off: imprecision, chaos, had won a small victory. The First Prince left the meal unfinished, and allowed herself to be led to the antechamber down the hall – where she was deftly undressed by her handmaids and helped into a dress more practical than the powder

blue court regalia she'd donned for her duties of the day until now. Grey velvet was laced at her back and paired with matching shawl bordered in golden brocade in deference to the chill that occasionally seized parts of the palace.

Her escort to what her councillors had taken to naming *l'archive en vogue* – the Vogue Archive – was a familiar face. Captain Lois had been a simple guardsman, when Cordelia had thrown herself down a windowsill, and proved to be a man of his oath. He'd been among those that helped her escape, and he'd killed to ensure she would not be dragged back to Balthazar Serigny's feet as a prisoner. There were some, after the coup, who'd said that the ancient palace of the Merovins should be emptied of all Salians and only trustworthy Lycaonese be kept in her service. These calls she'd resisted, and instead ensured both honours and promotions for all the Salians who had proved loyal. She was not First Prince of the Lycaonese but of Procer, and she would not let fear taint who she was: leal service must ever be met with reward.

"If you would allow me the honour, Your Most Serene Highness?" Captain Lois offered along with his arm.

Cordelia did, though lending an arm was as far as she intended to ever indulge the flirtation. She'd had discreet liaisons over the years, with men and rather more rarely women, but becoming involved with one in her service would be... uncouth in many ways. Her own people's traditions encouraged sharing a bed with one of the 'pleasant trade' rather than involvement with one's fellow soldiers but this far south it was seen as frivolous for an unmarried woman of her rank to dally with courtesans of any gender. Especially if there were lands in line to inherit, as was the case with her. The Rhenian princess had therefore been forced to be most careful in her dalliances, indulging only in the company of those who might never be a hazard to her position or reputation. The affairs had been rare, and after the first heart-wrenching time she'd had to part from a man she held deep affections for Cordelia had never again allowed them to linger.

Still, that did not mean she could not appreciate a well-formed calf or a muscled arm.

The First Prince's guards moved aside when they reached the threshold of the Vogue Archive, for access to what within was restricted by both ancient enchantments and much more recent wards. Cordelia parted with her escort with a courteous smile, pressing her palm against the heavy oaken door before her. Sorcery crackled against her skin, like a minuscule gust of wind, and the door opened without a sound as the old enchantment recognized her right to enter. The wards buzzed against her ears as she crossed the threshold, but the blonde Lycaonese paid it little mind: already her mind was on the sight awaiting her. This

had been a great salon, once, where the Merovins had entertained others in the sort of amusements where none were expected to be wearing clothes by the end of the evening and the company of the beautiful was much encouraged.

The need for discretion – the people of Salia would have raised brows upon hearing of the diversions of their rulers – had seen enchantments laid on the doors leading into the room, restricting for whom they would open. That and the size of the salon had been the deciding factors in Cordelia ordering the beating heart of administration settled within, and there was no trace left to see of the original trivial purpose of the Vogue Archive. Great tables covered in sprawling maps of the different regions of the Pirnicpate as well as broader Calernia had been set down, each matched with bureaus seeing to the reports from such regions and foreign locales. The maps themselves were adorned with sculpted stones and silk ribbons representing trade arteries and supply lines, garrisons and crucial resources.

The Order of the Red Lion, whose mages swept in and out of the room regularly, kept reports and notes as fresh – *en vogue* – as was possible, resulting in a living and breathing map of the Principate of Procer that had allowed Cordelia and her councillors to avert enough crises over the previous two years that she could not remember when anyone had last argued to cut funding for the Archive. Trusted and thoroughly vetted scholars, traders and officials swarmed the great hall like ants in an anthill, filling scrolls of their own as they read through reports. Those scrolls headed to the very back of the hall, where on a raised dais the keen minds the First Prince had appointed as her foremost analysts had been granted desks of their own. Theirs was the task to sift through the mass of reports and identify the disasters that would plague Procer and the Grand Alliance before they came to pass, warning Cordelia so that they might be averted.

The Rhenian princess's entrance was met with a pause in the intricate dance of duties as bows and curtsies were offered, though when she returned them with a nod the sudden hush broke and activity resumed. Cordelia took the time to pass by some of the tables and speak, as she'd scheduled for, praising the Segovian bureau for the sea supply lines to Bremen they'd successfully forged and encouraging the Aisne bureau to redouble its efforts to find a way to keep that principality's granaries and treasury afloat after the ravages the Carrion Lord had inflicted there. Callowan grain would not be able to feed the heartland forever. The Levantine bureau approached her with an intercepted communication from the Holy Seljun of Levant trying to formalize diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Callow through ambassadors as well as a list of the most likely individuals the Dominion might send should such an offer be accepted, which made for interesting reading.

She thanked the young woman who'd brought her the scroll and requested a more comprehensive report be made over the matter and sent to her. That would see to a third of the quarter-bell that Cordelia had allowed herself for reading this evening, by her own estimation, which was an acceptable way to spend the time. The First Prince's feet took her up the low steps and onto the dais, where the three appointed analysts that were currently awake and serving were awaiting her. One was a distinguished merchant of low birth, Maria Fernanda of Treville, who'd turned the ailing fruit trading family business she'd inherited into one of the foremost trade societies of the south by virtue of being able to read trends in demand in time to capitalize on them. The second was Brother Alphonse of the Montresor monastery in Creusens, who Simon of Gorgeault had personally recommended as being the finest policy hound of the Holies prior to their fall.

The third and last in attendance was more complex a presence than a merchant and a priest: the Forgetful Librarian was undeniably a brilliant woman, but she was also Damned and largely unwilling to entertain the notion of someone having authority over her. That she'd been born to a family distant kin to the House of Brogloise ruling in Cantal had only encouraged what Cordelia suspected was an instinctive resentment of anyone who might have a claim on her hours, not to mention seen her wealthy enough a villain few had suspected her of even *being* one before the Archer had caught her in the middle of trying to steal manuscripts from Mercantis bought at auction and headed for the Belfry. A great many dead hired swords and several bruises later, the Forgetful Librarian had accepted the Truce and the Terms and been assigned to Salia by the Black Queen at Cordelia's own request. There were good reasons for that, though on some days it was necessary for the Rhenian princess to reminder herself of this more than once.

"Your Most Serene Highness," Brother Alphonse greeted her, hastily rising to his feet and bowing.

Maria Fernande mirrored him, but a heartbeat slower on the draw, but the Librarian had yet to raise her eyes from the book she'd been reading. Only when she turned the page did she look up, and sharply nodded.

"First Prince," the mousy-looking woman said. "Right on time. Shall we get to it?"

Cordelia ignored her, smiling and gesturing for the other two to return to their seats before taking her own.

"Librarian," she said, tone mild. "You have something to report?"

"You might say that, Your Highness," the Damned said, closing the book. "Maria read through the reports on trade through with the League and the Dominion, and I matched this with the records of tariffs between principalities south of Salia. The numbers I

arrived at are worrying, when the substance of the Principate's debts is taken into consideration."

"And why is that?" Cordelia asked.

"We suspect," Maria Fernanda intervened, shooting a warning look at the Damned, "that the Principate had become fragile, Your Most Serene Highness."

Brother Alphonse cleared his throat.

"It is our conclusion that, unless regular trade routes are opened anew with League and Ashur," the priest delicately said, "Should Mercantis cease propping up the treasury Procer the entire Principate might come down like a house of cards."

A talk might be required, Cordelia faintly thought as the explanation continued, with the Black Queen.

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"Half past the hour would suit me better," Vivienne replied. "Though if it is a matter of great urgency, something might be arranged."

"We would not dare impose on your time in such a haphazard manner, Lady Dartwick," the tall woman facing her said. "I will relay your answer to Her Highness and see to it that your staff is kept informed of any and all developments."

Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the Kingdom of Callow, watched with a bland expression as the First Prince's own chamberlain bowed and retired. She was not blind to the courtesy Hasenbach was extending by sending the very head of her household, Ingrid Backhaus, to arrange a meeting to 'drink tea'. Neither was she particularly moved by it, though. For the First Prince to be seeking out such an arrangement meant that the ruler of Procer needed to address something by informal channels of diplomacy – given that Vivienne did not yet have an idea of what was in need of addressing, she was inclined to chalk any courtesies up to the woman trying to butter her up before the talks. Cordelia Hasenbach wielded pleasantness and courtesy with an uncomfortable degree of effectiveness, Vivienne had found, so it was best to remain wary.

It was a delicate line to walk, between being Hasenbach's friend and her foe. Never to trust too deep or to give offence unprovoked, and though the dark-haired woman knew she was not half bad at these games she had not been *born* to them as the opposition so often was. Catherine could afford to ignore most of this, swagger in with a drink and quip and turn everybody's plans inside out, because she had the charm and the *raw power* for it. Vivienne had neither, so instead she tread as carefully as she

had when she'd been the Thief and the evening air had smelled of ambush. She leaned back into her seat and let out a long breath, wondering if she should send for the Jacks now or later: whatever had moved Hasenbach to seek a meeting, it'd be best if she knew of it *before* that meeting.

"Let us resume, Henrietta," she finally said. "Word from the Observatory, you said?"

Henrietta Morley was heiress to the Barony of Harrow, Ainsley Morley's eldest daughter, and so the proper address would have been *Lady* Henrietta. They'd grown close enough to dispose with much of the formalities in private, however, as was only necessary if the heiress to Harrow was to remain as her secretary and advisor. That she was a thoroughly competent was only to be expected, given that Baroness Ainsley could not afford a weak successor given her rambunctious vassals, but even if she'd been a moonstruck fool Vivienne would still have found some place for her in her Salian 'court'. Ties to the baronies of the north, the last great landed nobles in Callow save for Duchess Kegan herself, were important in keeping the latter constrained.

Naming Henrietta her personal secretary had been a sign to the disposed nobles stripped of their lands by the Conquest and the Liesse Rebellion, too, that Vivienne was not as determined as Catherine to keep the highborn at a distance – after all, while Cat had used nobles and even appointed some to great offices she'd never kept any of them *close*. That'd been reserved for the Fifteenth, for the Woe, for those who'd borne steel in her name. But Vivienne saw these same man and women as a valuable resource: educated, often still wealthy by lowborn standards and often influential those nobles could be used instead of slowly ushered into oblivion. It'd be a waste to let them stay unused, where any rebellious hand might pick them up besides.

Besides, if the former thief was to be queen one day it wouldn't hurt to have a good relation with the future Baroness of Harrow.

"Fresh as of an hour ago," Henrietta agreed, tucking back her hair. "Lady Fadila has deemed the contents of the missive she passes on to be demanding of your immediate attention."

Vivienne's brow rose. Fadila Mbafeno was something of a liability, in her eyes – she'd once been a servant to Akua Sahelian, which as far as she was concerned was disqualification enough from holding office anywhere in Callow – but she'd remained as the informal head of the Observatory by virtue of being effectively impossible to replace and more than slightly competent. The dark-haired Callowan might not like the Soninke sorceress, but she did respect her judgement.

"Whose missive is it?" Vivienne asked.

"Our friend in the east," Henrietta delicately replied.

Ah, and there went her day. That meant Dread Empress Sepulchral, that ruthless old bat from Askum, who the heiress-designate to Callow trusted about as, well, a Dread Empress of Praes. Sepulchral was repugnant in nearly all regards, but too useful as a check on Malicia to ignore. In appearance, at least. The 'civil war' in the Wasteland had been going on too long and too *oddly* for Vivienne to take the surface stirrings of it as face value anymore. That the former High Lady Abreha was foe to the Tower was beyond doubt, however, and regardless of all the rest that made her useful. Sepulchral had naturally gone out of her way to cultivate her usefulness to both the Grand Alliance at large and Callow in particular with typical Wasteland canniness. That often involved passing on information that neither the Jacks nor the Circle of Thorns would have gotten anywhere near otherwise.

"You've the transcribed message?" Vivienne asked.

"Translated from the cypher and ready for your perusal," Henrietta agreed.

The scroll she presented held a seal in dark blue wax, the Observatory's own. The wax was enchanted to turn to dust the moment the seal was broken, which made it clear whether the message had been spied upon on its way to the hands it was meant for.

"Thank you," she replied, taking the scroll.

The wax frittered into fine blue dust as she broke the seal, and she blew it off the edge of her desk before turning sharp eye to what had been written.

"Dire news, my lady?" Henrietta asked.

Vivienne grimaced.

"Our friend sends us a timely warning," she replied. "Malicia is about to bite our fingers off in Mercantis."

And wasn't that going to sting, a kick in the Grand Alliance's moneybags? Something needed to be done before the fingers felt the teeth closing in, and for that Vivienne required more than what she had at hand. Fortunately, last word had Catherine on her way to the Arsenal.

Vivienne was overdue a visit, she decided.

[tkjarrah](#)

bidelia confirmed

[Liliet](#)

I like this fandom's priorities greatly and agree with them 100%

dadycoool

We've been given an opening. All aboard the Cat/Cordellia!

Catelia stan #1

Choo choooooooooo!

Anomandris

I genuinely don't know what I am rooting for – Cat/Cordy or Cat/Hanno – both seem full of so much potential...

xland44

why not both

Cloud_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)

Both is good.

[tkjarrah](#)

Here's How Catdelia Can Still Win

Vagabond

I ctrl+f searched the chapter for someone whose name starts with bi. Multiple times. Lol. Should there be another reader of comments slow on the uptake: bidelia > cordelia is bisexual ^^

Clinton Orebajo

Huh? What does that mean?

[tkjarrah](#)

bi(sexual) + cordelia = bidelia

look im aware its not the best of portmanteaus but i work with what ive got

Anomandris

I sometimes wonder at the extent the Grand Alliance seems to be dependent on Cat. "Want Named working together? Let's follow Cat's plan" " Problem with the finances? Need Cat to handle this one". Its like that one overworked employee in every office who is invariably dragged into everything because the business won't run without her.

agumentic

When you made yourself the biggest hammer on the continent, it only makes sense for everyone to call on you to deal with every nail-like problem. And there's plenty of those in their troubled times.

Senator Fish

I mean when your the most powerful villain sense Triumphant you tend to be interwoven into pretty much everything.

[Liliet](#)

This is literally what's happening, yep.

dadycool

Cat: "I feel overworked."

Yeah, it's almost as if everything is revolving around you or something.

Sanctus Obscurum

The Black Queen built the Grand Alliance from a crusade aimed at her. The Black Queen snatched back Callow from Praes and triggered the first united action by the western powers in decades. The Black Queen has the entire might of the Drow at her beck and call (as far as the rest of the world sees). The Black Queen bested the Fey. The Black Queen controls some of the most potent magics in the world and all the best mages outside Praes and living. Cat is the most dangerous, intimidating, financially powerful, and influential person in the Alliance. It's like she's a full five levels above the rest of her D&D party: they could maybe function without her, but it is infinitely simpler to draw her into everything.

[Liliet](#)

TBF Cordelia made the Grand Alliance for the Crusade, Cat just picked it up.

But yeah your point on the whole is ENTIRELY ACCURATE.

Shveiran

TBF, Cordelia made a Crusade to kick in Cat's teeth as an afterthought. Cat spanked them all and then said "I'd rather not break your spine over the knee of either myself or my eldritch allies, so how about you let me in your secret club and also all my friends? Your alliance could actually accomplish something this way.

Oh, by the way, completely unrelated but you just lost Ashur and your only remaining member of the Alliance was about to go home, maybe you could use this Gray Pilgrim I ressed? It's no big. Also, Neshamah is going to swallow you whole unless you somehow get a truce and a way to move armies faster from where you currently put them. Which I just gave you.

As I was saying, this is totally your Alliance, Cordy. I'm totally not in charge.

Now go clean my pipe.

[Liliet](#)

Hey, Catherine genuinely WAS uncomfortable when Cordelia did the kneeling thing.

I fucking love that that is canon.

xland44

what. when did she kneel?

[Liliet](#)

"“You must understand, now, that I do not have a single thing to threaten you with,” she quietly said. “I have no armies to send forth, no coin to cajole or coerce with and my alliances are weaker than yours. Besides, those allies I do have would not war on you for my sake, for you have them bound by debt and respect. I have through steel and insult ended any inclination between us that could now be called on, much less between our respective peoples.”

The thing was, there was a part of me that was savouring the words. The same part that remembered my every desperate plea to this same woman to call off her armies and rapacious princes. That remembered every spurned offer of peace, every sentence of scathing dismissal and barely-veiled contempt. She'd been so godsdamned arrogant, telling me she could choose the fate of Callow because she had the swords and the righteousness and that I should just go into exile like a good little thug after shutting my mouth and abdicating. And now she needed me. They all did, her entire alliance and the heroes behind them too. Even

the Grey Pilgrim had good as admitted to it. They had sneered and spat and tried to kill me, and now I fucking had them. Cordelia Hasenbach had laid out before me the death of her nation and her people, and yet I could not help but think that they'd brought this all on themselves. That if they'd left Callow alone, that if they'd let me fix it instead of hounding me every step for their own hungry purposes, they wouldn't be tumbling down the cliff right now.

Then, to my surprise, she pushed back her seat and rose. Not well, in opposition to the understated elegance of her every other movement. It was clear her leg had been broken and not finished healing. The pain had her lips thinning as Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West, knelt before me.

"I have a responsibility," Cordelia said, "to the people of the Principate. To rule, to guide and to protect. To ease their worst inclinations and spur their finest ones. I have failed them in this."

She was proud, Hasenbach. Not the kind of person something like this would come easily to. Not someone to do it unless she believed it to be necessary. Rozala was halfway to her feet, protesting her ruler kneeling before a foreign queen, but neither of us paid her attention.

"I have no right to ask grace of you now, and no might to compel it," the First Prince said. "So I can only beg that you act as I did not, and help those I cannot."

That I'd savoured this, for even a moment, tasted like ashes in my mouth. Because it wasn't her or her reign she was begging for. It was her people. And while I might not be leading a crusade into Procer, I could not deny it felt poisonous that I could be in this moment and begged at instead of begging. Not because I enjoyed the helplessness of it, but because I'd never liked to think of myself as someone who would need to be implored to save lives.

"Get up," I said, voice rough. "Enough. There was no need for this."

I pushed back my own chair, rising to my feet, and the eyes of both Malanza and Brother Simon went to me. Watching, weighing.

“Get up, Hasenbach,” I said. “You and I are going for a walk.””

Did I need to quote all that? No. Is there any reason for me not to? Absolutely not.

I fucking love that moment.

Shveiran

Personally, I found it really unsatisfying. Or maybe not that, but insufficient considering what followed.

I never felt like Cordelia capitulated or asked forgiveness, given how she acted in the following chapter. That made it an empty gesture and I’m disappointed it left an impression on Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia cannot actually capitulate and surrender the rulership of Procer to Catherine, or say “no yeah if you want to kill us all that’s fair”. She just... cannot. It’s outside the bounds of what she’s allowed to do. If she has to be somewhat shitty to Catherine to make sure her land survives, that’s what she has to do. Kneeling was a personal gesture, as much of an apology as she was able to make – the rest is politics and necessity.

zenanii

To be fair, half of Cat’s plan for entering the grand alliance was basically “make myself so useful they can’t pass up relying on me.”

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

And it probably wouldn’t have worked otherwise... but THERE ARE NEGATIVE SIDE EFFECTS

Juff

Typo Thread:

at a heart > at the heart

into the Salia > into Salia

Louis of Sartrons (previously Louis de Sartrons)

Sartons > Sartrons

The news (maybe switch to tidings, so it can be pluralised) was had > had

matter massive > matter of the massive

individuals princes > individual princes
exchange of > exchange for
pressured was > pressure was
was bad omen > was a bad omen
Ghislaine," she > Ghislaine." She
into bringing > to bringing
what within > what lay within
Pirnicpate > Principate
reminder herself > remind herself
Principate had become > Principate has become
with League > with the League
said, "Should > said, "should
treasury Procer > treasury of Procer
a thoroughly > thoroughly
them up besides. > them up.
Askum > Aksum
trusted about as > trusted about as much as
of it as face > of it at face

Javvies

Hmm. Is Cat going to need to "visit" Mercantis? Or perhaps merely imply/threaten to do so to the intermediaries from Mercantis?

And it seems that Cordelia/her people haven't picked up on the plot to betray the Drow ... which is definitely not going to put Cat in the most cooperative mood.

Liliet

I think this is slightly out of order – this is before all the messages Cat gets in that one chapter are sent, meaning the information about the plot is the next day.

We literally see Rozala talk to Cordelia about it, remember?

Adrian_V

"There were still two mouthfuls of poultry left, and one of sides. Her timing had been off: imprecision, chaos, had won a small victory. "...OCD much Cordelia?

Another Malicia vs Cordelia match? Nice!! Although i swear Viv is going to remind everyone she was the thief, like maybe she will pay Mercantis with solid gold bars, made at least partially from stolen old from their vaults or something xD

Like the idea is to demonstrate they could screw them a lot if they wanted (or at least appear to) and the stolen merchants are those that traded in bad faith, or worse faith if they all do it liek that.

Liliet

> ...OCD much Cordelia?

Huh. An interesting theory. I don't think she is – I think she's just run this haggard – but... anyone else have thoughts?

dadycoool

It could be an induced thing. Her entire slice of the continent is basically falling apart and these lunch meetings are basically "How much of the forest burned today?" She literally needs some way to be able to say to herself "My life is not entirely out of control. There really are islands of Peace in this hurricane of Chaos. Namaste." After all, Cat isn't the only one with sore shoulders.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Not all control issues are OCD.

Shveiran

I wouldn't venture a diagnosis, but I'd argue this isn't exactly new for her.

She has always put a lot of importance on doing things the proper way; she imposes order unto her days and hours, and follows the protocols closely, so much so that she can turn those into weapons.

I am not really surprised that she has a ritual for eating.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she normally leaves food on her plate because she didn't schedule extra seconds to finish it.

Shveiran

Exactly. She usually eats exactly that amount in the time she has allocated for that purpose.

That's why failing to do so has her irritated and musing her control is slipping.

Shikkarasu

I remember playing the OG Spiro trilogy. I was very bad at parts like the races or the skateboarding challenges. So I replayed the same part *over and over and over*, resetting the second I made the slightest misstep, because I knew nothing short of a personal best at every moment was going to see me through whatever challenge was giving me so much trouble.

This is what I'm reading into Cordelia, that she is demanding perfection of herself because there just isn't enough time in the day for anything less. (note that she opted to not eat the rest of her food, where OCD might force her to finish it) The fact that she failed to get the time-management right for one literal plate implies (to her) that she might not be able to handle the hundred metaphorical ones, all wobbling around her threatening to fall if she can't keep them spinning.

[Liliet](#)

mhm =x

[Liliet](#)

also thats 100% how i play racing games

[Adrian_V](#)

...it was a joke people xD

[Liliet](#)

Well, you learned something!

(Namely, that it's not a joke, inherently speaking)

[Adrian_V](#)

Errr, actually the main proof that that wasn't real OCD is that it was contained to her lunch, OCD is spread into every aspect of that person life, the point being they can't control those impulses, and some OCD are subtle actually, little more than routines on the surface.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, this didn't read like it to me either, not really.

Konstantin von Karstein

Still, that did not mean she could not appreciate a well-formed calf or a muscled arm.

Catherine has a bad influence on Cordelia 😊

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia had her spies sending her reports on how good Lady Itima's sons were in bed before she ever met Catherine.

Shveiran

More likely her spies included that in the report of their own volition because they just happened to have first-hand insights in those regards.

[Liliet](#)

I mean yes but she didn't tell them not to is the thing
dadycoool

I think I spy a Danger (or at least Plot) Flag: Masego is based in the Arsenal, Catherine is headed there, Hakram goes pretty much wherever she goes, and Vivienne is also headed there. If Indrani decides to head there, the entire Woe will be reunited, possibly for the first time since they joined the war. That kind of meeting has Narrative Weight, and if the three of them walk in on Masego and Indrani chatting (or something else ;)), then all my internal alarms are gonna go off.

Shveiran

Cat commented Archer will be there.

And... yeah, that's going to happen. And for good reasons. I want me some Woe!

Wonder

And most threads converge at the Arsenal.

dadycoool

Yeah. Isn't it terrifying to have so much attention be paid to the R&D department of the war?

[Liliet](#)

If by 'terrifying' you mean 'hell yes best thing ever' 😊

Shveiran

Can't it be both? XD

[Liliet](#)

100% yes it can

Dread Emperor Ridiculous

I wish this chapter wasn't so short.

Stirrings in the Wasteland, hmm? Either Amadeus or Abreha is rooking someone, somehow. I hope the next interlude is from Sepulchral's perspective.

hhesselmann

My mind:

It's not short though? The guides chapters are gloriously long – and exactly the right length for a web serial in my opinion.

My heart: it's way too short! Moar!!!!

Sadly Mother of Learning is completed, so I only have the gods are bastards and the practical guide to look forward to. Anyone have recommendations on (new) high quality web serials to share? I would be most grateful! 😊

MrRigger

I recently found The Wandering Inn, and I kinda want to read it again after I finished reading it the first time. Multiple PoV story, primarily focusing around Erin Solstice, a human girl from Earth who ends up transported to a fantasy world full of monsters and heroes... and becomes an Innkeeper. It's fantastic.

Konstantin von Karstein

Did you tried « the Wandering Inn »? It's very good too.

Eduardo

I second "The Wandering Inn".

Sykomantis

The Deathworlders perhaps?

[winterbrass](#)

I don't ever recommend the Deathworlders without pointing out that there are disappointingly regressive tropes woven into the narrative; it's Star Trek for dudes who unironically believe that Western men are being "feminized" and the entire series is a paean to hypermasculine violence. For what it is, it's fine – but I would boycott a movie and not purchase a printed copy because I don't support the author due to the personal beliefs he's inserted into what could have been a much better work.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

"For what it is, it's fine – but I would boycott a movie and not purchase a printed copy because I don't support the author due to the personal beliefs he's inserted into what could have been a much better work."

Someone could -and most probably does- declare the same for PGTE. 😊
Each with his/her taste and all that.

[Liliet](#)

I mean who? Homophobic people? What controversy is there that you see in PGTE?

All sides are not equally valid in conflicts like this, actually.

Sparsebeard

Yikes!

BoboDClow

reddit.com/r/litrpg fields this question at least once a week or so, and responses often include works I've not seen mentioned elsewhere.

PGtE, MoL, and GaB set an awfully high bar that few others meet. Wandering Inn certainly does, but isn't "new". For something less than a year old take a look at "He Who Fights With Monsters" and "The Infinite Labyrinth."

Kel the Seer

Also endorse The Wandering Inn and He Who Fights With Monsters.

Not new, but would add Not All Heroes

Onos

The Zombie Knight series is pretty good, and I'd also recommend the Wandering Inn.
Kill Six Billion Demons is also kick-ass, though it's a comic rather than a serial.

JT

Metaworld Chronicles is very good

flashburn283

You know, for all her whining about how the old dread leaders were short-sighted morons, Malicia is in the running to be one of the worst.

She COULD stand to the side, let everyone weaken themselves fighting the dead king, then polish off everyone once the war is over.

She COULD help the alliance, earning her a shitload of leaverage to use in the future to ensure Praes will always be in a good spot.

INSTEAD, she has made certain that if the Alliance wins, they will do everything they can to burn her to the ground, and if the Dead win, they will just sweep Praes like everybody else.

There is no winning for Praes in this situation.

laguz24

Personally, I think that it is the subtle influence of the dread empress Name, when the story says that you should be short-sighted, yes you will be. When Amadeus finally gets around to claiming the tower, he will bring it and the entire nobility crashing down preferably with goblin fire.

flashburn283

Can fate really be giving her blinders big enough that she doesn't realize she is acting just like EVERY other dread ruler in history?

[Liliet](#)

I think the issue is that [she thought that] she couldn't really 'stand aside and let the alliance do things' without declaring for Amadeus – audibly to her nobility confirming that he gets to control what she does by choosing his alliances even when they go against her previous actions.

And she prioritized asserting independence from him over... literally every other consideration in the situation.

Ah, trauma. Isn't it fun!

[sengachi](#)

I'm not actually sure she could wait for the Dead King to be pushed back and then come in to mop up.

Think about it, at the end of the Dead King conflict it's practically certain (if he loses) that there will be a whole posy of new heroes who just reached their absolute peak by pushing back (or killing!) the Dead Freaking King. If she comes in with some backstabbing right after that, that makes her Saruman in the Lord of the Rings epilogue. The far weaker, much less powerful villain who messed up the heroes' homeland while they destroyed the great evil, who now gets casually mopped up as part of the falling action.

That's not a good Story for Malicia.

Liliet

...and if the alternative to backstabbing would most definitely have ended up being conceding to Cat's demand that she abdicate, because Cat would 100% demand that.

Shveiran

Honestly, I don't think Malicia has that many options right now.

Her plan was – I think – to have everyone weaken themselves against the DK while preserving enough of her strength that taking her down at the end of the Bone War was simply not an option. That was made rather harder by Amadeus' decision and the Civil War she is stuck in.

Right now, I think she sees her goal have a much smaller margin of error (aka, how weak the Alliance has to be while also managing to not lose to the DK) but is still a possible mark to hit; so she goes at it through the Mercantis plot.

Point is, though that is certainly playing with fire, I don't think she has many options.

If she turned against the DK, the Alliance would not forget her part in causing all of this. She'd be taken down eventually, there is no walking away from that.

As for standing quietly to the side, I think she would if she thought that the Alliance would win by a narrow enough margin without her intervention; my guess is (purely speculation here) that she doesn't believe that to be the case.

Bottom line... I don't think Malicia is making "dread empress induced" stupid mistakes. My beef with her actions is because of their morality, not their stupidity. I disagree with her goals and priorities, but if I accept them as valid I see nothing stupid in the way she pursues them.

Bellower

Little did the first prince realize that the Revenant known as the Cold Poultry slain centuries earlier, had infiltrated Salia. Through cunning guile and wicked planning it had disguised itself as an innocent afternoon meal. It Successfully ruined her schedule on that specific day by being two portions to large All according to the Hidden Horror's design. This small victory in the name of its dark master would spell doom for the continent.

Walter

It is intensely weird to me that the economy of Procer is still reliant on Mercantis coinage to function, in the sense that there is still an economy of Procer. Like, at some level, somewhere in the pipes, for the lack of coinage to matter someone must be like "I won't give you, the Grand Alliance, these war materials,

unless you pay me. I'll sit here on these swords/armor/wagons/food/whatever until the Dead slaughter myself and my family."

Like, are there Dead King Denialists? Surely in the face of 'a literal army of the Dead is coming to commit genocide, they have so declared and enacted in the north already, you are surrounded by the refugees of their past slaughters' folks would all pitch in. I totally get the Mirror Prince plan of getting ready to backstab your unwelcome allies after the fact, that makes sense, but the fact that they still need to pay folks in any coin other than 'we are dying to defend you and once we are gone so are you' is pretty severe.

It makes me think Malicia is at work in bigger ways than we've had hinted. She may have convinced the Mercanti that they can do a deal like hers with DK and he'll let them live and pay them even more gold.

[sengachi](#)

Welcome to the perils of Game Theory. There will always be some asshole willing to bet that the great and terrible universal problem can be solved without them, and they'll be in a better position at the end of it if they don't pitch in.

[Liliet](#)

My guess for who's demanding the coin is: Southern principalities, possibly Levant and Free Cities (Mercantis selling weapons, etc).

And yes, they're absolutely being assholes about it, but it sort of makes sense: AFTER the Dead King is beaten (they're all presuming he obviously WILL be), who's left with what? They all want to be the one standing with the most advantage, note that even Vivienne is maneuvering to come out on top at the end – not because she's not willing to give it her all, but because otherwise Callow will get eaten after the war.

Anyone who's not playing this game will get eaten after the war if even one person/entity did. It's the shittiest Prisoner's Dilemma ever, where even one person defecting will fuck everyone else over if they don't all defect too, and there are too many players for any guarantees.

Shveiran

"The spice must flow."

It doesn't have to be about denialists or profiteers; it can be about people needing money to live. It's not necessarily about people telling Procer "I won't sell you these here hens to feed your troops".

It's about them needing money to continue to give them hens tomorrow.

Because hens need to heat, need warmth and shelter.

If you don't sell the hens, but gift them, how are you going to pay the woodcutters that give you the wood to warm yourself and your hens? How are you going to pay what you feed the animals? How are you going to pay the guy that repays the roof? Are they all going to work for free because you give the hens for free to Procer?

If they do, how are they then warming, feeding and clothing themselves and their families to keep doing that work through time?

Thing is, this war isn't a one-time sacrifice; you can't chip in once and be done with it.

It is a continued effort and it must be sustained through time; to be sustained, it has to be SUSTAINABLE.

Economics is complicated, and everything is connected. If the system goes through stress it becomes fragile, brittle. That's what's happening here, I think. Not assholes being assholes (though there could be some, sure: there are always some assholes) but people needing coin to live and the system being vexed by the war efforts.

To make war against the dead abomination of all that is good and pure, "the spice must flow".

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

Yes, in a case like this, a war of extermination, even in a medieval setting we would have a command economy emerging. Even moreso. Satan and his army of the damned are invading. Money and debt would have a place but it would be subservient to the war effort, used as units of measurement.

I wonder if there are watsonian reasons for this or the doylist reason that the author adheres to the paramount importance of credit and cash flows.

I'm not pessimistic about it, the author has time and again surprised me positively.

Point Point

There are a few issues with a command economy on Calernia.

First, there is no centralized government of the Grand Alliance that can issue unquestioned orders. Maybe Catherine could issue arbitrary orders to Callow and expect them to be followed, but her situation is unique in that most of Callow's ruling class was wiped out, so much of the nation is now managed by a government that Catherine set up herself, and she has the power to punish anyone who disobeys.

We have a much better idea of Cordelia's limits, especially since the coup. She can only do so much without the assent of the Highest Assembly, and that includes ordering the other Princes and Princesses to fund the war effort. And with the war ongoing, she also needs to make sure that she doesn't burn so many resources that Procer is unable to make more.

Second, each member of the Grand Alliance wants to ensure that they can survive after the war. If Catherine did order all of Callow's resources put into the war, she would be leaving it vulnerable to yet another Praesi invasion, and at a time when all of Callow's allies would be just as vulnerable, and likely unable to lend significant support.

And to deal with those, they need to trade with external entities, which really wouldn't be part of any command economy.

Of course, they still need to focus everything on the war as much as possible. This chapter gives us a look at what that means: extensive loans and deals that enable Cordelia to continuously funnel resources into the war effort, while preventing Procer from falling apart.

Speck of Stardust

eh everyone who isn't directly on the front lines still believe the heroes will win the day.

Like the Dead king himself wasn't planning on trying to win until the end of the last book because he didn't think he could. Frankly unless the Allies start losing rather than simply 'holding' nobody is going to change their tone.

[Liliet](#)

Command economy? How?

There is not a unified Calernian government, and any government – Proceran, Callowan, Levantine – depends on passive consent of the governed.

Some people are shitty and/or idiots, and they're enough to ruin it for everyone else. See also: Rozala being deeply, deeply disappointed in her fellow rulers at Princes' Graveyard.

[sengachi](#)

I really loved this chapter. Seeing snippets of all these characters and getting caught up in the rush of politics is really wonderful to read.

Interlude: Terms

"The doom of carefully laid plans is two unfeeling sisters by the names of mishap and surprise."

– King Pater of Callow, the Unheeding

"She'll be here in two days, we believe."

Masego thoughtfully peered down at the blade, insofar as it could truly be called that.

Though Helmgard had eventually been able to forge a sheath for it, an ornate affair of enameled steel, even that skilled heroine's finest work had not proved sufficient for full containment. The sheathed blade was being kept in a deep pool of ice cold water so that the power it constantly emanated would be dispersed, though to his practiced eyes it seemed like there would be need for more liquid: as matters stood, the surface of the pool subtly stirred as if touched by winds and the Hierophant believed that someone dipping a finger into the water was near certain to lose it. The aspect that Catherine had extracted of the Saint of Swords' corpse had been a temperamental thing even *before* seven Named and one had lent their hand to making a proper artefact of it. Masego was careful not to stand too close to the edge of the pool, for the edge of his robes would be no more immune to the power than flesh, and he frowned. Though the capacity of what had been forged here could not be denied, he suspected that he might well be scolded for the unfortunate impracticalities of certain aspects of it.

The odds were at least six in ten that anyone drawing the blade would die, after all.

"And you're not listening to me in the slightest, are you?" the Rogue Sorcerer sighed.

"Perhaps if we made a suit of armour," Masego considered. "That allows one to withstand using it."

Though in principle he supposed use would be 'withstood', if at the likely loss of limb and or head. It was all a matter of defining the acceptable boundaries of loss. It would take significant time and effort to create such a suit of armour, however, and a wielder for the blade would have to be decided upon first. Such matter, to his admittedly half-hearted understanding of the politics involved, might become somewhat contentious.

"You could at least deny it," the Rogue Sorcerer complained.

What were they talking about again? Hierophant vaguely remember talk about hearings, and beliefs. A trial of some sort, he decided.

"I agree," Masego said, which usually got him out of these situations.

A heartbeat passed.

"Yet we should discuss it in greater detail with the others," he cunningly added.

It would not do to accidentally approve of another bout of foolishness like a wine cellar being added to the Workshop, even if acceding to that request had ended up making the Hunted Magician unusually agreeable for a few weeks. Either that or drunk, Masego could sometimes find it hard to tell.

"You only ever say that when you haven't been listening, Masego," Roland said. "It's the single most transparent evasion in an arsenal made of particularly thin air."

Hierophant's brow furrowed. He'd been seen through, then. Fortunately, Indrani had taught him how to escape this sort of situations flawlessly. Pushing down his general dislike of physical contact with anyone but a few, he laid a hand on Roland's shoulder and put on a sympathetic expression.

"I am flattered by your interest," he said, "but I do not reciprocate the attraction."

Roland looked down at the hand, then back up at him. It would probably take a few heartbeats to work, Masego mused. Referring even obliquely to sex made people skittish, which made sense as it seemed like a lot of trouble for middling returns. It wasn't like children couldn't be made with the proper alchemies, either, though admittedly the lack of soul might be off-putting to some.

"It is important to me, my friend," the Rogue Sorcerer slowly said, "that you understand the Archer is not an appropriate person to take cues from."

Masego's brow rose, loosening the silken blindfold before this glass eyes.

"In what context?" he asked.

"In *any* context," Roland feelingly said.

That sounded rather dubious but then, for all his intelligence and learning, the man was a hero. And Proceran as well, which some of the bolder treatises about bloodlines from the ninth century considered to be a birth defect. Masego withdrew his hand, having left it there quite long enough.

"As you no doubt already knew," Roland said, tone rather pointed for some reason, "Queen Catherine has reached out to one of the boundary stations and informed the garrison that she will be arriving within two days."

It would take the better part of a day to get to the Arsenal proper from any boundary station as well, Masego knew. He'd never known the translocation to happen in less than six hours, and it had to be initiated at the proper time besides.

"It will be good to see her," Hierophant agreed.

"It will," Roland sighed, then muttered under his breath about herding cats.

That was a notoriously difficult activity, Masego knew, which meant the other scholar had likely reached a dead end in one of his research ventures. Hierophant could sympathize, given that proving his Quartered Seasons theory had become increasingly difficult. If there was truly a fourth realm of power out there, or even the husk of one, it was resisting his best efforts to locate and measure it. Yet Catherine's return, he thought with a brightened mood, would – as if often did – open up the option of using overwhelming brute force against a complex problem.

"Is this why Tomas and Helmgard have been holed up in their private workshops for two days?" he suddenly frowned. "Catherine wouldn't insist on running them ragged to finish the last touches on the Mirage, she's always found the Observatory quite sufficient for all her needs."

Masego allowed himself a degree of pride over that last truth, for he'd known granting his request to build in those first months after her coronation had been an extension of trust on her part. It was deeply pleasant to know he'd not failed that trust. Besides, while she knew neither the Blind Maker nor the Bitter Blacksmith he doubted Catherine would want them to face consecutive sleepless nights on her behalf.

"It's not for her personal use, it's for a full council session of the Grand Alliance's highest officers," Roland said, as if he ought to already know this. "Twilight's Pass sent the Kingfisher Prince to speak in its name, but neither Princes Rozala nor the Iron Prince will be able to make the journey. That means the Mirage will have to be fully functional or we'll be relying on constant scrying-chains."

Hierophant idly wondered if he should start paying more attention at the daily evening briefings of the Belfry. Maybe, since he'd had no notion of any of this. Would he? Probably not.

"The Order cadres in Salia would prove sufficient for the task, when it comes to Vivienne and the First Prince," Masego said.

It was a little unseemly, resorting to such slick wiles to ascertain if either of these would be coming. Yet to do otherwise would shatter the illusion he'd been maintaining that he devoted his full attentions to any part of those meetings that was not about funding or the attribution of staff.

"It won't be necessary, with both of them here in person," Roland replied. "Mind you, there might be as much as a week between Queen Catherine and the arrival of the rest of them so we're not out of time quite yet."

"It would be best to be ready ahead of time in case of any surprises, though," Masego caught on. "That is reasonable. I'll take a look at the complex myself."

"That would be appreciated," Roland said, inclining his head.

Hierophant briskly nodded but cast a lingering look at the sheathed sword within the waters. When the other Named moved he willed one of the glass orbs within his skull to pivot and watch him, noting the short-sleeved cloth shirt and simple trousers the other man wore. Tinkering clothes, the kind that would not get caught on things and would not be a significant monetary loss were they irreparably damaged. The shorter Named strode up the five steps to the edge of the pool, only there ending his advance. Out of politeness Masego kept an eye on him, even if he did not turn his head.

"We still haven't agreed on a name for her, have we?" the Rogue Sorcerer mused.

"It is not a sentient artefact, it cannot have a gender," Hierophant noted. "And I remain in favour of *Severance*."

"*Severity* has the better ring to it, as far as I'm concerned," Roland replied.

"It hardly matters," Masego said, "unless one adheres to that Pelagian nonsense about term resonance."

Though Procer's sorcery was largely of the unfortunate Jaquinite mold, there were several enclaves in the Arlesite territories where older methods were at work. The Pelagian theory of magic was a child's mimicry of what the Gigantes could do with Ligurian methods, liberally seasoned with ignorant mysticism and rites more religious than magical. Pelagia herself had been famous in her time for her splendid enchantments, and some of that talent still remained in those who claimed to be the inheritors of her ways, but the few shards of truth to be found there buried in a sea of drivel.

"I do believe in it," Roland reminded him.

Ah. He'd quite forgot that, admittedly.

"Naming something cannot stabilize its 'nature', which is a rather dubious concept in any case," Masego bluntly said. "There has been no dependable evidence of this being the case."

"When it comes to most things, I would agree," the Rogue Sorcerer said, then he flicked a glance at the blade in the water.

Ever-roiling, as if waiting for the hand that would wield it.

"But there are bodies in Creation that obey different rules as the rest," he said. "How can I not believe that, having seen it with my own eyes?"

"We are all ignorant children trying to piece together the truths of titans," Masego said, "but the moment, Roland, that was we are *satisfied* with an explanation we are lost. Observation is not understanding, and is there anything as hateful as willfully lingering in your own ignorance?"

The other man's lips quirked.

"You've a surprisingly poetic bent, on occasion," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "But in the end, my friend, you are a scholar of the Gift while I remain a mere practitioner. If I only ever used what I understand, I would use nothing at all."

"You are deepening your faults beyond the reasonable," Hierophant informed him. "Though on occasion you act more like a collector than a mage, you've also used sorcery from every extant theory of magic without going stark-raving mad."

That was, as far as Masego knew, largely unprecedented. At best one of the Gifted would borrow insights from other approaches to sorcery, as delving deep into another after already being taught tended to learn to severe mental sicknesses as well as deeper spiritual weaknesses. In this matter Hierophant suspected that it was one of the Rogue Sorcerer's own aspects that shielded him from the backlash inherent in genuinely believing often fundamentally opposing facts about magic, the same that allowed him to flawlessly wield any sort of magical artefact he touched: *Use*, simply termed for how frightfully deep the waters of it ran.

"Collector's accurate enough," Roland quietly said. "Though I like to believe myself a principled specimen of the breed."

The man was in an odd mood, one Masego found it hard to decipher, so he decided to press forward.

"Would you accompany me to the Mirage?" Hierophant asked. "If I find defects in the work, I'll have to seek you out regardless."

"If that is agreeable," Roland replied. "Shall we?"

Masego nodded. A few steps took them away from the pool where the blade that once been an aspect lay sheathed and seething, and the pulsing runes carved into the otherwise bare stone walls shone brighter as the pair of them left the room before winking out. Behind them, enchanted doors barred themselves shut and they continued across the granite walkway leading them further from the cube they'd been inside of. The holy water within, regularly blessed by priests, swept over the walkway the moment their feet reached the other side: the wretched Blessed Artificer, though utterly unpleasant in most regards, had been somewhat helpful in providing mechanisms that would allow the walkway to rise and lower without relying on sorcery the blessed water might disrupt. The precautions were, in the end, warranted: that blade was, so far, the closest to a weapon capable of destroying the Dead King the Arsenal had come to making.

Another set of enchanted doors closed behind them as the pair entered the Depository proper, which Masego tended to think of as an overly grandiose name for what was in effect a glorified warehouse. There were parts of it more protected and restricted than others, the one they were leaving most of all, but the least secure parts were typically large rooms full of crates awaiting shipping out and not some mysterious maze of wonders. The nature of the men and women the two Named encountered after passing another three protective chokepoints reflected this. There were few of the scholars in red, white or bronze – Gifted, priests, academics – that were everywhere in the branches of the Belfry. Instead it was armed guards, handpicked from the different hosts of the Grand Alliance in equal numbers, and workers that they came across. Most bowed, though unlike scholars they tended to aim the courtesy more towards Roland than himself.

Masego asked of his companion's latest venture, a runic seal meant to be able to impress that same rune into cloth or wood and have it magically functional, as they walked and found himself engrossed in the pleasant conversation as they made their way out of the Depository, through the curling hallways of the Knot and through that oft-messy and crowded crossroads up warded stairs and into the silent hush of the Chancel. There only a few were allowed entry, and the wards guarding the sanctum had been of his own design. Though the Chancel was the smallest section of the Arsenal, it held within its walls several matters of variable importance: the central warding array, the restricted stacks and the offices of the Arsenal treasury. It also held the reason the two Name had come: the great enchanted room called the Mirage, which Masego suspected might just be the first example of the sorcery that would come to replace scrying.

The lower level belonged to the treasury and the restricted stacks, the latter of which being warded and guarded, but the Mirage and the central warding array were further above and even more heavily restricted. At least the Mirage was not the furthest

level up, where the array awaited: the guards here, heavily armed and armoured as they were, were not allowed beyond the first checkpoint. The second gate would open only for a drop of the proper blood, fresh from the body, and would fill the hallway with hellflame should it not be provided quickly enough. The last and seemingly third gate was kept closed unless one of a limited set of keys was used, though depending on *which* was another action was required beyond it – else a mounting accumulation of power in a hidden enchantment would grow to trigger an alarm ward. The Mirage was meant to be used, however, and restricting access too much would be inconvenient.

A series of comprehensive checks and another set of wards were all the two Named had to wait through before entering, though the guard captain supervising notified them there were already people within.

“Scholars?” Roland asked, brow rising.

“Chosen, Lord Sorcerer,” the soldier replied. “And one of the Damned as well.”

Masego strode past the two of them, mildly curious but rather more interested in inspecting the latest refinements of the Mirage. The room itself was not so large, a circle of a mere two hundred feet in diameter, but it had still taken a colossal amount of work to ensure that not so much as speck of the floor, walls and ceiling would offer magical interference with the delicate sorceries meant to be worked within. For that reason the great round table at the heart had been made of stone as well, as materials that had previously been alive had been judged risky, though the parts worthy of admiration were not these. Around the table, exactly twenty armchairs of stone had been placed within boxes of glass just slightly apart from each other. Linked to the scrying pool hidden beneath the table, ropes of a dozen different purified metals – including grey adamant, which only the Gigantes knew how to make – connected to different parts of the ritual arrays hidden under the floor of the seats, connected to the glass of the boxes through a superbly clever bridging enchantment of the Repentant Magister’s invention.

The result was a nearly perfect illusion carried by the glass: with the proper preparations made on both sides, anyone seated at the table of the Mirage would be within an illusion perfectly mimicking the immediate surroundings and individual of whoever was being scryed by the central ritual. When Catherine would claim her seat here, she’d be able to converse with the likes of Rozala Malanza and the Iron Prince as if they were all truly in the same room. The difficult part had been creating the portable kits that’d allow the illusion to carry from the *other* side, and there imprecisions remained in need of fixing. But an elementary kit for connection had already been provided to all three fronts,

and at this point the burden of work was largely on the Arsenal's side: it was the room here that needed to be flawless so that everything would function. Which was why Masego's lips thinned when he saw that one of the glass boxes had been opened, the seat within removed and the tile of stone covering the hidden arrays taken out.

Of the three people already in the room, two were kneeling and digging into the entrails of the array while the last was on his feet and looking down with apparent indifference. The Hunted Magician, as the only one not occupied, was the first to notice Hierophant's entrance. The dark-haired man in ornate court dress took a bow.

"Lord Hierophant," the Magician said. "An unexpected pleasure."

The sound of boots scuffing stone informed Masego that Roland had caught up, and the Rogue Sorcerer answered before he bothered to.

"Magician," Roland said. "Shouldn't you be working on a replacement wardstone for the Army of Callow?"

The distaste between those two had been instant and instantly shared, which Hierophant found a waste given that they were the two finest Proceran practitioners he'd met.

"Have my hours suddenly become accountable to the likes of you, Sorcerer?" the Magician nonchalantly replied.

"A pleasure to see you as well, Lord Magician," Masego finally replied.

If he was lucky, his intervention might even end the bickering before it truly began.

"Roland, kindly abstain," one of the kneeling pair called out. "I was the one who requested his assistance."

The Repentant Magister rose to her feet after speaking, smoothing down her robes.

"Assistance with what?" Masego asked.

"Worry has been expressed that the Black Queen's mere strength in the Night might serve as a disruption of the Mirage," the Hunted Magician said. "And so there was a need to get at the lower arrays for testing."

The Proceran villain had been the one to design the enchantment that kept the stone tiles in place, so both his presence and the way he'd merely been waiting around when Masego entered were explained in a single stroke. Yet a question was begged by what he'd been told.

"And when it comes to matters of Night," Hierophant said, turning his head towards the Magister, "you did not come to consult me?"

"She didn't need to," the last person in the room said, rising to her feet.

The Blessed Artificer smiled tightly in his direction. Her dark skin and golden eyes, the signature of Wasteland highborn of the oldest and most powerful lines, were always jarring to behold when paired with the truth of what she was: a priest with a blacksmith's hammer, an ignorant meddler of the worst sort. Masego was not Roland, to let his irrationally strong dislike of the other Named affect his judgement, but neither would he deny that something in him always itched to *crush her work utterly* whenever he caught sight of it. It was quite distressingly visceral a reaction.

"After all, she already had an expert on hand," the Blessed Artificer said.

"You have never even encountered Night," Masego replied in clipped tones. "And you hardly have the proper academic frame to even begin to conceive of it."

"You're a Praesi miscarriage of a person," the Artificer smiled. "You've no proper frame to conceive of anything at all."

Her hand slipped into her tunic, fingers closing around some half-seen device, Light bloomed and then Masego saw nothing at all. Not that he'd fallen into unconsciousness, but rather that some sort of device was interfering with the sight of his eyes. How deeply unpleasant of her.

"Adanna," the Rogue Sorcerer reproached.

Witness, Masego thought, and his Name sang. His eyes burned behind the blindfold, with Summer flame and something entirely his own, and in the Artificer's grasp he found the whirling device of steel and Light she'd used to blind him.

"**Wrest**," the Hierophant coldly said, raising a hand.

The Light ripped out of the device, uncontested for the lack of will behind it, and it formed into a ball above the palm of his hand. He closed his fingers into a fist. When he opened his palm again, it was to reveal dispersing wisps of Light.

"You broke my device," the Blessed Artificer harshly said.

"Be thankful it was not your spine," the Hierophant replied, just as harshly.

Both eyes on the heroine, he did not catch sight of the sculpture until it bounced off the side of his head with a perfect bopping sound.

—

On most days, Indrani was all for the amount of pretty people in this room getting all red-cheeked and flustered but sadly this looked a lot more likely to end up in the Eleventh Crusade than clothes hitting the floor. Something had to be done, so Archer turned to a method that had never failed her: throwing things at people until they did what she wanted. The wooden sculpture she'd been working on over the last wander just because it made Alder and Aspasia embarrassed bounced off Zeze's head magnificently, catching the eye of all five other Named in their secret hush-hush magic room.

"Is that a naked woman?" the Repentant Magister asked, cocking her head to the side.

"Is that Catherine?" Masego asked, sounding rather curious.

Bless his soul, Indrani fondly thought, he no longer even bothered to comment on her tossing things at him.

"You've seen the Black Queen naked?" Roland asked, sounding shocked.

Indrani swaggered up to her paramour, throwing an arm around his shoulder so he'd be too distracted to mention it was the faint scar carved across the belly and not the nice ass that'd revealed the identity of the woman she'd been carving.

"He's been in her quite a bit, Ro-ro," Indrani told the Rogue Sorcerer, wagging her eyebrows.

"Quite regularly, during the Tenth Crusade," Masego agreed absent-mindedly, which was just perfect.

The Repentant Magister – Nephele, wasn't it? – cast a look at her carving that bore curiosity of more than merely academic nature, so Indrani almost patted herself on the back for being such a good friend. The Stygian heroine was quite the beauty, with those curls and curves, so one might even argue she was being a *very* good friend. Indrani's intentions to keep stirring the pot for entertainment and also the sake of peace, she supposed, were neatly waylaid by utter surprise when Masego turned and put a hand on her shoulder. He stood almost a head taller than she, Indrani froze when he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss on her right cheek and then the left. His lips were soft. He smelled of ink and cool stone.

She was *not* blushing.

"Welcome back, Indrani," Masego warmly said.

"Er, yes," she said. "Lovely to welcome you too. Back. You know what I mean."

"Not particularly," Masego cheerfully admitted.

He extricated himself from their embrace and she let him – she'd known from the start it would be best to let him set the boundaries of their involvement, when it came to physicality – only after they'd separated tugging down her tunic.

"You can keep the sculpture," Archer told the Magister, winking. "You know, for comparison purposes."

The Stygian reddened, speaking a denial in tradertalk that shouldn't fool anyone with any sense.

"What a delight to have you among us once more, Lady Archer," the Hunted Magician smiled at her.

Ah, yet another pretty one. That one was all about the chase, though, as Alamans tended to be – the way he was simultaneously pursuing the Bitter Blacksmith and the Blessed Artificer spoke to that. Both of them looked they wanted to cave in his head, on most occasion Indrani had seen, but also there seemed to be a lot of feeling reluctantly flattered. Right on time, the Blessed Artificer shot the man an unimpressed sideways look.

"Same, Mags," she drawled. "Brought in a new girl for you lot, so put on your fairday best."

"I would not dare to disappoint, Lady Archer," he drily replied.

"New girl, you said. A mage?" Roland asked.

He looked all hopeful now, which made it all the more a pleasure to crush his happiness. In her defence, Archer wouldn't have kept picking on the man if it wasn't so *fun*.

"She's called the Red Axe," Indrani grinned. "And she screws with magic just by being around it."

"That would be interesting to study," Zeze agreed, blind to the disappointed look on Roland's face.

"Brought in the rest of my band too," Archer idly mentioned.

"Rest and recovery, until we head out again. Magister, you know the Vagrant Spear right?"

"We fought together in Cleves," the heroine agreed. "Though I would not consider us closely acquainted."

The way Indrani had heard it Nephele had been pretty much a twat up there in Cleves, before she got her shit together, so she wasn't surprised to hear it. Then again, Cat did like the catty ones so it checked out.

"You'll be staying for some time, then?" Masego asked her.

"At least a week," Archer shrugged. "Why?"

"Catherine will be arriving in two days," he told her. "I'll have your affairs moved to my quarters."

Indrani suppressed a smile. It was pleasant to sleep in the same bed, and even more so when he seemed to enjoy that intimacy as well.

"You could buy me a drink first, at least," she said, fanning herself.

"A wine cellar has been added to the Workshop, so that shouldn't be necessary," Masego revealed.

Indrani flicked a look at the Hunted Magician, whose lips twitched, and she bestowed upon the man a nod of solemn approval. It was heartening to see at least one of these people had their priorities straight.

"That'll be fun to break into," Indrani mused, the eyes the calmed situation in the room and decided that if she left all the ingredients here the brew was likely to start boiling again. "Come with me to have a look at the Red Axe, would you? I want to know if the poor girl will be locked into a room for the rest of this or if she can wander around some."

To her appreciative surprise, Masego not only agreed but offered her his arm. Considering she'd made it clear that he shouldn't offer physical contact unless he wanted it, a lesser woman might have been chuffed by how unhesitatingly he extended the unspoken offer. Not Indrani of course, unless you squinted a lot in the right light. She threaded her arm through hers and offered the rest of the Named a nonchalant wave, allowing herself to be escorted back out.

"So, is it me or do you have even more Named kicked around than before?" she asked as they began their way down the stairs.

"It isn't you," Masego replied. "The First Prince got her hands on the Forgetful Librarian, but we've added two since your last visit: the Blind Maker and the Doddering Sage."

"Heroes?" Indrani idly asked.

"We are not certain for the Sage," he admitted. "His moments of clarity are rare, if incredibly useful. We've also a guest in the

person of the Wicked Enchanter, though he'll not be staying. He's more a hedge mage than a true practitioner, even if he has mastered some lesser arts, so his value outside the field is limited."

"Anything fun?" Archer said, mildly curious.

"Mind control, though rather imperfect," Zeze replied. "Some elemental conjuring as well, but his arsenal is essentially varied methods of domination."

Indrani's steps stuttered.

"The Wicked Enchanter," she slowly said. "Where did he come from?"

"Valencis originally," Masego said, "though he spent some years in Helike and lately in -"

"- Orense," Indrani finished. "He was in Orense, where he slew and robbed and raped his fill in the villages around the outskirts of the Brocelian."

"You have heard of him before," Masego realized.

"I just spent two months travelling with the heroine he made," she grimly replied. "So we best hurry and keep them apart, or there'll be blood on the floor."

They were too late.

Archer realized, with a sinking feeling, that she might just have helped make a very large mess.

[esryok](#)

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Big Brother

Ooh, I think a Villain might be dead...
At least, I dearly hope so. That asshole sounds like he deserves it.

[Tohron](#)

If the heroine in question is the Red Axe, the ability balance would definitely be in her favor.

Shveiran

On one hand, damn right he does.

On the other...

this is a mess. It is a blatant breach of the Truce and Terms. Now Cat will either have to ask for the head of (what could realistically turn out to be) a rape victim that took revenge on her abuser after the system let him go scot free, or suffer an emhorrhage of Villains.

It's... not a pretty picture.

[Liliet](#)

Maybe not necessarily head. There's got to be SOME demonstrative reparations demanded, enough for villains to feel like heroes do in fact have a strong incentive to NOT touch them under the new system.

Shveiran

In theory, I can agree with you, yet what reparation could possibly be enough? This measure is meant to reassure people that superpowered zealots that could have both personal enmity to them and a divine mandate to clean off scum like them won't harm them.

It is either that, or any villain offered to join for an amnesty plays along only so long as they think they can't make a clean escape and make the heroes lose their tail while the white cloaks are very much occupied.

I don't think there is much that could work besides an unbending rule.

After all, Heroes are often all about personal sacrifice for the greater good. If there is a penalty to pay to get the bad guy, they'll pay it. Death may be harsh, yet... what else may suffice?

[Liliet](#)

That's a great question, and largely depends imho on what actually happened and how Cat manages to sell it.

[Adrian V](#)

Also remember the last conversation between Cat and the Barrow sword, so long as is practical to the war effort she will do what is necessary, thing is that part of it is the witness, even if she wants to and it's the most practical approach she has to respect the letter of the accords if not the spirit (which is what she prefers to do, follow the spirit of the accords that is), but I know this will actually be used for the benefit of the accords, I mean do you people seriously think something like this wasn't thought of? There must be clauses and whatever to deal with messes like this.....if there isn't a name for lawyers already there will most definitely be one soon enough xD

ninegardens

And thus it was, that Hakram's superior editing skill and foresight dealt with the current problem 8 months before it actually happened.

Shveiran

Rules lawyering this won't work. I'm pretty sure there are rules about this sort of things; I'm also pretty sure those rules involve the death penalty. Of course someone must have considered the possibility, but that doesn't change the fact that loopholes won't cut it: saying "look, we don't want to execute this kid" or "aha, but this word in this line actually refers to the ancient Arlesite precedent of the Renowned Twat, and thus raping made on Thursdays are exempt from the amnesty."

It won't satisfy the black shirts watching; if you ruleslawyer the T&T, they will do so themselves; they'll skirt the line of duty, they'll leave people to die, they'll curb their initiatives until you come back crawling to them because Villains do that shit better than the opposition. And Cat will have no ground to call them out on it because she would have done it first.

It doesn't matter if a clause exist; using it means a white cloak gets away with it, and once that happens there is no placating the fear that she was just the first instance.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah, there are basically only two ways that Red Axe would get to walk away from killing Wicked Enchanter. Option one – there's some sort of loophole in the pardon system, ie you only get pardoned for stuff that you selfreport or otherwise own up to and Wicked Enchanter left some significant stuff out. This is ...

unlikely, because if you're getting an automatic pardon for anything you say you did, there's effectively hff a zero point in leaving anything out. Especially if leaving something out would be grounds for you to not be covered by said pardon.

Option two – the Wicked Enchanter just did something in this encounter to seriously provoke the Red Axe in such a way that a lethal response is warranted, even under the Truce and Terms. This is perhaps even more unlikely, as that is both an incredibly high bar, and remarkably stupid.

Basically the best chance for the Red Axe to get away with killing the Wicked Enchanter would be if the Red Axe had witnessed the Wicked Enchanter having dealings with the Dead King or Malicia, or more likely an envoy or scrying link.

However, I fully expect that the Wicked Enchanter managed to push just about all of the Red Axe's buttons, but I also expect that he limited himself to verbal provocations and perhaps crude and/or suggestive gestures as provocations – or, in other words, staying clear of anything that could be grounds under the Truce and Terms for the Red Axe to attack him.

[Liliet](#)

There exists in the world a legal concept of “fighting words” – as in, a sufficient verbal provocation that the person who said it first counts as starting the fight.

Shveiran

Sure. However, including such a cause in the Truce and Terms would be ridiculous; this many cultures rubbing each other the wrong way? We saw heroes nearly drawing on each other, the T&T supposedly held for years without Named on the opposite sides snuffing one another.

Anything close to a “fighting words” clause would be abused to no end.

Plus, didn't Cat say to Tancred that grievances had to be reported, not acted upon?

[Liliet](#)

“Fighting words” is one thing, “fighting touching someone you'd previously raped” is another

and yes Catherine did say that, but there are different degrees of offense

SMR

He wasn't part of the Truce or Terms. Masego described him as a guest, rather than a member.

[Liliet](#)

A guest at the *Arsenal* because he'll be more useful in the field. He is absolutely part of the T&T.

Alex Straughan

I don't see that villain as a volunteer.

He was likely forcibly and violently conscripted into the army to fight undead on pain of death.

That's hardly 'scot free'.

And describing the Truce and Terms, as the system is a little disingenuous. It's not a court, it's a desperate measure to prevent an ascended lich from eating the continent.

Shveiran

Sure.

But try to step in Red Axe's shoes. Granted, we know next to nothing to her, but her story is closely bound to that of a Killgrave style enchanter that uses his skills to "kill, pillage and rape" as per Archer's description.

She is not necessarily a rape victim or the fiancée/sibling/friend of one such person, but since her Name is based on disrupting magic and bloodied weapons, I think it is a safe bet that that her coming into her Name was closely bound to that of the Wicked Enchanter.

She'd see him as a monster. The monster, maybe.

And now, rather than putting him out of his misery... the system tells him "if you fight the good fight, the slate is clean". Basically, from a heroine point of view, in exchange for doing what any decent living Named ought to do in the first place, something she may see as a moral imperative, he gets to be forgiven?

I think the T&T are the right idea, the only idea; but let's be real about it: the amnesty is always going to be an hard (if necessary) sell.

And though it is easy to recognize it as a necessity when you are not involved, that's harder when the monsters played a part in your own tragic backstory.

NerfContessa

Archer makes the best messes though.

And dang, I have missed zeze. In my youth I had a similar if lesser outlook to him, albeit focussed on physics instead. Sadly my mind was not made for higher level physics. Luckily my social prowess improved 8n the last decade. :p

Mental Mouse

> Archer makes the best messes though.

Oh, you have (had) no idea (yet). Read on...

Darkening

Roland and Masego are a really fun contrast in a lot of ways. The man that can cast any magic, but doesn't really understand them, and the man that can't cast any magic, but understands them deeply. A hero and a villain, the fact that roland seems to be a decent people person and masego is decidedly not... The list probably goes on lol. On another note, if that hero killed a villain that's going to be a delightful clusterfuck. Looking forward to seeing how the Terms are going to be enforced there. Does a hero killing a Villain mean the White Knight is obligated to kill the hero?

Oshi

It's a quieter part of Catherine's success. They are writing a story too. It's one of those subtler things I've noticed. Each time we see the glimpses of how the Accords are working you notice patterns of villains/heroes who complement each other along wwith ones who oppose.

RoflCat

Doubt it, to kill one for killing another would be a waste of manpower.

Furthermore, if she killed him out of personal revenge, it means she is unlikely to do it again since the only target of her revenge is now dead.

Which to be fair, it's surprising it took this long for this to happen considering it's a pretty well established fact by now that villain presence in an area will give birth to heroes, as Black can testify with all the ones he buried.

I think the most likely option is extra harsh deployment or something, though obviously after she's been trained enough she wouldn't ends up being +1 Revanant for Dead King.

hakureireimu

But if the sentence isn't harsh enough; that will be the end of the Truce and Terms, as no new Villain will join, and some of the existing ones might leave also.

Flameburst

Your points are entirely irrelevant. Not killing her sets the precedent that under the terms heroes may kill villains. That will immediately lead to the majority of villains abandoning the war.

Basically, if the terms are to be upheld, Hanno has no choice but to have the Red Axe executed. Problem is, that would feel like injustice to him, making it anathema to his core beliefs. And if he doesn't do it, cat can't either, or it will be seen as a villain killing a hero in retribution. A real catch 22...

Javvies

On the other hand, the Wicked Enchanter would have aligned onto the Truce and Terms/proto-Accords ... which explicitly includes a pardon for all previous crimes. Maybe there's a loophole there that you can only get a pass for stuff that you self-reported, and the Wicked Enchanter left something out that directly involved the Red Axe.

But ... I think as much as Hanno dislikes the necessity of giving blanket pardons to Villains, even when they've done straight up terrible things that under other circumstances would get them murdered even by other Villains ... Hanno would recognize that once they've been pardoned for past acts, doing anything or allowing anything to be done to them over those same past acts that they've gotten pardons for isn't justice for them.

This is an absolutely ugly situation that's a harsh test of the Truce and Terms and people's commitments to them.

If the Red Axe has killed the Wicked Enchanter ... however justified she might have been, however repulsive his actions were, it's a blatant and severe violation of the Truce and Terms ... and it can only end with the Red Axe being executed for that violation.

There might be a bit of wiggle room if he can be resurrected somehow (unlikely), or if he did something specific to provoke her in this most recent encounter.

Liliet

Why executed specifically???

Shveiran

Because no other price is steep enough. If you'd argue against this, please present at least one alternative option that you believe would satisfy the villains.

[Liliet](#)

That's a great fucking question. Luckily, I'm not Catherine whose job it actually is to come up with those 😊

Shikkarasu

Make her into an Akua-style puppet. Perhaps bound to something other than the Mantle of Woe so other Heroes could summon her into the fray.

Pros:

- Is a severe punishment
- Relatively small loss assets
- Isn't an end to her existence
- Why is the holy-warrior ghost not a trope? People were buried in the floor/walls of churches for that exact reason! It's like the coolest thing real world lore that *we just aren't using in fic...* A-hem, I mean, potential for Name growth

Cons:

- Something that Winter!Cat would do
- Justifications -will- matter to the Sword of Justice

[Liliet](#)

Note: it's Hanno's job to punish her, not Cat's. He's her representative. Cat's job is to demand justice from him, his is to mete it out.

Shveiran

if you can't picture a sustainable alternative, then why do you insist execution is not necessary?

[Liliet](#)

Because Catherine's (and Hanno's!) goal will be to avoid it, and Catherine tends to find ways get what she is aiming for.

Meta reasoning, really.

[Javvies](#)

Not exactly.

I'm pretty sure neither of them will emotionally

want to execute the Red Axe for killing the Wicked Enchanter.

But they won't have a choice.

Barring clear and convincing reasons to the contrary, Red Axe will need to be executed for such a blatant violation of the Truce and Terms in front of lots of both Heroic and Villainous witnesses.

Maybe, just maybe, if this had happened without so many witnesses, they could try to rules lawyer around maximum punishment for the Red Axe. But in the circumstances under which her attempt to use lethal force against a Villain covered under the Truce and Terms? They can't. Cat has to be seen as standing up for the rights and protection of Villains who are abiding by the Truce and Terms. For that matter, Hanno has to stand up for the principle that Heroes keep their word once given, and enforce the principle that if Villains are abiding by the Truce and Terms, the Heroes have to too.

Remember, none of this is happening in a vacuum. The Truce and Terms are helping to lay the groundwork and precedent to support the Accords. Plus, there's still that matter of the apparently existential war against the Dead King – and if the Villains think that the Truce and Terms aren't going to be enforced when a Hero violates them, they have little reason to stick to the rules themselves.

[Liliet](#)

I would like to note that we don't even know anyone is dead yet.

[Javvies](#)

Ergh.

Or, rather, their Priority won't, and cannot, be protecting the Red Axe.

Cat and Hanno have to prioritize protecting the Truce and Terms.

[Liliet](#)

Here's the thing: if something sounds Very Wrong about the situation that will likely be exceedingly common in the long run, then it will

continue to sound Very Wrong in the future as well.

I wouldn't be surprised if there was a literal exemption for sufficiently harsh personal scores – with a promise of protection but no promise of punishment.

Javvies

Thing is, the Truce and Terms after going to be of finite, albeit unspecified, duration. Until some amount of time after these war is over and the Accords can be negotiated and implemented. At which point, as long as you stay within the constraints of the Accords, it's open season on other Named.

The Truce and Terms are about making sure everybody works together to defeat the Dead King. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with that objective. And if someone doesn't have the self control to prioritize the war against the Dead King over personal issues (however justified), they're both a liability and an active threat to the war effort and the Truce and Terms.

I very much doubt that there's an exception in the Truce and Terms for nemesis-related acts. That runs counter to the very concept of "sign on and you'll get a pardon for past misdeeds and protection from other Named for the duration of the war".

Liliet

Mm, true.

We'll see 😊

Javvies

If the Red Axe has actually killed the Wicked Enchanter, and he didn't do anything to specifically provoke her *in this specific encounter* (that is, after both are signed onto the Truce and Terms), she will have violated the Truce and Terms in order to kill a signatory of the Truce and Terms.

That's effectively a soldier murdering a fellow soldier in a warzone. That's a death sentence in real life.

More to the point, if she doesn't get executed, the enforcement clauses of the Truce and Terms will not have sufficient teeth to both satisfy the Villains that they are actually going to be safe from the Heroes if they follow the rules, and convince the Villains that they should follow the rules and that they won't be able to get away with murdering Heroes who are subject to the Truce and Terms.

If Cat and Hanno are lucky, there's going to be a loophole in the pardon system (ie, you only get pardoned for stuff you selfreported and the Wicked Enchanter left some nasty stuff out) or extenuating circumstances of the moment that they can use to mitigate the punishment, but ... the enforcement of the Truce and Terms has to be strict and impartial.

Just like in real life, if a rape victim killed their attacker three months after they were attacked, nobody would like it, but they'd still have to charge the former with the murder of the latter, barring extenuating circumstances in the encounter when the murder happened (ie, the attacker tried to do it again, or some other grounds for self defense). Admittedly, in real life, the original rape victim would probably have decent odds of being able to get a sentence on the lower side or a reasonably favorable deal from prosecutors, or so one would hope.

It's an ugly situation, at best.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think the pardon requires reporting stuff.

However, I expect him to NOT have behaved perfectly without stain towards her, and there being some kind of "provocation" argument insertable.

Yep. It's ugly as fuck 😊

Shveiran

Provocations short of assault won't be enough. And given how he is being presented, that doesn't seem likely.

If you can kill signatories and live to tell the tale, this won't be the last incident.

[Liliet](#)

It was never going to be. You think there won't be heroes willing to sacrifice their own lives to bring down particularly nasty villains?

Shveiran

No.

Do I expect them to keep their sword in their pants while everyone is feuding on the Megalich and the living are treading in a house of glass? Yes.

That is what the T&T are about.

It's a temporary truce while a grave situation persists. And the thing about a truce is, they can break; if you don't stick the course, if you shelter those that don't, it all falls down. One can emphasize with Red Axe, most certainly, but she screwed up; she pulled a nega-Carrot and decided (possibly just in that moment of rage) that personal meant important.

This won't be the last time? Possibly. But that is beside the point.

For the Villains to trust the system, they need to know that the culprits will be dealt with most harshly, every time; this tells them the system has their back, and they need to watch out for just looners with a vigilante agenda.

It's either that, or lose half your Named manpower.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Admittedly, in real life, the original rape victim would probably have decent odds of being able to get a sentence on the lower side

That's a pretty recent development, and even now it's not such a sure thing. And there's still a lot of women serving life sentences (or the moral equivalent) for killing their abusers.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Admittedly, in real life, the original rape victim would probably have decent odds of being able to get a sentence on the lower side or a reasonably favorable deal from prosecutors,

Extending my other reply: In fact, women are still sometimes prosecuted for killing someone who was actually trying to rape them, or preparing to do so imminently. There's at least one of those currently in the news.

Mental Mouse

- 1) With the silence of Judgement, Hanno is learning to do more than just kill or walk away.
- 2) The amnesty applies to organized punishments and force-of-law stuff. Responding to personal victimization is likely to warrant more sophisticated response.

Bluntly, they'll have to do *something*, but not necessarily *kill* the Red Axe.

Liliet

Yeah, this.

Shveiran

Imagine if Squire Catherine and Swordsman William joined under the truce and terms. Heck, let's say Diabolist did after Liesse (yes, yes, I know, but play along), and Laurence with her.

These are the kind of enmities the Truce and Terms need to regulate. Named have stories and stories have MORE THAN ONE CHARACTER. Red Axe's situation is unlikely to be unique.

Several of these Named may have crossed path before, and chances are that happened in strife.

What penalty short of death would have ensured that this hypothetical Catherine would not try to kill Diabolist? What penalty could have stayed William's hand or that of teh Saint fo Swords? It could be argued even death is insufficient.

Either the Terms are inviolable, or they are nothing. There is no wiggle room, not for something this new, this unprecedented, this fragile. Not for something many Villains likely already want to wiggle out of: fighting the DK is not fun, and some of them are not interested in glorious combat.

If you's argue other options could work, please provvide one. I do not wish to be pedantic, but I feel the burden of proof lies on your side this time.

Liliet

Note that a large argument for villains to join up is “you do that or we kill you”.

Sure, there’s also deliberately set up incentive for those who would join on their own, but fucks at the level of Wicked Enchanter? This was basically Gallowborne equivalent for him.

Shveiran

These are Named.

You can conscript them at swordpoint, sure; but you can’t make them stay unless you convince them that they are better off sticking to it.

If the amnesty doesn’t hold, the villains will leg it as soon as they are able.

If they are watched, you can’t deploy them effectively because they can’t be alone, and as soon as they can shoot their guardian in the leg and leave them to the Revenants, they will.

Most of the Villains are not overly powerful. No incentive is worth sticking in the war if you know the likes of the White Knight or the Gray Pilgrim can slit your throat in your bed without the Black Queen flipping the table for it.

It’s a sucker’s bet, it’s a martyr’s sacrifice, and these are the VILLAINS. I’m not completely sure CATHERINE would accept this kind of bullshit.

It’s not about the Wicked Enchanter not being a monster, is about the amnesty being a guarantee or not. It’s about a heroine killing a villain under truce and surviving.

Maybe a few, like the Barrow Sword, will go “come and get me, bitches”, but most will flee. I have my doubts even on him, frankly, and he is fucking Levantine.

[Liliet](#)

The amnesty is from the government and from the officials of the Grand Alliance – Black Queen and Grey Pilgrim indeed.

There’s a hell of a distance between that and ‘a heroine this villain literally made by his actions’.

I wonder how detailed the Truce & Terms are 😊

Shveiran

You'll have to explain this one to me a bit more, I'm afraid.

A heroine signed the terms.

A Heroine broke the Truce.

That heroine must be executed, or everyone will see that the truce and terms both don't prevent them from acting out if they wish to and don't protect them from being attacked by their temporary allies.

What does Red Axe not being a head of state means?
The T&T are also about Named, and she was a signee!

Liliet

Eh, nobody says execution specifically has to be the punishment. It has to be something severe enough to serve as a demonstration, but death does not really have to be it IMHO.

Mental Mouse

Consider the two named attacks on Catherine herself – the guy who tried slipping into her tent to slit her throat got “made an example”.... But for the straightforward one, who was open about trying to kill his way to the top, she just kicked his butt.

RoflCat

Because death is a release. The ‘criminal’ learned nothing, repent nothing, repaid nothing, they’re now ‘free’ from the crime they committed.

That’s why Cath is still keeping Akua around with some kind of plan for her ot eventually repay for the 100,000 souls she killed.

Shveiran

You are arguing for sanctions as a re-education of the convict.

For domestic crimes, you’d be right (or at least, you’d have several philosophers arguing the same point, as well as my own much less impressive approval).

This is not a domestic crime.

Sanctions have also a different objective: to discourage the repetition of the infraction through the fear the sanction provokes and to make the convict unable to commit the infraction twice.

This is an international treaty.

Re-educating the convict is not a priority, here.
The priority is enforcing sanctions that force partners to keep playing nice and prevents them from sinking the boat.

RoflCat

Well, if they set precedent of killing = death, guess what, it might actually have OPPOSITE effect.
Because if you know you're going to die after you kill one, what stops you from just going on a rampage and killing more while going out in a blaze of glory (applies to both Heroes and Villains btw)?
Is the side that suffer going to demand your side sacrifice unrelated people just to balance the scale? Unlikely since that's going to raise a whole different issue.

If Cath want to keep the Named in line, the punishment can't be severe enough to tilt them over the edge.

[Javvies](#)

The Red Axe has to be turned into an example.

This means an execution, and probably a brutal one, not something clean like beheading. But it still has to be quick enough that Aspects or other Name tricks can't be used to escape. So maybe beheading after all.
Her corpse may or may not end up getting nailed to a cross after.

Especially since the Red Axe committed a major and blatant violation in front of all kinds of witnesses from both sides and people from all members of the Alliance.

And, because this is (presumably) the first such incident.

Examples have to be made to deter repeats.

And, sure, it's possible that a sufficiently determined Heroic type would consider the cost worth it and/or take the mandatory death penalty as motivation for going to kill multiple Villains in quick succession. However, that is not going to be the normal response.

Plus, it's not just about how the Heroes react – the Villain reaction is equally important, and they aren't going to accept anything less than the death of a Hero who breaks the rules to kill one of them who was (presumably) following them.

RoflCat

Yes she need to be an example, one that doesn't cause that blaze of glory death story down the line.

>However, that is not going to be the normal response.

Except Named are NOT normal.

It does not matter if it's rare, as long as that option exist, it WILL happen eventually, and when it does the whole Accord goes out the window when one person pull that mass killing before dying thing.

Heck, even before the Terms exist we had example in Saint of Swords already, and we've also seen Names trying to skirt the edge of what's allowed from both sides.

Javvies

The point of the Accords is to lay down rules of engagement and the equivalent of the Geneva Conventions for Named conflict. Enforced by everybody uniting to come down hard on anyone who breaks the rules.

The point of the Truce and Terms is to both lay groundwork and foundation for the Accords after the war, but also to keep everybody pointed at the Dead King during the war.

—
You're missing the point — sure, a single Hero trying to kill as many Villains as they can before they get stopped hard (or vice versa), is not going to be the standard Named reaction to ther Accords/ Truce and Terms.

That is an extreme outlier scenario, and would be resolved with extreme prejudice, ideally by a unified team of Heroes and Villains working together to stop the offender. And the offender would be turned into an example, most likely ending up dead, if not worse.

And as long as that kind of action remains an extreme outlier scenario, and gets dealt with firmly by both Heroes and Villains in unity, the Truce and Terms, and ultimately the Accords, will hold up.

The Truce and Terms prohibit Hero/Villain conflict during the war against the Dead King (and presumably also in the inevitable intervention against Malicia), not forever. After the war, the

Accords will allow for Hero/Villain conflict, as long as it falls within certain conduct constraints.

Shveiran

Spot on.

RoflCat

And surely executing someone for breaking it will TOTALLY keep everyone in line....because controlling through fear always go well....

Seriously, we're this far into the series and your first thought was execution? Is EE such a boring kind of writer?

Other options, that has been shown in the series, that everyone else would see as pretty severe punishment that isn't execution includes:

1. Since it just got mentioned, Severance/Severity. Basically have Red Axe be the test dummy for whatever method they plan for getting someone to be able to wield the blade.
2. Related to above: Have an Aspect ripped out of Red Axe and turned into an artefact for use in the war. She'll live, but a loss of an Aspect is definitely something both Heroes and Villains can see as harsh.

[Liliet](#)

This, agreed. Overly harsh punishments result in perverse incentives.

Shveiran

insufficiently harsh ones, however, fail to guide behaviors.

We are talking about rules needed to prevent Named individuals that may have strong personal enmities focused on the big bad for as long as it takes. Considering imprisoning them would be costly in resources (again, Named) and likely to fail, what punishment could possibly be effective as a deterrent, not a logistical nightmare and non a slap on the wrist without being death?

RoflCat

Well, since it just got mention in this very chapter: Ripping out an Aspect and turning it into an artefact.

The 'criminal' will forever be a crippled Name-wise, while the item will be useful for the war.

Losing an Aspect is definitely something both Heroes and Villains can agree to be a very severe punishment.

[Liliet](#)

Well, we're about to see 😊

Note that Catherine did not say "no extenuating circumstances", she said "there better be good ones"

[Liliet](#)

A simple and reasonable punishment I have come up with:

An oath of service / obedience (to someone specific, willing to take the responsibility, from the other side) / non-aggression for a limited period. Serves as well as confinement for limiting unwanted behavior in the future, does not present logistical difficulties if the person being punished is willing to go along with it and there is someone willing to take responsibility for them (which both of the above need to be the case for execution to not be the only reasonable solution, yes), the likes of Mirror Knight and Blade of Mercy would avoid like the plague, serves the Red Axe situation as long as she's willing to put her money where her mouth is and pledge herself to Indrani (or Masego or Catherine if Indrani isn't villain enough for this) in a non-optional way.

[Javvies](#)

Her word isn't going to be worth anything to the Villains. She did after all just break the oath she'd sworn to obey and uphold the Truce and Terms (presumably).

Swearing new oaths as punishment isn't useful as punishment since her sworn word is in doubt.

Alex Straughan

How have people not caught on to the Rogue Sorcerers deal yet? He does not and never has had the Gift. He's a Named that is pretending to be a wizard using Aspects. He can take and control the magic of others but can't cast any spells of his own. Hence his love of artifacts. Tyrant: "What's another lie at the heart of who you are?" Himself: "Collector is accurate."

Konstantin von Karstein

So he would have managed to fool everyone in the Belfry (a magical research center) while participating to the research's during months? It seems unlikely.

Alex Straughan

It's a fine distinction. He can use magic and control that which already exists but he cant cast it. There are lots of clues though. Remember when he applied that ointment to his and Archer's eyes that let the ungifted see magic?

[Liliet](#)

He straight up says he's no scholar. And he has tricks at his disposal that are useful. Note that Masego doesn't currently have the ability to produce sorcery either and that doesn't get in his way.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Just so. Rogue may not be a sorcerer, but he's still a magically-oriented Named. And probably has some very useful Aspects for studying, using and manipulating magical devices.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm. With the abilities he has, having or not having the Gift is splitting abstract hairs.

Even if he has a complex about it 😊

Juff

Typo Thread:

extracted of > extracted from
Such matter > Such matters
this glass > his glass
as if often > as it often
he suddenly > He suddenly
to built > to build it
ab extension > an extension

there buried > there were buried
that was we > that we
tended to learn to > tended to lead to
last and seemingly third > third and seemingly last
strode pas > strode past
as speck > as a speck
she, Indrani > her; Indrani
Archer," the > Archer." The
looked they > looked like they
Axe," > Axe."
week," > week."
the eyes the calmed > then eyed the calmed
through hers > through his
the began > they began

erebus42

Well that was a delightful little exchange.
Good gods the Blessed Artificer seems like a real asshole though.
I guess you can take the named out of Praes but you can't take
the Praes out of the named. Though arrogance and hubris are just
as much heroic flaws as villainous ones so I guess there's that
too.

[Javvies](#)

Blessed Artificer is Proceran, not Praesi.

hakureireimu

She's Praesi

[Javvies](#)

Huh. Missed that somehow.

She'd pretty much have to be descended of expats/exiles,
then. Otherwise she almost certainly wouldn't be a worshiper
of Above or a Hero, nor is it likely that she'd still be
alive.

So ... of Praesi descent, but almost certainly born and raised
(and Named) outside of the Dread Empire. Probably Procer or
the League.

And probably at least the second generation away from Praes.

Culturally, I don't she can count as Praesi in such a
scenario.

[Javvies](#)

Oh ... wait.

Since it's a small world ... perhaps she's a child or
grandchild of that relative of Akua's who ran away from

Praes into self imposed exile only to get assassinated later.

[sivarajan](#)

Thandiwe Sahelian, Akua's great-uncle.

Jago

A little more than an asshole.

1) She attacked another member of the Alliance, a violation of Truce and Terms;

2) Where she has got the time and money to make her artifact?

As its workings were aimed specifically at Masego I doubt it was part of the approved projects. I would suspect misappropriation of funds for a personal project. Again one aimed at another member of the alliance.

So we have a hero attacking a villain. If, as implied, the Red Axe has attacked another Villain we have the basis of a huge crisis.

The Wandering bard had a meeting with some Heroes and prepared a crisis for the Alliance?

dadycool

Indrani just loves playing with Goblinfire. Too bad she just accidentally set some loose.

She and Masego are an utter delight to have in one place.

Shveiran

To be fair, the mess happened on her watch but not because of her. She brought the Red Axe here as she was meant to, then left her alone for half an hour. It was, unfortunately, enough for a story to grab her.

[Adrian_V](#)

I just love seeing Zeze and Idarani, the genuine love we see is heartening, and i just know more than a few heroes that witness it for the first time have their mind boogling, and villains too, i mean they are wicked and all but so sweet and innocent at the same time that they give me caries xD

And my god Erra you almost gave me a heart attack at the end of Masego's POV, like i thought "betrayal" then "shit Roland not only was there but in position", glad i was so wrong.

[Liliet](#)

What the fuck does the word "wicked" even mean?

* *by any other name*

Well, for one, I'm pretty sure it means you can't stand to be good, if it also means you must let it go.

For another, it means you are a monster – and thus one of Catherine's.

It's all there in the manual. 😊

[Liliet](#)

That is not how most people use the word, though I'm not quite clear on how they DO.

[Adrian V](#)

Evil, perverse, perverted, or at leasts they are supposed to be all that, wich is what makes their "tastes like diabetes" romance so funny xD

[Liliet](#)

♥

Oshi

"I am flattered by your interest," he said, "but I do not reciprocate the attraction."

I've fallen over and I can't get up. Worth the wait indeed.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's effing hilarious how Masego thinks he's being so sly and sophisticated. And that's coming from a fellow spectrumite...

[Liliet](#)

TBF all of this might have worked on people who know him less well. The attraction thing is hilarious and would have worked in most situations on most people, by my estimation.

Just... tough crowd.

(He should not be trying to fool Roland, specifically)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, the thing is, one of the classic weaknesses of spectrumites is dealing with *context* – identifying the current context, adapting to it, recognizing when it changes. That's exactly what he was so spectacularly failing at here, using individual responses that might have done for a party, in a workshop discussion, and not picking up when they weren't working.

Liliet

And that's why he ASKED Roland to help him calibrate, and Roland REFUSED. TFW your friend is neurotypical)=

Catherine is much better at giving specific conditional directions!

Liliet

(Indrani, of course, did not clarify on purpose)

Mental Mouse

I suspect Indrani might say something like "I was teaching him how to deal with annoying folks blathering while he's thinking, not how to be *polite*!" 😊

Javvies

I have acquired a near instant dislike for the Blessed Artificer. She is immensely fortunate that Masego listens to Cat and knows that Cat wants the various Heroes and Villians to get along. Masego has quite literally killed people over less than what she just did. Remember the Interlude where Masego boiled the blood of two Praesi for insulting the Woe (and For Science!/Magic!)?

And Aspect ripping from the Saint of Swords is confirmed. Gonna be a bitch to wield that artifact, though. And will probably need to be a Hero, lest it react poorly and/or trigger the "vital artifact fails" trope.

And, whoops. Red Axe and Wicked Enchanter ... at least one of them is probably probably about to end up dead, or at least severely injured. And I'd say the Red Axe probably has the advantage, between being a Hero and becoming a Hero to oppose the Wicked Enchanter. This could easily elevate to a major Accords dispute, especially since the Wicked Enchanter will have signed onto the proto-Accords, and the Red Axe has presumably also been informed and signed on. Fortunately, Cat and Hanno will be arriving soonish.

Shveiran

The wicked Enchanter has the story trope "sly villain gets away after being defeated" though. regardless, my interpretation of the "too late " line is that WE is already dead.

Mental Mouse

> And Aspect ripping from the Saint of Swords is confirmed.

Also confirmed that they may yet regret this.... I wonder if Tariq knows?

Shveiran

Undoubtedly. He is involved at the highest level, and this must be a high profile project. There is no keeping him in the dark even without behold.

[Liliet](#)

The only period of time when Catherine was 1 on 1 with the Saint of Swords' body not on-screen was after resurrecting Tariq, so yes, presumably he gave his consent to this.

[Burlyraven](#)

Not gonna lie, we've seen a lot of villains with mitigating motivations/backstories, but I'm really hoping this Wicked Enchanter is dead and in little pieces. I'm not seeing much use for a rapist whose only real powers center around dominating humans in a fight against the undead, except to show what a badass the heroine meant to counter him actually is.

[Liliet](#)

Keep in mind there's also Malicia etc.

But, uh, yeah.

(Of course Cat cannot act like this, she needs villains to join willingly, regardless of how useful they expect to be)

But, uh, yeah.

Zgggt

... why could someone blind Masego and get away with it? Other than the clear slight of Cat in that action, it's wartime and such acts should clearly be tried as at best assault of a superior officer if generous, treason at worst.

Cat really fucked up if the authority Masego represents is such a joke. I mean, even if this is a part of a grand conspiracy involving the biggest names, this is humiliating disrespect. It creates a narrative in which the Woe are done as a power, and are about to be butchered just as much as Black's cohort once people stopped thinking of his reach and just how terrifying they are when attacking his friends.

Konstantin von Karstein

He just break her toy without any effort, and he could not kill her because she is too useful for the war effort. I think it's a bit stretching it to think it's the beginning of a Story where the Woes are slaughtered.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I don't think his use of an aspect to break it constitutes a lack of effort. But yeah.

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, Masego broke that right back, and I don't think if he didn't others would just stand by and not stop her. This is more of a shitty-ass prank than anything.

I AM very much impressed by Masego's restraint and sweetness, considering he thinks his dislike of her is irrational. I mean I believe him that there's an instinctive Role-driven component to it – likely why SHE did that – but holy shit separating that out and restraining himself when she's like THIS? Hot dang.

I don't think the issue is the lack of authority. Note that Masego did not try to assert any only to be ignored, or anything. Just... someone can be both your subordinate and an asshole to you. Catherine did not teach him the best of habits alas XD

[Mental Mouse](#)

As Liliet pointed out, this was basically a nasty prank, which Masego slapped down hard and pointed out that he could have done worse. On the one hand, we readers see villains showing far more forbearance than heroes, but then we're mostly following the villains' POV.

The flip side is the point that someone like the Wicked Enchanter was actually allowed to survive by *anyone* – running into one of his prior victims without supervision, was his bad luck.

[Liliet](#)

Y e p

[Liliet](#)

...well I am excited 😊

Important facts we learned this chapter:

- Roland and Masego are both trying to herd cats as best they can, even if Masego doesn't call it that;
- heroes can be ASSHOLES holy shit and Masego is sweet as fuck actually;
- Indrani's sense of humor is as horrible as ever, god bless her;
- Indrani absolutely ships Catherine with everyone in sight and considers it being a good friend and BLESS;
- Nephele is no longer a twat, apparently ♥
- Masego and Indrani EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE;

- oh yes Indrani is nOT aro no matter what Catherine might have wondered;
- SO MUCH COOL SHIT IN THE ARSENAL;
- Mirage is like Star Wars tier cool;
- no but Indrani carved a naked sculpture of Catherine and - oh my fucking god I wonder if Catherine ever learns of this;
- ah yes, the perils of recruiting villains 😊

Shveiran

More like the perils of recruiting villains and forcing them to work with heroes, some of whom may have visceral enmity with others. But yeah, I mostly agree.

medailyfun

I wonder what kind of naked sculpture can actually make ppl blush. Definitely not "oscar statue"

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure a naked statuette of a person you know will make people blush regardless of pose.

Trebar

Pretty sure the "herding cats" comment that Roland made was about keeping Masego focused, lol

[Liliet](#)

Like he's the only one like that in an institution comprised out of scholars, mages and artisans 🤪

and they are both trying to prevent / dissolve conflicts where they can

ninegardens

So... just to be clear here... Archer totally just waltzed past ALL the wards they have on that place- yes?

I mean, I know that she is apparently Expert tier user of the twilight ways, but um... that still seems like maybe a bad sign regarding the ward levels?

Also, like.... phone calls are nice, but it seems weird that one of the main artifacts they are working on is an improved teleconference lounge. Given that they ALREADY have scrying connection, it seems... odd.

Darkening

Seems like this is a direct connection instead of needing to have a chain of mages extending the scrying links, so maybe it'll free up manpower from communications to go do other things? As for the wards maybe she slipped in right behind Roland and Masego before the wards went up again?

[Liliet](#)

Archer probably has permission to go in, duh.

ninegardens

....

Admittedly, given her sudden arrival, and general propensity for being sneaky and ambushfull... I had not even considered the possibility that she had gotten in legitimately.

I'm honestly not sure if this is is more or less horrifying. Just imagine lounging on Cat's shoulder while she's on a conference call to Klaus and Cordelia.

[Javvies](#)

Actually, I expect that Archer is the expert on Night that the Blessed Artificer mentioned was on hand.

[Liliet](#)

That is 100% going to happen at some point and you know it.

caoimhinh

Yeah, it's odd. But I guess what they mean to do is to have a multiple scrying connection instead of a 2-ways one.

They are basically going from phone calls to group chats in Discord.

[Liliet](#)

Sounds right!

Ashley Sage

I'm thankful for the offline e-book of the Practical Guide.

Wait..too early by a few years?

Best interlude for a long time

Hot sexy Masego!

Onos

After that lovely conversation about how Hanno can't mimic Saint's tricks, we have her aspect lying around in the form of a magical sword...kind of like the one Hanno used to wield, which fell under the "associated artifact" trope rather than the "turns at the last moment" trope. 3 guesses as to who gets Severance.

An (in Masegos opinion) ignorant, unpleasant, living, Light-wielding Sahelian (surely) on one side, an educated, charming, dead, Night-wielding Sahelian on...well the same side technically. The Blessed Artificer ought to be interesting.

The Mirage surely has higher security and range than ordinary scrying, otherwise it does seem like a bit of a waste of resources. If Nessie can't spy on their leaders having conference calls though that's pretty handy.

Rampant speculation aside, I seem to have missed something regarding Zeze's Quartered Seasons theory if anyone could clarify? Winter was given to Night, Summer became Twilight, yes? Yet Masego is looking for a *fourth* Season. Did Spring/Autumn get involved at some point and I completely missed it?

Darkening

The king of winter and queen of summer married and formed a single, unified court formed out of spring and/or autumn. That's 3, and he's theorizing there's a 4th out there somewhere. Cat speculated the new court might be made of both when she was talking down Sve Noc from taking the Twilight Crown, but it's entirely possible there's a whole other realm out there somewhere.

Draylen

Spring and Autumn Courts technically stopped existing in book 2, if I'm remembering right, when the King and Queen wedded and properly joined Winter and Summer into a single Court.

Which means there are six known Realms, and Zeze is theorizing a seventh (which makes a lot of sense). We have:

Heaven

Earth

Hell

Arcadia (United Courts)

Night (the hollowed corpse of Winter)

Twilight (the hollowed corpse of Liese stuck inside Maybe-Summer and solidified by the exKing of the Wyld Hunt being just, the most wonderful terrible trickster to exist)

Unknowable (the antiArcadia?)

We also had a couple blink-and-miss-it scenes when Cat was still the Last Sovereign and she went through a couple of the joined Fortresses. I think the last one was on the way up to

Neshamah? But that I don't remember so well. I might have to reread it.

Mental Mouse

The Serenity might qualify as a Realm by now.

caoimhinh

Quartered Seasons doesn't necessarily mean that it is related to the 4 seasons nor the 4 Courts of the Fae. I think that's a failed train of thought that keeps people looking the wrong way.

The first time this was mentioned was when Catherine decided she needed to kill the Wandering Bard, and there was no context nor previous mention about what it is about, just the implication that it would help them face the Intercessor.

Now, as we just got another glimpse of it: It's about "realms of power", they know 3 but Masego has theorized the existence of a 4th, which has yet to be accessed.

My current hypothesis is that the 3 "realms of power" currently known are:

- **Heaven** (where the Choirs of Angels reside)
- **The Hells** (where the Demons and Devils reside, also where the Serenity is located)
- **Arcadia Resplendent** (where the Fae live, home of the Courts -now a unified Court after the union of Winter and Summer, preventing the appearance of Spring and Autumn- and a fragment of which was used to create the Twilight Ways)

From those 3 planes of existence, power can be drawn by a practitioner, priest or Named, so they would fit to be called *Realms of Power*.

Acclaration:

- Light and Night are manifestations of the energies from Above and Below, not realms by themselves.
- Winter and the other Courts of Fae were fragments of Arcadia, not proper realms, and were even constantly destroyed and recreated in the endless cycle that the Fae were trapped in (Winter vs Summer / Spring vs Autumn) until the Winter King and Summer Queen married.
- The Serenity is a layer of Hell conquered by the Dead King, repurposed and terraformed to have people living there.
- The Twilight Ways is a shard of Arcadia transformed to serve as a means of transportation.

Now, the question would be what's the fourth.
My guess is that the 4th and unknown "realm of power" is the **Nowhere**.

That place that has been referenced multiple times when mentioning the Bard and also the song "The Girl Who Climbed the Tower" is said to come from there. It's also the place where the Intercessor goes to when not in Creation and what allows her to teleport across Creation (she also said she hates it).

It would make sense that reaching out to the realm where the Bard goes to escape harm would be an effective way to truly harm her, and that being what Catherine wanted by financing Masego's research of this.

Oshi

This is an interesting theory. A 4th real that might serve as a prison rather than a kill zone.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Regarding Hanno's sword, it may not have turned on him, but eventually an opponent (Black, I think?) did decide to Deal With That, and summarily broke it.

Frivolous

I wonder if perhaps the Mirror Knight could pick up Severity and survive; after all, he was very durable before, and he's had 2 years to grow more indestructible since.

Indrani would be more embarrassing if she made wooden replicas of a male Bestowed, especially if they were anatomically correct and to scale.

[Liliet](#)

No, Cat is max embarrassing because of how high her position is and how scared everyone is of her.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The question is just how the Mirror Knight's indestructibility works. Remember, SoS was known for being able to Sever high-indestructible things, not to mention the fabric of reality.

SpeckofStardust

Everyone- The villain must be dead
the worse case would be the hero dying after the villain defended himself.-myself

Shveiran

You mean, Red Axe being dead and Wicked Enchanter surviving?

Uh, it could be. Though it wouldn't really be worse. The terms would be clear: either he did something despicable NOW after meeting her, or he would have been justified in his actions. Some may grumble, but there is no difficult decision: he was attacked, the hero is dead, things proceed. Some would grumble, but that wouldn't really be worse than the conflict already ongoing.

Having to kill the victim no one wants to off would be much more controversial, in my opinion.

jbanastacio@yahoo.com

I think that is not in fact the worst case.

I think the Wicked Enchanter might have dominated some of the other denizens of the Arsenal, maybe even other Bestowed, and commanded them to defend him from the Red Axe. So Masego and Indrani would come across a pitched battle, with WE's mind controlled minions on one side and the Red Axe and everyone else on the other.

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Tyckspoon

If Red Axe really is the hero created to stop the Wicked Enchanter this would go exceptionally poorly for the Enchanter – Not only are Red Axe's abilities going to be uniquely suited to defeat him, she'd be riding a story in which she is fighting to free/defend his unwilling victims.

And then politically, there would be cover for reducing Enchanter's protection under the Terms (he used his abilities to put innocent/uninvolved/non-Named people in danger and/or attacked another Named) or mitigating circumstances to Red Axe's actions (she was acting to remove an active threat to others, not taking vengeance for the prior actions that Enchanter was already granted pardon for.)

[Liliet](#)

Nope, that's what one calls "the problem took care of itself", politically speaking.

Morgenstern

My "worst case" interpretation of this "oh shit" moment cut-off to the chapter was actually "oh noes.... they destroyed a lot of the stuff in the Arsenal and left a body count of 'collateral damage' aka bloodshed already?". But yeah, I guess one of the two being dead, making it a political conundrum could also be a massive clusterfuck.

Daniel E

"Masego has been in the Black Queen quite a bit" "Regularly during the tenth crusade"; I am in tears from laughing. Him & Indrani are just the best.

caoimhinh

I find it interesting that they consider the Tenth Crusade to be over, not repurposed and aimed against the Dead King. Sure, their original target was Praes and Callow, but after turning around and marching North, I thought they would still consider it part of the same Crusade.

If there's one thing worthy of being called Crusade, it would be this war of nearly the whole continent vs the Kingdom of the Dead, right? Though Crusades have never before worked that much against Keter, so there's that.

Shveiran

I'd argue most of the Villains would balk at being part of one as much as the Heroes and priest would to let them (and drows, and somewhat Praes) in.

caoimhinh

Maybe, but there's something grand about the number 10. I had thought they would go for the narrative of "The Crusade that changed it all", something along the lines of "the greatest Crusade, the one that united Heroes and Villains against the true threat to Calernia".

And also because the Crusade wasn't over when the Dead King invaded, and all the parties involved in it are now going against Keter, so it wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that the current war is the 10th Crusade reaimed. Though of course, the current Grand Alliance is vaster than the one before, when they first launched the Crusade.

Shveiran

I think they will milk it... only after the war, to avoid the mess that is having this be a formal crusade, with all its baggage attached.

Oshi

Political not a good idea. You saw what happened to Cordelia when the crusade got out of control. Crusades are stories and not the ones where everyone works in harmony to defeat the Dead King kind.

[Liliet](#)

Actually as I understand they're exactly this kind of story. It's when the enemy is not in fact Dead King tier of Definitely Bad and everyone is NOT in harmony that you get it falling apart with the narrative pissing on the ashes.

Shveiran

they aren't successful stories, though. No crusade ever won.

Though I suppose that depends on how you define winning, since the DK may have been forced back in the Serenity before.

Mhm.

Konstantin von Karstein

Only the first was won

[Liliet](#)

...the one against Triumphant won?

And the couple after that iirc

Odd

Anyone detect the hand of the mostly absent Bard in this series of Named related coincidences?

[Liliet](#)

What coincidences?

Water flows downhill, stories happen around Named. Not all narrative fuckery needs Bard to facilitate it, especially when someone else (Catherine) is deliberately stirring the pot and putting all ingredients together.

[John Anderson](#)

My favorite Cat-ship, CatLand, gets a bit of wind in its sails simply by how much he gets along with Zeze.

Ultimate_procrastinator

I had not seriously considered that ship until this moment, but the name alone has me 10,000% on board

Alex Straughan

Sure it's possible, but why?
She wants the Dead King to be beaten. Destroying the Truce and Terms doesn't help with that.

[Adrian_V](#)

People are forgetting the accords are big, think of it as a constitution with lots of clauses, with how Cat alone thinks not to mention the people that helped make them i just know this sort of situation is covered and there is a procedure to follow

[Liliet](#)

Truce and Terms aren't full on Accords but yeah most def.

superkeaton

I'm so glad Roland and Masego are friendly. They make for good buddies. The Wicked Enchanter sounds nasty, but in the face of annihilation, all hands on deck.

Severity is functionally a nuke, or an equivalent to the Fellblade. Wonder who's going to be sacrificed to make the strike?

[Liliet](#)

...consider: Akua

superkeaton

Given Akua's lack of corporeal status, I'm iffy.

[Liliet](#)

She's as tangible as she likes.

laguz24

I have a problem with this chapter is the fact that there seems to be no direction beyond uphold the truce and terms and kill the dead king who is such a distant threat that he is rather unconvincing. I need a story here not just cat running around and keeping the entire alliance from falling apart.

Liliet

I mean – I find the plot of “prevent universal annihilation and also build a new social system from scratch” to be more than sufficiently compelling. Different strokes for different folks?

nipi

Legions of undead at your doorstep is a “distant threat”?

Mikasi

I’m going to let everyone else have a go at the whole thing between Red Axe and the other guy.

I just want to outright appreciate the relationship Masego and Indrani have. The fact that it’s about as pure ‘extrovert loving an introvert’ as it can be, along with all the other small things, like letting him pace the intimacy and physical touch, which shows that she’s so very *pleased* that he’s letting her touch him so much, and also that he’s growing more and more comfortable with it, if only specifically with her. God I love this bit, and I cannot get enough of it.

Liliet

SO FUCKING GOOD????

the perfect bopping sound, Indrani acting like she doesn’t care but internally just fucking melting into a puddle, Masego *kissing her on the cheek, , ,*

TheItzal

So Jessica Jones caught up with the Purple Man and things did not go well

AndromedaStar

I know that part of it might be since this is Masego’s POV, but the Blessed Artificer really annoys me here. Acting like you’re some great expert on something you’ve NEVER EVEN SEEN because you have a personal grudge against the person who’s an actual expert? That’s the sort of arrogance that gets people killed when they try to use your devices.

Also, having the audacity to be angry that he broke your device... that you literally built to blind him!? Even somebody who’s not a “Praesi miscarriage of a person” would react the same way. What was he supposed to do?

This type of Heroic arrogance really rubs me the wrong way. “We are just because we follow the Heavens, and they are just” and all that.

Javvies

I believe that she was referring to Archer when Blessed Artificer said they didn't need Masego because they already had an expert.

Admittedly, the way she said it is particularly prone to misunderstandings, especially if you haven't noticed Archer is in the room already.

So ... not necessarily (officially) intended as an insult, but incredibly easy to hear as one, and perhaps leaving it so easy to take as an insult was intentional.

But the blinding device ... that's definitely not acceptable. And Blessed Artificer is incredibly fortunate that Masego usually listens to Cat and follows her lead when the subject isn't magic/magic-adjacent, because he has quite literally killed over far less.

nipi

Wonder if Cat can rip out aspects out of living named without killing them. Would work as an effective deterrent/punishment. Probably not enough of one if a named just died though.

Jessica Day

This chapter was particularly good.

[wjnng](#)

2

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Chapter 13: Ingress

"One must not look down on tricks that deceive only fools, my son, as the better part of the people of the world are patently foolish."

– Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthé of Nicae

It'd once been a delicate balance, keeping Zombie walking at a pace that Hakram could easily match, not anymore. She'd grown used to it and was quite capable of understanding without me pulling on the reins that I wanted to keep pace with my towering second-in-command. Sometimes I wondered exactly how intelligent the undead horse was, or even if she was truly still that at all. The necromancy I'd used when Sovereign of Moonless Nights had been... off. The dead Akua had raised in my place at the Battle of the Camps had famously ignored holy water, and I'd noticed myself that the longer they remained raised the more intelligent they seemed to become. That was not, I'd been told, something typically associated with necromantic sorcery. It was with the summoning arts, though, and some days I could not help but wonder

whether I was riding a corpse or a bound spirit. I stroked the mare's mane softly, and she neighed softly in approval.

"The White Knight is five days behind," Hakram said, breaking me out of my thoughts. "He found it difficult to arrange for a trustworthy replacement in seeking fresh Named."

Trustworthy was unlikely to be the problem with Hanno arranging for someone to stand in his place. Even the worst pricks on his side of the fence tended to be at least well-meaning. I'd guess that the trouble had been finding someone who wouldn't pull a blade on a fresh villain or talk in a way that got a blade pulled on *them* instead. Heroes with a diplomatic bent didn't grow on trees, though if I ever caught so much as whiff of such a thing growing anywhere I'd been sending a band of five after it faster than you could say 'oh Gods please, just please'.

"Do we know who he picked?" I asked.

"The Silver Huntress," Hakram gravelled.

Approvingly, I noted. I was more ambivalent over that particular heroine, as though she was undeniably competent in all manners of ways she also fought like cats and dogs with Indrani whenever they got even remotely near each other. Archer had, to no one's surprise, regularly 'sparred' with the heroine back when they'd both been pupils of the Lady of the Lake. The Huntress was eager at the notion of settling that old debt, and very sensitive to the perception that she might be getting forced back over anything by her old bully. Between that and the two of them being Named with a preference for bows, there were quite enough grounds there for seething hostility to be the name of the game.

"She'll get it done," I evenly replied.

And on that we set the matter aside, both of us having noticed the approach of the outriders headed our way. The fortress where we were headed went by the name of Saregnac, though fortress was something of a misnomer: it'd been as much a jail as a castle, which a less diplomatic woman might have said meant it'd been a pretty shitty castle. Gods, look at that curtail wall: the bastard thing wasn't even crenellated, it was like they were just *asking* to be stormed.

"It's all over your face," Hakram said.

"I could take this place with five goblins and a scarecrow," I muttered back. "I've seen the costs to the treasury, they could have at least sprung for a place with a proper moat."

"How good of a scarecrow are we talking?" Adjutant asked, sounding interested.

I flicked another glance at those walls: barely twenty feet tall, and I'd seen thicker ogres.

"Below average," I decided.

"I could do with three, it it's a really good scarecrow," Hakram said, the fangs he allowed to peek slightly through his lips implying mocking challenge.

"Please," I snorted, "any idiot could do it with that good a scarecrow. Just dress it up like Black and bait them into a field full of munitions. Scarecrow quality is the crux of the difficulty here."

The outriders from Saregnac reached the vanguard of our little caravan, though in truth our entire group was ahead of the slower-moving wagons as unlike those we could cut through the countryside without risking wheels coming off. The line of legionaries ahead of us spoke with the Procerans and shortly after a lieutenant peeled off from the rest to pass along the message. Saregnac, he told us, was ready for our arrival and the Arsenal had been told of our coming. We were lucky, as it happened, as one of the functional times for translocation was one hour before Noon Bell and we were nearing it. The wagons would have to stay behind and wait until one past Afternoon Bell, but if our little group picked up the pace we'd get there with time to spare.

"Send a messenger back to Captain Forfeit," I ordered Adjutant. "We'll be going on ahead."

The Soninke would approve of resting the horse teams for the wagons beneath the shade of Saregnac's walls, I suspected, however unimpressive the walls in question. She'd probably enjoy a halfway decent meal and cold water as well, I mused, the spring days were much warmer in southern Brabant. Even as a messenger peeled off, the rest of us returned to the journey. It wasn't long before we were back on the Proceran country roads – which, though it pained me to admit it, were better than anything in Callow save for the royal roads and what little highway we'd inherited from the Miezens – which I was coming to suspect were the reason Saregnac had been chosen as a boundary station for the Arsenal. The defences might not be anything to praise, but the place did seem eminently accessible. That was almost as useful, though in all honesty I would have preferred the northernmost of the Arsenal entrances to be a stronger holdfast.

The gatehouse was respectable, at least, with a drawbridge over a shallow dry moat leading to a well-maintained portcullis that was already up when we arrived. The commander of the forces holding Saregnac came out to meet me personally. Some middle-aged cousin of Prince Etienne of Brabant, which was the unfortunately not an unexpected amount of nepotism when it came to Proceran soldiery. They weren't usually *stupid* about raising up kin, though, so

there ought to be – ah, and there was the man actually in charged. A former *fantassin*, by the looks of the garishly dyed red and yellow hair, but he'd clearly not gotten the scar under his eye in garrison duty. I requested the man in question – Lucien of Pitrerin, as it turned out – to be my escort, pawning off the royal relative to Hakram, and was rewarded by a blunt assessment of the situation as we were escorted deeper into Saregnac by impressively well-drilled soldiers.

"We can't hold the walls if we're seriously tested, Your Majesty," the man agreed without hesitation. "I wouldn't even try. The place was a prison for nobles, so it was never meant to withstand a proper storm."

"I don't mean to impugn your efforts here," I said. "But that's not the answer I was looking for, Master Lucien."

"We have truly defensible grounds, Your Majesty, they're simply not the walls," the man told me. "The barbican deeper in is what the place was built around, and it's from the early days of the Principate. That I could hold against an army for days, and the room where the magic circle is was dug beneath into bedrock."

That was good to hear, I thought, though I still had concerns. While losing one of the boundary stations to the Dead King wouldn't necessarily mean losing the Arsenal – there were further precautions – it'd be a hard blow. While it'd be a waste to send a Named to stand guard here, there were things that could be done without resorting to that.

"I'll see if I can't shake loose a company of sappers and send it your way," I replied. "Not permanently, but at least long enough to turn those outer defences into something it doesn't wound me to think about."

"My most humble thanks, Your Majesty," Lucien of Pitrerin said, sounding genuinely thankful.

I waved a hand, somewhat embarrassed.

"We're all in the same boat, soldier," I said. "Gods forbid it capsizes."

"I hear *that*," the man muttered back.

By the time we reached the barbican the soldier had told me about – which was a solid little bastion, I'd admit to that, though hiding the arrowslits under gargoyles was good as, practically speaking, not hiding them at all – Hakram was back in the fold, his royal lamprey in tow. I almost had to admire the dedication to social climbing of a Proceran willing to fawn over an orc. It was oddly inspiring to see petty ambition triumphing over bigotry, kind of like if I'd seen an imp knife a Beast of

Hierarchy. The nearing turn of the hour served as sufficient excuse to escape an invitation to a meal with the man, and reluctantly we were led into the barbican and then through a broad downwards tunnel into bedrock. A few wards and fortified doors later, we stood in an otherwise bare ritual room large enough to accommodate maybe a hundred people at a time. Rituals arrays, a dizzying tapestry of circles and squares and interlocked arcane shapes that would give me a migraine if I looked at them too long, had been craved directly into the floor.

The mages stationed here were mostly Procerans, though there were two of twenty that were on loan from the Army of Callow. I was attended to by them – Callowans both, I learned, fresh to the service but both taught personally by Masego at the Arsenal – as my escort and I were herded into the proper locations and finally asked to avoid leaving the circles we were standing in. Some larger shapes, probably meant for wagons and the like, remained empty. The ritual itself was not long, half an hour of incantations in sequence as the arrays were methodically powered, and then with a shiver we were all standing within an almost identical stone room without the mages who'd sent us here. The air here had that particular taste to it I knew well: Twilight's subtle sweetness, or perhaps freshness. Arrowslits in the walls around us were the first indication that any intruders would find this a well-prepared killing ground, though when red-robed mages from the Arsenal entered the room to invite us to follow them I was quick to see that was only the beginning of it.

The corridor beyond had been built with seemingly two things in mind: for supply wagons to be able to pass through and the ability to wage a stubborn defence against anyone entering through the array room. Spike-bearing steel bars could be brought down to anchor makeshift palisades, portcullises were set in the ceiling every thirty feet and I even caught sight of runes and ritual arrays carved into the walls, awaiting someone to wield them. Soldiers in red, the Arsenal's own garrison drawn from every army of the Grand Alliance, watched in silence as we passed through ward after ward. This place, I thought with approval, would be a bloody grinder if the Dead King ever reached it. Which he shouldn't be able to, as it'd begun as a simple cavern within a mountain in the Twilight Ways before being expanded into this: no full route to the surface had ever been opened. At the other end of the corridor, we reached another ritual room that would take us to the last stopover before we reached the Arsenal proper.

To my surprise, though, it was not only red-robes mages awaiting us in there: pushing himself off the wall he'd been leaning against as he waited, Roland de Beaumarais – also known as the Rogue Sorcerer – stood up at my approach. His inevitable long leather coat swirling behind him, he made to bow until I caught his arm and pulled him into an embrace instead.

"Roland," I smiled, "Weeping Heavens, it's good to see you."

He looked about to say something, his still-tanned face beginning a frown, but instead he returned my smile in kind.

"And you as well, Catherine," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "It's been too long."

Over a year now: he'd not set foot outside the Arsenal since its construction that I knew of, at least not on Creation. The half-realms allowing entry to our little house of wonders didn't count. Hakram stepped up and the two of them clasped arms, the orc towering over the human.

"Rogue," Adjutant gravelled. "Always a pleasure."

"Deadhand," Roland replied with quirked lips. "Glad to see the Stained Sister didn't leave you with a limp."

I was a little sad Indrani wasn't there to hear that, since she would have been able to make something damned filthy out of that.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. "I'm always glad to see you, but I'd not expected to run into any of you until we reached the Threshold."

Which was on the other side of that complicated array in front of us, as it happened.

"There's been some trouble," Roland grimaced. "I judged it necessary to give you advance warning."

My brow rose.

"Not Keter," I slowly said.

We'd be having a rather more urgent conversation were that the case. It wasn't that I believed it to be impossible for the Dead King to reach this place – I couldn't think of a way out of hand, given that we were using the Twilight Ways as way to keep his creatures out, but that hardly meant there wasn't actually one – but rather that if he did get to the Arsenal, it would be for a killing stroke. I couldn't see Neshamah revealing his hand over anything less than a good chance of outright destroying the place: a raid would just lead us to tighten the defences, after the frankly ridiculous amount of Named within the halls drove it back.

"There has been killing," the hero told me, sounding like someone trying very hard to avoid saying the word murder.

If there'd been blood spilled by the mundane staff of the Arsenal, I thought, he wouldn't be standing in front of me offering advance warning. It would not be my place to address a

knife fight between guards or a scholarly rivalry gone red. Which meant this wasn't about the killing so much as *who* had done the killing.

"Who?"

"A villain by the Name of the Wicked Enchanter was slain," Roland told me, pitching his voice low.

"And one of you lot did the slaying," I deduced.

My fingers clenched, though I would not hasten to judgement. I'd given a bleeding boy surrounded by the corpses he'd made the benefit of the doubt, and it was not a principle if it only applied to people you felt for.

"The Red Axe," he tacitly agreed. "I will not argue for breach of the Terms, Catherine, but there were... extenuating circumstances."

"The Enchanter has – had – a certain reputation," Hakram told me. "Though he was also considered a promising lead in usurping control of lesser dead from Keter."

"I hope they're damned good circumstances, Roland," I bluntly said. "Otherwise this ends with gallows and a noose."

I leaned a little closer.

"This is known?" I softly asked. "It was seen?"

"It was done as our people were heading out for midday meal, an openly fought battle," Roland murmured back.

Shit. Whatever happened now, there would be no keeping that from spreading. The Arsenal might be isolated from Creation and we read the letters going in and out, but given the amount of people that lived within its walls there would be no way a Named fight would stay secret forever.

"How many Named are there in the Arsenal right now?" Hakram asked.

Good, I'd been wondering that myself.

"Archer arrived two days past with her full band and the Red Axe," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Which brings us at sixteen – eighteen including you and Adjutant, Catherine."

In other words, I was about to walk into a warehouse full of goblin munitions after someone had tossed a torch into it. *Fuck.* Better it be me than anyone else I could think of, and even better that Hanno was on his way, but still. In the immortal words of Queen Catherine Foundling, first of her name: *fuck.* And there were more of us coming, too. The White Knight for one, but

the Painted Knife and her own band were headed our way at a brisk pace. I genuinely could not remember reading of such a large amount of Named in the same place at the same time, at least not outside a crusading army marching on Keter itself.

"Tell me it didn't get out of control after that," I demanded.

He hesitated.

"Tell me no one else died after that," I said, haggling with disaster.

"Accusations were thrown that the Chosen were attempting a purge, and Archer had to pull the Vagrant Spear off of the Hunted Magician. Bruises and a cut, but nothing lasting."

I repressed the urge to swear under my breath, knowing my soldiers were close enough they'd be able to hear. The Vagrant Spear was one of Indrani's crew, so I wasn't worried there, but all my reports about the Arsenal mentioned the Hunted Magician as being fairly influential among the villains there. Masego could have edged him out of the unofficial leadership fairly easily, as either more or equally powerful as well as *significantly* better-connected, but Masego would have no interest in playing court games as long as the Magician let him have his way on the things that actually mattered to him. And if he'd been good enough to survive as a Procer mage villain while the Saint and the Pilgrim were still kicking around, then it was safe to assume he was at least that smart. *Fuck*, I thought once more. Why was it that, of the two Proceran spellcasters with social skills, it was the one supposedly on my side that was most likely to become a headache?

This had the making of a pivot, and not one I liked the looks of.

"Get me there, Roland," I said. "Before the fucking Eleventh Crusade starts in our backyard."

"Your Majesty," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, inclining his head.

He was one of the few heroes that'd never actually sounded at least a little mocking coming from, yet another reason I'd seriously considered asking Masego if it was possible to make more of him. With a Named wizard taking over the ritual, the second translocation was a breeze: Roland outright dismissed the attendant mages and handled it all himself, taking us into one of the larger wagon circles and muttering the incantation under his breath. With a sensation like having a stiff wind suddenly blown over my entire body, we went through after a mere quarter hour of chanting and when my eyes opened it was to the sight of a slab of stone standing surrounded by nothing. Behind us was only void and ahead of us was another slab of stone, but only one.

"I took us through a shortcut," Roland told me. "Otherwise we'd be stuck going through several checkpoints."

"What is it with wizards and not putting up railings?" I wondered out loud, looking at the empty void surrounding us.

There was some quiet snickering from my soldiers, to my own amusement.

"Your horse can fly," Roland pointed out.

"My horse is only coming through with the wagons, so I am distinctly lacking wings at the moment," I replied. "Crows, at least it doesn't rain in here."

Just the thought of treading slippery-slick wet stone with only nothingness around was enough to have me want to wince. I'd worked through most of my old fear of heights, but half-finished dimensions like this were in a category of their own.

"I'll be sure bring up your complaints at the next monthly assembly," the Rogue Sorcerer amusedly said.

He took the lead, walking assuredly through the first stone slab and then not pausing as he reached the end of the second. With reason, as there was another slab in place under his foot before it could be put down. I looked back, wondering if the first slab would disappear, but it was still there. This was unlikely to be a conjuration, I decided – it'd take a massive amount of power to make something like stone slab out of seemingly nothing – but odds were this was from too esoteric a branch of sorcery for me to be able to make a proper guess besides. I simply followed, as did my personal guard, and Roland led us through a walk of perhaps half an hour in a straight line before we reached a significantly larger slab, where a circle of silvery light the size of a door was hanging in the air.

"The shortcut leads into the most heavily defended part of the Arsenal," Roland told us. "Do not be alarmed by the steel and spells awaiting you on the other side, they are a mere precaution."

"Reassuring," Hakram drily replied.

While the defences were slowing our way, even with a shortcut being what we took, I could not help but approve of how thoroughly the safety of the Arsenal was being seen to. I was one of the few who'd been brought in on the nature of the place, so I was aware that the Arsenal itself was in neither the Twilight Ways, Arcadia or even Creation: Hierophant had, using Warlock's old research and what he'd learned by stealing the ruins of Liesse, hung a fortress in a stable dimension somewhere *between* Twilight and Creation. The Witch of the Woods had then gone a

step further and grafted on the Threshold, less dimensional pockets between the Arsenal and everything else. That was where we were right now, and that gate ahead ought to be the last hurdle in getting in. Roland saw to it quickly, tracing the hanging edge with his fingers until it filled silver and speaking in cadenced mage tongue until the circle had become a rectangular door anchored on the ground.

"I'll have to be last to cross," he told us. "But the way is open, go ahead."

"See you on the other side, then," I shrugged.

I limped through, ignoring a half-hearted protest by my escort that one of them should be first to cross. It wasn't all that different from a fairy gate, I decided as I crossed, though somehow more... precise. Travelling Arcadia or the Ways was a journey, while this was more like... walking up or down stairs. The other side was, I found out, a beautifully designed killing field. Flat stone grounds overlooked by tall structures leading into corridors, bristling with soldiers and engines of war, and even just striding through and onto the stone I could already feel the sorcery buzzing in the air. Wards and enchantments and half a dozen other things too. My escort followed me through as I limped forward, at least a hundred soldiers looking down on us, and I noted that the only way through was a stairway wedged between the heights. I waited until Roland crossed as well, the gate closing behind him, and only then noticed that someone was coming down the stairs. I smiled, recognizing him immediately.

Though Masego was tall as ever, he'd gained some weight since I last saw him. Nowhere near what he'd worn when he was still young, but at least enough he no longer seemed thin – though he was still built like a scholar, not a warrior, as there was not much muscle to his frame. The long braids going down his back had shed some of the ornaments they'd down, now limited to one ring per braid. Most of them gold but a few silver and even bronze. All of them carved with runes. His robes were no longer the old black ones he'd taken to wearing after becoming the Hierophant, instead a more ornate grey set touched with tiles of pale green and paler gold. The cloth band that covered his eyes matched the grey of the robes, though it was not broad enough to hide the glimmering light of Summer's sun still dwelling within his glass eyes. Masego looked, well, hale and happy. To my admitted surprise.

I'd not exactly expected him to waste away here, but I *had* expected that without one of us to keep an eye on him he'd go through an obsessive phase the way he had after the Observatory was first built – only without Indrani around to force him to eat and actually talk to people. Evidently I'd been wrong, and I was pleased to learn it. Masego swept down the stairs and, to my

deepening surprise, brought me in for a short embrace before leaning down and kissing my cheeks one after the other.

"I, uh," I eloquently said. "Hello, Masego. It's good to see you."

Hierophant looked rather pleased with himself, standing a little straighter.

"And it is good to see you, Catherine," he said. "We have much to talk about."

A pause of a heartbeat.

"I would also enjoy catching up," he mused.

I choked on a startled burst of laughter before coughing into my fist, though I found myself grinning like a fool. Some things never changed, huh? It just wouldn't be Masego without the effortless praise and insults, neither of which were entirely meant to be offered.

"I have missed you, Zeze," I admitted.

I patted the side of his elbow and he withdrew, straightening his perfectly straight robes. While I'd been distracted Adjutant had come to stand at my side, and the dark-skinned practitioner tuned to him afterwards.

"Hakram," Masego smiled. "Good. I have been meaning-"

"Win a shatranj and I'll consider changing the hand," the orc replied.

"I have been practicing," Masego swore. "And I have this lovely artefact, which has fingers but also shoots lightning and -"

"Shoots lightning?" I mused. "Hakram, you should reconsider."

I was only halfway screwing with him, since I could think of a lot of situations where shooting lightning might be useful. Like, a solid half of all the conversations I'd ever had in my life.

"Masego, please stop bartering away ancient Mavii artefacts," Roland sighed. "Especially when our ownership of them is dubious to begin with."

"It was my understanding that grave-robbing is allowed when a hero is the one doing it," Masego replied, sounding surprised. "Surely that is not invalidated simply because it was a *heroine* instead."

His tone implied a degree of appalment at the discrimination involved, which had me breathing in sharply so I would not laugh.

"That's not," the Rogue Sorcerer began, "I mean – you ought to... we can discuss this later, Hierophant."

I suppressed my grin. Masego's occasional bouts of well-meaning earnestness had always been near impossible to ward against, in my experience. The humour faded, though, when I considered what was still ahead.

"So," I said, eyes on Masego, "I hear from Roland we've got a bit of a situation on our hands."

Hierophant's face brightened.

"Oh," he said. "That reminds me: I have been asked by the Hunted Magician to arrange an audience with you at your earliest convenience."

I did not groan, because I was a grown woman – sadly enough, as grown as I'd ever get – and a queen and I'd not yet found a way to pawn this off to anyone else.

"Lovely," I muttered.

"The Blessed Artificer also requests such an audience," Roland said, coming up behind me. "She wants to lodge a complaint under the Terms."

My brow rose.

"What about?" I asked.

The Rogue Sorcerer looked meaningfully at Masego, who looked unimpressed.

"The device blinded me," he said. "I will not apologize for breaking it."

The device had *what*? If some fucking heroine thought she could take a swing at Masego and that I'd then make him apologize for it just to keep the peace, then someone was in need of a rude awakening. My friend might not be the deftest of hands when it came to avoiding giving offence, but on the other hand I'd almost never seen him resort to violence without dire provocation himself.

"Who did what now?" I asked, lips thinning.

"I'll not get into it without her being there," Roland said. "There is little point. Something to discuss when we are not standing in the middle of the translocation area, yes?"

Fair enough, I silently conceded. I wasn't like we were in anyone's way, but I should settle in my guards and take up quarters of my own instead of standing around. Besides,

considering the treasury of Callow had pitched in to pay for building this place I was rather due a tour of this Arsenal. I would have preferred to visit when the Named here weren't at each other's throats, but if wishes were horses than beggars would ride.

"You have me there," I easily said. "Which of you fine gentlemen volunteers to-"

A silver rectangle opened behind us, though more than ten feet to the left of where own door out of the Threshold had stood.

"Roland," I said. "Was anyone else supposed to come today?"

By the shortcut, too, if I was correct.

"No that I know of," the Rogue Sorcerer grimly replied.

"To the stairs," I barked at my guards.

We'd only barley begun to withdraw when a silhouette came out. My staff rose, until I caught sight of the perfectly polished shield the figure bore. The Mirror Knight gathered his bearings, then started in surprise when he caught sight of me. I ought to have been the one surprised, really: after all, he was meant to be in Cleves right now.

So what the Hells was he doing *here*?

matesbe

Well this is a jolly clusterfuck. Heads are going to roll, and I might not be being metaphorical.

Also, I expect we're getting the Mirror Knight's sub-arc out of the way.

panic

And so the treason begins

[Javvies](#)

What the fuck is the Mirror Knight doing here? That's a problem. In multiple ways. Not just because he's an asshole who isn't supposed to be here. It's the how did he get in there question and problem. Plus Roland took a shortcut. Plus he's an asshole who will likely make the situation worse, not better. And he's not supposed to be anywhere near here.

This has clusterfuck, maneuvering, and setup written all over it.

Blessed Artificer probably doesn't have any room to stand on if her complaint is solely about Masego breaking her toy that she used to blind him.

dadycoool

This is the kind of thing I was scared of when I realized the Woe was getting back together. The most powerful Band of Five (from our perspective) has gathered without a threat to face. That means an even worse threat will show up to make the gathering worth it.

Wonder

Is Thief coming to the Arsenal too?

RoflCat

Not physically, I believe. I think she and Cordelia will be using Mirage to have a conference later, well, at least that was the plan anyway.

dadycoool

My original comment a few chapters ago was filled with dread at four of the five getting together, only to be told in a reply that Vivienne would be there, too. I didn't check, but her being part of the conference call makes more sense.

Agent J

> "The Order cadres in Salia would prove sufficient for the task, when it comes to Vivienne and the First Prince," Masego said.

It was a little unseemly, resorting to such slick wiles to ascertain if either of these would be coming.

> "It won't be necessary, with both of them here in person," Roland replied.

It was literally the last chapter.

dadycoool

...-_- *facepalm* One of these days, I'm gonna have to binge these again, like I had when I first found this story. Maybe then it'll settle in my head enough that my memory can be reliable. I won't be offended if people ignore every word that comes out of my mouth.

Jago

As I said in the last chapter, this sound as the Wandering Bard doing.
Plenti of "coincidences" moving toward a major crisis.

The last chapter mentioned both her and Cordelia coming to the Arsenal in person.

[Sethur](#)

Now, now people, I am sure there is a perfectly good explanation for the mirror knight being here. Like... The Witch of the Woods threw him so hard at something that a portal to the arsenal was created.

Shveiran

You say that as if it was somehow *unlikely*.

Cicero

He does seem to be surprised, so this may not be intentional on his behalf.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Inb4 we find out for real: "I've been seeing these black crows at the corners of my mind, even while I'm in bed with a woman... maybe you know something about that, hmm?" 😊

Hellspirit

I call bard! She's also probably responsible for that pairs hero-villian dynamic, producing the clusterfuckery.

hakureireimu

I am wondering how the epigraph relates to the rest of the chapter.

[Liliet](#)

If I have to guess?

"Welcome to hell, Catherine: yes, all of these people are idiots"

Big I

I'm really curious what a Beast of Hierarchy is now. Some type of devil from the context? Is the Hierarch a devil now? Has he declared war on the Hells? So many questions.

hakureireimu

It's just another name for the order demon.

ninegardens

And Hanno is 5 days away. 😞

He is probably the one person with the moral authority to sort this out on the heroes side of things.

caoimhinh

True, though I don't think it is the Heroes' side the one that needs to be placated here, it's the Villains' side, since one of them was the one killed and it is them that will be raising complaints and asking for retributions.

IDKWhoitis

Well the problem is settling the complaints without involving the heroes. Catherine can't exactly take up the slack every time a Hero does a stupid. Either Cat subdues the Hero and waits for Hanno, or she might have to apply the a quite literal application of Alexander's solution to this Gordian knot.

Shveiran

Well, it isn't now.

Cat seems inclined toward the removal of the Red Axe, though, at least for the time being. I reckon if she ends up taking that scene (which I fully expect her to, yet it is not a given) the heroic side could understandably have a few pointed words on the matter.

I'm curious about how these new heroes will approach Cat, personally.

My perception in Book 6 so far is that Heroes and nobles have kind of forgotten who they are dealing with and think her soft, given were we were two years ago and how they act now. I'll admit however that this is something I **like** being angry about, so I may be seeing phantasms of my own creation? We shall see.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Trustworthy was > Trustworthiness was
anywhere I'd been > anywhere I'd be
it it's > if it's
shorty > shortly
mused, the > mused; the
the unfortunately > unfortunately
in charged > in charge
craved > carved
red-robos mages > red-robed mages (or red-reobes)
Roland," I smiled, "Weeping > Roland." I smiled. "Weeping
trouble," > trouble."
Ways as way > Ways
been killing > been a killing
snickering form > snickering from
sure bring > sure to bring
less dimensional > lesser dimensional
then," > then."
protested > protest
at leas enough > at least enough
braids goings > braids going
they'd down (worn?)
tuned > turned
I wasn't like > It wasn't like
horses than > horses then
where own > where our own
"No that > "None that
barley > barely

Sun Dog

"Accusations were thrown that the Chosen were attempting a
purge, and Archer had to pull the Vagrant Spear off of the
Haunted Magician. Bruises and a cut, but nothing lasting."

>Hunted Magician. Though Haunted sounds cool too.

caoimhinh

The demimondes allowing entry to our little house of wonders
didn't count.

It should be:

The demimondes *allowed* entry to our little house of wonders
didn't count.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think « allowing » is the good option. It is the demimondes
that are allowing entry that didn't count

caoimhinh

Oh, EE edited it. It no longer says "demimondes", which I now see was supposed to be "demimundi" or "semi-worlds".

Now it says: *"The half-realms allowing entry to our little house of wonders didn't count."*

A whole other meaning now, as "Demimondes" are a class of women kept by wealthy protectors, more concretely female prostitutes.

That's why I was like "the prostitutes do not *allow* entry to the Arsenal, they *are allowed* entry there for the entertainment of the people inside." and I was already starting to question their security standards if they were allowing hookers inside such a secret location.

Konstantin von Karstein

I didn't know that « demimondes » where prostitutes 😊
French is my native language, so for me it was obvious it was meant to say « half-world »

M0och123

Ahh yeah demi and monde.
Makes sense!
Hadn't heard that word before in french...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not quite – a "demimonde" is the subculture and/or ghetto associated with prostitutes, or with other "outcast" groups (e.g., drug dealers would count). And yes, "half-worlds" is the original sense – the idea that these people are living in their hidden realm, not quite part of the daylight world. Given the connotations, "half-realm" is indeed better for this literal usage.

flashburn283

Great, I figured somebody was going to have to get their head bashed in over this, but now the friggin unkillable man is here everything just got loads worse, hell this is going to be bad.

50 to 1 keter is behind this.

[Liliet](#)

I'll take that.

It's a perfectly natural self-brewing disaster. The Dead King is utterly unnecessary to villains and heroes getting along like a house on literal fire, lots of it.

Oshi

Don't discount the Bard...this has all the trappings of politics mixed with story shenanigans. It's totally within the Bard's wheelhouse. Doesn't even have to do much but delay the White Knight long enough to force Catherine to do some harsh shit.

Tohron

Question is, does the Bard actually want Catherine to alienate a bunch of people right now? We haven't seen anything of her since the Auger undermined her long-term plan and Neshamah decided to take the opportunity to go for the kill. If she's as desperate as seems to be the case, then she can't really afford to do anything that doesn't weaken the Dead King's position somehow.

caoimhinh

On the other hand, the Bard doesn't like Catherine's changing of the game. She didn't even like *Amadeus and Alaya's* changing of it, and theirs was less reaching and lasting than the change Catherine is bringing.

This might be one of those situations where the 3rd party says "I want Party 1 to win, but not by too much. I want them wounded and tired after defeating Party 2". The Intercessor might be on board with the Grand Alliance killing Neshamah, but not with them creating a new way in which Heroes and Villains interact on Calernia. She would be rooting for it to collapse right after ending the Dead King.

Miles

She's not so shortsighted as to allow the dead King a chance to win just to make sure Catharine doesn't also win.

Shveiran

She may be farsighted enough to aim for a greater victory, though: a Calernia that defeats the Dead King, but whose Grand Alliance has already sown the seeds of its defeat, so that the game may resume as it was.

If that's what she wants.

We don't really know.

Jago

It all depends on how her Name works.
If it is linked to Celernia she would want it to endure and she doesn't want it to change, as both things can damage her.
If her Name doesn't depend on Celernia's existence, sacrificing it so that some non-regional power would intervene and fight the DK could be acceptable for her.
Black said that of all the nations in Celernia only the Dwarves aren't a regional power. Maybe he hadn't included the DK in that, but probably there are stronger powers than the DK around the world.

Liliet

Why do people act like story shenanigans just don't happen when Bard isn't there?

They do. She's just one player, and she's a player with a pretty specific agenda, which we know about and which this does not match.

(The agenda is "kill DK")

Shveiran

And we know that because...?

Bard is an enigma wrapped in a mystery.
If anything, we KNOW that the Bard's agenda is not JUST killing DK, or Neshamah would not be convinced he "needs but to tell them" to have the people of Calernia choose him over the Bard.

The WB reply to that wasn't "you are deluded", it was "yeah, but I'll kill this part of you so no one will actually find out".

Heck, bard is older than DK. I really doubt she had no goal prior to his ascension.
She may WANT the DK gone, but that is not the sum whole of her.

Liliet

Bard's method of killing him, as he understood, involved the angel weapon that was apparently THAT destructive.
Painted Knife is currently checking that out with her band.

And if he was wrong about how bad people of Calernia would find it, well, why would she disabuse him of the notion?

dadycool

I had more fun reading this chapter than I have in a long time. I never realized how much I missed the Woe being together. Masego is a joy to be around, especially with the others to bounce off of. Of course, the same applies to the rest, like Cat and Hakram discussing how they would go about storming the castle. Or how he was able to read her like a book. A few chapters ago, I expressed worry about the five of them reuniting, but I had forgotten. This chapter and the way it reminded me what the Woe really is makes the hells that are about to be unleashed worth it.

Wonder

Dun Dun Dun!!!!!!! We have a potentially messy situation on our hands.

Cat is going to grow into her Name very soon if the Mirror Knight is here.

About the Name, does she get a transitional one like Squire or she gets a full blown mature Name?

Also what flavour is her Name going to take considering she is a priestess(wielder of prayers and miracles)

, queen (dueling with words and maneuvering political minefields)

and Warlord(crushing armies with steel and goblinfire, leading an army herself)

Insanenoodlyguy

She will get a full name for all of those reasons. She's too big, too center stage.

Miles

She'll be the Harried Diplomat.

Or maybe the Short Conqueror

Cicero

You are all missing the obvious:

The Suffering Schoolmarm

Doomed to forever be disciplining various named at this future school of hers.

Observe: [www\(dot\)youtube\(dot\)com/watch?v=aFJXbL7_TYQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFJXbL7_TYQ)

hakureireimu

Well it looks like Hanno will have to...judge.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh hell, your not wrong. That's his part in the story. He's going to have to make a big ass call before this is done.

Mammon

Dead King: This is the end, Cathrine! Now you die! *Blasts lightning*

Dead King: What? NO! Damn you, you fooled me for the last time, Sc-

Legendary quality scarecrow stuffed with goblinfire explodes

Cat: *Scoffs dismissively* Anyone could've done that with such a high quality scarecrow, you're not impressing me by only using three Named instead of five.

Wonder

I am hoping Cat gets aspects that can create simulacrums of her, that she can use as goat bombs.

It will be nice to see her get Seek back. Something tells me the odd way her necromancy works is important.

Mental Mouse

> I am hoping Cat gets aspects that can create simulacrums of her,

Cat: "What I really need is a way to be in three places at once!"

Name Inchoate: Can do!

Mith

If this happens are we able to say that she is heavily Mirroring the Wandering Bard?

- Cannot die (especially if she gets a simulacrum abilities)
- Commits to a cause above all else
- Manipulates forces on both sides of the Board.
- Massively cross cultural influence

Mammon

I think that Cat would balk at getting such a power. For a Hero it could be great, but a Villain with metasense would

know it's a death trap. It's not quite as debilitating as having your minions wear face-covering masks or helmets, but having more than one of yourself greatly diminishes your Story weight and power.

That simulacrum might be very powerful compared to normal people, but if a Hero has trouble fighting it the first time and then defeats it the second time, it's pretty much a stepping stone bringing them closer to defeating the real deal. Doubly so because the connection to fighting and defeating the simulacrum would give Story weight points for the Hero to defeat Cat, while being easier to defeat than the real deal because it's not the real deal, and stringing a Story that will see to Cat's defeat despite Cat herself never having met the Hero face to face. The way that Providence doesn't play fair, it probably doesn't even need to have the Hero be in the same room during the Villain wins first act to create a narrative aimed at killing her and strengthening the Hero when they do face Cat.

Burlyraven

There are a *lot* of stories gathering in one place here. This is the kind of situation where the impossible and the unfortunate tend to happen.

Also, yay to dead rapists! Boo to political manipulations!

Frivolous

So we're all agreeing that this will result in a fight, yes? Because, as everyone knows, the MK is a very undiplomatic Proceran, and his talents are all in the physical in general and physical combat in particular, which means his usual solution to everything is to hit it.

In other news: Does anyone know how to contact erraticerrata privately, without using Patreon and/or becoming a Patreon patron?

ninegardens

Can't answer the second question... but something of potential note:

It has been hypothesized (can't remember when), that Mirror Knight was created by above as a direct counter to Sve Noc. Given that Cat is an agent of the great Svees, this may be a problem.

Frivolous

I have a terrible, awful idea: The Mirror Knight might have come to kill everyone else in the Arsenal and claim all its magics for the greater good of Procer.

I mean, it fits, right? He really can kill everyone else, and he's too useful to be sent away from the front lines for anything but this, a hostile takeover.

Plus I don't believe he can leave any witnesses alive, because the White Knight would eventually find out if he did. Hanno would never countenance mass murder of their allies, but Christophe could, because he really is that stupid.

If I'm correct, then the next several updates will be like the Alien movie, only instead of being hunted by an indestructible horrible xenomorph, they'll be hunted by an indestructible handsome patriotic bigot.

[TeK](#)

Nah, he isn't that stupid.

ninegardens

>If I'm correct, then the next several updates will be like the Alien movie, only instead of being hunted by an indestructible horrible xenomorph, they'll be hunted by an indestructible handsome patriotic bigot.

This is hilarious. I don't actually believe its a thing, but its hilarious.

There's also the point that like... MK is tough, but... they are literally hiding inside Masego's personal realm effectively.

Heck, I'm not even sure that Sve Noc has any power here. My estimate is that in Arsenal, Masego is large and in charge.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not only is he not that stupid (see his response to that attempt to suborn him in bed), but even those who might have sent him have to be smarter than "take all the magic weapons... and kill the unique characters folks who made and maintain them".

Sun Dog

I'm going with "he somehow heard there was a brawl between Named and rushed over to make sure the good guys won."

Rustndusty

He can't kill any heroic witnesses without Hanno finding out either.

Insanenoodlyguy

If he started killing a place stocked with innocent civilians and heroes just to make a poorly thought out power grab, he'd A. Stop being a hero, even if the name doesn't change, and B. Would ensure his death.

An isolated area, no easy way in or out, and an unstoppable lunatic is stalking the halls killing everybody he can. You just made this a horror. But that's the kind of horror that MAKES heroes, let alone puts already established ones in the situation. We have a small army of "last survivors" here! Even if a few of them fall to set things up, this is absolutely the sort of story where at least one survivor kills the lunatic and lives, and is more likely going to shift into a group victory with a healthy number of mook unnamed mages killed so Mirror Knight can spout a few horrible lines before they scooby-doo trap his ass. Nah, Sun dog has it right. He has the much simpler idea of "Make sure my side 'wins' this." .

Javvies

Eh, I've always thought that the Mirror Knight is more likely to be intended to go after Ranger than Sve Noc. For that matter, I'm not sure where the idea that he'd be intended to go after Sve Noc even came from.

His Dawn Aspect makes him little bit stronger and tougher every day, and even Saint said that in 10 years he'd be on her level.

Ranger gets better all the time, but her rate of improvement is very slight these days.

Mirror Knight gets better all the time but much faster, so even though he's starting out from real far behind, he gets to close the gap.

Djinn O'Cide

31 posts, 5 hours, no reminder to vote. Please don't leave it to me—I'm allergic to comments.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Mental Mouse

> Trustworthy was unlikely to be the problem with Hanno arranging for someone to stand in his place. Even the worst pricks on his side of the fence tended to be at least well-meaning. I'd guess

that the trouble had been finding someone who wouldn't pull a blade on a fresh villain or talk in a way that got a blade pulled on them instead.

As for that, "trustworthy" is exactly the problem. Trust is about many things, including self-restraint and competence. Someone who can't be trusted to keep their blade *and* tongue in the scabbard while recruiting a villain, is not someone who should be recruiting.

And yes, this is totally a pivot – three conflicts presented at once, and the Mirror Knight showing up to match the Black Queen, that's a hut full of goblinfire waiting for a match.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, different kinds of trust: in one's intent, and in one's judgement -_-

Sun Dog

Eh, you can trust someone generally but not trust them to do a specific task for which they are ill-suited. Cat had to reach to find someone who isn't treacherous, while Hanno is surrounded by righteous face-stabbers he 100% trusts to have his back in battle, to the very gates of Keter, but who aren't the best pick for delicate diplomatic things like indicting new villains.

[Liliet](#)

Oh this is brewing up to be an UTTERLY DELIGHTFUL clusterfuck.

If I'm lucky, this won't even turn out to have been orchestrated or even nudged along by either of the Evil antagonist: no Dead King, no Malicia, entirely natural dynamics of trying to get villains and heroes to work together 😊

God I love grown-up Masego... god I love Masego learning physical affection... (also still aro af lmao, his favorite cousin gets the same treatment as his girlfriend) god I love Catherine being huggy... god I love Roland... god I love his dynamic with Masego... god I love Cat bantering with Hakram... god I love Super Cool Magic Defenses nerdery.... ;u;

Oshi

The whole natural dynamics thing smacks of Bard interference. I've been smelling a rat since the MK was mentioned as sleeping with a Procern princess.

[Liliet](#)

Why? What do you think is off about that without Bard involved?

Shveiran

Personally, I don't.

I just think it's odd that Bard has no stake in this cake after being so active before, and now she has been silent for two years. The Painted Knife is coming back with her big secret (allegedly) I can't imagine she'll sit this one out.

Also, it's the last book. At least one between DK and WB will be involved.

Considering EE usually has three arcs, I find it more likely WB will appear than not.

[Liliet](#)

True enough.

justsomeguy

I can't wait for Cat to get her Name already.

caoimhinh

"The demimondes allowed entry to our little house of wonders didn't count."

Of course, why keep a supremely secure location that could decide the fate of the continent, if you are not allowed to bring hookers inside?

Nothing could go wrong there, right?

Also, I bet it was the Haunted Magician who told Masego about kissing both cheeks in greeting. Both Indrani and Catherine looked very surprised at the gesture, so it must be new. Plus, that's a Proceran gesture (if I recall correctly, one of the Interludes showed Otto Redcrown mentally complaining about the Kingfisher Prince's tendency of using that greeting), and the Haunted Magician is a handsome Proceran Villain who Indrani noted to be a womanizer, so it would fit.

if someone who is an accomplished Mage and successful with women gave Masego a piece of advice, then it would be in Zeze's character to at least test it out (he seemed pleased by Cat's reaction, too).

Sanctus Obscurum

"The Mirror Knight gathered his bearings, then started in surprise when he caught sight of me. I ought to have been the one surprised, really: after all, he was meant to be voting right now."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

We are behind Ward currently, this must not stand.

ThatOneGuy

Complicated mess at its best. At the base of is a hero killing a rapist murdered who did both to her home. She would probably be given a pass due to her ability to mess with magic and having a good reason.

Problem is politics. Team "hero" is standing by her and throwing their weight in with it as they give a few villains a few strikes because they are villains or they just do not like them. They have reason, but none of them good ones.

Like artifice and our favorite mage. Petty conflict with flash of egos, but not important enough to make a conflict or to murder one another. Still they will add their weight saying it is discrimination against heroes because villains are being evil.

Mirror Knight on the other hand is... A gullible idiot. Important enough to be the next Grand Hero after white knight, but lacks political awareness for the more political minds to feed him a "good vs evil" line to justify what they want and why he should back them... Instead of it actually being "petty and greedy" which would fly over his head.

So yes... I see mirror knight as the well meaning, but easily tricked hero and someone on team politics thought to bring him there knowing what would happen when a certain hero and a certain villain would meet.

Maybe not Evil with a capital E... But political jerk with the moral center of a rapid hyena. Good is good while it lines the pockets and weakens the enemy. Those who had yet to become the enemy just need to be weakened before they are declared.

Say what you want about the undead king... You have to admire how he managed to get rid of most of the political problems that normally infest most places.

laguz24

Yes, being a living god and turning all of your closest allies into undead does have that effect.

Cicero

My thought is that the best way to handle it is to de-escalate from being a hero villain thing to a simple revenge killing.

"Oh, okay, you killed him because he raped you. That means it's not a hero purging villain thing. Hanno what is the punishment for murder when the murderer was raped by the murderer?"

"Hmm... the punishment for murder is death, but when the murderer was a victim like this the penalty is reduced. X Years of hard labor."

"Okay good. Red Axe you are now Cordelia's slave until your sentence is completed, you don't get any of the benefits of being a Chosen either."

I don't know, something like that.

Shveiran

You are trying to paint this as something other than a T&T breach to find a better solution.

IMO, this won't work because whatever else this is, it is ALSO a major breach of the T&T. All its signee will be watching. Finding an out of the box solution leaning on something other from the T&T won't work.

It doesn't matter whether or not the solution makes sense if you squint or change your perspective: it won't be enough when everyone considers this a test of the T&T primarily.

And the T&T were always bound to be simple, given what they were meant to achieve, so I wouldn't hold my breath for "sexual assault" clauses and exceptions. It isn't a code of laws, it's a treaty cobbled together during the largest nightmare war of the millennia.

Morgenstern

Maybe it's high time then that they DO get some clauses/exceptions, if they are meant to work **after** said war as well 😊

[Javvies](#)

They're not. Not really.

The Truce and Terms are a measure to get everyone pointed at the Dead King and working more or less together without any real backstabbing for the duration of the war, probably plus a little extra.

They're also intended to lay the groundwork and foundations and serve as a trust building measure for the negotiation and implementation of the Accords after the war is over.

The Truce and Terms are not a permanent measure – they are by nature finite in duration. They're a stopgap measure to

hold off the emergency and to allow a longer term solution to be put into place after the crisis is over.

Mental Mouse

Mirror Knight may be earnest, but I suspect dismissing him as an idiot would be a Mistake.

laguz24

Ok, here is where things are beginning to pick up speed. I really just can't wait for MK to get slapped around verbally by the crows, he deserves it.

RoflCat

Well, given that there's at least 1 Drow listening to him and that princess from Procer, I think it might be... 'interesting' to hear what the Crows might say to him.

"Only your hardness is worth appreciating"
"She was pretending to enjoy it"
etc.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'll call it now. Bard has been hanging back after Cat's warning, no doubt deciding the next time her presence could be seen it was gonna be something big.

This is now far too much FUBAR to be coincidence. The odds are too long now. This is a big ol story powder keg and I suspect she's holding the fuse and a match.

ohJohN

Last chapter, when Severance/Severity was introduced and Masego was thinking about who could survive wielding it, my first thought was: Mirror Knight, obviously! His whole thing is taking abuse, Cat describes him as nigh unkillable. Masego even speculated about special armor that could allow someone to withstand the blade, and MK conveniently already has special armor!

Him showing up unexpectedly soon after sure smells like story shenanigans, too, and "a newly forged weapon that could turn the tide of the war, if only someone could wield it" is definitely a big story.

Morgenstern

Yup. My first thought as to who might wield it as well.

superkeaton

Uhoh.

Mental Mouse

>“Archer arrived two days past with her full band and the Red Axe,” the Rogue Sorcerer replied. “Which brings us at seventeen – eighteen with you, Catherine.”

Hakram: “<clears throat>”

Mirror Knight: “O Hai.”

Mental Mouse

The question is what number is significant here – 20, as a round score? 21, as three sevens?

An army of five teams of five would be pretty wild too.

Morgenstern

What’s significant is that the Rogue (or the author) seemingly forgot to count HAKRAM as a Named, too. Because if they were 17 before Cat arriving – it should be *19* after her arrival, seeing as she brought Hakram Deadhand with her, directly on her toes.

Mental Mouse

That’s noticable (thus my prior comment), but perhaps understandable – firstly, Hakram is currently doing the “shadow at Cat’s back” thing, which would tend to make him socially invisible like many another secretary or assistant. Then too, he’s a non-human, and it wouldn’t be surprising if RS has some unconscious racism happening – which would feed directly into looking past Cat’s assistant.

sengachi

You know, it *is* oddly inspiring to see a Proceran putting petty ambition above bigotry. Because that really is a big way that you get political winds to shift around bigotry, with situations that ensure ladder-climbing less-than-saintly politicians get more out of leaving the bigotry at the door than they do trumpeting it.

Dresdenflame

Point of order, we don’t know that she’s older than DK, just that she was alive around the same time he was

Timothy Nemet

If I recall correctly she was around prior to the Dead King. As she had knowledge of the immortal civilizations that existed

and stagnated prior to the Gods implementing Humanity to play their games.

Mental Mouse

If you're talking about the Wandering Bard, I'm pretty sure we've seen explicit statements that she was already old and experienced when DK reached apotheosis.

Timothy Nemet

Hey All I have a question regarding Masego/Hieorphant in this chapter.

I thought his magic was destroyed, so how was he able to hang the arsenal in between Twilight and Creation without it?

Is it named shenanigans, something else, or did I forget some key plot point?

Mental Mouse

His *sorcery* was destroyed, he still has his Name, and a collection of miracles to play with.

Chapter 14: Audience

"To boast of an opinion unchanged is to boast of wearing child's clothing."

– Atalantian saying

The Mirror Knight's appearance had me surprised, but the three other Named that followed him out pushed that over the edge and into consternation.

One of those I was already familiar with: the Blade of Mercy's youth and greatsword would have made him memorable enough even if I'd not once ripped out his arm to throw it in another hero's face as a distraction. Another Alamans, like the Mirror Knight, and one who'd strenuously argued against the Terms before they were forced through with the Pilgrim and the White Knight's backing. The other two took me a moment to place, as I'd only ever heard of them through reports. But heard of them I had, and they were not unknown quantities. Short, stocky and painted in colours that belonged to no Blood, the Exalted Poet looked like he belonged in a Dominion shield wall instead of the pleasure palaces of Levante he was said to have been conscripted from. Archer had mentioned to me he'd once been among the Hidden Poets,

some highly prestigious Levantine society of poets and singers, until he'd somehow touched upon some truth of the Heavens through his words. Yet for all that he did not wield Light – he was a spellcaster, if a middling one, and likely how the band had come through.

The last of the four was a Callowan, though she wasn't one of mine in any sense. She'd allegedly fled in the early years after the Conquest, and she was the only one who did not openly consider herself one of Above's champions. The Maddened Keeper looked instead like a perennially exhausted woman in her early twenties, skin drawn and pale and her dark hair ratty. Her threadbare robes ever rumpled and she was thin, but there was a sense of... menace about her. Not like a snake coiling but rather like a diseased thing, the sight of which had you withdraw your hand out of fear and disgust. She was host, it was rumoured, to a great many old secrets that should have stayed unknown – and had even turned herself into a living seal on a Hell Egg from Triumphant's days. After the Mirror Knight himself she was the one of that bunch I'd be most wary of fighting. I knew from personal experience that one didn't rub elbows with entities on the darker side of the fence without learning some rather nasty tricks.

"Mirror Knight," I said, tone cool. "I was under the impression your duties kept you in Cleves."

Adjutant fell on my left side to cover by bad leg, as naturally as taking a breath, and he did not need to reach for a blade for the heroes to tense. Christophe, for that was the Mirror Knight's name, looked as surprised to see me as I was to see him. The Blade of Mercy's hands closed around the handle of his greatsword so strongly the metal creaked as he stared me down with pale eyes and clenched teeth. I was meant to be respectable, these days, so I refrained from asking him how his arm was doing. The Poet looked calm, and had even warily stepped away from the Blade, but the Maddened Keeper was looking at me blearily through the long strands of her ratty hair.

"And I was under the impression I need not answer to you, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight replied, back straightening.

"Christophe, you speak to the anointed queen of Callow," the Rogue Sorcerer mildly said. "Have you forgotten your courtesies?"

Roland had stepped between myself and the newcomers, while I was studying them, and though he seemed calm I recognized the tension to his stance from the last time he and I had been in a mess together. He'd not known about this either, then. I'd not expected him to, but these days my trust came slower and died more swiftly than ever before. The world had gotten larger, the older I got, and ever more complex. There were fewer certainties left in my life than I'd like. To my surprise, Roland's

admonishment actually seemed to strike true with the Mirror Knight. A flicker of something like regret passed across his face, and the man offered me what a generous soul might call a bow.

"That was not one of the usual portals," Masego suddenly said, voice cutting through the room. "And there is more coming."

The glass eyes beneath the cloth were staring at what I would have thought to be nothingness, but then I was not the Hierophant. There were only three other Named with Christophe, I noted once more. I'd thought him one short of a band of five, and that a good sign, but was he really?

"What are you doing here, Mirror Knight?" I asked, tone grown colder. "The Arsenal is not a hostel anyone can visit when the whim strikes. Explain yourself."

My gaze swept by the armoured hero and onto the rest of his companions, flat and unfriendly.

"That question stands for the rest of you," I said. "Two of you ought to be in Cleves, and the —"

"Hooves," the Maddened Keeper suddenly said. "Someone rides."

My brow rose. That implied whatever was coming was not with them, which only further added to my confusion. Supplies, maybe? There would be carriages and wagons for those. It should be too early for it to be my own, though I supposed time did tend to get rather fluid when it came to places like this. No telling what it was.

"You tneed to ask why I am here, Queen of Faithlessness?" the Mirror Knight sneered. "Fine, play your games if you must. I am here to prevent the murder you've plotted."

The what now? Wait, was he talking about the way Prince Gaspard of Cleves might bargain himself into a slit throat if he didn't curb his ambitions? Because I'd not even begun to pursue that, choosing instead to delay until I spoke with the First Prince before beginning to act.

"Have we been plotting murder?" Masego asked, sounding a little bemused. "People never tell me these things. You should write more often, Catherine."

I closed my eyes and sighed. The last part was probably true, I'd give him that at least.

"See, even the Hierophant admits it," the Blade of Mercy triumphed. "A murder here in the Arsenal, where no word will escape of it—"

"This is absurd," Roland flatly said, "and beneath you as well, Antoine. Are we now nothing more than a pack of street thugs throwing around wild accusations? We set down rules to address suspicions like the one you have brought, and swore to follow them."

"*Va te faire foutre, Sorcier,*" the Blade of Mercy cursed in a hiss. "You might have forgotten the butchery at the Camps so you can get comfortable playing the wizard in your little tower, but we are not all so eager to be bought out of our principles."

"What principles would these be?" Hakram gravelled. "All I see is a handful of Named who were caught breaking agreements and now spin unlikely tales to dig their way out."

"It is no breach of the Terms to come to the Arsenal," the Exalted Poet said in Chantant, and I started at how gorgeous his voice was.

Warm and full-throated, like honey for the ear. I could understand why he'd never had to work a day in his life, with a voice like that: people would have thrown coppers at him just to hear him list out the chores of the day.

"That may be true. Lacing your voice with sorcery when speaking to other Named *is*, however," Hierophant said, tone gone icy.

The warmth left me, gone as if by a snap of the finger. I frowned, eyeing the Poet rather more warily than before.

"Who throws wild accusations now?" the Blade of Mercy said.

"Keep your lackeys in hand, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight ordered me. "This is disgraceful."

My fingers clenched around my staff of yew.

"What," I asked very gently, "did you just say to me?"

"Did I perhaps stutter?" the Mirror Knight smiled.

I breathed out, mastered the frozen vicious thing that was roaring in my veins. *At seventeen, you arrogant little shit, I would have answered that sword in hand.* But now I had responsibilities, and no matter how fucking satisfying it would be to make the prick spit out his teeth it would also be a major incident. The Truce and the Terms, I knew, would already be stretched to a breaking point by the killing of a villain no matter how the matter was resolved. If the representative for Below's lot assaulted the most famous Proceran hero alive the same week, they might just snap. I told myself this again and again until the anticipation of that smirking jackass bleeding from the mouth had left my knuckles, and only then spoke again.

"Under the Terms, I judge your presence here to be suspect and your behaviour needlessly provocative," I said, voice cool. "You will be held under guard until the White Knight is here to speak on your behalf."

Outrage was the answer, and the Blade of Mercy laughed scornfully, but I was not finished,

"Set your weapons down on the ground, right now," I said. "All of you. You will use neither sorcery, Light nor Name until it is made explicitly clear to you it is permissible once more."

"I did not mean to breach the Terms," the Exalted Poet said, raising his hands, "and will not add further insult to the injury."

The voice was just as gorgeous as before, I thought, but it wasn't so... attention-grabbing anymore. Huh, interesting. A little like fae glamour, then? That made him an odd duck compared to the usual Dominion lot, who rarely resorted to tricks on the more subtle side.

"You bloody coward," the Blade of Mercy swore. "Have you no pride?"

"Roland," the Mirror Knight gravely said, "did you not hear her speak? Hear the threat she threw at our feet like challenger's glove?"

The Rogue Sorcerer's face was a blank mask.

"If Hanno had given the order to a group of Named, I would have backed him without hesitation," Roland replied. "Christophe, swallow your damned pride for an hour. It is not worth what your swaggering threatens to bring down upon all our heads. I do not know what brings you here, but I have *been* here all this time and I tell you now that you are mistaken."

The Mirror Knight hesitated. I kept my mouth shut, even though by all fucking rights in the eyes of Gods and crowns just my giving the order here should have been enough, because I was not so enamoured of my pride that I'd knife a method that seemed to be working.

"It was a villain that was slain," Roland continued, "and-"

"See," the Blade of Mercy spat, "see? It is *exactly* as we learned. Some wizard rapist got nothing more than he deserved and now they would slay a Chosen in cold blood for it."

"And how did you learn this, I wonder?" Adjutant asked, voice calm.

"Orcs have-" the Blade of Mercy began-

"Finish that sentence," I mildly said. "And I will have to answer it."

I met his eyes, pale blue, and idly ran a finger just to the side of my shoulder. About where I'd ripped his out with my bare hands, the last time we'd fought. The boy flinched, until his eyes glowed with Light and he leaned forward instead.

"Answer the Adjutant's question, Christophe," Roland said. "Something is afoot."

"I will not unmask our friend in these walls so that you might silence them and hide the next sin from our eyes," the Mirror Knight harshly replied. "Queen you might be, Catherine Foundling, but you are *no queen of mine*."

Was I supposed to be stung by that? I sometimes pitied Cordelia Hasenbach for the fact that the blunders of her nation's heroes inevitably reflected on her and counted my blessings that the closest thing to a hero I had to answer for was Vivienne Dartwick. Once in a while, I supposed, I did get a stroke of luck.

"I didn't ask you to kneel," I said. "But I did ask you to put your fucking sword on the ground, *Christophe*. I can't help but notice you haven't even managed that much."

"And what will you do, if I do not deign to indulge you?" the man smirked.

"Do not think," I softly said, "that I will not beat some sense into your empty head, if you leave me no other choice."

"What do I have to fear of Night?" the Mirror Knight chuckled. "Perhaps this is for the best, yes? Too long have better souls tread softly around your pride for fear of your *power*. You are in dire need of a--"

I'd have to aim it carefully, to finish it one blow. Just tossing Night around like some Secret-drunk ispe wouldn't do anything, the man had survived being submerged in acid with only light discomfort. The trick to it would be--

"Hooves," the Maddened Keeper sighed. "I told you."

The portal's opening was silent, though the shiver of power was not. A rider came through, leaning low against the neck of the horse to avoid hitting their head, and there was no missing the power wafting off of them. *Another* one?

"Weeping Heavens," I swore, throwing up my hands. "Is this a secret magic fortress or a bloody fish market?"

"We do have ponds," Masego helpfully told me in a whisper, "and some of them have fish."

"Thank you, Masego," I sighed. "But the fish weren't the point of the comparison."

"It's not a very good comparison, then," he informed me.

I did not answer that, because I had better things to do and also I couldn't think of anything that'd be a match for that serious earnestness he'd spoken with. For a moment, looking at the rider straightening in the saddle, I was genuinely unsure whether I was looking at a man or a woman. But then I caught sight of the ornate kingfishers carved into the armour and put one and one together. Frederic Goethal, the Prince of Brus. More importantly, the Kingfisher Prince: the only ruler Named in Procer I'd ever heard about outside old legends. Prince Frederic, I decided as I took in the perfect blond hair, slender jaw and fair skin, was *ridiculously* pretty. The mass of ribbons in his hair would have looked ridiculous, I thought, if a closer look did not reveal they were purple and silver. The Dead King's banners, torn up and made into vain ornaments.

The Prince of Brus had style, I had to give him that.

"My, it seemed I've stumbled onto quite the assembly," Prince Frederic laughed. "I dare not claim it was sent for on my behalf."

Eyes just a little too sharp for me to find them beautiful lingered on me, and the Prince of Brus offered me a theatrical bow from atop his horse.

"Queen Catherine, I must say it is a fine pleasure to meet you in person at last," he said. "I am, one might say, an admirer of your work up in Hainault."

The heroes I'd been about to draw on looked utterly befuddled by a Named prince of Procer quite literally riding into the middle of the confrontation. It calmed the waters some, took the edge off the stormy urgency everyone had been feeling in their air.

"I hear good things of you from my people, Prince Frederic," I replied, meaning every word. "Or do you prefer your Name instead?"

"There is less difference between one and the other than I would have thought," the man mused. "But Frederic is all I would require of you, Queen of Callow."

"How forward," I said, smothering a grin, but did not outright deny him.

It was just an Alamans thing, the grandiose manners and bold suggestions, but it was still flattering in its own way. Dismounting smoothly, the Prince of Brus set foot on the stone and offered a sweeping bow to the rest of the Named here.

"I am Frederic of the House of Goethal, Prince of Brus," he introduced himself.

"Did we invade that?" I heard Masego ask Hakram in a whisper. "He's very polite, if we invaded that."

"We haven't," Hakram replied in a whisper. "Too far north. And technically speaking we never invaded Procer. We were invited into Iserre by Prince Amadis Milenan."

"Oh, I get it," Masego said, tone brightening. "We never killed any Procerans either, we just stabbed them and then an unrelated death ensued. Politics is all about ignoring causality."

I decided, after a moment, to pretend I'd never heard that. The Kingfisher Prince greeted several the other two Proceran heroes by both Name and name, which seemed to rather move them, and charmed his way through introductions with the Poet and the Keeper. Who was, if I was not mistaken, blushing. Roland stood at my side, a rueful look on his face, and shrugged when I raised an eyebrow as if to say, *Alamans, what can you do?* The glance I traded with Hakram was more laden with meaning. *Retreat*, I asked him with my eyes, *or press forward?* He studied the heroes and the Prince of Brus for a moment, then nodded. Forward, he was saying. I was inclined to agree. Though in principle the Mirror Knight and the Blade of Mercy were of equal standing to the Kingfisher Prince, in matters of Truce and Terms at least, the way they behaved spoke differently. They were deferring, treating the man a superior whether they were conscious of it or not.

And I'd been around Alamans long enough now to learn that their culture frowned on making a scene when a superior was there to see. The trait was even more pronounced in highborn, who would be expected to 'remain graceful' to the extent that they'd have to face even an utter disaster with a smile and a pithy phrase instead of genuine emotion. It galled me that I'd have to use someone authority's as well as my own, but not so much that I wouldn't actually do it. I stepped into the circle, Hakram and Masego trailing behind, inserting myself into the ongoing conversation.

"- it was the of the Bitter Blacksmith's make as it happens, though not the one here," the Prince of Brus said, touching the sword at his hip with a smile. "The younger brother of the pair. His blades are in high demand, and Revenants have learned to fear their sight."

"I am sure that stories would be best traded in comfortable a place than this room," I said. "Your horse will need stabling as well, Prince Frederic."

"Every time title is used, Queen Catherine, my heart breaks a little more," the man said, hand over his heart.

"Frederic, then," I smiled, against my own better judgement, but the mirth went away as I turned to the four unexpected guests. "As was discussed earlier, your unexpected presence at the Arsenal means you'll have to remand yourself to the custody the guards until the White Knight can be scryed. I expect you've no issue with this?"

"None at all, Black Queen," the Exalted Poet immediately conceded.

"A place with little light, please," the Maddened Keeper said. "Queen of Lost and Found."

My eyes narrowed as I looked at the haggard woman. That was not one of my better-known titles, much less by someone who should not have ever gone anywhere the Firstborn. This one was worth keeping an eye on. I smiled at the Mirror Knight and the Blade of Mercy, who were both doing poorly at hiding their anger. But they were only two against many, and likely to disgrace themselves in everyone's eyes if they fought back against my very reasonable request.

"Of course," the Mirror Knight said. "We will do what is right."

"We always do," the Blade of Mercy said, looking at me defiantly.

I glanced at Roland, who nodded. I'd trust him with seeing to that, then. I knew not the officers that must be spoken to or the places the heroes would have to be stashed away until Hanno could either free my hands to deal with this mess or deal with it himself.

"I'm sure one of the guards can show you to the stables," I told Frederic Goethal. "I'm afraid I cannot claim the same."

"Every hour parted from you will be a torment," the Prince of Brus assured me, "but I may be able to withstand it, for the promise of a cup of wine shared at a later date?"

"Best you bring the bottle," I told him, tacitly accepting, "I know little of Proceran wines."

Even when it came to Callowan bottles, I only knew so much. Gods, I realized with some amusement, I could name more sorts of liquor than wine.

"A journey of discovery is always a pleasant evening to share, Queen Catherine," the Kingfisher Prince smiled, and with a bow took his leave.

A charmer, that one, I considered. That made him that dangerous, if rather pleasant. The heroes left, until the only ones here in this strange room in this strange place were of the Woe: Masego and Hakram, who I would trust so long as I still had it in me to trust anything at all. I breathed out, then, appreciating how close to fighting this had come. The heroes were bucking the Terms and bucking them *hard*. Those two Proceran hotheads were trouble, had been from the start, but I'd thought that Hanno's word would be enough to keep them in line. That belief was starting to wane, unfortunately, and if words failed then there was only one way left.

"Fuck," I muttered. "This is going to get worse, isn't it?"

I knew better than to believe house arrest would keep a hero contained. Which meant I now had to take this situation in hand before the fucking idiots broke the agreements that were keeping Named pointed north at Keter instead of squabbling.

"Find me a room I can receive people in, Zeze," I asked Masego. "And then get me the Hunted Magician."

"Are you not going to settle into your quarters?" Hierophant asked, cocking his head to the side.

"I'll rest when I'm dead," I sighed.

Better that than everyone else dying, I supposed.

"And Hakram-" I began.

"I'll see what bottles I can rustle up," the orc agreed.

Ah, Adjutant, that prince among men. What would I do without him?

—

I'd expected to end up in a glorified scholar's nook, but perhaps that'd been naïve of me. After all the Arsenal had been built on the Grand Alliance's gold with the understanding that it would be receiving some of the finest minds from three nations as well as packs of Named. Moreover, for something like the Mirage – that great enchanted room that'd been sold to me as the sorcerous step beyond scrying – to be worth making, there would have to be fitting accommodations for the few people on Calernia that would actually be allowed to use that room. That meant that an entire wing of the Arsenal, named the Alcazar, had been built for that purpose. There were luxurious private quarters, there, and

private dining rooms, but also the kind of parlour where a prince or a queen could receive important guests away from prying ears.

Masego had cut me loose in the wing after bringing me there, admitting he was less than familiar with the place and so of limited use, and instead gone off to find the Hunted Magician. The attendants here, though, had sorted me out. I'd requested something 'intimate', which was what rich people called small, since I'd not brought a household with me and the villain I was going to receive was both Proceran and mostly likely highborn. Better the lack of personal attendants be taken as preference for privacy than an admission I'd simply not brought any. Or had any, to be honest. Even when I'd spent most my time in Laure, I'd kept a rather modest house by royal standards. Enough that Anne Kendall had once praised me for my frugality, and that thought had me reaching for the bottle of *aragh* that Hakram had somehow gotten his hands on.

I'd been a while since I'd last thought of the once Baroness of Dormer, who'd been my Governess-General and died so senselessly in the Night of Knives. Her and people dearer to me, like Ratface, whose death Malicia would one day answer for.

I gulped down the thimble I'd filled, the roaring warmth of the Taghrebi liquor spreading down my throat, and leaned back into the cushiony Proceran sofa I'd claimed as my seat. The parlour was not large, two sofas and a low table taking up the greater part of the room while service tables and tapestries took up the rest. It would serve for my purposes, as would the bottle of *aragh* set on that nice polished table along with one wet thimble and one still dry. Adjutant stood behind my seat, to the side, since he was here as my second and not a villain his own right. I'd not expected for Masego to return with the Hunted Magician, since he'd see little point in walking back and forth the Arsenal for courtesies he only dimly paid attention to, so I was not surprised when it was only the Magician that was announced by attendants. The man was ushered in, and as he bowed I took the time to study the man that Hierophant's indifference to matters of status had allowed to become chief among the villains of the Arsenal.

Nearing or past thirty, I decided, well-dressed in fine robes but leaning towards the practical – and I did mean *well* dressed, not *richly* dressed, which smelled of nobility to me. Good-looking and well-groomed, the stubble on his face sculpted, he was dark of hair and his eyes straddled the line between grey and blue. No one knew his name, only his Name, and the mystery around him had so far remained inscrutable. He cleaned up nicely, I thought, but that wasn't why I kept staring at him. There was something about the Hunted Magician, something strangely familiar. It was on the tip of my tongue and it was irritating me I couldn't quite spell it out.

"Queen Catherine, it is my honour," the Hunted Magician said, bowing respectfully.

I stared at him, some part of me feeling like I could just order him to kneel and he would. The certainty of that thought was what surprised me, because there was no room for so much as the shadow of a doubt in it and that was not something that came upon me often. Not anymore, thank the Gods. And just like that, it fell into place.

"Oh," I said, "you poor dumb bastard. Which Court is it that you sold your name to?"

The man twitched, then looked at me what I could only call naked fear. I was almost surprised Masego hadn't noticed it, but then I supposed that was not he part of fae nature Hierophant was familiar with: he'd studied fae, made use of them, but he'd never felt that power coursing through his veins. He knew it like a rider knew a horse, while I knew it like the horse knows the stride.

"I-" the Hunted Magician began, mouth gone dry. "I do not know what you mean, Your Majesty."

"I can *smell* it, Magician," I said. "They've still got a claim on you, and a debt like that can be pulled at by more than the true debtor. Can't be Summer, or I'd feel like smashing your skull open, and if it was Winter you would have physically balked at lying to me. So, which is it: Autumn or Spring?"

"It is true, then," he quietly said. "You were, for a time, queen amongst the Fae."

"I scavenged that crown," I said, "and it ever sat ill on my brow. I was glad to be rid of it. Answer my question, Hunted Magician."

I did not Speak – I'd lost the talent when I ceased being the Squire, and my new Name was not so close to coalescing that I could call on old tricks – but he shivered anyway. There was an echo of power there that had a call on him, much as he would like to deny it.

"Autumn," the villain answered. "It was Autumn I bargained with."

And you use Maviii runes that not even Masego can seem to figure it out, I thought, so I don't really need to ask what you bargained for, do I? Ancient knowledge seemed a petty thing to sell your name for, but then that'd never been my calling.

"Good," I smiled. "Then I have a use for you, Magician."

"I have evaded the eye of the Prince of Falling Leaves, remaining free of eternal servitude," the Hunted Magician angrily said, "I'll not suffer the yoke of the Black Queen instead."

"I'm not going to make you into a puppet," I snorted, "I'm going to speak to Hierophant so that you might be brought in onto a project of ours that the Kingdom of Callow backs above all others. You have the potential to greatly contribute, and so be greatly rewarded."

Masego had been running into trouble proving his Quartered Seasons theory, but if we could bring into the work someone who had a lasting tie to Autumn then doors would open. And I'd just discovered I could squeeze the Hunted Magician rather hard if I felt like it, so I was even fairly comfortable bringing him in. Already my mood was improving.

"That can wait for later, though," I dismissed. "You wanted an audience, Magician. Well, you have it."

I gestured vaguely, inviting him to proceed. The man straightened in his seat.

"The death of the Wicked Enchanter was not happenstance, a stroke of fateful misfortune," the Hunted Magician told me. "This is a plot, Black Queen, and we are all in danger."

[esryok](#)

What's this? Not just one, but *two* more chapters? Someone give this author a medal.

After that, help lure in more unsuspecting readers by voting for PGTE at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

After *that*, come hang out on the discord and subreddit!

<https://discord.gg/jeHRFXm>

<https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

Miles

"To boast of a vote cast is to boast of voting for pgte."

– <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> saying

[ErraticErrata](#)

First update of the month, so extra chapter in the eponymous tab: it's titled "Kingfisher II" second and last of the Prince Frederic POVs.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Oh, I get it," Masego said, tone brightening. "We never made any vote reminders either, we just typed strings of letters and then an unrelated link ensued. Tobwebfiction votes are all about ignoring causality."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Mike E.

Nicely done, and with my favorite Masego "observation" of the recent chapters.

[*Liliet*](#)

Booo

Emily

It's been awhile since I voted. This made me vote

[*tkjarrah*](#)

damn cat has spent 5 books putting out horny energies and the world is finally returning said horniness to her tenfold
The Secret works, everybody

Burnsy

This has Malica written all over it in big scrawling letters that say "ALAYA WASHHERE"

Shveiran

My bet is on the Bard, actually

Oshi

not mutually exclusive. One hand helps the other sort of thing.

[*Javvies*](#)

Or they could be at cross purposes here.
Or Bard could be using Malicia's efforts, helping parts of them along, and twisting the results to some other end.

After all, when it comes to Bard, we really don't know what her actual goals are. Plus, she's basically an instance of bullshit ex machina.

Shveiran

Kinda, yeah.

I can't wait for us to read what Painted Knife found.

beleester

Evidence for the Bard: Plan relies on numerous Named showing up at exactly the wrong place at the wrong time. Plan seems designed to blow up the Truce and Terms which would otherwise limit her control of Named. Malicia no longer has the influence she used to without Scribe.

Evidence for Malicia: Plan seems like it will blow up the Arsenal, the foremost weapon against the Dead King – something that goes against the Bard's interests. Malicia has a history of manipulating Procer to her benefit. Plan apparently relies on sorcery, as the Hunted Magician managed to sniff it out.

I'm leaning towards Malicia, but the sheer number of Named here definitely smells of Bard.

[Liliet](#)

You do realize that these Named weren't brought there by Bard, most of them just, like, live there? And that narrativium ensures drama swirls up around Named autonomously, meaning all the problems happening at the same time is basically the law of the universe?

It does not require an agent to bring it together deliberately. Hell, if Bard has a stake in this, half of it might actually be messing with her plan.

Shveiran

There is no guarantee that Bard is involved.

However, as the most esteemed mistress of story-fu and narrative manipulation of her time (which is a long time, I believe it is at the very least a possibility she may be nudging this mess along.

Considering how important the pie is, for good or ill it's almost a given (though not quite a certainty) that she'll be involved: she is bound to have a stake in what happens here, because this will shape what follows and she has a stake in that for certain.

While I acknowledge it is possible she is sitting this one out, or that she will step in to help the lead, I find it more likely that this toxic brew of heroic idiocy and

coincidence (two of her usual tools) has been helped along.

If nothing else, because this could have been prevented with subtle interventions before, and wasn't.

[Liliet](#)

Note that the whole thing did not in fact break down before, during the previous two years.

Now THAT is almost suspicious, considering the amount of toxicity in the air.

JRogue

We only named two of the three likely individuals capable of both wanting to plot against this and being able to.

The Dead King is the third. He could be manipulating this. Instead of a direct assault on the Arsenal and the Terms he is planting seeds of doubt among the Hero's that already WANT to misunderstand Cat. She said that MK and The Blade were already bucking them.

My bet is still on Bard tho

Shveiran

A possibility.

However, that is something one achieves with talks and dialogue rather than with undeads and rituals.

Considering how hard it was for Squire!Cat and Queen!Cat to get Heroes to talk, I find it unlikely they are entertaining guests from the Serenity while they are at war with it.

All in all, I'd say it's unlikely.

erebus42

Gods Procer really does breed the biggest pricks in Calernia. I wonder whom this particular plot belongs to. It's certainly on brand for Malicia but something makes me think this is someone else's doing.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not counting Bard out yet. This could be shaped into a story of "Well we killed our valuable ally, but we had to, they were evil. Somehow, we will find a way!" which might give them enough inertia to put things back on her track, especially if she can now interfere directly and regularly again.

Liliet

Reminder that “no direct touch” is a limitation that has nothing to do with Cat :3

Insanenoodlyguy

Directly in the sense of “Don’t have to care if anybody knows I was involved in this.” Whereas right now, there’s a hanging threat that if she’s doing something Cat notices and perceives as threatening the T&T she’s going to Dread Empress this situation.

Liliet

That’s not what the metaphysical “no direct touch” limitation is about, that was around long before Cat came around.

Also, she obviously didnt care if anyone knew she was involved with the Liesse Rebellion and Hanno’s band in Free Cities, since both are in fact open information nobody ever kept any kind of secret.

So no, that’s not what that limitation means either.

sengachi

Hmmm. I feel like Catherine might have her Name by the end of this debacle, if just because of meta-narrative logic. There’s only so much space in this book and she’s either likely going to hit all three aspects before the end or get her Name *only* at the very end.

But that attention being drawn to Chekov’s Gun this chapter (“my new Name was not so close to coalescing that I could call on old tricks”) makes me think her Name isn’t being saved for the very end. And if she’s going to have three aspects by the end of the book she needs to get started *now*.

So ... Catherine might get Named soon!

I am both really excited by that possibility and enjoying having a story with such explicit in-universe narrative that can make a thought exercise like this feel like a proper part of the story and not just meta stuff.

Mental Mouse

And triggering Catherine’s Name would be very much in the Wandering Bard’s wheelhouse.

Juff

Light – he > Light, he
ever rumbled (ever seems the wrong word)
cover by > cover my
tneed > need
several the other > the other
someone authority's > someone's authority
in comfortable > in more comfortable
then," I > then." I
custody the > custody of the
Catherine," > Catherine."
him that dangerous > him dangerous
I'd been a while > It'd been a while
villain his > villain in his
forth the Arsenal > forth across the Arsenal
quiet spell > quite spell
at me what > at me with what
not he part > not the part
Maviii > Mavii
figure it > figure
"Good," > "Good."
angrily said, > angrily said.

Javvies

Well, the Magician is probably right.
The appearance of so many Heroes out of nowhere who are supposed to be on the battlefield, in addition to their foreknowledge of events that even Cat was just hearing about, that's definitely premeditated and planned by somebody. Plus their use of a shortcut entrance ...

The only question is who is responsible for this plot. Or if it's multiple people behind it. And if there's only one agenda in play other than Cat. I suspect that the Kingfisher Prince might not have been put into motion by the same agenda as Mirror Knight and company, because his arrival headed off the imminent fight. This is big enough that Bard almost has to have some kind of connection. The only question is what that connection is.

Darkening

Given his chapter today, I'm pretty certain that the Kingfisher Prince would violently murder anyone that tried to do anything to sabotage the war against the Dead King, so he's probably gonna be an ally of Cat in keeping things from erupting into open war between named.

Javvies

I tend to agree.
From what we know of him and his personality, Frederick knows and recognizes that without Cat and her efforts, he'd be dead and all of his people would be dead, and while he might not

mind dying if that's what victory required, he'd really much rather live to see his people prosper and not fail them. I think he's more of a reasonable/practical good, however flamboyant on a personal level. Or, rather, he may be idealistic, but his implementation of his ideals are tempered by realism and pragmatism. And he's definitely fully onboard with the Truce and Terms. Although, he'll probably end up objecting to the no Named Rulers clause that Cat wants in the Accords, but I think he'd be largely in favor of them as well.

I suspect that his arrival was orchestrated by someone/something who doesn't want what Mirror Knight and company are engaged in to work out the way they want it to. But he was presumably on the Lycaonese front ... which makes his arrival even more of a surprise than Mirror Knight, albeit a more pleasant one. Something is definitely up. I suspect Pilgrim might also be on the way, either directly to the Arsenal or to rendezvous with someone else who is already on the way to the Arsenal, perhaps Hanno.

Shveiran

My bet is on Pilgrim being how the Kingfisher got here so soon and at the right time. Ophanim's insights and the Twilight Ways

grzecho2222

Given that Fredrick seems to be some variation of Prince Charming

Shveiran

He certainly charmed me

[Liliet](#)

> This is big enough that Bard almost has to have some kind of connection. The only question is what that connection is.

I agree that it would be increasingly odd if at this point Bard did not get drawn into it, but I argue she's not likely to be the origin, if only just for the staggering amount of weight for OTHER points of origin that aren't her.

[Javvies](#)

I'm referring to the decidedly suspicious arrival of Mirror Knight and Company plus the Kingfisher Prince.

Everything else that happened prior to their arrival (ie, Red Axe killing Wicked Enchanter and that generating a

clusterfuck inside the Arsenal), is something that needs no outside intervention.

But for all of them to show up suddenly, and nigh simultaneously, through a shortcut entrance, and the necessary travel times from where they're supposed to be, plus apparent foreknowledge of events ... that is massively suggestive of third party intervention by at least one entity possessed of the capacity and necessary influence/political capital to get them to move and arrive when they did ... and anyone with that would also need motive.

For that matter, the Kingfisher Prince almost certainly has an agenda at odds with Mirror Knight and company. So he could easily have been sent by someone who became aware of Mirror Knight and company and that agenda who is in opposition to them and their agenda and whomever sent them.

Wandering Bard is basically automatically at the tops of the lists of those who meet any of those criteria, much less all of them. On the other hand, Wandering Bard would also know that Cat's going to be incredibly suspicious ... and that Wandering Bard not fucking things up is enforced by the Grey Pilgrim on penalty of his own death.

Augur could have been responsible for sending the Kingfisher Prince if he's there to support Cat in upholding the Truce and Terms, as seems likely. Augur would not have sent Mirror Knight and company in unless her plan was for them to discredit themselves and remove themselves as political and influential factors moving forwards or to get some of them killed – which is to say, Augur would only have sent them if she were setting them up for failure ... which is possible, and potentially in character, considering her play with the coup attempt.

[Liliet](#)

I do agree that it would be odd for Bard to not intervene at SOME point, and the scenario where she tips off Frederic to come in time is not unlikely – though it does seem Augur's style as well, judging from what happened with the Salian coup – however, MK's "friend" is imho extremely likely to be just that – a pissy/sabotaging faction within Arsenal itself.

[Liliet](#)

Note:

– time is fluid in "places like this" (c) Cat, and in Arcadia and likely in Arcadia-derivative dismensions it's fluid specifically in service of the story. If Frederic was

going to arrive 'around then', his arrival would inevitably gravitate towards the maximum impact moment;

– Cat assumes it's the Poet who let MK through the shortcut entrance, meaning it does not in fact require a mysterious third party.

Javvies

The foreknowledge absolutely requires a third party.

I do not believe we have any basis to believe that time is sufficiently inconstant so as to allow Mirror Knight and company to leave the battlefield, arrive at the Arsenal, and pass through the outer defenses (which Cat said would take about a day) in the amount of time since Red Axe first attacked Wicked Enchanter.

Liliet

Note: it's been two days since Red Axe attacked the Wicked Enchanter.

But yeah no you're most definitely right, that specific thing is a plot.

It's just that the only entry requirements are:

- be able to arrange a provocation with Red Axe killing Wicked Enchanter (how complicated that would have been we have yet to learn)
- have Mirror Knight's ear

With ~20 Named in there... we have a lot of candidates.

Javvies

Nobody inside the Arsenal knew Red Axe was coming in with Archer or her history with Wicked Enchanter, and one of the very first things that happened after they arrived was Red Axe killing Wicked Enchanter.

It has to be someone from outside the Arsenal.

In addition, I'm pretty sure that for something this sensitive, no one would be entrusting communications to magical means that can be overheard without the knowledge of anyone in the call. Plus, I'd bet that there's tracking and monitoring for any unscheduled magical communications in or out of the Arsenal.

No.

Passing through the outer defenses takes a full day, in either direction. Mirror Knight and company had to be in motion long before Archer and Red Axe even arrived

at the Arsenal. Which means no one inside could have tipped them off.

Mirror Knight and company have to be the work of a third party, and one outside the Arsenal. Kingfisher Prince is almost certainly the work of a different third party, most likely one opposed to the third party responsible for Mirror Knight and company.

Wandering Bard is at or near the top of the list of those who could be responsible for Mirror Knight and company. She could instead be responsible for Kingfisher Prince if she doesn't like whatever plan Mirror Knight and company are following, but she is probably not responsible for both.

Augur is a strong possibility for Kingfisher Prince, no matter who sent Mirror Knight and company. She could have sent Mirror Knight and company if her intent was for them to fail miserably.

[*Liliet*](#)

> Nobody inside the Arsenal knew Red Axe was coming in with Archer or her history with Wicked Enchanter,

How do we know this?

> Wandering Bard is at or near the top of the list of those who could be responsible for Mirror Knight and company. She could instead be responsible for Kingfisher Prince if she doesn't like whatever plan Mirror Knight and company are following, but she is probably not responsible for both.

Reminder that Bard does not really set events in motion – no 'direct touch'. She only nudges them. Even if she's involved (which I will grant is not unlikely SOMEWHERE in this mess), she is not the one who *started* this.

Shveiran

And this could not have been set in motion with words because...?

I mean, that's what the Bard does. I'm not sure what you are arguing here.

[*Liliet*](#)

It's not like she's forbidden from touching people? She's hugged William and has explicitly mentioned having sex.

That's not what 'direct touch' means.

Insanenoodlyguy

Floating this now Somebody Named is going to die very soon. Only this time we'll have no clue who did it, save that we and Cat will know that it's an attempt to take a hammer to this blasting cap.

Put your theories out now for possible bragging rights later! I submit Red Axe is going to die within a fortnight, because she's the optimal choice to get everybody paranoid.

dadycoool

The Plot has only just been mentioned, yet it has thickened. I hope Cat can do what she does best: kick ass, take names, smoke like a chimney, and drink like a fish, all while Breaking the foundations of what her enemies hold dear.

Masego is a gem, too precious for us.

I see Freddy has similar taste in personal decoration to Cat. I wonder if they'll bond over that.

Razorfloss razor

Well damn this is going to be the true test to the accords anit. Why can't people calm the fuck down and deal with the giant world ending event before politics come out. I mean damn your issues won't mean shit if you are drowning in dead.

[Adrian_V](#)

Next chapter:
Beat.

"And its not mine, just in case" said the Hunted Magician. xD

Between this and the extra chapter i think i am going to like Frederic even more. And sadly this was going to happen sooner or later, the need to make it clear the Terms can and will be enforced is what will determine if they succed or not. Pity the blade of mercy didn't die, i mean so far every major fight he ahs been or been mentioned has ended with him defeated right?

PD; winter extra chapters (i think he appeared) don't count since that was more of the new everyday fight kind of thing.

Wonder

There is a slight possibility Scribe is in Arsenal.

Konstantin von Karstein

She would not sabotage the Grand Alliance, she has enough on her plate with Praes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sabotaging enemies and competitors alike is what Scribe does.

Agent J

Grand Alliance is not an enemy to Black. In fact, they tacitly support him over all other Praesi players (largely at Cat's insistence). And so, they are not an enemy of Scribe's. I can't see her actively sabotaging them. What would even be the goal there?

Shveiran

This. Combined with the fact that pissing in Cat's porridge is not something Scribe would survive, and throwing away her life is most definitely a disservice to Amadeus as well.

[Liliet](#)

SO GREAT

TFW you're Named and you cannot take a vacation without stumbling onto a plot)=

ofc that also means providence sent Cat there right in time to counter the plot, so y'know that's good

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. I mean she probably will counter the plot, but I think the plot is happening BECAUSE she is there. She didn't stumble into it, it's charging at her!

[Liliet](#)

IDK, the decision to head to the Arsenal was recent and spontaneous as I understood

SpacyRicochet

But also, a relatively easy part of any narrative. The protagonist moving to a place of great importance, only to find sudden upheaval happening? That's a story right there.

Don't forget, she already suspecting this debacle to be a pivot of some kind.

[Liliet](#)

y e p

Insanenoodlyguy

But inevitably she was going to. Whom ever did this knew how to get people who weren't supposed to be there to be there. Just had to wait for a good shot

[Liliet](#)

Or, y'know, they were trying to pull this before anyone of importance showed up, so they'd come to smoking ruins and a lot of bodies.

Insanenoodlyguy

I dont' think so. This is happening just as all the major players are set to convene in one location. If the place is a flaming wreck, all the big players won't be coming. Since we can reasonably conclude whomever the plotters are have no love for the Grand Alliance, at least as it stands now, I'd be this plan is rather hoping Cordelia, Hanno, Cat, and all these big players in the Named are in one convincingly volatile place. This is coming together too well to be an accidental stumble. Somebody saw this as a pivot, and/or made it one.

[Liliet](#)

> This is coming together too well to be an accidental stumble.

I think you're completely losing sight of how narrativium works.

Like, this is GUIDEVERSE. Where Amadeus just so happened to be passing through the exact dark alley where the one kid he was planning to check on just so happened to be right here and now needing rescue from a fight. And no part of it is surprising because THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU HAVE A ROLE.

We have 20+ Named in one place. The way their toast burns at breakfast is going to be 'accidentally' geared towards maximum drama.

It's like gravity, and we're in a WELL of it.

Shveiran

You are completely right. The part where I disagree – no, not even that, in truth, just add a little bit –

is the consideration that this is known to some players.

Bard or DK or other genre savvy players could use the fact you just mentioned to further their agenda, setting up the mess while being aware that a lot of Names means narratives picking up steam.

[Liliet](#)

I'll complicate things further: this is known to ALL players whose savvy is greater than that of a jellyfish, and maybe even to MK & BM. This is actual in-universe common knowledge.

Shveiran

I can count a dozen players that have used narrative logic with consistency, and some of them are dead.

"Common knowledge" is a bit of a stretch.

[Liliet](#)

Remember Iason and Co?

I'm not accusing whoever started this of competence by any means.

Agent J

Mirror Prick & Co. were surprised to see her there. I'm betting her sudden decision took the plotters off guard.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. The plotters are the ones that have to know she was on her way, not the pawns.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine decided it like two days ago. It would take about as much for Cristophe to get there, and that's how long ago the Wicked Enchanter died. The timing suggests the plotters were not any more aware of Catherine's impending arrival at the point all the rest was sent in motion than Catherine herself was (which is to say, not).

Emily

weren't you pro it not being a plot?

[Liliet](#)

Okay, I'll grant you that the funniest option is that there is no plot afoot at all, just a lot of people being idiots individually with some miscommunication on top.

SO MANY POSSIBILITIES~

(I am pro- this not being in control of any particular mastermind. There can easily be a local low level plot involved, or a dozen)

Burlyraven

I'm getting some serious vibes that Frederic might end up at the core of the endgame band of five versus the Dead King, even excluding a lot of the extra attention he's been getting. The bigger question is whether Cat's going to be on that one or if her story is going to force her to focus on Malicia before everything finishes on the war front.

Liliet

Why does everyone think there will be a core endgame band of five against the Dead King??? He doesn't seem like that kind of antagonist at all..

Burlyraven

I mean, there's usually a main group no matter the genre, but there's definitely room for a different endgame.

Mental Mouse

The end of the DK would actually be a good place to pull out a meta-band of five bands of five, with the individual bands also representing the roles of band members wrt the whole.

Liliet

A distinct possibility!

Liliet

Yeah but the group will not necessarily be a band of 5 of adventuring Named. It might be a group of mages/casters, or a group of politicians/generals hemming him in, or – you know.

Shveiran

I think it is a fair bet that you kill Neshamah only through Narrative weight; a band of Five is not a save-all end-all measure, yet is a pattern with a very strong groove.

I'd say, at the very least, it is more likely for him to be killed by a Band of Five than for him to be killed by anything else.

[*Liliet*](#)

I don't think a band of five is the *right* narrative weight for that. Mind that narrative itself takes logistics into account, and not always inversely: there's a reason why Dorian of Helike died so comically.

I'd put my money on Quartered Seasons as a large part of the finale, and if there IS a band of five formed to finish matters at the end, it'll be more of a logistically convenient last second ragtag matchup we can't predict because it WON'T consist of the people who matter up to that point. IMHO.

Agent J

Are you suggesting C-listers are gonna be the ones to put Nessie down for good? As opposed to the real heavy hitters of the Grand Alliance?

[*Liliet*](#)

Yes, because the real heavy hitters are going to be sitting in their laboratories / war tents / diplomacy parlors and doing the important background work.

Shveiran

In the Endgame? Unlikely, in my opinion.
It makes sense for them to work off-site right now, but then?

So far, we always saw rituals as complicated magic that often needs last minute adjustments and must be deployed on site.

If a big magic boom is involved, a powerful mage will have to wield that ritual up to Keter's gate himself/herself.

[*Liliet*](#)

> must be deployed on site.
...on the site of the ritual, not the site of effect.

Shveiran

Granted. Now, would you care to name an instance where the two didn't coincide in the series?

[Liliet](#)

Shveiran, easily: Akua's doom fortress would be able to open a Hellgate anywhere on the continent. It just opened one right next to itself because that's where Akua needed one. By technical capabilities it was nuke level of universal threat.

Shveiran

Unproven. It had the capacity, certainly, but it was never said it didn't have a range.

The weapon was simply also a flying fortress, so of course it had the capacity to, say, open one in Salia. I'd expect the fortress would have needed to move closer to Salia first, though.

To be frank, if that wasn't the case the fortress was a danger to anyone anywhere, not just Calernia, including the powers beyond the sea. The scale would have gotten much bigger in the aftermath.

ravedthrad

And Catherine and Frederic meet at last. I can't help but wonder, if Frederic were to present Catherine with a rose, would Brus and Callow unite into a new kingdom – let's call it "Solamnia" – and birth three new knightly orders?

Jeremy Cliff Armstrong

So long as the mage with the golden hour-glass eyes stays out of the realm of the gods we'll be ok.

[Liliet](#)

The Chinese-Finnish border is peaceful?

ravedthrad

In Dragonlance, the kingfisher was one of the main symbols of the Knights of Solamnia, who were organized into three related orders of knighthood: the knights of the Crown, the knights of the Sword, and the knights of the Rose.

[Liliet](#)

Nice!

My point about the Chinese-Finnish border, and the distance between Brus and Callow, remains 😊

ravedthrad

Well, I'll be the first to admit to being geographically-challenged. My Ryouga Syndrome is bad enough that I have gotten lost in a friend's house going to the toilet.

[Liliet](#)

(There are maps on the website)

ravedthrad

You underestimate the power of Ryouga Syndrome. 😊

Ben

It's a good point. But possibilities abound with the creation of the Twilight Ways.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, I do not disagree in any way 😊

Shveiran

So, in chapters past I have expressed a (lukewarm) defense of the Mirror Knight.

...can I take it back now?

I'm going to take it back. Thanks.

[Liliet](#)

TBF, his perspective is understandable if you account for him being an idiot.

...I am a very generous person.

Shveiran

Well, yes, (assuming you are willing to squint a lot) I can see your point.

But, well, "it is reasonable so long as you ignore all the facts they are purposely deciding not to take into account" is kind of a low bar to clear.

I'll admit I have very poor patience for idiots determined to light match next to the gasoline tank.

I mean, come on! Just... just come on!

I don't care if he and Mercy are still hung up on the Saint's death or some such, or over being swatted around during the Battle of the Camps, or if they are being manipulated by an outside force to believe that this is the start of a purge.

This is **SILLY**.

Anyone who has fought in the north CANNOT not know that the war would have been lost without the Twilight Ways and the Callowan and drow reinforcements; let alone if they not only didn't join but also gave the crusader the battle they actively **sought** before leaving.

Anyone with two brain cells must know that if there is one person that is keeping it all together is Catherine: without her you likely lose Callow, the drow, the Villains...

And they risk this for what, posturing? If you kill her, if you humiliate her, if you antagonize her, it could all go up in smoke?

Just... come on!

There is being young and idealistically naïve, and there is being morons.

Don't be morons, guys.

dadycool

As I considered a reply to this comment, my mind went back to what Hanno told Cat as part of his reprimand for her behavior towards (that one girl that was the Scorched Apostate's Light Mirror). If I'm remembering correctly, he essentially said not to fault the girl for following her Name-based nature and that trying to act counter to it would be detrimental to her well-being. I also remember various points in Cat's time as Squire that she tried to act contrary to her Name and got punished for it.

Possible summary: These are Heroes being Heroes because they're Heroes. Any old-style card-carrying Villain /will/ end up cackling and monologuing simply because they're driven to. Any Paragon-style Hero /will/ go on about the Power of Friendship or something and fight the Villain because they're the Villain. This means they're either evil or Evil and absolutely cannot be tolerated.

The Power of Protagonism means anyone who opposes the person we're following is either the enemy or an idiot, which completely negates any virtue such an attitude would have. ("From my point of view, the Jedi are evil!" or "Harry needed to grow up in an abusive household because I didn't want him to be too confident or have too much will to live. All for the Greater Good, of course.")

Shveiran

You may have a point in theory, but let us consider the roles in question: the Mirror Knight is meant to reflect evil back to evil, and the Blade of Mercy I have no clue.

Regardless, I see no evidence that their roles require them to oppose all evil at all times: they sure didn't mind the ratlings and Keter while they were busy helping the Proceran trying to annex Call- I MEAN, helping them crusading.

So they CAN choose which evil they oppose and focus on the rest at a later date without falling out of their roles' shapes.

Hence, they are CHOOSING to oppose "the Evil Black Queen, who must be doing something wrong somewhere somehow because, well, she is Evil" over the friggin Dead King.

I can see they don't want anything like the T&T or the Accords, and find it revulsive to make a truce with the Villains.

That is still a battle for tomorrow to fight, assuming the world makes it that far. Forcing it here and now is still **moronic**.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not if they see this is a pivot.

taking into account they are stupid but not hopeless lets set this up. They get word, however they did (though presumably from a plotter or more direct pawn of the plotters in the armory), that the Black Queen is going to have the Red Axe killed. Now, the key isn't to hide all the fact, just to alter the flavor. This is all coming together too suspiciously to be coincidence, and most heroes are going to see that. But what they are being sold is that it's CAT'S PLOT. That Red Axe was put with the rapist who created her as a pretext. The hero wins, it's a breaking of the Truce and the hero will be killed for it, just as planned. The Villian wins, they were "Defending themselves" while abusing the T&T and a hero will be killed for it, just as planned. Either way, it's obviously an Evil plot to make the hero's break the letter of the law while shamelessly abusing the spirit, and prove the T&T was a bad idea to begin with. Well, fuck that. They are not going to use this plot to see a hero killed, not while Mirror Knight and Blade of Mercy have anything to say about it! Best to just charge right into this trap so it works out for the best! And look, there's a magic user that can help them get there! Oh this is all coming together now. Charge!

And of course, the Black Queen is making a big show of appearing "reasonable" but she's also disarming them and meanwhile, Red Axe is about to be killed, so maybe it's go time right now!

At this point I suspect that Red Axe will end up dead, probably with the help of whomever warned Mirror Knight. Red Axe is going to end up dead.

[Liliet](#)

What I want/expect to see is for Indrani to be protecting Red Axe thoroughly enough that an attempt at that fails.

Underhanded plotting that underestimates (1) the Woe's commitment to what they DO commit to, (2) their power = I want 😊

Shveiran

Yeah, but the point remains.

Even if one buys all that and it turns out it was true, you are putting at risk **everything living** to try to save **one Heroine** which is included in the "everything living" in the first place.

Worse, they are not just rolling the dice, they are just waiting to see **how they will lose**.

>They win by killing the Black Queen?

Even though they likely don't know about the dwarves, there is no one else that has even an amiable relationship with the drows, who are fighting *half this war on their own*.

There is also no other villain with her pull and commitment to this cause, so there is no one to fill her cloak as Representative in a satisfying way, and you still established the precedent that Heroes will slay Villains if they think it's ok and the Truce is dust.

-> Neshamah eats everything, including the Heroine.

> They bully the Black Queen into doing what they want?

Her reputation is weakened; her ability to keep the Villains in line is compromised; the system of the Representatives is turned into a joke; the Truce has still been broken by the death of one Villain scot-free; Heroes have both proven unwilling to uphold the Truce and able to bully the Villains out of their agreed rights and guarantees.

Villains could walk, trust between allies is fractured for good, chain of command is compromised. Also, though we know it's impossible but they don't, there is a chance the Black Queen takes her shit and goes home as the wicked Villainess she is.

→ Neshamah not necessarily eats everything (including the heroine) but is certainly more likely to do so.

> They try and lose?

Even if the Black Queen doesn't kill them, which from their perspective cannot be a given, trust is still broken, the Truce is still put into question, and with such a flagrant breach of terms either gallows are employed and we lose several good Heroes, which is followed by a massive outcry from the Heroic community, or they get away with it, followed by a massive outcry from the Villain community and a loss of face for both Cat and the T&T.

→ Neshamah not necessarily eats everything (including the heroine) but is certainly more likely to do so.

There is nothing to gain here even from their warped perspective, **and a lot to lose.**

Pressing on means being angry teens with too much power, and I'm appalled by how many times that seems to be the only thing under a hero's golden paint.

This needs more Frederic, damnit.

hakureireimu

No one is accusing the Mirror Knight of using his brain too often.

[Liliet](#)

> the drows, who are fighting half this war on their own.

(note: plural of drow is drow)

Does Mirror Knight really KNOW that the drow are fighting half this war on their own? Does he really understand the size of their contribution in Cleves? Note also that they are fighting that half of the war because they have to – Cat or no Cat, they actually don't have anywhere else to go.

> There is also no other villain with her pull and commitment to this cause, so there is no one to fill her cloak as Representative in a satisfying way, and you still established the precedent that Heroes will slay Villains if they think it's ok and the Truce is dust.

No, see, the Truce and Terms are evil in the first place, an abhorrent compromise forced by the Black Queen. Nothing of value will be lost by shaking

villains loose of the cause, and much will be gained since villains won't be doing all of that sabotaging they no doubt are doing riight over there out of sight. He hasn't seen any but his buddy told him there was some, and who could really doubt that? They're VILLAINS, everyone knows what that means. It's like doubting water flows downhill.

> Pressing on means being angry teens with too much power, and I'm appalled by how many times that seems to be the only thing under a hero's golden paint.

...you are? 0.0

[Liliet](#)

> Pressing on means being angry teens with too much power, and I'm appalled by how many times that seems to be the only thing under a hero's golden paint.

That's the whole THING with Named? They are more often than not kids who stumble into way too much power. Neither Above nor Below are deliberately choosing them, the stories just happen. It's horrifying and unfair and it's the law of the universe, and part of the change the academy will make is... *ameliorating* that, specifically.

Did you notice how William, Akua and Catherine were all 16-18 during their three-way clash?

Insanenoodlyguy

Lillith already chimed in with most of the stuff I'd have said anyway, but as to the rest:

-Even if one buys all that and it turns out it was true, you are putting at risk everything living to try to save one Heroine which is included in the "everything living" in the first place.

They. Are. HEROES. Which means their default setting is often "no compromise." Yes, stopping the Black Queen here is a huge risk. But letting her kill a fellow hero is unacceptable, which means it's a risk worth taking. Better that than let evil have it's way, even once (and it's never just once!). It only emboldens them and next time it will be worse. No, you draw the line at the beginning, and you'll never have to worry it's gone too far.

As I said, the whole thing could be made into a "We'll find a way!" Story. I think they'd agree that

taking away the Black Queen and all her allies makes the situation appear hopeless. And that's great for them. That's how they win. By making it impossible to win by doing the right thing without compromise, their victory is assured! (And do remember that 99% of the time that's exactly how it would go. the Dead King is a great example of the other 1%, but obviously they aren't expecting that to be the case)

From their perspective, the only way to lose for sure is by doing nothing. So goddamit, they are going to do something. And since they really have no idea what's going on, killing the biggest bad guy in the room is probably a great place to start!

[Liliet](#)

You are definitely and 100% not wrong lmao

tithin

Getting strong Death alarm vibes from the deadhand here, by which I mean he is likely going to die.

[Liliet](#)

What exactly are the death flags?

Everyone keeps saying this about Hakram, and I keep not seeing it.

tithin

Catherine has thought several times in the last few chapters, of how heavily she relies on him now – she is extremely reliant on him. She's thought that several times throughout the series, but never so often and in such a short time.

You want to cripple cat, you want to break her and her alliance, Hakram's the weak point, the link in the chain that is the woe and the thing that may very well push her over the edge of her new name.

Shveiran

Granted, that was always a possibility, but I can't say I've noticed an increase of such remarks.

If anything, I suppose since we are drawing closer to the endgame the dramatic draw of loss could pose more danger for Adjutant. But it is nothing new.

dadycool

The first step to Black's rebellion and climb of the Tower was the death of Captain. Hakram fills a similar role for Cat, so maybe she'll start eyeing the Tower in the not-exactly-distant future? I'm most definitely spouting nonsense, but two people have heard the Song onscreen and both their Names start with Black.

Shveiran

Again. I can't say I see your point here: Cat has heard the song ever since she was the Squire. I can't imagine how Hakram's death would push her to climb the tower, even if Malicia does it with her own bare hands; she already wants the Empress dead, climbing the Tower is a whole other beast.

dadycool

Thinking about it, she's always been "open" about how much she relies on him. This really isn't anything new.

Captain's death wasn't enough to get Black to climb the Tower, either, nor was Warlock's. But with each death in his Cabinet, as it were (including the generals and eventually the Legions in Exile), he was made more alone, which I believe is one of the requirements as stated in the Song. Another thing, Black waited ~25 years before he decided to actually make the commitment, largely due to his relationship with Malicia. Villains have Eternal Youth. Cat has time. I'm not saying she absolutely will, but I can't say she won't, either. After all, Black thought he wouldn't and look where we last saw him.

[Mental Mouse](#)

By the same token, an attack on Hakram would simply be part of an attack on Cat. Killing Hakram would fit in a story-slot where Cat would otherwise be maimed.

[Liliet](#)

Mmmh.

Yes, okay, I see the reasoning)=

Insanenoodlyguy

Hmmm. I don't see it happening just yet. But while I keep guessing Red Axe is going to die, I could definitely now see somebody TRYING to kill Deadhand. But we haven't even learned the full deal with his new hand yet. It's not time.

I wouldn't be shocked if he loses his artificial arm though and just starts ghost-handing it dual wield style.

[cakeofdoom](#)

Wait is he the Hunted Magician or the Haunted Magician? because both are being used.

hakureireimu

That is false (thanks to the power of edit). There's only Hunted Magician now

negagardens

Oh wow- the hunted Magician is like... the perfect minion. If needed, she has a pretty sharp leash on him... but as long as she is reasonable and doesn't USE it, he can presumably be persuaded to play ball.

AND he thinks for himself and actively provides information. Horray!

Also: nice job Frederick. What a hero (again)

negagardens

Also, seriously- The PRince of falling leaves ain't never coming back, and that's Cat's doing. HM totally owes her BIG time... not that this probably counts for heaps for a villian.

Alex Straughan

Or he's now around forever, having replaced Larat. Arcadia United has not been explained at all. We know nothing about it's rules other than it seems isolationist so far.

Insanenoodlyguy

That sounds like an Autumn name to me. I think the Prince of Falling leaves is in fact in huge danger of coming around.

blubber

oh for fucks sake..dont tell me the heroes got the backing of more than just one noble...if you remember the night and its story, its hardly surprising there might be more in the works...

this is gonna end in tears and i doubt they will be catherines. And if you tell me, autumn wont utilise their claim in the most secret place of the alliance, with all of their leading names assembled..boi you gonna be surprised. Been wondering what the king and queen where up to, it seems to me we will soon see it... fuck

[Mental Mouse](#)

I note that the very intervention of MK & friends may well force Cat to kill the Red Knife, when she was looking for a way out of that...

[Liliet](#)

How so?

Indrani's there to be a big demonstrative 'do not fuck with my people' club. I don't think Cat's hand is forced so easily.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I was thinking more of the politics – now if she goes easy on the offenders, it would at least look from outside like MK and friends went in and leaned on her. Of course that depends (inter alia) on how widely known his little expedition is.

That said, Frederic is positioned for the save in this respect also. "That idiot MK and his idiot friends charged in where they had no business, they were about to push Cat into doing something intemperate, but I managed to defuse things...". Which also has the advantage of being pretty much the plain truth. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Y e p

Xinci

I must say after seeing him again I am even more curious about exactly how the Blade of Mercy serves mercy? Is he guided like Tariq or is he supposed to be their fist when they need more force? I would expect him to be closely tied to Tariq due to that, to be honest.

Also interesting that the deal Hunted made was with a Prince. I wonder if he gave away his actual name as part of the deal.

erebus42

In regards to selling his name that would be an interesting situation. It reminds me of a situation from Pact by Wildbow (MAJOR SPOILERS) When a certain character gets tricked by one of the fae into selling them her name. They end up taking her place in the world and she nearly falls through the cracks of reality. I wonder if the Prince of Falling leaves is out there somewhere playing the role of (whatever the Hunted Magician's name is). If that is the case than his Name would probably be one of his only tethers and it would probably be very bad if he were to lose it.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing Blade of Mercy is unrelated to the Choir.

And yes, it sounds like his actual literal given name was what was traded away.

Tinfoilhat

My little pet theory is that the Hunted magician is actually part of the ex-wild hunt... if not Lariat himself. That would also explain his ancient knowledge of runes and perhaps he is implicated in the shortcut to Twilights, having made the place and all.

ninegardens

This is a super cute theory... but given that Cat's like "Right, so you can't be Winter, because otherwise you would have had your ass kicked just now", it seems less likely.

[Liliet](#)

Larat is no longer subordinate to Catherine, nor any of his. The specific thing that tipped Catherine off – the potential she felt to order him around – is exactly what wouldn't be happening with that lot.

ninegardens

I can really think of only one politically feasible way out of this, and I don't see it happening.

Sit the Red Axe down.

Tell her:

"What you did was right. We know it is right. We believe in you. But we also believe that unless you are put to death for this, a whole lot of people are going to suffer.

We know you don't deserve it... but for the sake of maintaining the truce and the terms... are you willing to give your life?"

laguz24

Her answer will probably be no. He deserved it because nothing gets wrapped up that easily.

Agent J

Also, define 'right'? Because I'm not willing to just hand that to her unless she was attacked and very clearly acting in self-defence. Otherwise, birthing this monumental clusterfuck was not right by any means.

Jeremy Cliff Armstrong

Agreed. Morality is about consequences... not the past. That he was an monster is beyond doubt. But that cannot justify anything in a moral context. Not that it shouldn't. It actually cannot. As in "it's a fundamental law of the universe" cannot. Any other perspective is simply an attempt to justify what isn't justified or a complete failure to understand the difference between right and wrong.

The reason we punish people for past actions, then, is the implicit worry of them comiting those actions again unless steps are taken. Weighing that possibility against the certainty that the Truce and Terms would be at risk and the tens of thousands that will die if it fails... all the Red Axe accomplished by killing him is putting herself in the same category of monster as he was.

[Javvies](#)

Arguably, she's worse.

He at least knew when to stop and follow the rules to fight the Dead King (presumably).

[Liliet](#)

> all the Red Axe accomplished by killing him is putting herself in the same category of monster as he was.

Most decidedly not the **same** category.

Shveiran

It's really about points of view, with this kind of stakes.

I mean, say that because of this innocent the Terms go up in smoke, Catherine dies, and the whole shebang is turned upside down. The Dead King wins and everybody loses. It won't happen, but that is a possibility in theory, no?

At that point, how many lives would have been destroyed compared to how many the Enchanter ruined?

I can't stress this enough, I AM NOT DEFENDING RAPE, here.

I'm just saying... let's not defend causing the slaughters of millions, either? Because that's what sneezing on the house of cards could cause.

[Liliet](#)

Different categories still, in whichever direction you'd stack the comparison.

Also, probability of outcome should be multiplied by its severity, for proper weighting. The probability of harming someone by raping them is as close to 100% as to be functionally indistinguishable, and has no upside. The probability of losing the whole war by killing this one guy is... not that, AND has the added weight of "preventing future rapes" with some probability (the probability that the Enchanter would commit future rapes summed over the timeline with the corresponding probability).

I'd say the sum's still negative, and Red Axe fucked up badly.

But it's not... "the same category of monster". Like, no system of categorization puts those together, even if you insist on absolutes: Wicked Enchanter's actions were not, in fact, going to lose everyone the war with the Dead King.

Yes, I'm quibbling the phrasing here most of all. No matter what point of view you take on this, THAT way of putting it is not correct 0.0

Javvies

Yeah, anything other than immediate self defense and the inability to stop her attacker without killing him is not adequate grounds for using lethal force herself. Maybe if he were in the middle of actively betraying everyone to the Dead King ... but that's unlikely.

Liliet

Won't help disprove the heroes' point that the whole thing is bullshit.

What would actually help resolve this situation is coming up with a method of discipline that does not in fact kill Red Axe but also makes it clear to both villains and heroes that it is not, in fact, open season.

Forced oaths is one idea I have: have Red Axe swear to something for a limited time period that would in fact be something the likes of Mirror Knight would strongly like to avoid while not actually being 'savagery toward the poor victim',

Javvies

Her word isn't going to be worth anything to the Villains. She did after all break the oath she'd sworn to obey and uphold the Truce and Terms (presumably).

Swearing new oaths as punishment isn't useful as punishment since her sworn word is in doubt.

[Liliet](#)

No, not a regular word given. One of THOSE oaths. A blood oath, of the kind that you physically CANNOT break.

[Javvies](#)

...
Cat's not a Fae Sovereign capable of creating magically enforced and binding oaths anymore.

Still, even if a magically enforced and binding oath were possible ... I'm pretty sure that such oaths need to be willingly taken ... you can't just impose them on somebody, they actually have to make the oath themselves.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, exactly. That's what I said.

The person who broke the Truce&Terms gets to choose between execution (assuming no further alternative is found) and making a specifically worded binding oath. It's up to them, really!

And Cat and Akua made binding oaths to each other just fine in First Llesse. Fae are not necessary to the process.

Darkening

Fae magic isn't necessary for a binding oath, Cat and Akua made a blood oath with each other at the end of book two after Cat got Resurrected. Remember, the whole, "You can't spill a drop of my blood!" "I don't have to."
Cat breaking all of Akua's bones without breaking the skin sequence. Though admittedly the rules of magic oaths are vague and not super explored. They even brought up a couple other potential binding oaths in that same bit with Cat refusing to swear on the gods below and a couple other things as I recall.

[Liliet](#)

Akua was the one who refused to swear to the Gods Below
iirc

[Liliet](#)

(I'm guessing there's more kinds than the blood oath, but a blood oath has been confirmed to work and be unavoidably binding, as of Cat and Akua at First Llesse)

ninegardens

Actually, as a question, was the blood oath unbreakable, or was it just the idea that breaking such an oath would have *consequences*, in terms of the story hating you and wanting to screw you over afterwards.

[Liliet](#)

Cat had a 'bracelet' on her hand squeezing it if she so much as thought of trying to weasel her way out of it, and she trusted Akua to keep her word, so, it's either literally unbreakable or a 'you die instantly if you break it' unbreakable.

Shveiran

So you suggest the punishment for breaking the Truce is being forced by oath not to do it again?

Or did I read that wrong, and you are suggesting instead that they have all Heroes and Villains swear they'll uphold the Truce and Terms?

I'm not sure either would fly that well, honestly.

The first is insufficient from the Villains POV; I can totally see them going "Well, *since that is alright* let's kill a bunch of the non combat Heroes and *then* pinky swear we won't do it again. Everyone is cool with that, right?

The second won't be agreed by the Heroes, because even now they (some, let's be honest) believe the Red Axe was right. If they felt it was ok to bind everyone's hands this way, this wouldn't be happening in the first place.

[Javvies](#)

I'm pretty sure swearing to uphold the Truce and Terms is a requirement of being brought into them.

Which means anyone who violates them will have already shown themselves to be an oath breaker, and therefore inherently untrustworthy.

[Liliet](#)

There are oaths and oaths.

Any oaths made by the fae are automagically binding, but humans are capable of making those as well. The magically enforced oaths are nasty and unpleasant and literally limit your freedom of action, they are easily comparable to imprisonment.

Only, unlike imprisonment, they ARE actually reliable and DO still allow the person to contribute to the war effort.

Of course, unlike imprisonment, they need to be submitted to willingly, but it's not like the Grand Alliance lacks the capacity to go 😊 do

[Liliet](#)

Neither, exactly.

The punishment for breaking the Truce and Terms is swearing to *stricter* terms. Service / obedience / never raising a hand to a person known to them as a [hero/villain] again. For a limited duration, unless the sentence says 'lifetime'.

[Liliet](#)

* Where by 'never raising a hand' I mean along the lines of 'unconditionally' 'yes, even if they are attacking you right now with deadly force' 'we just don't trust your judgement anymore buddy'

Shveiran

I don't know about you, but I would not be willing to turn my back on a former enemy that I'm sure wishes me harm if I thought the only consequence he'd face for stabbing me would be a magical compulsion not to stab more allies. **I'd still have been stabbed**, possibly fatally, so that is not a big damn consolation, is it?

We are back to this: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/03/03/chapter-14-audience/comment-page-1/#comment-63365>

Either you make the terms magically binding (which the Heroes won't agree to) or you enforce magical binding oaths as retribution for a breach (which the Villain won't agree to).

It's not gonna cut it. Breaking the terms must be impossible or something met with harsh consequence, or no one will be able to trust the Named that stand by their side.

[Liliet](#)

> a magical compulsion not to stab more allies.

Obviously insufficient, yes. To get proper disincentive potential you need to make it one or more of the following:

- excessive (you cannot so much as be rude to a representative of the other side, which would not have been a breach of T&T and they are fully free to do to YOU, but you're no longer allowed because punishment for breach);
- humbling/humiliating (you are now sworn to OBEY one of the [stupid heroes/wicked villains]).

Villains are not, in fact, babies. Cat doesn't need to nanny them THAT much.

[Liliet](#)

> I'd still have been stabbed, possibly fatally, so that is not a big damn consolation, is it?

...the same is true if the punishment is death fyi

Shveiran

Of course them dying doesn't bring me back to life, I'm not arguing that.

The difference is the extent the sanction discourages the action and preserves the balance of strength.

Let's say NotRaphaela looks at NotBarrowSword and thinks he threatens all that NotLevante stands for.

And she starts thinking: "well, maybe I should do something before it's too late".

The right sanction is something that gives her pause.

With the death penalty, she may consider that if she tries to kill him, the very best outcome is they both die. But it isn't a given that will happen: perhaps he will survive, but she will still die. And who will check on him then?

Moreover, there is a war against the BigBad going on: she might consider his contribution not very significant because Villain and other nonsense, but she knows HER efforts are valuable at least. If she strikes, her efforts won't be a contribution anymore. And so she may consider that waiting for the end of the truce is the better option.

It is not a given she would think that way, of course; she can still strike. But there are good incentives to consider how you doing this is bad for the reason you are striking in the first place, which may make you stop.

Let's consider the oaths instead.

Raphaella (that being NotRaphaella, of course) may dislike the oaths; but in the end, the oaths are contingent to the truce, and thus a temporary measure; she would still be an asset to the war effort, she'd still be deployed, she'd still help.

Meanwhile, the threat she perceived (if she succeed in her attempt) will be permanently checked.

NotBarrowSword can't break traditions anymore, because he is dead. There is one less Villain, which is good, but there is still the same numbers of Heroes.

The oath is humiliating, frustrating, and prevents her from doing it twice, but it still ultimately just a temporary sanction she just has to endure; the only troublesome part is she can't strike again if another Villain tries the same shit, but that is no reason not to act the first time one such Villain appears.

After all, the very worst case is that you are back to square one with one less villain around, no?

Of course, they might kill you, but that was always a problem, and if you fail to kill them you can't try again; but all that pushes you to do, if you think they must die, is act carefully and decidedly.

This is why you need the death penalty.

I'm against it in real life, but a fragile truce between superpowered, idealistic beings you can't afford to see broken kind a changes the situation.

Liliet

Again, the oath needs to be TO A VILLAIN. It prevents this hero from responding to hypothetical BIGGER future threats – let's be honest, Barrow Sword is not a big deal to the actual heroes of Levant. Not was big as they worry villains might get if completely unchecked.

Consider also extenuating circumstances. It's completely valid to go "well if this was actually unprovoked FOR being a villain we'd kill her but since this was personal and traumatic and he really should have known better than to provoke her, we're going to go with a milder penalty."

This does assume he provoked her, for this particular phrasing. My point is it's a sliding scale.

Agent J

I think you're focused more on finding a solution that the heroes would begrudgingly accept, but they are only one

side of the coin. Why would the villains begrudgingly accept such a compromise?

Swearing more oaths, stricter or otherwise, is less of a punishment and more of a preventative measure to assure the oath breaking idiot doesn't shit the bed again. How does that satisfy a villain's concerns? They are still being treated as though their lives are expendable.

Because let's not even pretend the Enchanter would've gotten the same consideration were the reverse to have happened. Catherine would have brutally murdered him with little fanfare. She does not pussyfoot around when it comes to keeping her side in line.

Don't be mistaken here, both the heroes and villains are watching this with rapt attention. And there's only a single question on all of their minds. "If a Hero won't be held to account for this, *when will they be?*"

Shveiran

Couldn't say it any better.

I should know, I tried.

[Liliet](#)

> Because let's not even pretend the Enchanter would've gotten the same consideration were the reverse to have happened. Catherine would have brutally murdered him with little fanfare. She does not pussyfoot around when it comes to keeping her side in line.

Really? Really? How sure are you?

Because I'm not at all sure. Catherine is harsh when it comes to people trying to murder her at night, but Barrow Sword challenged her in public and got a little roughed up and that was it.

This 100% needs to apply to both sides.

Agent J

Barrow Sword's actions are in no way related to what Red Axe did. He came to Cat up front (point one), made the case that villains would not and should not be expected to follow a weak leader (point two), and then took his defeat on the chin like a trooper (point three). His actions are right up Cat's alley and perfectly legal within the framework of the Truce & Terms.

If he, fuelled by ire of a past altercation, killed a hero in a situation where his life was not in immediate jeopardy? Yea, no, Cat would sooner put him down like a rabid dog than let him shake the already fragile foundations of Truce & Terms.

Hells, his case against the Levantine nobles, Cat agrees is entirely legitimate and fair. She still threatened to get him killed off quietly than let him weaponize the T&T in a way that might lose her the Levantine soldiers.

[*Liliet*](#)

Consider the hypothetical: Tancred gets in a fight with a hero and kills them. You think Cat wouldn't look into extenuating circumstances?

Shveiran

Of course she would LOOK, that is not the point.

The question is what she'd consider to BE an extenuating circumstance.

What we are arguing is that once the answer to "did they start the fight to the death or did you?" came out negative, she would string him up. And she would cry, and she'd whip her back bloody, but she would still make the hard choice because if the Truce becomes a joke this all goes up in flame.

[*Liliet*](#)

Escalation tends to be gradual.

And I don't think T&T is fragile to that in particular. The question of 'what exactly do the rules say' is less important than 'so does one person breaking the rules lead to the whole thing breaking down'. Note that Barrow Sword tolerated Cat basically telling him that his ~rights by her own law~ got trumped by political expediency any day and he should keep that in mind. As long as what they get out of following the law is better than the alternative, they're going to accept what the big bad Black Queen says.

JJR

One idea I had for an alternative to hanging them punishment is sending them to the northern front. They oath breaker in question can still do some good for the alliance, and gets a

new perspective on why it's so necessary against the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

The problem with this is that it's already the default for those who join T&T, it's not an additional punishment.

Consider a Mirror Knight style fucker, and also Mirror Knight himself. Whatever the punishment is, it has to be convincing disincentive for someone like THAT.

JJR

Sorry I should have been more clear. I don't mean the north of Procer norther front. I mean the Way North Drow front. You know the meat grinder that is currently supported by a pair of Night Gods and is still slowly losing. The place where the Dead King might actually be fighting seriously and does things like throw away tens of thousands of binds to act as distractions. Powerful named from coming in from the south, unless they were bigger ones like Grey Pilgrim or White Knight, would probably find themselves to be below average fish in an ocean.

It would almost certainly end up being a death sentence, just with a certain amount of deniability for everyone involved.

[Liliet](#)

Oh wow, ouch

Insanenoodlyguy

I think a hero named Red Axe is going to be pretty "Oh fuck that shit." in response to such an approach.

laguz24

Also, did the MK just lose a couple dozen brain cells from getting thrown all the time because he seems way more stupid than when we got his perspective at the battle of the camps, I think that is right.

[Liliet](#)

He seems more ill-informed than stupid per se, to me. Not smart enough to seek out information that would verify/disconfirm his assumptions.

Shveiran

This isn't lack of information, this is unwillingness to consider the consequences of his actions.

That is stupidity, not ignorance.

[Liliet](#)

Consequences of actions are not obvious when you are not the one juggling everything. Surely the Grand Alliance can handle itself just fine, and the Black Queen wickedly forced her way into it by threatening to stab them in the back?

It's not like HE was one of the generals going "so anyway if this keeps going we're dead within 3 months" while looking at complete tactical maps of the entire North.

Shveiran

He doesn't need a deep awareness of all that's going on, he needs nothing but **open eyes**.

The guy fought the DK for almost three years, and he saw first-hand how dire the situation was before Callow became an ally!

He never even left the front, so far as we know! He has so much empirical evidence that the situation is better now and it was a nightmare then that ignoring it requires a conscious effort! He is turning a blind eye to so much stuff that I'm surprised he can find his shoes in the morning!

[Liliet](#)

He is not a leader of armies.

They were fighting then and they are fighting now. It does not require WILFUL ignorance to fail to track the strategic situation, especially when you have friends a la Prince Gaspard explaining to you what is going on in liberal interpretation – you DO know what's going on!

Shveiran

Come now, this is getting ridiculous.

Are you honestly telling me you expect the Mirror Knight not to know that Keter is out in force now and wasn't then, and not to notice they regained ground rather than keep losing it as they had been doing before the Truce?

If you were arguing this about a random peasant, a few leagues from the front... I could get behind it, really.

But him? Someone that has been in more battle than most?

There is no way he may have failed to notice that he has seen only DEFEATS before the truce, and that now it's actually a battle. Do you remember how low the spirits were during the interlude Winter I? You don't need to be a General to notice your battles have stopped always ending in a desperate retreat, come on! Especially not if you are always the bloody rearguard!

[Liliet](#)

Sure, the tide shifted now that the Levantine forces came to aid too. And sure, the Black Queen helped with that (suspicious) truce, but who knows what she's plotting NOW?

flashburn283

Looks like Hanno is going to have to execute the mirror knight for working with the enemy. Damn shame.

Popcorn anyone?

[Liliet](#)

Why tf is everyone talking as though execution is the only option for punishment here???

Shveiran

For starters, because those arguing it isn't are proposing alternatives that are not a slap on the wrists.

Shveiran

AREN'T Curse you, lack of edit function! If it wasn't for the Truce, your ass would be grass!

[Liliet](#)

Note: Catherine has mentioned 'those had better be damn good circumstances' already, implying the execution outcome is, in fact, conditional on there not being any.

Shveiran

>> The Red Axe," he tacitly agreed. "I will not argue for breach of the Terms, Catherine, but there were... extenuating circumstances."

"The Enchanter has – had – a certain reputation," Hakram told me. "Though he was also considered a promising lead in usurping control of lesser dead from Keter."

"I hope they're damned good circumstances, Roland," I bluntly said. "Otherwise this ends with gallows and a noose."

I can honestly read this in no other way than as "unless he attacked her under truce, we'll have to kill her."

Liliet

Keep in mind Catherine has no idea who Red Axe is or her origin story, yet. She just knows "one of the heroes" and at this point it sounds to her like "a Mirror Knight type".

"Damned good circumstances" can very easily include "irresistible impulse because of previous trauma".

And yes, it does mean the Named who want to be safe under T&T will be expected to stay out of the way of the people they'd previously harshly traumatized. I doubt they'll find that a particularly unreasonable condition.

Shveiran

You are talking about the same woman that after rejecting her darker sides STILL looked in the eye the ugly truth that she could not get the Alliance, Pilgrim and Tyrant to stop being stupid without giving them a bloody eye in battle; and proceeded to send tens of thousands of man into battle, accepting the loss of lives involved as the cost of doing business.

That's Cat: a woman that may feel sorry for all those poor Proceran peasants and Levantine soldiers brainwashed into thinking she is Triumphant in a fancy cloak and weeping for their deaths but still ordering their superpowered troops to mow them down, because the hard truth is that their deaths have become a necessity for the greater good.

And you are telling me that she'd look in the eye the danger of the Truce going into flame and she would take that rather than killing one heroine, traumatized or not?

She'll do what is necessary. And the politics of it make slapping that woman on the wrist suicidal. She won't take that risk, and she will look at the greater good.

Liliet

I am not saying she would not choose the Truce over one woman.

I am however saying the Truce does not require her death.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'd imagine a Gallowborne style-sentence might be optimal here. You send Rex Axe on a crucial, important mission... that's completely and blatantly suicidal. If she emerges alive, she's done her job.

This isn't perfect but she can argue to the heroes she's given her a chance, and argue to the villains if Red Axe comes back alive and thus in the clear "Guys, I didn't expect her to actually return alive, and fuck, I gave my word! Yeah, I know some of you are that kind of villain as well, that guy, over there, he gets it. This happens sometimes. Fucking heroes, right?" There'd be grumbling but something like that'd probably pass with the T&T intact.

flashburn283

Because the mirror knight is an asshole and nobody like him.

ChillyPepper

So, Mirror Knight is the guy that keeps power up'ing every dawn, or am I confusing him with another named?

If I wasn't then I wonder if this is the "task" that he was supposed to do, since it was mentioned his task wasn't the Dead King, but something greater.

Javvies

Yep, he's the guy with the Aspect of Dawn that makes him a little bit stronger and tougher every day.

I always figured that Above planned to throw him at Ranger in a decade or two.

ChillyPepper

The way I'm thinking at the moment, you've got almost all of the woe in one spot, and a band of five (despite them being four at the moment, I suspect,) heroes.

Sounds like a story.

Insanenoodlyguy

Considering one of his aspects is "Dawn," the Drow reaction to him, and his own statement that he specifically doesn't fear the night, the theory is that he's thematically tailored to have opposed Sve Noc. This is the blade that would have cut her down if she had killed Cat and went up to the Surface world in-charge herself, making the arrogant mistakes a god makes that Cat warned her about.

[Javvies](#)

His Dawn Aspect is his power up Aspect.

I don't buy that he was created to deal with the Drow. Pre-Cat, the Drow were being (slowly) ground down by the Dwarves. A Named custom built to take on the drow would be expected in the Dwarves. The drow involvement and Cat going to the drow are consequences of a series of extremely low probability events involving multiple entities protected against supernatural perceptions and future sight abilities. No, the Drow are not why Mirror Knight was raised up with the abilities he has.

I lean towards thinking that he was made to aim at Ranger in retaliation for her part in Black's rise to power and the Conquest of Callow. Also, as a contingency for when the forces aligned with Above moved to retake Callow, defeat Praes, and kill Amadeus.

SpeckofStardust

over 20 named in a single location.
It's going to catch fire isn't it?

Agent J

You don't need twenty Named for a fire. Just one short girl.

ChillyPepper

The Black Queen will remember this.

[Liliet](#)

Chider and Vivienne resemble this remark.

[KelShalay](#)

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Speck of Stardust

Sudden note of realization –

“The last of the four was a Callowan, though she wasn’t one of mine in any sense. She’d allegedly fled in the early years after the Conquest, and she was the only one who did not openly consider herself one of Above’s champions. The Maddened Keeper looked instead like a perennially exhausted woman in her early twenties, skin drawn and pale and her dark hair ratty. Her threadbare robes ever rumpled and she was thin, but there was a sense of... menace about her. Not like a snake coiling but rather like a diseased thing, the sight of which had you withdraw your hand out of fear and disgust. She was host, it was rumoured, to a great many old secrets that should have stayed unknown – and had even turned herself into a living seal on a Hell Egg from Triumphant’s days. ”

So that’s where the demon of absence went.

ninegardens

Huh... and here was me just assuming that it was... absent...

Chapter 15: Machinations

“A ruler should always join regicide plots: is the finest possible teacher for a locksmith not a thief?”

– Dread Emperor Traitorous

I poured myself another finger of aragh, since it was quite evidently going to be one of *those* days.

“A bold claim,” I said, “but I am open to the notion.”

The Hunted Magician would, by my reckoning, have spent Gods only knew how many years pursued by a prince of the fae. Most likely through agents as there would have been... waves if a fae noble of that calibre came into Creation to collect a debt, but the old Courts of Arcadia had come by their reputation of always getting their due honestly. It would have been a constant ordeal of enemies hidden under glamour, pursuit that could not be shaken off by simple distance and terrifying visions both sleeping and waking. The occasional complaints I’d gotten about the man being cryptic, distrustful and generally unpleasant now had an explanation. Living in a world where there might be an enemy hidden behind any smiling face, with forced servitude as the

consequence of making even a single mistake, had a way of making people paranoid to the bone.

The thing was that the kind of enemies I was up against did actually warrant that level of caution. The Dead King had been three steps ahead of the rest of the world this entire war, the Intercessor had been out of sight for an unsettling amount of time and that was setting aside the most dangerous enemy of all: simple, petty human nature. The trouble here would not be the paranoia itself but figuring out if the Hunted Magician's paranoia was the *right sort* of paranoia.

"Two weeks ago, the Blessed Artificer received news that troubled her a great deal," the Hunted Magician told me. "I know not what they were, but I do know that some of the other Chosen here began acting oddly around the same time."

"And how would you know that?" I mildly asked.

"The Bitter Blacksmith was herself unchanged, and did not seem to notice any difference," the Magician said.

I traced the rim of my cup with a finger.

"You misunderstand me," I said, *and perhaps on purpose*, I did not speak out loud. "How do you know that the Blessed Artificer received such news?"

The man did not answer, his face turning into a pleasant mask that was just a little too sloppy to be believed. It didn't reach the eyes, which to a Praesi would be counted as a beginner's mistake. He did not trust me, which was fine, but that distrust was getting in the way of my finding answers and that was not acceptable. Using coercion here would only make things worse, I decided. Threats would serve to make me an enemy and that was not the role I wanted to play in this conversation. Another approach would be needed.

"I am observant," the Hunted Magician replied.

"So you are," I mused. "You must work closely with the Artificer?"

His eyes narrowed.

"On occasion," he said.

"This is unrelated to the current conversation," I elaborated. "I'm told she wishes to lodge a complaint under the Terms about some device being broken, and I would like some understanding of the technicalities involved coming from someone else than the plaintiff."

A chance to exert influence, which I knew he'd want to take: one did not become the informal speaker for villains in the Arsenal by *accident*. It was ambition, and ambition was a familiar beast.

"It is not my field of speciality, but I do have some insights," the Hunted Magician said.

"Do you know what it was meant to accomplish?" I said. "Or at least what it might have been based on?"

"The underlying principles had some similarity to an artefact displayed by the Repentant Magister last year," the Magician said, "though I am unsure whether or not you'd be familiar with it."

Underlying principles, huh. No, that could still be shop talk between colleagues.

"Made of the same materials?" I asked, pitching my voice in surprise.

The Proceran mage suppressed a smirk. *That's right*, I thought, *I'm just some uneducated mudfoot from Callow. Lord your knowledge of me, you know you want to.* I'd bet rubies to piglets the man was highborn, and some of that stayed in the marrow even when you left the life behind.

"Light favours different materials than sorcery," the Hunted Magician told me. "She chose them accordingly."

"So you saw the device as it was being built," I said.

The man went still as stone.

"Adjutant," I mused. "Do remind me – can projects without official sanction be built in the official crafting rooms of the Workshop?"

"They cannot," Hakram gravelled. "Though it is allowed in one's private quarters, on their own time."

A beat passed.

"So," I smiled, "you've been sleeping with the Blessed Artificer."

"I was simply visiting-"

"I would invite you," I mildly said, "to consider very carefully whether or not you want to lie to me."

The Haunted Magician's mouth closed. Yeah, I'd thought as much.

"I like to operate by a simple rule, when it comes to keeping an eye on my Damned fellows," I told him amicably. "Don't make it my problem, and I won't treat it like one."

Looming behind me, a tower of muscles and fangs in burnt plate, Hakram stared the man down.

"Are you going to be a problem, Haunted Magician?" Adjutant growled.

"I came to lend aid," the man protested.

Good, he was off-balance. Time to press.

"So aid me," I smiled. "Have you been sleeping with the Bitter Blacksmith as well?"

He did not immediately answer, and I had to hide my utter surprise. Godsdamn, that'd been a shot in the dark since he'd specifically named her as well: I'd actually wanted him to deny it so I could twist it into a confirmation he *was* sleeping with the Artificer. The silence was as good as an admission, though. I cocked my head to the side, studying him carefully.

"I am impressed," I said, and he smirked, "that you haven't gotten your head caved in."

Would you look at that, the smirk was gone. Probably helped that neither of those heroines were fighting Named, I mused, though that hardly made them shyly blushing maidens. Still if he'd tried to pull something like that with, say, the Painted Knife and the Vagrant Spear? There'd be a mistake-shaped corpse propped up in front of me instead of a living man.

"That makes you a useful source of information," I mused.

That reassured him as it was meant to, though he tried to hide it. If I'd tried to assure him I held no ill intentions towards him he wouldn't have bought it for a second, but from villain to another an open admission of usefulness was one of the most prized guarantees of safety.

"You said the Artificer was troubled," I said, "and others began acting oddly. Expand on this."

"She put an end to our trysts, irregular as they were," the Hunted Magician admitted. "And I saw her speaking with the Repentant Magister frequently afterwards, when they have never been close."

Shit, Nephele too? She'd not struck me as the scheming type when we last met, but a flirty acquaintance wasn't exactly understanding in depth.

"And the oddness?" I asked.

"They've several times gone to the general archives, both together and separately," the Magician said, "and the two times I spied on them it was the old assembly transcripts they were going through. Specifically, those of the monthly sessions."

What were those for again? Roland had not long ago joked about bringing up my complaint about lack of railings in one, but they couldn't be just a general venting of complaints. It'd be a waste of time to make the ten Named based at the Arsenal sit through these. Of course, asking would make me look like I'd missed what he was implying. Which I had, but *he* didn't need to know that. Cowing people stopped working when they saw you stumble.

"Allocation of personnel and resources, general financing," Hakram said. "Do you have a notion of what they were trying to piece together?"

Ah, Adjutant to the rescue. So, going scavenging through the records of what and who had been allocated to projects those two had been trying to figure out the nature of one they hadn't been brought in on. There weren't many of those, only three. As I recalled the Hunted Magician and the Sinister Physician – who was also one of mine – were working on a 'plague' that would affect undead, under the appellation of Late Regret. Roland and the Concocter were working on a brew that'd affect undead like holy water and could feasibly be produced in sufficient quantity to contaminate the northern lakes, called Sudden Abjuration. The last was actually under debate to be opened to all Named, an attempt by Blind Maker and the Repentant Magister to make an artefact that'd prevent the Dead King from actively possessing undead within a certain range.

Only the last of the three was showing promising results, though it was also the one whose success would be hardest to prove: Neshamah was clever enough to pretend it was working to take us by surprise after we'd come to rely on it. The Haunted Magician hesitated, and not because it was Adjutant who'd asked the question. It was well-known to everyone by now that when Hakram spoke it was with my voice.

"I believe," he finally said, "that they were not interested in what was in the records so much as what was *not*."

My face remained calm, because it was not the first time an ugly surprise had been sprung on me today. Hells, it wasn't even the first time *today*. I reached for my cup of aragh and sipped. *Shit*. Was this about Quartered Seasons, then? Hierophant was the only Named on that and we'd kept it very, very quiet. Hasenbach knew the name and that it could yield a potential tool for decide, but on the Dominion side the only one I'd told was Tariq since Levantine nobles had famously loose lips. I'd wanted the Pilgrim

to be able to vouch someone from Levant had been told and picked him in particular because it'd put out any talk of dishonour the moment the Peregrine's involvement was mentioned. It was even true that the funding and resources for Quartered Seasons wouldn't be discussed in their little Named councils, since I'd made it clear to Masego that if need be the crown of Callow would fund it entirely on its own.

But there's only many so people within the Arsenal, and for some parts he would have needed helping hands, I thought. For drudgework and fetching records or even assembling mundane objects. Hells, just the use of limited ritual resources like high quality scrying tools or rare substances were trails that could be followed if you knew where to look – which Nephele would, since she was in on one of the quiet projects. The two heroines had been trying to figure out what had been used by figuring out what hadn't been allocated in the actual sessions: resources and staff that mysteriously never made it to the discussion, unexplained holes in the budget. Even if they had managed to pull it all together it still wouldn't be enough to actually know what Masego was trying to accomplish, but it might be enough to allow them to make a few educated guesses. Which as lot more dangerous than them actually knowing, in my opinion.

"Interesting," I finally said, putting down my cup. "But it's the killing of the Wicked Enchanter you mentioned when making claim of a plot."

"There have been rising tensions for weeks," the Hunted Magician said. "Incidents occur more and more frequently, and become graver – and then, in a fortress the size of the Arsenal, the Red Axe and the Wicked Enchanted simply *happen* to meet. Someone filled the cup, Black Queen, and then arranged for the drop that would make it run over."

And the thing was, that made perfect sense to me. But then I was speaking to a man for who paranoia had been the path to survival for years and coming back from fighting on a front against the Hidden Horror for two straight years. I was inclined to believe him because I'd grown used to death hiding in every shadow, which meant my judgement was not unbiased. *And if I tighten my grip too strongly around honest mistakes by heroes,* I thought, *I might just cause the incident I am trying to avoid.* There were more than twenty Named in the Arsenal, if I – a villain, however respected I was in some quarters – acted like I was trying to cover up something then *someone* was going to do something stupid. And when the first stone in the avalanche came down, it'd be beyond my power to turn the tide back.

"That is speculation, not proof of anything," I said.

The man's face fell into a mask again, this time trying to hide his anger.

"But I dislike the shape and timing of this," I conceded. "You were right to bring this to my attention. I'll take the situation in hand personally."

Anger was gone, a mix of relief and wariness in him instead. He must have been halfway decent at this at some point, I thought, since the reflexes were there. He was badly out of practice, though, and he'd learned some self-defeating habits since. Another detail adding an entry to the 'highborn who fled from the consequences of his actions' tally I was mentally keeping.

"Then I can only thank you for granting me this audience, Black Queen," the Hunted Magician said, bowing in his seat.

I didn't invite him to stay and share a drink, though it would have been good politics, as my mind was already considering what needed to be done and I was reluctant to let the pot keep boiling while I played courtesy games. Instead I rose to escort him out, then closed the door behind him and leaned against the wooden frame. Hakram poured himself a finger aragh in the cup the Magician had not used, then sat down on the edge of the sofa to sip at it.

"Two Named, if not more, were led to start digging around one of our most dangerous secrets," I said. "Another two Named, between who conflict is good as certain, happened to run into each other here. And now the Mirror Knight was sent here to prevent a 'murder', when even with the fluidity of time in the Ways it's near certain he was warned about the circumstances before they took place."

I grit my teeth.

"Once is accident, twice is coincidence," I began-

"Thrice is enemy action," Hakram finished.

Except that, when it came to Named, coincidences were nothing of the sort. Which meant my enemy had drawn first blood and then struck again before I even realized I was in a fight, so I was in dire need of catching up. I limped back to low table and took my drink in hand, tossing the rest of it back in a single swallow.

"You have a plan," Adjutant said.

"I have a step," I corrected. "What I need is someone with utter disregard for other people's privacy, an inveterate hunger for juicy gossip and a pathological need to screw with everyone until it's clear what makes them tick."

"Wouldn't it have been simpler," Hakram asked, "just to say Archer?"

—

I'd meant for Indrani to come to us but apparently she was currently eating, not all that inclined to move and the attendant we'd sent to fetch her was afraid of her. Which, in all honesty, was probably smart of him. So instead I limped my way down to the meal hall with Hakram at my side, the two of us and our guide passing through corridors ghostly empty. The Alcazar, the part of the Arsenal meant to host important guests, was apparently connected to quite a few other sections by private halls not meant to be used by anyone else. It made sense, I supposed. If Cordelia Hasenbach needed to use the Mirage, she wouldn't want half the scholars in this place to watch her every time she headed there. I learned from our chatty guide that Archer had ignored her own guest rooms in the Alcazar to bunk elsewhere – Masego's quarters in the Belfry, at a guess – and that she'd never bothered to use the private eatery in there. She was eating the same commissary fare as everyone else, which I found odd given her appreciation for luxury.

It all made a great deal more sense when we entered a hall that could have seated four hundred and I saw she was the only person in it, sprawled lazily on a bench as she dipped pieces of bread in melted cheese and popped them into her mouth. Indrani did not need decadence to be brought to her, she brought decadence wherever she was.

"Did you make the kitchens cook this for you alone?" I called out. "I'd call it abuse of power, but honestly by your standards this is almost reasonable."

Practically inhaling another dipped piece of bread, Indrani swung around and rose to her feet in a single fluid gesture. It would have been a lot more impressive if she didn't have a string of melted cheese hanging off the corner of her mouth.

"Your Queenly Majesticness," Archer solemnly bowed, smothering a grin, "your most humble servant hath returned. I now pray most faithfully that Your Great Regality will smile on—"

With great pleasure, I stopped leaning on my staff just long enough to smack her on the crown of the head – or would have, if she'd not twisted around and caught the yew before pulling. Before I could so much as insult her I was made to stumble, caught by the waist and led into a dip before she kissed me. If I put a hand behind her neck it was purely to hang on, not because I was trying to lean into it and feel a little more of her. She withdrew with a smug grin, leaving my lips pleasantly bruised.

"You smell like cheese," I told her.

"You sound a little breathless," she replied, the smugness deepening.

"From trying not to breathe it in," I scorned, then parted from her with a step to the side.

"That aragh I got from you?" she asked, sounding interested.

I leaned forward and stole a piece of bread from her plate, dipping it and deftly popping it into my mouth. Huh, that really was quite good. Adjutant cleared his throat, reminding Archer that he was also there. The attendant had retired during my passing moment of distraction, though the more honest word for it might have been *fled*.

"I'm happy to see you too, big guy," Indrani warmly said, clasping his arm. "But you've got too much teeth for a dip of your own, if that's what you're hinting at."

"You've got too little to warrant a hint," Hakram replied without missing a beat. "But it's good to see you too, 'Drani."

Even as I laughed at the casual verbal backhand she'd received with a stunned *oof*, the tall orc picked her up in a hug as easily as if she were bag of turnips. She shrieked in laughter, her 'surprised struggling' somehow ending up with him being smacked on the side of the face quite a lot. She was put down on the long table little bird and tried to bat away my continuing pillaging of her meal – there was some Arlesite sausage there, the good stuff with the spices from the Free Cities, so I'd gleefully helped myself – only to be ignored by right of queenly prerogative.

"Did you come all the way here just to eat my food?" she complained.

"Callow pays for part of the food budget," I said, chewing on a mouthful, "so in a sense it was really always *my* food."

"It's sad how power will go to the head of even the most sensible of women," Archer sighed. "And you too, I guess, but-"

I threw a stripe of mustarded venison at her, though as expected she caught it. I'd been hungrier than I'd thought, I mused as I stole a stripe for myself. There was a sweet taste to the sauce as well that was delicious, and I let out a little noise of pleasure. In a sense the way I'd been when I'd still been Sovereign of Moonless Nights, requiring neither sleep nor food, had been better. It'd certainly been more efficient. But I still remembered the nights where it had all been like ashes in my mouth, when nothing but the hardest of liquors had tasted of anything at all, and I could only count my blessings that I was now rid of those times.

"Is no one going to offer me anything?" Hakam drily asked.

We ignored him, since it wasn't that large a plate.

"We have something of a problem," I told Indrani.

She nodded.

"I brought the killer in from the cold and didn't keep close enough a watch on her, that's on me," Archer frankly said. "Mind you, the man had it coming if even half the stories I heard are true."

The Wicked Enchanter had been, from what I beginning to grasp, broadly disliked and held in disgust. It shouldn't be difficult to find out exactly why, though likely unpleasant, but that wasn't what caught my attention. He'd been a villain even other villains were lukewarm about, one the heroes would be able to hold up as the kind of monster deserving the headman's block instead of the protection of the Truce. That was a problem, since it meant this wasn't just a thorny little mess to arbitrate: it was a knife someone had aimed at the Truce and the Terms themselves.

If the Red Axe was killed over this, I suspected the heroes would riot. If the Red Axe wasn't killed over this, I knew sure as I knew my own breath that the *villains* would riot. And on top of that, just adding more more disastrous insult to the injury one of the heroes I'd find it most difficult to beat into humility without killing him, the Mirror Knight, had just blown in with supporters and no warning to meddle. If it even looked like I was lenient on the Red Axe, the perception among the villains I spoke for would be that I'd been leaned on by one of the luminaries of the other side and given ground.

I'd look weak and Below's champions did not follow weakness, much less obey it.

"We're in a fight, 'Drani," I murmured. "And it's starting to look like we showed up to it already bleeding. I'm going to need you."

Archer's hazelnut eyes turned serious as she leaned forward.

"You have me," she said. "Are the heroes taking a swing?"

"I don't know yet," I grimly replied. "But we're in a story, Archer, make no mistake. And it's one meant to cut us deep."

And it might just be my imagination, I thought, the habit of seeing a grinning skull in every dark corner... but I can almost the smell the cheap booze in the air, hear the mocking tune from the badly strung lute. I took the pretty silver knife on the side of Archer's plate, idly flipping it through my knuckles as I stepped back from the table.

"There are now," I said, "twenty-three Named within these walls."

That we knew of. Certainty was a necessity for Named, if you wanted to ever be more than a middling swordhand in the middle of nowhere, but this early and when the game afoot was still shrouded it would be a mistake to believe we knew everything about the board there was to be known.

"The Arsenal usually counts five heroes, three villains and two Named of unclear allegiance," Hakram said.

I took to tapping the flat of the silver blade against the side of my fist, thoughtful.

"The Concocter's one of ours," Archer said. "She keeps it quiet but the things that end up in her cauldrons aren't always the sort the Heavens would approve of, if you catch my drift."

Charming. Five to four, then, and with the Doddering Sage being the only uncertain – though more because his bouts of lucidity were rare than because of any reluctance to pick a side, as I understood it. That was still ten Named who stayed in the Arsenal on a more or less permanent basis, and most of them would have ways to communicate with the outside world beyond those the Grand Alliance had made available to them.

"You've got four," I said, eyes turning to Archer.

"Half and half," she cheerfully said.

And she'd brought in the Red Axe as well, who was now being held in a cell. Then another five Named after that: the Mirror Knight and his close friend the Blade of Mercy, the seemingly cautious Exalted Poet and the ambiguous Maddened Keeper, and last of all the gallant but decidedly dangerous Kingfisher Prince. Throwing in Adjutant and more generously my own nascent Name brought us at twenty-three. Twelve heroes, nine villains and two whose nature was not so clear-cut. Enough that the villains would feel outnumbered, and dangerously so since one of them had just been killed. Yet the heroes would feel pressured as well, given the quality of the opposition: four of the Woe were here, and our reputation was a weighty thing. The two poor bastards in between would be seen as potentially decisive in any clash, and so worth forcing the allegiance of – either to get rid of liabilities before blades came out or to secure a nasty surprise to spring on the opposition when they did.

It was a murderous brew someone was pressing to the lips of the entire Truce and Terms, and all it'd take was for one fool to be scared enough to drink.

"The Arsenal regulars are the thread that should be quickest to unwind," Adjutant said. "Someone set the Repentant Magister and

the Blessed Artificer after a secret – it may truly be Quartered Seasons, it may be something else. But they were contacted, and that is a concrete thing.”

There were five under Above in these Arsenal ‘regulars’: Roland, the Blind Maker, the Repentant Magister, the Blessed Artificer and the Bitter Blacksmith. The Hunted Magician had implied that his ‘close study’ of the Blacksmith had revealed no change in mood around the time the Magister and the Artificer began digging, so she was not a likely suspect. I closed my eyes to think.

“So we find them in their rooms and make them spit out a name,” Indrani mused.

“As it happens, the Blessed Artificer has already requested an audience to lodge a complaint under the Terms,” Adjutant gravelled, pleased.

Something about that had me begin tapping the side of the blade against my knuckles, the coolness of the silver against my skin grounding me.

“It’s bullshit,” Indrani flatly said. “She was pushing Zeze, not the other way around. I don’t think she meant to actually blind him – she looked surprised by how harsh his reaction was – but she was definitely trying something.”

“What he means is that we should now consider ourselves watched at all times,” I said without opening my eyes, “and that an audience *she* requested is a reason to meet in private with her not even the heroes can grumble about.”

As it happens, Hakram had said. That was what had raised my hackles. It’d happened and it’d happened in a fight where coincidence was nothing more the flimsiest of the lies at play. A story had been offered up to us: Adjutant, Archer and the Black Queen met with the Blessed Artificer. It was the only the first step, though, the air of the tune. Through guile and reason those three would reveal the machinations hidden in the shadows of the Arsenal, to prevent madness from seizing the halls and keep the peace. It was a pretty story, true, and for more than a few Named it’d be a serviceable horse to ride. For *us*, though? I was a warlord, a killer and maker of pacts. Adjutant was my right hand and guardian, Archer was my blade and my eyes. It was a good horse but one for which we’d make poor riders, which made it a shit horse in every way that mattered. After all, no matter how good the horse if an ass was riding it’d still lose the race. We’d been offered that hook so we might bite it and be reeled in to our defeat.

Another angle was required here. The villains? There were four among them that were Arsenal regulars: Masego, the Hunted

Magician, the Sinister Physician and, if Indrani was correct, the Concocter. I was inclined to believe her, given that they'd known each other back in Refuge when they'd been pupils of the Lady of the Lake. But no, it was still the same story from a different angle. We'd shake the tree until truths came tumbling out, and they would. I was not so naïve as to assume that if some plot was afoot there would not be at least one of mine involved. The Hunted Magician himself was not exempt from the suspicion for having brought this to me in the first place, for though I doubted he had the skill or know-how to hook me onto a losing story that did not mean he was not the tool of someone who *was*. Trouble was, we only had so much to go on here and following any of those threads would take us back to the end I was trying to avoid it.

"It's a shit horse," I muttered. "But it's the only one we've got, isn't it?"

Ah, but that was my mistake. I was trying to win according to the rules when I should be trying to win despite them. If you were forced to run a race you could only lose, then the only way to win was to *cheat*. I opened my eyes and found both Hakram and Indrani were watching me in silence. Waiting, knowing from experience that if I'd emerged from inside my head it was with an idea.

"This is a story," I repeated, and smiled.

I twirled the knife across my knuckles, enjoying the blur of silver and movement that danced according to my will.

"And we might not know how it goes, not exactly, but we know the *shape* of it," I mused.

We three curious souls would learn things from our first step that only caused more questions, struggle and search and perhaps even tangle with a mysterious or misguided opponent. It'd go downhill from there, though, but when it all seemed like it was going to fall apart we'd get a moment of revelation from an unlikely source that flipped it all upside down and allowed us to turn it around at the last moment. *We* wouldn't, of course, because we were not the heroes of his story. I was likely to be executing the Red Axe before long, so it'd be like a chicken trying to fly in a sparrow's tracks if I tried to act like I had the right to that sort of providence.

"The thing about providence, though, is that once you understand how it works you can predict it," I told them with a smile. "It can't do something out of nothing, and it uses the most appropriate tool for the job."

And of the ten Arsenal regulars, who was it that was the best fit for a revelation at the edge of disaster? I caught the knife and

flicked it down, smiling when it bit into the table with a satisfyingly sharp *thunk*.

"We're going to speak to the Doddering Sage," I said. "To see if going backwards from the revelation allows us to quicken the pace."

Disaster was on the horizon, I thought, I was in over my head and even the trusted companions at my side might not be enough to get us through this unscathed. And still, as I hummed the first few notes to the old rebel song *The Fox In the Woods*, I found myself smiling.

Gods, but it was good to be home.

[*Javvies*](#)

Yep, this is a situation rife with problems.

And yeah ... Bard is almost certainly tied into this in some way, shape, or form.

And there's confirmation of third party involvement and meddling.

hakureireimu

Cat basically called her out:

dadycoool

Honestly, if she weren't the Intercessor, I'd say someone needs to give her a hug. All these years she's been chained to this life, constantly decaying, just sounds like a very bad time. But then she goes and ruins it by being herself.

erebus42

Oh. That is a good way to fuck up a conspiracy story. The sage is the one everyone would ignore until he spouts off some crucial insight that sets the stage for the final act.

Tenthyr

The Bard is back. I do wonder how long it'll take before her ultimate aims are revealed. I'm honestly surprised the dead king hasn't belled it into the universe by now, just to be rid of her.

[*Javvies*](#)

If the Dead King said it, who would believe him?
He pretty much has zero credibility with almost everyone.
Anything he claimed would be nigh automatically dismissed as lies and deceptions, and any evidence supporting his claims that was later uncovered or otherwise found out would be viewed in the same light.

Oshi

He already set up for his revelation. Remember the thing cat is hunting among the Dominion's past. That is where he will start. The Bard knows it and I'm betting this is her play to counter his.

[Javvies](#)

The Dead King cannot just tell anybody whatever information he has.

He has to set them up to find it out on their own.

Shveiran

-> "And we might not know how it goes, not exactly, but we know the shape of it," I mused.

We three curious souls would learn things from our first step that only caused more questions, struggle and search and perhaps even tangle with a mysterious or misguided opponent. It'd go downhill from there, though, but when it all seemed like it was going to fall apart we'd get a moment of revelation from an unlikely source that flipped it all upside down and allowed us to turn it around at the last moment.

If the Painted KNife doesn't end up appearing just to play this role, I'll eat my keyboard. Cat was even playing with a knife as she said it XD

RoflCat

Considering what the Arsenal and the Terms stand for, my guess is: her goal this time is to break the rising 'peace' between Heroes and Villains.

We have the Hunted Magician as an example of that, he's managed to bed at least two heroines who in normal circumstances would likely smash his skull in asap.

But with this slowly built up peace between them, if left alone some day the Named might stop caring about Heroes and Villains and only punish the ones doing bad things, Heroes or not.

Which means the end of many old Stories, and in a sense Bard's influence.

So Bard need to poke the biggest "WE GOOD" Hero and stab the biggest "I BAD" Villain to try and stir hostility between them. And hey, we got one dead Enchanter whose crimes are so bad everyone, even Villains, detest him. And here's Mirror Knight, the ultimate Good (read: stupid) Hero oh so easy to use even Procer nobles are doing it.

Wonder

But why? Why? Why would Hard sabotage the very thing keeping all powers focused on Keter's war? Isn't she an enemy of TDK?

Shveiran

Bard has more than one objective, though which they are is everyone's guess. She has been around for a very long time, and I doubt she cares only about Keter.

Either she cares about something else more, or she believes she can crumble the Truce and still lure the DK in a snare that will end him.

[Liliet](#)

This is a FANTASTIC setup for Cat's paranoia to blow up in her face and for her to find out in the end that actually the person she assumed was an antagonist by definition without bothering to even try to assess her actual motives, was not in fact an antagonist in this one.

Cat has been known to jump to conclusions in things like this before.

A confirmed false guess: at the start of the fae invastion Cat was convinced Akua was behind it.

Shveiran

It's not that you are wrong, but I'd point out that Cat is mainly doing her thing.

If the Intercessor is an ally, she won't sabotage her. If she sabotages her, she isn't.

I mean, it's not like Cat was preemptively trying to slay the sleeping dragons, creating an enemy out of her fears. She is just taking into account the existance of a powerful player whose objectives are still an unknown.

That's not really paranoia, is it?

[Liliet](#)

-vague wiggly hand gesture-

Shveiran

<http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots0405.html>

Liliet

I feel like the part at the end of that strip and where that went supports my point.

Liliet



onedollargum

She sees Catherine as the greater threat. I seem to remember she wanted TDK to “eat” her a couple of books back.

Sir Nil

Cat is sidestepping the story... again. I have to wonder, if whoever plotted this accounted for it. For Cat is predictable in the way she never rides the story.

Sir Nil

Well, stories that she doesn't win anyways. Just remembered Contrition. Still, Cat getting served a story she doesn't win is very suspicious.

dadycool

This is the environment she's supposed to be in. Not a position of ultimate power where things tend to go right (she's not a Hero), not a million-and-one-step scheme where ten thousand people each have a slice and can't interact (though that was a really fun moment last book), not even an even fight. Her environment is uphill battles. She can only truly succeed if every deck is stacked against her, she's surrounded by enemies, and there's no hope for survival. Then, she can Struggle. It's good to have OG Cat back. Especially when she can play with her Archer.

Juff

Typo Thread:

knowledge of me > knowledge over me

Which as lot > Which was a lot

Enchanted > Enchanter

for who > for whom

years and coming back (maybe “years, and I myself was coming

back", so it's easier to parse)
finger aragh > finger of aragh
to low table > to the low table
Majesticness," > Majesticness."
grin, "your > grin. "Your
long table little bird (something missing?)
what I beginning > what I was beginning
more more > more
the smell the > smell the
more the flimsiest > more than the flimsiest
the only the > only the
avoid it. > avoid.
his story > this story

RoflCat

>Ah, but that was my mistake. I was trying to win according to the rules when I should be trying to win despite them.

Finally, she remember that one thing that help her through so many impossible odds: Screw the rules.

Now let's see how she'll put that Mirror Knight in his stupid place for getting manipulated so easily.

Frivolous

I'm kind of surprised that Cat isn't worried about killing the Mirror Knight. She seems confident that she can; she worries instead about stopping him without killing him.

Makes me wonder what set of tactics with the Night she has planned that can zap MK. Maybe putting him into a domain, exiling him into outer space?

We keep getting hints that there is more than one Bitter Blacksmith, and that they are siblings. How is that possible? I thought there was only ever one holder of a Name.

Really wish I knew what Quartered Seasons was about. I didn't anticipate it would turn out to be a weapon, and yet Cat thinks it can be used for decide.

I love the Name Sinister Physician. So cool.

Shveiran

Honestly, whatever else she has become, she is still Black's pupil: just because she has been working with the Heroes for a long time, I doubt she doesn't have a plan to take down every single one of them if the need ever arises.

Tony Stark preparing to clone Thor ever since the first Avenger meeting has NOTHING on Black and Cat.

And to think she used to say she didn't have this sort of mindset and never would have. Ah, they grow up so fast...

Mammon

Heavenly Artificer and Bitter Blacksmith are siblings of one another. One good, one evil.

Quartered Seasons is probably that if there's a Summer, Winter, Spring and Autumn, that's a consistent number. Either they haven't found Spring yet, or the Book 2-3 stuff now merged Summer and Winter or dissolved them completely to require 1-2 new realms. One is Twilight, the other might be undiscovered. Maybe good, maybe something akin the Shadowvale, maybe the Drow's Gloom will end up becoming it. Or maybe the elves stole Spring turning it into the Bloom, thus leaving it undiscovered.

Liliet

> Heavenly Artificer and Bitter Blacksmith are siblings of one another. One good, one evil.

No, you're wrong. For one Blessed Artificer is Soninke and Bitter Blacksmith the female is named Helmgard, which is decidedly not a Soninke name. For the other we have repeated mentions of a 'younger brother' who is a villain and currently located at Twilight's Pass. Like, it's explicit. While this one is specifically mentioned as a hero.

Liliet

> We keep getting hints that there is more than one Bitter Blacksmith, and that they are siblings. How is that possible? I thought there was only ever one holder of a Name.

I think it's not hints, it's blatant text at this point.

We've had twin Soninke candidates for a Name in the Squire arc in Book 1 (though it was revealed only in WoG that they were twins) and there are the Sisters (who likely had the Name of Priestess of Night until their apotheosis with Cat's help).

It looks like siblings can, in fact, share a Name.

Frivolous

I'd agree, but I keep/kept wondering if maybe there was some kind of mistake, maybe a typo or continuity error.

Liliet

No, it was pretty explicit from the start that a heroic sister and a villainous brother by the same Name exist.

Like, the whole context in which it first came first was Cat clarifying “this Bitter Blacksmith, not that other one”.

Ze Mighty Vegetable

Maybe the Bard wants to trap Catherine in a Name? Names are Roles. Some have built in limitations. We know the Bard chooses the stories. Or maybe she fears what Catherine’s nascent Name could become. She might want to lock Catherine in a Name to prevent her from getting a more dangerous Name. Who knows? Catherine could have the potential to get a Name whose schtick is affecting the stories themselves. The Bard might fear this. Or she could be training Catherine as her replacement. Maybe Catherine’s story mirror the Bard’s origins. Who knows? The only certainty is that I can’t wait to read more.

Matthew

That was what I think, what better name for an enemy you hate, releasing yourself and stopping her from directly leading or interfering again... Cat would still catch on to how use it well very quickly I dare say

[Mental Mouse](#)

It makes me think of quantum exclusion: Siblings can share a Name, but they still have to be differentiated – say, one Hero, one Villain. I wonder if one of those twin Squire candidates would have followed the White Knight instead of Black?

[Liliet](#)

That seems definitely wrong. They were both fighting William, they were running on twin telepathy, and our other likely example (the Sisters) did not have a differentiation like that either.

Miles

Remember when Masego got his Name and made an exclamation about understanding the nature of Gods, after witnessing the fae sun attack from ground zero? That’s what quartered seasons is. They’re trying to something something Gods by something something Fae

[Miles](#)

“This is a story,” I repeated, and smiled.

I twirled the knife across my knuckles, enjoying the blur of silver and movement that danced according to my will.

"And we might not know how it goes, not exactly, but we know the time to vote is at hand " I mused.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Burlyraven

Look, just resurrect Tancred and use him to even the numbers some (I kid, I kid).

Seriously, though, in stories where the villain needs the hero to discover a truth for themselves, it's usually best for them to drop hints for a sometimes allied hero. Roland actually would fit that story perfectly, as he's an unimpeachable hero that seems "permitted" to work with agents of Below, even outside of extenuating circumstances. He has been noted as taking on the wizard in the tower role, though, so there may be some ambiguity there.

Liliet

...Huh. Cat's failing to properly take on the mastermind mantle, isn't she? Her best story bet should be guiding one of the heroes towards these same revelations, and Roland would make an excellent candidate... but it seems she's not there yet skill-wise 😊

beleester

The trouble is the mastermind is usually also a suspect in a mystery like this.

onedollargum

Or ends up as the person with the shady past risking (and losing) their life to save the hero in a noble redemptive sacrifice.

Cat's deadset against redemption because redemption would set her dead.

Liliet

I mean, Cat's already a suspect – for MK no-one else, and likely for Nephele and Blessed too. But she is in fact innocent, so...

Shveiran

The mastermind in a conspiracy story does not win. The protagonist does.

In some stories, the mastermind dies "while misunderstood".

I think she has it right in staying clear of those roles.

[Liliet](#)

The mastermind can win if they were in the right all along.

We might have different pools of examples, I'll give you that.

Shveiran

I think it's more that you are thinking in terms of "can work means Cat could make it work", whereas with this many Named around I think more in terms of "can work means can fail, and there is too many variables for Cat to choose to ride this particular horse".

As in, you see her going Pilgrim (stories lend me strength, so I embrace the right ones) whereas I think she'd go more Black in this instance (stories carry risks, so I stay clear of the wrong ones).

[Liliet](#)

Cat doesn't really go for Amadeus's approach. She rides stories that suit her and twists ones that don't until they do.

"Framed party on the run trying to goad the heroic investigators into the real truth" is a quality variation ^^

Shveiran

→If the Red Axe was killed over this, I suspected the heroes would riot. If the Red Axe wasn't killed over this, I knew sure as I knew my own breath that the villains would riot.

→ We wouldn't, of course, because we were not the heroes of his story. I was likely to be executing the Red Axe before long, so it'd be like a chicken trying to fly in a sparrow's tracks if I tried to act like I had the right to that sort of providence.

Confirmation we were on the right track, it seems.

[Liliet](#)

Right track indeed, but we've yet to see how this shakes out :3

Thanatoss

I feel like this Story may shape her new Name. It will end in some epic line where she comes fully into her Name.

But yeah Intercessor is very likely to be involved here, or maybe not, maybe Dead King is making it look like Bard?

[Liliet](#)

Or maybe Cat's just paranoid. There's a reason why she caught herself and told Hunted his guesses were only guesses.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you! It's "heightened watchfulness", aka "security mindset".

pagesbe

Enough things are lining up in a world where coincidences rarely are actual coincidences. And Bard has the means to set this up (we don't know the motive, but she could do it), and the DK has the motive and unlikely but possibly the means.

I would be absolutely shocked if this was just a series of unrelated events. I'll follow Occam's Razor on this one and say that it's more likely these events are related than each one of these things happens to be a complete coincidence. Not to mention, SOMEONE tipped MK off about what was going to happen... before it happened.

[Liliet](#)

> in a world where coincidences rarely are actual coincidences.

...except for when they usually are. Again, narrativium makes sure everything COINCIDES in maximum drama way.

I mean yeah odds are this is all related somehow, but there are degrees of related that are not 'there is a puppetmaster directing every single weird event individually'.

Shveiran

... In Book 6?

[Liliet](#)

I mean, 'puppetmaster directing every single event without any unexpected interference popping up from people just being idiots/assholes in a general way' is straight up bad writing regardless of what Book it's in, so there's that.

Shveiran

Sure, but there is no need to go that route.

For a while, Aqua served as the “puppetmistress” opposed to Cat’s “brute” role.

EE handled it by showing us that Aqua’s defeats in Book I were red herrings (she was never really planning to become the squire or win a Legion) or that they were bumps in the road that she could, nevertheless, work with because she had secured some of her objectives (Aqua getting mauled at First Liesse, yet securing at least the governorship that would allow her to start the preparations for her ritual array).

Bard (or Malicia, or DK) would not need to have foresaw all of this since its inception. They’d merely need to be able to say “this protagonist induced change causes stress to the system/narrative here, here and here.

With the many subtle, secret yet narratively established tools, how can I prod these sensible parts to shape this mess in a way that is profitable to my own long term objectives?

I mean, really; Malicia spending these two years making a study of heroes and their mind frame to find ways to manipulate them would really be out of character or a bad twist, considering how many spells there are in her treasure trove? I wouldn’t find it contrived in the slightest.

Granted, I’d want the novel to explain to me how it happened, but that’s kind of a given for anything.

And of the three of them, Malicia is probably the one will LESS secret weapons.

[serpentrose](#)

Regardless of whether she had a hand in instigating this situation, I can’t see the Wandering Bard not getting involved at some point. It’s too important for her to sit out.

Which gave me an odd thought: Scribe is behind this and is planning to trap the Wandering Bard.

Arden

I well I think it would be fun if Cat gets a Hero NAME in all this mess. That would make a lot of Charakters totally shocked and therefore likely 😊

Mel the Seer

Or Bard is meddling and using this to shape Cat’s new Name, plus setting up a strong enough story for Cat to finally cross that final hump. It has been pointed out that the Intercessor has less influence on those without Names.

Cat has been ruining stories, orchestrating the Truce (which would effectively flip the chess table Bard has been playing on

for millenia), and running an arguably successful war against the DK all while the Intercessor has little more than a light grasp on how to steer her.

UnNamed Cat is a threat, the DK is a long term opponent. By forcing Cat into a Name that is "acceptable" to Bard, there is a handle to use to tilt the story in a way where Cat and the Dead King either destroy each other or at least weaken each other enough for their easier demise. In Cat's case, the Intercessor then gets to end the Truce and keep creation functioning as Above and Below intended.

AceOfSpade

We have two named whose allegiances aren't clearcut, Below or the Heavens? The Doddering Sage and the Maddened Keeper.

And at a glance you'd think it would be somewhat easy to put them both on opposing sides because they mirror each other somewhat: they both have access to important knowledge, but they're mostly cryptic and only reveal important stuff somewhat randomly. The Maddened Keeper because she's... well mad, and the Doddering Sage because he's senile. And from there you'd put the Maddened Keeper with Below because madness seems like a villain thing and she's the one dealing with forbidden knowledge, while the Doddering Sage seems to be a harmless senile scholar that Providence would love to use to drop important information when it is most useful to the heroes.

But I'd like to point out that "doddering" actually describes a condition of physical frailty more than a mental decline. And while Villains stop aging once they get their name... they can be of any age. So I'm thinking that the Doddering Sage might be a villain pretending to be a harmless senile old man.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Nice catch.

[sivarajan](#)

I wonder why this chapter's epigraph is by Traitorous.

[morghus](#)

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Isi Arnott-Campbell

no u

[Liliet](#)

So the analysis that murder is necessary, as well as the analysis that Bard is likely to be involved, is backed up by Cat's opinion so far.

Of course, Cat's looking for a way out of the whole thing, and she's been wrong in assuming a known antagonist to be behind a new problem before. We'll see 😊

So far my bet is that a *lot* of people are going to end up involved ^^

Liliet

...come to think of it this would be an excellent (awful) setup for "Catherine I was trying to work with you I was literally offering you a straight road to walk (that would have coincidentally cast you as more of a hero, don't look in that corner please that's a long-term setup that doesn't concern you really honest) there IS NO CATCH" from Bard ;u;

Daniel E

Looks like Black told Catherine about 'cheating providence' reasoning, likely as thanks for 'blowing up a perfectly good warhorse' trick. I wonder what Cat will use as her proverbial 'decoy stuffed with explosives' in this situation.

Jurai

I'd wager it probably won't be an undead goat.

Mental Mouse

> and that was setting aside the most dangerous enemy of all: simple, petty human nature.

"Against stupidity, the gods themselves contend in vain".

WuseMajor

I'm honestly curious what kind of heroine the Red Axe is. Is she the type who says "screw the rules, I do what I want," or the type who says "I know it was against the rules, but it had to be done and I accept the consequences."

Either of those could be a problem. The first one would make a big stink about things and pull the Mirror Knight into making a stink about things, regardless of the fact that she's legally in the wrong. The second one would be a nobly suffering martyr which is very sympathetic and very likely to generate providence to help her get out and bad press if she does get executed.

But yeah, this is a situation where a hero is morally in the right and legally in the wrong. Those stories tend never to go well for those tasked with upholding the law.

Jeremy Cliff Armstrong

I reject that she's morally in the right. She might be... if she can prove that the Wicked Enchanter was still engaging in the same behavior under the truce and terms. Or if she could prove he was going to return to the same behavior in the future. Otherwise what she's done is nothing more than petty vengeance... and vengeance is not a virtue. What the Wicked Enchanter did in the past is irrelevant to morality. The past is always irrelevant to morality... except in so far as it informs our understanding of likely futures.

Morgenstern

Following that line of thought, doesn't that make ALL "justice" (randomized punishment for past deeds, if you so will) the same as "vengeance"? Aka... there never is ANY justice at all?

(At least not in the sense that most would understand, as in some kind of ... compensation / reparation for the victim / heinous deeds someone committed.)

So, it's moral to (try to) defend yourself against, say, a rapist. If you succeed – and that means, he ends up dead – so be it, all fine and moral. If you do NOT succeed, however, because the other is too strong / you ended up in shock / whatever – you're simply fucked?

(Trying to find out the application of (this understanding of) "morality" in a *general sense* – that is, no longer related to this specific case here, where the argument is not about morality at all, but about how a sense of morality is juxtaposed to a specific set of terms/laws (the Terms and Truce). As you seemed to make the case that morality is somehow absolute and always comes along in the sense of "the past is ALWAYS irrelevant to morality, only the future ever counts".)

Morgenstern

To clarify, I actually came up with the exact same understanding some years ago. That it seems as if all "justice after the fact" seems to be simply "vengeance", because it's all about punishing some past deed, giving some sense of satisfaction to the victim(s) by whatever reparations/punishments thus incurred... But if I turn this on its head... I always end up with the question: Then what about the victims?

We do not KNOW about the future, CAN never know – we can only ever judge by past deeds. A rapist might turn into a self-sacrificing martyr afterwards, trying to make up for what he did – or he might not and just go on like he did before. We don't *know* and can only ever know AFTER the fact... So there seems to be no "safe way" to judge a perpetrator.

But what about the victim? Do we just go on because of said conundrum we have in the person of the perpetrator and tell the victim to "shut up and live with it"? How do we 'make good on' the victim?

Morality that says the past doesn't count seems to totally forget about the victim. While the kind of justice that seems more vengeance... is maybe too much centered on the victim.

Is there no standpoint in between these two extremes? If there is, what would it be... =/

Morgenstern

Also, "past" and "present" are rather mixed concepts when it comes to certain crimes. From other viewpoints, the deed might be rather fixedly in the past – but for the victim? It's all too often the DAILY REALITY they *live in*. It's their PRESENT; not their past. How to alleviate that, without at least punishing the perpetrator and telling people "this is NOT okay"?

It doesn't seem quite "moral" to leave out the victim and their reality out of such thoughts or even concepts, now does it. =/

Morgenstern

The Truce and Terms are presently a clusterfuck because it's total amnesty for *whatever*. The concept seems somewhat too absolute to me to still be "human(e)" and thus something that simply WILL turn into a clusterfuck at certain points (like this case here), if not amended via some exceptions where some kind of non-*total* amnesty comes in.

Not killing, of course. But some kind of "making up for what you did" – as well as some kind of leniency in cases of highly emotional confrontations, like "murder" and "killing in moment of unmanagable emotion" (lacking the correct word) are usually different things in our modern law systems.

Of course, that's still a whole new kind of clusterfuck as edges get muddled, but... aren't the Truce and Terms already all about alleviating the biggest problem into something a bit more manageable, cutting off the utmost

extremes into some kind of ... less extreme behavior to each other?

Morgenstern

(Yes, in this present case, serving the war is the "making up for it" – but that leaves out the other part of the equation: the leniency in situations where overboiling emotions come into the equation, as seems to have been the case with the Red Axe. Killing as a way to solve all such conflicts that ended in more or less "accidental", out-of-the-moment killing is no solution that fixes the problem, as Cat has stated, that will only lead to one side foaming from the mouth – and that is full well knowing that leniency regulations might lead to people trying to exploit them, as in any law system. Just like there will always be some people arguing for making the law fiercer vs. more lax – but what's the solution? Extremes and absolutes certainly don't seem to lessen the problem, least of all solve it.)

ninegardens

Okay, so I have a plan to get out of this.... all their going to need is a scarecrow of sufficiently quality..... dressed as the Red Axe...

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

After this chapter I see the Repetant Magister snatching the little statue with Cathrine's likeness under a new, more wary, eye.

What a sorceresses can (attempt to) do with a figurine of one's likeness?

MoreDakka

Most likely get her face melted when the gods who quite like their high priestess notice. It's like hacking into the Pentagon it can be done but it's avoiding the man hunt after that's the dangerous part

[Mental Mouse](#)

If Catherine gets her hands (and Night) on it *first*, what might *she* do with it?

Shveiran

Honestly, I don't see the big deal.

Why would that wood figurine provide Nephele with a more powerful focus than she could have obtained from a talented carver?

Chapter 16: Divine

"Biting the hand that feeds you is another way to feed."

– Dread Emperor Vindictive II

There were seventeen different repositories of books in the Arsenal.

It was a frankly absurd amount and that number didn't even account the private collections some scholars, priests, mages and sundry Named had brought with them. The amount of knowledge held within these walls could be staggering to think about. There were a few places on Calernia where there might be greater collections, like the Tower in Ater or the House of Ink and Parchment in Delos, but those were fewer than five and even those would not draw from so many places and scholarly traditions as the Arsenal had. Several of the libraries were restricted to individuals assigned to official Grand Alliance projects and some held knowledge dangerous enough only a handful of people would ever be allowed to enter them, but we were not headed into the depths of this maze of a hidden fortress: the miscellaneous stacks were, in fact, a repository even guards had access to.

"People around here call them the Stacks of This and That," Archer told me.

She'd fallen into to my right and Adjutant to my left as the three of us abandoned the eating hall and headed towards where the Doddering Sage was most likely to be at this hour.

"So it's the dumping grounds for everything that doesn't fit into another repository," I said.

And wasn't either potentially useful or dangerous, I didn't add. Those books our people were most careful about leaving lying around.

"Might have started out this way, but it's a different beast now," Archer said. "It's one of the largest rooms in the Arsenal and it's filled with little alcoves. Now there's half a hundred little secret nooks where people can sit with a cup of something, hide for a secret talk or a fuck or even just a quiet nap."

"Wouldn't the custodians put an end to that?" I said, eyebrow cocked.

While I found it oddly charming that even in a place as alien as the Arsenal people were finding ways to claw back a piece of normality from the world, at the end of the day the stacks had an actual purpose.

"I expect there aren't enough of them to make a proper attempt," Adjutant said. "There's been two written requests to increase the people assigned to these stacks, since they frequently get their people temporarily poached for other work."

I'd probably seen one of those requests and simply put it out of my mind within moments of reading it, I silently admitted to myself. Throwing more coin and people at something like the miscellaneous stacks wouldn't have even warranted a second look when there were only so many of either those to go around and so many more important matters requiring them.

"It doesn't seem to be causing trouble," I finally said.

I was willing to let sleeping dogs lie, if the only consequence of letting this go on was the existence a few discreet places for people to wind down. Gods knew even Hasenbach's financial wizardry had its limits, and I wasn't going to be sending more coin this way if I could avoid it. The Arsenal cost near as much as one of the war fronts to maintain, which was a damned burden on the treasury even if it was a necessary one. The three of us kept a brisk pace as we passed through the central nest of winding hallways that was the Knot, the occasional pack of scholars in coloured robes falling silent as we passed by. A few recognized Indrani and greeted her, either through actual greetings or hastily taking a turn leading away from her, but to my amusement Hakram drew the eye more than I. I wasn't wearing the Mantle of Woe and my face was not well-known here, while he was a towering orc in attention-catching blackened plate.

We headed down through a set of broad stairs towards the part of the Arsenal known as the Stump. Named for its stout build, low ceilings and the fact that it was where the leftovers of more important places ended up, it reminded me of the old Proceran keeps sometimes found up north. Except the stone here was new and utterly bare, like it'd been conjured up out of thin air, and there was a... scent in the air. Almost like metal, but not quite. It was everywhere in the Arsenal, I thought, but stronger here than anywhere else. It smelled of work done through sorcery, and the taste of it had seeped into every breath I took. We took a right on a crossroads where the other path would have, as the carving on the wall indicated, led us to the Repository.

"You've met the Doddering Sage before," I said, breaking the silence.

I glanced at Archer and found the trace of a frown on her brow.

"Met is a strong word," Indrani shrugged. "It wasn't one of his good days."

"He grows... confused, as I understand it," I said.

"He's an interesting fellow," she replied, "but his conversation loops back around after a bit. He does not realize. Sharp, though, when he's there. Or so Zeze says, anyway. He must have been quite something in his prime."

Or he was a skilled liar and thought it in his interest for others to believe him as past said prime, I thought. Though Indrani could be frightfully perceptive at times, she was not flawless in her judgements. None of us were.

"Anything I should worry of?" I asked.

She considered that for a moment.

"I can't place his accent," Indrani said. "More like he doesn't have one, and he speaks at least four languages."

Maybe not Proceran, then. Most Named tended to be polyglots, but in that regard both heroes and villains from the Principate tended to be lacking. It wasn't a reflection of any inherent inferiority but rather of the fact that most of them tended to be regional and might genuinely never meet someone who didn't speak their native tongue throughout their entire life. Then again the old man *was* a sage, even if a doddering one, and that implied a certain knack for the scholarly. Something to keep in mind, anyway. A walk down a stunted little corridor brought us to broad open doors, and a carving in the wall spelling out Miscellaneous Works Repository in three languages: Chantant, Lower Miezan and Ceseo. There was a bureau buried under an avalanche of books just past the doors, and a harried-looking young man behind it who was frowning at an open volume by magelight. Someone had written *department of this and that* in chalk on the side, as well as the even cheekier *ring if you need a custodian, we would like one as well* I noted with a suppressed smile. We entered and as Archer took the initiative to go speak to the young man I took a moment to study our surroundings.

After the description of this being dumping grounds for every other library, I'd expected some sort of rampant chaos with but it wasn't anything like that. The magelight globes hanging from the low ceiling shone instead down on cramped but neat paths of shelves filled to the brim with books of all shapes and sizes, Chalk slates haphazardly distributing revealing some arcane library reference symbols and broad themes to swaths of the collection to which I saw no rhyme nor reason: *history of fish*, *probably untrue* sat side by side with *Arlesite romance* and both

were across an entire stack filled with *travel journal*, but *metaphorical*. There was not a single lit flame within here, but magelights in glass globes had been tied to tongs of leather in a way that made it so they could both be worn and used as a handheld lantern. The impressive part, though, was the size of this place.

It was larger than the throne room in Laure, at the very least, and every spare inch seemed to be used by either stacks or wagon-sized wicker baskets filled with books not yet classed. *I could hide an entire company of legionaries in here*, I thought, *and not a soul would notice until the goblins got bored*. While I'd been lost in my contemplations, Archer had apparently gotten what she needed from the young man at the bureau – who was now, I noticed, staring at me with fear and awe while trying very hard to pretend he'd gone back to reading his book. I winked at him, then turned to Indrani.

"So?" I asked.

"He's in there," Archer said. "Though Gods only know where. Last sighting was apparently near the 'fluorescent, neither flora nor fauna' stacks."

"Stacks," I repeated. "As in, we have *multiple* of those?"

"It's important to look on the bright side of life, Catherine," Indrani grinned at me, then winked. "You know, 'cause fluorescent means-"

"You are the worst person I know," I informed her in disgust.

Ugh, puns. At least when the sappers made one of those, something usually exploded not long after. That was as close as redeeming such atrocity against the laws of Gods and men could be had. It was a true shame the Sisters weren't willing to allow that in the holy book, but I'd just have to keep suggesting it. Maybe some sort of appendix, I mused.

"But I don't expect we'll have too hard a time finding him," I continued, "will we, Adjutant?"

"That's about as clever as her pun," Hakram told me. "You just didn't wink afterwards, so it was less glaringly terrible."

We both ignored Indrani's outraged noises.

"Everybody's a fucking critic these days," I muttered. "*Fine*. My lord Adjutant, kindly use your aspect to *search* for the Doddering Sage until we have *obtained his presence*."

"Well, since you asked so nicely," Adjutant gravelled, sounding amused.

I found I was swallowing a grin. Gods, how was it that I'd missed those assholes so much? Without any more need for verbally jostling, Adjutant called on one of three crystallized manifestations of his Name. **Find** was Adjutant's most subtle aspect, and in truth one of the most nuanced I'd ever heard of: much like with Hakram himself, the apparent simplicity hid remarkable depth. While it could be used to significantly accelerate searched for anything material, whether living or not, it had more abstract uses as well. They tied into the way the aspect itself functioned, in my opinion. For example, after we hit the first crossroads Hakram closed his eyes and called on his aspect again before taking a swift left. This was not the act of finding information from a book where we knew it was or picking out a woman from a crowd: he was, in effect, going on nothing. And still he'd get us to the Doddering Sage, I had no worry whatsoever about that.

Masego had theorized – and Akua seemed to think it a reasonable inference – that what Adjutant was doing was a phenomenon known among diabolists as *tapering*. It was apparently common among the most intelligent of devils, when they grew ancient enough. It was an inherently inhuman degree of perception born from the fact that such devils could notice and remember ever detail in a way that humans could not and call on a sheer amount of experience physically unattainable by mortals. It allowed those creatures to adapt to wildly different surroundings, people and situations with seeming flawlessness by taking in everything around them and then refining the possibilities to what was the most likely truth. Tapering the noise until all that was left was the true tune. It was why an incubus could take over a Praesi seraglio just as easily as it could break apart a Stygian line-match.

The devil had a degree of perception that could not be matched by humans, and it was helped along by decades if not centuries of learning about the ins and outs of human nature. It was the opinion of those two that Hakram's aspect essentially allowed him to tap into a similar state for a small amount of time.

Vivienne, on the other hand, had noted she'd seen similar behaviour from the Bumbling Conjuror: providence's golden son, whose every debacle turned out to be a masterstroke until he ran into a villain so far beyond him providence was buried along with him. I was actually inclined to side with her on this. To my eye, **Find** looked a lot like discount providence put together for one of Below's: luck put together from the possible, but only ever a story's sort of luck. It could get us closer to what we needed, or what was already within our grasp, but it was not a panacea for all our ills and relying on it for answers was putting our lives into the hands of fickle, fickle luck. Regardless of who had the truth of it, though, in practice Adjutant guided us through twists and turns until we were deep within the maze.

Twice we passed hidden nooks, one occupied by a snoring priest on an armchair and the other by an impressive collection of bottles from I confiscated what looked like genuine Harrow brandy in the name of the throne of Callow, until Hakram's steps slowed. I cocked my head to the side, taking a whiff of the air. Was that what I thought it was? Huh. I took the lead in turning the corner, stumbling onto my first sight of the Doddering Sage. The old man looked haggard, I thought, taking in the rumpled grey robes and ratty cloth shoes, but somehow there was a sense of power to it. A mane of shoulder-length grey hair mixed with what would have been a long and luxurious beard, were it not unkempt. The Doddering Sage licked wet red lips and narrowed his amber brown eyes as he caught sight of me in turn, leaning back into a ratty brown armchair. In his hands was the source of the smell I'd caught: a polished little wooden pipe filled with freshly-lit wakeleaf.

"It's not for you, Constance," the Doddering Sage told me. "You're much too young, and this is a fool's vice besides."

"*Shit*," Archer muttered. "Not a good day."

I stepped forward, ignoring the comment, and came to lean against the stacks at his side.

"Tell me about it," I sighed, reached for the pipe I carried in my tunic. "I get headaches if I don't smoke at least once, nowadays."

The Doddering Sage watched me produce a small packet of my own wakeleaf – Hanno's gift, still with me – and stuff my own pipe before passing a palm over it to light it with a touch of black flame.

"Dragonbone," the old man said, eyes narrowing further. "Expensive. Rare. *Dangerous*. You are not Constance."

I breathed in, swallowing the smoke and spat it back out.

"I'm not," I said. "I'm the Black Queen, and you have answers for me."

"Do I?" the Doddering Sage said. "How good of me."

He brusquely snorted, then pulled at his own pipe. I could only watch in envy as he blew a smoke ring, then further showed off by blowing a smaller ring into it.

"Damn, but that *is* impressive," I admitted.

"I have a few years of practice on you, Foundling Queen," the old man smiled, face wreathed in the last wisps of his smoke. "You come to me for my eyes, I take it."

"Do I?" I asked.

When completely out of my depth, I was in no way above smiling meaningfully and saying something mildly cryptic. A truly ridiculous amount of people were almost *eager* to fall for that.

"That boy of yours, the one with the deadly earnestness, he'll be a terror one day," the Sage said, "but he's a few years short still. That's why an old sack of bones like me are brought in even when there are all these swaggering youths. I can look, yes I can. But you'll not hurt Constance, will you? Promise me."

His lip trembled in sudden emotion, and something in me clenched. He looked fragile, in that moment, though the truth of his fragility was hidden from him. Pity welled up, but I pushed it down. *You could be playing me*, I thought. *And so I'll offer kindness where I can, but never without keeping a knife in hand.*

"I won't," I said. "I promise."

"Good," he muttered. "Good. You do remind me of him, you know. Robert. He was kind, but he was not *soft*."

I said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

"**Perceive**," the Doddering Sage said, and Creation shivered.

I watched him, and saw his eyes had turned pure white – he looked blind, but only a fool would have made that mistake. I felt something skittering across my soul, like a spider against glass, and the old man exhaled.

"Twinned," he said. "Incipient. You make your own Role, and the Name walks hand in hand with another. I cannot see them, there is... refusal."

I shivered, fingers clenching around my pipe, and did not believe this for a moment to be the mad ramblings of an old man. Not when my very soul was shivering along with the rest of me, lost and reaching. The Doddering Sage turned towards me abruptly, so quick I thought his head might snap.

"More?" he said, sounding surprised. "You... *how*? It isn't yours, where did you take it?"

"What?" I said, leaning forward. "What did I take?"

"A rival?" he muttered. "A thief? A *successor*? You keep stories within you that neither your ear nor eye ever knew. Shapes and beats and the sound of the knife kissing flesh."

My pipe tumbled across the floor, though I did not remember dropping it – or catching the Sage's robes, fists tightening around them as I pulled him closer.

"Focus," I ordered, voice ringing with power. "The stories, where do they come from?"

My hand was shaking, and the answer was on the tip of my tongue. I knew this, I'd had it since/

/and my eyes were blinking. I pushed down the surge of rage that seize hold of me at the way I just couldn't seem to remember what I wanted. I would be mistress of my own mind, even if I had to rip out the parts that misbehaved.

"Sage," I said, "tell me."

"Reflection," he whispered, sounding awed. "No, an echo. You stole from her echo, and now it's in your head. How did you not break?"

I released his robes, stumbling back. Oh. Oh. And at last I remembered, what it was that Masego and I had done in the depths of Arcadia, when we'd harvested the echoes left behind by things that would become gods. He'd learned dark secrets from that, deep magics. And I had/ *no you fucking don't, it's my mind and I there is only one ruler here.* I wrenched the world back from the blankness, wrestled it back into submission. I was kneeling, gasping, and Adjutant's worried hand was on my shoulder. But it didn't matter, even as I convulsed and threw up at the feet of the Doddering Sage.

"Cat," Hakram quietly asked, "can you hear me?"

"Yes," I laughed. "Yes, I can hear you. And I remember now, what it is I got from the Intercessor."

The shape of a thousand stories, the tune of the song if not the words. An instinct, one that'd sharpened something already existing into a blade capable of upending old monsters and empires. I wiped my mouth and an apology to the Sage was halfway to my lips when I realized his eyes were closed and he was, seemingly, sleeping. Unearthing what had been waiting in the back of my head had knocked him out, looked like. I rose to my feet, slowly, and allowed Hakram to tuck my cleaned pipe back into my tunic as I leaned against his arm.

"Catherine," Indrani quietly said, "what the Hells was that?"

"I forced myself to remember something my mind didn't know how to cope with," I said. "But it was worth it. I know what's in the back of my head, and now that I know it can't be used against me."

The Augur had told us that the Bard saw in stories, saw all the stories, and that when dealing with Named she was nigh untouchable. But she could be beaten, because the more we knew of

her the less power she held over us. And one of these days I would find a set of shackles even her smug immortal ass couldn't slither her way out of. The first step to that was realizing I'd stolen part of her and made it my own: that was on less surprise for her to pull on me when the time came. With surprising gentleness, Indrani reached out and took my face in hand. She withdrew after touching under my nose, fingers coming away flecked with blood.

"Don't think too hard, Cat," she said, sounding worried. "You're not made of Winter anymore: some things you won't get back up from."

"The more I bleed now," I replied, "the less I'll bleed when the knives really come out."

Still, I winced as I wiped away the blood beneath my nostrils. I had the most horrible headache. A glance at the Doddering Sage told me he was still out, so there'd be no more to learn here.

"Find out who the Constance he was talking about is," I quietly told Hakram. "If she's still alive, see to it she doesn't want for anything. If she's not, see to her descendants."

I owed the man, for this, and I'd pay my debt in full. He'd have a warm place to stay in after the war, be it in Callow or at Cardinal. That much I could repay, for what I'd learned today and what it had cost him to tell me.

"I'll see to it," Adjutant promised.

"I hate to be that girl," Archer said, "but we're in the shit now, aren't we? You said we were here for a revelation, but there wasn't anything about this that helps us figure out what's going on here."

I pushed off of Hakram and took my staff from the stacks where I'd left it propped up against, rolling my shoulder to loosen it. She wasn't wrong about that, though she wasn't exactly right either. I found the bottle of Harrow brandy I'd liberated from oppression earlier pressed into my hand, uncorked, and Indrani gave me a steady look.

"Your breath still smells like, you know," she told me, not unkindly.

Ah. That. Fair enough. I took a long swallow from the bottle, then another until the taste of vomit was quite gone and a pleasant warmth was beginning to settle into my belly.

"Good stuff," I muttered, passing it back. "Right, so us being the shit. True enough, 'Drani, but she actually told us exactly what we needed to know before we dipped into my little... gift."

"He told us things about your Name," Archer skeptically said. "Which I've been curious about, true, but it doesn't get us out of this mess."

"Sure it does," I said, "if you consider that, should we have followed the story as it was offered to us, we'd be learning this *quite* late. This is our revelation, Archer. We can go back from it."

Hakram cleared his throat.

"You're doing that thing again," he told me, "where you talk to yourself in your head and then expect us to keep up."

"You usually do, though," I muttered. "Fine, hear me out then. The three of us are bold investigators for truth and justice—"

"Hungering Gods," Hakram swore under his breath.

"Yes," Indrani jeered, "and let them kneel before us, begging abjectly for mercy we will always deny!"

"I'm not going to touch that," I decided, "so, by going down that road we bite into a story. One that got set out for us to bite because we're a bad fit for it, so we'll fail."

"And we are a bad fit for it, because?" Hakram asked.

"Indrani," I said, "how many people have you killed this year?"

The ochre-skinned Named hummed.

"Define people," she finally asked.

"Because that," I told him.

"So we are avoiding this story," Adjutant said.

"No," I said, "if I had something else to slap down instead I might, mind you, but I've got nothing. But that doesn't mean we can't cheat. The thing is, Hakram, that is a functional story. If we were a band of heroes, we could ride it to the finish."

"Now you're just making it too easy," Indrani reproached.

"For the trap to work," Adjutant slowly said, "the story has to be... functional for lack of a better term. It is simply us who would not function with it."

"Yeah," I said, "which is why we went directly for the Doddering Sage. He was my guess for the guy who, when it looks like we're about to lose for good, reveals a truth to us and allows us to turn it all around."

"As heroes are wont to," the orc nodded.

"Hate to break it to you, Cat, but he didn't say shit about conspiracies," Archer pointed out.

"Yes," I agreed. "He talked, instead, about my Name. Which means someone's trying to fuck with my Name, or maybe the one 'twinned' to it."

A poetic way to talk about a nemesis, but it fit. For every villain with Destroy, there was a hero with Protect. That was the way the Game of the Gods was played, and I'd be no exception. I cleared my throat.

"Without sounding arrogant-"

"That'd be a first," Indrani mused.

I flipped her off.

"- at least part of this is meant as a swing at me as well as a broader attack on the Truce and Terms," I said. "And that rather narrows down who it is we might be fighting against."

"If you cannot name the swordsman, name the sword," Archer snorted. "Fair. Only so many people who'd come swinging at you this way. So we're in a scrap with the Wandering Bard, are we?"

"She's come out of the woodworks at last," I grunted in agreement. "And she took her sweet time before she did, 'Drani, so this isn't going to be some sloppy half-baked attempt. She's come for blood, and at the moment she's *winning*."

"The Truce and the Terms are holding," Adjutant said. "And you have learned valuable information."

Yeah, I had. Which I would have taken for a victory, if I'd not just learned that part of the instincts that'd driven me to this decision had been ripped out of the old monster I was now facing. Which meant I was about to get taken for a ride, because she'd known about that and until now I hadn't.

"The Sage is unconscious," Archer suddenly said.

"But obviously alive, and not a hero besides," Hakram said. "If stirring conflict is the purpose, that is a weak hand."

"Shut up," I said, "both of you. Use your Name."

I called on Night instead, sharpening my senses to the very limit of what I could bear, and that was when I heard it: hissing sounds. Like a gas being released. At least ten, probably more.

"There is something in the air," Adjutant growled.

"And I don't hear anyone out there moving," Archer said.

Was everyone else out there dead? It might simply be a curse or a deep sleep instead, I mused, though death would likely be easier to arrange. I could not afford to take a moment and ponder how many innocents had likely just been snuffed out as part of a scheme, not when there were more lives on the line, so I tucked that away cleanly.

"The Concocter would be capable of making a brew that can do this," I said.

"I've known her to work with gases, sometimes," Indrani hesitantly agreed. "But she wouldn't, Cat."

"It doesn't need to be her plan," I murmured, "just her work. It being used will be quite enough, when heroes stumble into this."

Because that'd be the logical move, wouldn't it? If someone was trying to start a fight between Named in the Arsenal, what better way to have a pack of heroes stumble unto me and two of the Woe surrounded by corpses and an unconscious Named. Hells, it was going to be the Mirror Knight and his band wasn't it? That was the reason that little fucker was here at all: so that the Intercessor would have someone capable of rallying the heroic side of the Arsenal but having no interest in talking this out with me instead of drawing a sword. Any moment now he and the worst possible combination of Named the Bard could muster were going to come in, and I needed to think how I could wiggle out of this mess. The moment the Mirror Knight and the Black Queen came face to face, I decided, this was no longer recoverable. It'd become a conflict between the two of us, and people would have to take sides: even if I won and showed restraint, there was a decent chance the Truce and Terms would collapse in the aftermath of this debacle.

I needed someone to distract the Named coming, and then I needed to start tugging at the other threads of this story until it all came tumbling down and the Intercessor had nothing left to work with.

"People just came in," Archer murmured, then paused as she pricked her ear. "Five, two in armour."

"Hakram," I said, "I need you to do something for me."

The orc looked at me, then sharply nodded.

"It was my plot," he agreed. "Will you have already arrested me, or are we fighting?"

I clenched my fist, then slugged him in the side of the face.

"The day I throw any of you under the wheels like that is the day I slit my own throat," I hissed. "You, Adjutant, are investigating this on the behalf of the Black Queen. You're going to them for help, because you caught sight of two people running. Do what you can from the inside."

He took a step back, staggered more by the words than the hit.

"Archer and I are going to make a run for it," I said. "Make it look good."

If the Intercessor wanted to make me the villain of this fucking story, then she ought to have been more careful what she wished for.

[tkjarrah](#)

Cat at the feast; knives out, beak bloody

[tkjarrah](#)

this is gonna be *fun*

dadycoool

I don't have any idea what you just said, but I agree wholeheartedly. Cat being a smartass Murderhobo spitting in the DM's face is always a good time.

[tkjarrah](#)

its from the movie knives out, and where the title comes from:

in the movie its pejorative, but it seemed appropriate to me here with cat being a fox in a henhouse now, the knives coming out

NerfContessa

That is 9ne twisty way to. Go. About it.

Don't twist yourself too much, or you'll come full circle.

Still, very interesting.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Claws bloody...

ruduen

I'll keep it simple this time:

Vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

... Well. It makes sense that that particular mental mirroring could occur, and it's fortunate that it was caught early.

Insanenoodlyguy

"She's come out to the topwebficion at last," I grunted in agreement. "And she took her sweet time before she voted, 'Drani, so this isn't going to be some sloppy half-baked reminder. She's come for #1 ranking, and at the moment she's winning."

Insanenoodlyguy

aw for chrissake

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Jecherio

You tried!

Juff

Typo Thread:

account the > count the (or account for the)
into to my > in to my
existence a > existence of a
word," Indrani > word." Indrani
worry of (worry about? be wary of?)
pas the > past the
chaos with but > chaos, but
sizes, Chalk > sizes. Chalk
distributing > distributed
searched for > searches for
from I confiscated > from which I confiscated
cloth shies > cloth shoes
with would > with what would
reached for > reaching for
smoke and spat > smoke, and spat (or smoke and spitting)
Queen," the > Queen." The
are brought > is brought
seize hold > seized hold
and I there > and there
on less surprise > one less surprise
being the shit > being in the shit
the actually > he actually

WuseMajor

"I've known her to work with gazes, sometimes," Indrani hesitantly agreed. "But she wouldn't, Cat."

I'm pretty sure that should be "gasses" there.

greycat

It's "gases", actually. But "gasses" is better than "gazes", I guess.

[Barthumphries](#)

Oh good, I was about to go look up what clothing item a cloth shie was.

Nice just! Also, when you only include a couple words, it can be a little difficult to place them in the story. Great work!

Abodmuthkat

Idle thought: did we have the Red Axe's name? I've only seen them get called by their Name.

Might be Constance.

[Liliet](#)

That's EXACTLY what I thought 😊

SpeckofStardust

Considering that Archer has been in a band with red Axe and knew her well enough to know the villain that spawned her she propyl would have said something by now. Further more Cat was first mistaken to be Constnace.

Kel the Seer

Constance could be the hero with Cat's twinned Name. It would explain the confusion.

ninegardens

Constance is a synonym for Stillness.

"Stillness" is a name given to the Bard by both Nessie and Hierarch.

Constance is totally the Bard.

Trebar

Well... that's an interesting little theory there. That could be interesting to see play out.

therealgridlock

And wouldn't you know it, cat let her paranoia drop and promised *not to hurt her*

Wanna bet that was the point of all this, to get cat to promise not to hurt whoever this constance is? Bard or not?

Funny how these things work out. She promised not to hurt her, so it's gonna have to be someone she needs to hurt.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh god, this could work. Brute forcing the issue till you stumble into the real truth at the last minute is an easy alteration to the ill-fitting hero story she was almost trapped in! So why not use that? Be the wrong runaway they start chasing and let them charge right into the actual plot. Even if they think the wrong people are behind it they'll still promptly start unraveling the plan!

caoimhinh

I had thought she would just recruit some Heroes to form the investigative Band of Five. I mean, since her trio wasn't fit for that story, she could add 2 who were and then maybe it would work.

Right now she is risking a lot by embracing the role of the seemingly guilty party, as that kind of misunderstanding is the key to causing the bloodshed. There doesn't even need to be a villainous plot at play, just to make Heroes think there is one, for them to take arms and react violently.

pagesbe

Cat is smart, so I'm assuming that she dismissed that possibility for a reason other than "I didn't think of it." When it comes to manipulating stories, she's top tier in the book.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's pretty sure there ARE guilty parties and there IS a plot and at least some villains will be involved.

And "framed party trying to lead the heroic detective to the truth through hints" isn't all that bad a role. Especially when Cat's too powerful personally to get easily killed at the last minute.

caoimhinh

Yeah, true.

But the problem is that whether or not she is guilty of something is nearly irrelevant. She only needs to *look like* she is up to some Evil scheme and the Heroes will riot. This goes beyond whether someone is right or wrong, as that will not matter once there is bloodshed.

The real threat of this situation is towards the Truce and Terms, towards the fragile trust and temporal peace that was achieved between Heroes and Villains working together.

What you mentioned is indeed not a bad story *for Catherine's survival*, but it is a HUGE risk for the peace between Heroes and Villains. Because the target of this scheme is not Cat's life, it's the T&T.

Even if the Angels were to come down and clear Cat's name saying that she did nothing wrong, it would not matter if the Heroes and Villains are no longer willing to work together.

beleester

"The moment the Mirror Knight and the Black Queen came face to face, I decided, this was no longer recoverable. It'd become a conflict between the two of us, and people would have to take sides: even if I won and showed restraint, there was a decent chance the Truce and Terms would collapse in the aftermath of this debacle."

She thinks that the Mirror Knight is already convinced of her guilt, so she's running away to avoid a violent confrontation. She wants to buy time, keep running away from the Mirror Knight until the rest of the heroes (and villains) can investigate properly. Ideally, the story works in her favor, and the heroes discover the real villain just in time to stop the Mirror Knight from killing her.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah. It rarely goes this smoothly, but in the more conventional version of this story as Cat is guiding it, it goes something like:

Mirror Knight: *standing over the wreckage of the conspirator/s" Your plan has failed! We have stopped this plot! *turns to Black Queen" And now that the pawn is destroyed, time to deal with the mastermind!"

Some hero Mirror Trusts, running in: Waitttttttttttttt!
explanation of what really happened ensues

Shveiran

The real treath is to the T&T, but by provviding the heroes with a plot to uncover, she is delaying any extreme action on the heroes' part.

Sure, they are convinced Villains are plotting nefarious things, but there is forms to follow: you don't start the purge before you have UNCOVERED THE PLOT.

Therefore, so long as she avoids a direct confrontation, nothing irreparable happens to the T&T.

Unless something changes, obviously, but she is making this up as she goes.

[Liliet](#)

As Catherine has pointed out, this is a solid story that should get the heroes to the end with the correct conclusion.

Shveiran

She is taking on the physical role of the fugitive, while using the Adjutant to shape the narrative so that the BlackQueenTeam is also investigating the nefarious plot. So long as that is up, the Black Queen is not the Villain, but the unlikely ally.

A stopgap measure, to be sure. Yet the deadliest part of this whole venture is how much the table was tilted before Catherine even noticed: time is precisely what she needs to turn it around, and so long as she doesn't interact with the other parties the story can't cement its shape.

ninegardens

The story can totally cement its shape without her. ESPECIALLY if her agents are around and visible.

Shveiran

Only if her agents act as her limbs, it's not enough for them to be there. By claiming a role in the story, she becomes a key element; the bonds go both ways, the story will TRY to force itself out of the stasis and find a way to bring her back into the spotlight, but it cannot progress without her being in the spotlight.

She is trading in the certainty to be brought into the spotlight eventually for the guarantee things will stall until she is; this buys her time, without binding herself to an ending.

Brilliant yet risky, which is pretty much Cat in nutshell.

Insanenoodlyguy

yes, but she's COUNTING on that. The way she sees it, no matter how well she defends herself now, there are people who won't believe her and a confrontation will be inevitable. Especially since somebody will move the plot along. Even if she starts talking them down a crossbow bolt will catch somebody in the back or something. So instead, she's siccing the dogs on them. See, the heroes WANT to uncover the plot. The problem is, they think Cat is behind said plot. So, they look for Cat, take her down, and probably uncover the real plot at the same time. Or Cat fights them off, they uncover the plot after a lot of broken bones and hard feelings, and the T&T is fucked.

Instead, Cat's pushing the story along another acceptable groove. They "know" Adjutant is there to help with the bullshit. Black Queen is behind this plot! And where the hell is the black queen? Off running the plot, of course! Time to find this damn plot and root it out!

And so, they will. They will, by skill or by luck, end up right in the middle of whatever the real plan is, and immediately start stamping it out. During the course of this, said plan should be revealed, and can lead to a "Wait, so the Black Queen really didn't have anything to do with this?!" moment when none of the strings end up attached to her. Why prove your own innocence when you can make your accusers do so?

Justsomeguy

So, Cat is being measured for the role of intercessor's nemesis? That twinned could be someone else but I think the bard fits best right now.

dadycoool

When Cat was in Issere, the thought came into my head that her Name ought to be Narrator or something. My ongoing theory is at some point she'll Erase someone, probably Narrate a scenario to Hells and back, and, idk, Retcon something out of ever existing. (Think the forest that Tiber Septum Dreamed out of ever existing in The Elder Scrolls. I could be misremembering that.)

Raivshard

Narrator would be too similar to The Bard's own purpose, I think. If Cat's new Name is to be oppositional in some form, then it should be something that screws with the Game.

The Judge/Adjudicator, perhaps? Able to decide that a person is unfit or unworthy of a Name, and remove it from them or seal it away, or somesuch.

RoflCat

The Carver.

If Stories are grooves carved into Creation, and she is 'carving' open new grooves to create her peace. While Bard is merely someone retelling of those existing grooves.

Basically she's the force of changes while Bard is trying to push things back into the same old.

And of course she's carved up some fools in her time so it work as double entrende for her warlord way too.

Noldo

Has Cat realized that the pivot in this story is not the mystery or potential confrontation between Cat and Mirror but the formation of Cat's name?

[Javvies](#)

Bard.

And an active conspiracy to keep making things worse inside the Arsenal. Not just Bard having put pieces into motion long before and letting them play out.

Hakram, this is Cat. You're one of her people, and a personal friend. She's not going to treat you as expendable, much less throw you away as a decoy for dumbass Heroes. You should know this.

Earl of Purple

And if she did use Hakram as a decoy, who'd believe that his plot to kill Wicked Enchanter to give the villains an excuse to kick the heroes out of the Arsenal didn't come from Cat? He speaks with Cat's voice, most of the time, and is her one true, trusted friend and ally. He's her shadow, her right hand, her left hand and her pen on the paper. He's been empowered by Below to support Cat in all she does. Sure, he might betray her, but... More likely he's been put up to it by her.

WealthyAardvark

They're fighting a war, and it's life or death. The Truce and Terms shattering would be death assured. As we saw in the prologue, sometimes someone needs to volunteer to lead the doomed rearguard that keeps all from being lost. Hakram's a soldier, and that is a story he knows. Thankfully Cat once again has a better option.

Tenthyr

I find it very funny that the intercessor forgot that Cats specialty when playing the villian is causing atrocious amounts of carnage till everyone's plan is in pieces but hers.

Point Point

But in this scenario, carnage will make the situation worse, so the bard may think she has the upper hand. And by Catherine's own admission, she has had an edge up until this point, plus some two years of preparaton.

Tenthyr

That's the thing though: cat is currently playing the Mystery Villian On The Run. She's working the story from both sides. And now she's going to play a very, very good chase scene.

WuseMajor

See, I was wondering about the possibility that that Bard is grooming Cat to be her replacement. Or that becoming the new Bard is the punishment for upsetting the game between Heaven and Hell. I'm glad that the Sage raised the point.

Also, I'm concerned that she already got played here and that Constance is the Red Axe. Or at least someone else she'll have to have killed. And a Promise to a Named is not broken lightly.

Big I

Cat would never break a promise. She's "a woman of her word, however terrible that word might be. Let all Creation witness it."

[Liliet](#)

Yep, it's very very likely that Constance is the Red Axe 😊

ninegardens

Or the Bard

[pirateddesigns](#)

Wandering Bard is currently Marguerite of Bayeux ("Alamans? Really?").

I do think Constance is likely the Red Axe – it makes for a good Story twist that puts Cat in a bind and forces a decision between a) upholding her duty to be the villains' champion under T&T, or b) keeping her promise to the Doddering Sage.

Thorium

Two years ago, when we last saw her, she was Marguerite. That doesn't mean she is still her. She has a history of switching identity when leaving a Story, meaning there is a good chance she isn't Marguerite anymore.

talenel

What if Constance is Bard's original name? Something that even the Bard herself has forgotten after all this time.

[Liliet](#)

Ehhhh

Shveiran

"His lip trembled in sudden emotion, and something in me clenched. He looked fragile, in that moment, though the truth of his fragility was hidden from him. Pity welled up, but I pushed it down. You could be playing me, I thought. And so I'll offer kindness where I can, but never without keeping a knife in hand."

This is what she said literally after making the promise.

I don't know **which one**, but she has a loophole in hand. That much I know.

Shveiran

*literally before.

Curse you wordpress, you made my literally literally wrong.

Frivolous

Cat can kill Constance without hurting her. She just has to do it painlessly.

This is the same woman who totally wrecked Akua without shedding any blood, so there's even a sort of precedent.

Morgenstern

A promise of "I will not hurt person X" has multiple potential loopholes. Some centering around "hurt", some around "I" come to mind first.

Konstantin von Karstein

Just like Amadeus did with Akua's father

Hierenius

O god this is so awesome. That twist!

Big I

So let's speculate on the Sage's cryptic pronouncements:

The "earnest boy" is probably Masego, since the Sage has Percieve and Hierophant has Witness.

"Robert" might be her birth father, someone with a Name? The Shining Prince or the Good King maybe? She was a plucky orphan to start with.

"Thief, rival, successor" is probably about Cat replacing the Bard, which would suck for her and I really don't want to happen.

Oshi

Robert is the King of Callow. The dead one that Nessie held.

[Liliet](#)

That was Edward.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing Robert would be the last Good King of Callow 😊

> "Thief, rival, successor" is probably about Cat replacing the Bard, which would suck for her and I really don't want to happen.

OOOF YEAH

Shveiran

Yeah, Book I talks about a Good King Robert killed during the Conquest

[Liliet](#)

...yep, so that tracks 😊

Wonder

.i think all three might be the flavours of the aspects of her not yet crystalized Name.

[Barthumphries](#)

> "Thief, rival, successor" is probably about Cat replacing the Bard

Hunh. I thought he was taking about Vivienne going from The Thief to Cat's rival to her successor on the throne of Callow.

Big I

Re-reading this chapter and it just struck me that the Doddering Sage might be the Wizard of the West. Do we know if Warlock killed the one during the Conquest?

dadycoool

I am cackling in my chair. Cat's insight has just gotten a boost, she knows her enemy, she's on the run, and she's making up a plan as she goes along. This is gonna be FUN!

Seeing an above comment, I'm not even gonna touch the Sage's message. I just hope my brain won't dismiss it as beyond any hope of comprehension and forget it all.

[ayon96](#)

Twinned is prbly meaning Akua. Akua is getting a Hero Name while Cat is getting a Villain Name both Name are prbly intertwined.

hakureireimu

Akua isn't Cat's rival; that ship has sailed long ago.

Evgeny Permyakov

Intertwinning doesn't mean literal rivalry, and rivalry does not need to be antagonistic. However much Akua is under Cat's thumb, Akua is Cat's foil in that Cat has a goal and (arguably) a higher moral ground, while Akua doesn't and play the hero shtick for fun.

They are quite literally opposite of each other: a villain for the the greater good and a hero for no good. Them molding each other into mutually opposite and rivaling yet mutually complementing (from story perspective) roles could be an interesting twist.

dadycoool

I like that "villain for the the greater good and a hero for no good". That'd be quite the twist: the arguable Scourge of this Generation, the Diabolist, taking on the role of Hero. Wasn't Akua the first person in this story to actually invoke the Power of Friendship back in the Everdark?

hakureireimu

Except that Cat does interpret it as "a poetic way to talk about a nemesis." I mean you can argue that she's wrong, but I wouldn't take that bet.

[Burlyraven](#)

Ah, and now Cat begins the dangerous game of staying one step ahead of the heroes while leading them to the truth, which culminates (hopefully) with Cat standing near the real truth, begging Roland to trust her after he's stepped into the role of lead investigator, all the while holding the Mirror Knight and his squad back so they don't kill Cat. Hakram takes the role of suspicious/evil teammate for the heroic investigators, who will likely be discovering the details Cat has to ignore in her haste.

Or something like that. It's a modern classic of a story, but a good one.

Oshi

The Kingfisher Prince is the spoiler in all this. The rest of the plot makes sense. He's the added soup. The Prince always comes to the rescue. Besides we've seen from interludes he's the most clear-sighted of them all. He knows conspiracies but is truly honorable. He's either the one meant to die or the one to witness/unravel it all.

Shveiran

And I'm ok with that, I need more Frederic.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hopefully, Cat is planning to hand him a nearly-completed plot for him to "figure out" and preside over the parlor scene.

Trebar

So are you saying Cat got it wrong? She tried to jump to the Doddering Sage as the end of the story, but the big reveal is actually supposed to come from the Kingfisher Prince and so she missed it?

Oshi

No, the reveal is from the sage. The Prince is her trump card. He's the one that was supposed to clean it all up after the bard killed off the T&T. Now Cat will use him to shape the story in another way. He's a Prince. He needs someone to save. Wonder who that could be?

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

Cold Air

Why not just tell the heroes about Bard, and her attitude..?
Sure, probably they would not believe, but would they not become harder for her to manipulate?

Liliet

Right now? Because, as Cat said, the minute she and Mirror Knight come face to face, this is a confrontation, and that's what she wants to avoid.

Oshi

The opposite. It would be like attacking a friend (you know she is their friend at this point). No ones inclined to believe you and it just makes them seem even more guilty. The MK is too dumb to think beyond classical villain tropes.

That Other Guy

After the last episode I was convinced Cat would get an aspect that unravelled and rewrite stories, something akin to Skien's Unwind.

Now I'm more sure than ever.

Akua can't come into a name again because she's actually being played by Kairos in disguise. She's actually possessed a goblin and has snuck off to join with Black and usurp the throne when things go Shakespearingly pear-shaped.

Frivolous

I think I agree. I suspect that Cat's Name will be something like Unraveler of Tales or Incisive Critic. Critic in this case is like Atropos with the shears; she cuts down stories that she finds unworthy. Example: She cut through Pilgrim's attempt to trap her into a pattern of three.

Or she could be Named Dark Intercessor, because she intervenes on behalf of villains, Look at how she contests with and intimidates Choirs of angels.

I really hope Hakram isn't killed outright by the heroes. He is an orc and a villain, and the Mirror Knight especially just might cut him down.

Sykomantis

I'm thinking her Name will be Unreliable Narrator, and her first aspect will be Decide: getting to choose what kind of story is going on.

Insanenoodlyguy

He's dumb but not that dumb. If your Ally, however shaky, runs up to you and says "Two people! Running that way! Lets go!" one of two things is about to happen.

1. They mean it. Lets get after those bastards!

2. It's really him, this is a trap... so lets get after those bastards! The best place for a hero to be when there's a trap is jumping right into it, springing it and taking down whomever is surprised you are still standing.

Now on the other hand, stabbing your ally in bad faith, not such a good story, unless there's some obvious thing wrong with the story that you can explain to your allies immediately afterwards when they are all freaking out. Mirror Knight does that, he just might not survive this. I've no doubt he'll consider just wasting the Arch-Heretics right hand man, but he won't actually start the fight until he has something concrete, like the trap he might well believe is up ahead. And if they instead do find fleeing people, well, now the momentum has moved us back to #1.

Lartek

Oh.

Oh.

So the Sage is the Wizard of the West, that's pretty much confirmed.

Firstly, she called herself the Black Queen, and he corrected her by calling her the "Foundling" Queen, because it's technically the title that matters to a Callowan vassal. She's Queen Catherine of the House Foundling of Callow, after all.

Secondly, because it's the defining trait of all good Good Kings of Callow as the Revenant King said: kind, but not soft.

The last king's name was Edward, but who's to say his father wasn't named Robert?

Now who's Constance, I wonder?

Shikkarasu

Does anyone remember the other time that/

/happened? I know it did in one or two chapters, but I can't place where.

[doominator10](#)

Demon of absence?

Gamer7956

It happened when the Skein used Spool, and when Masego undid it. It's EE's way of showing sudden discontinuity.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cognitive break – in this case, she's no-sells a "surge of rage" pitfall, literally interrupting her own thoughts.

Shoddi

It also happened in Chapter 5, "Interlude: Mirror". Louis de Sartrons tried to study Scribe but could only recall "ink-stained hands".

[Zaddek](#)

Cat had at least one other instance I can remember, during one of her talks with Karos. I think it was the one the dead king sat in on? I also feel like she had a second one but I'm drawing a blank as to what section it was in.

[Zaddek](#)

Ha! I remembered correctly. Chapter 81: Devotional

"...Hierophant had plundered the thoughts of still-mortal Neshamah but I'd seen/

/ . Still, this was a rather clear indication of our coming guest's identity..."

Shikkarasu

That's the one! I remember Mirror and Spool now that the others mention them, but this is the one I was thinking about.

+10 internet points

Shveiran

Good catch! Her brain was likely going toward something close to "but I'd seen inside the brain of the Wandering Bard" and that thought was too much to process; so it aborted that line of thought and went back to the closest safe spot to branch off.

"Still, this was a rather clear..."

[Walter](#)

The implication seems to be that Cat has a Named opposite out there, but I think it's the other way round. Cat is the Wandering

Bard's opposite, long overdue. Bard starts stories, Cat ends them.

I dunno, it doesn't quite fit, but I feel like something about that is at least truth-adjacent.

Oshi

Bard spins stories into being and forces them into her view of things. Cat unravels stories and never let's them be one view of things.

Cat's Rashomon to Bard's Cinderella.

moonwatcher13

I think its a bit different. The Bard stands for keeping things as they are, not allowing real progress by maintaining the status quo of Heroes vs Villians, which is why she so opposes the Truce and Terms because they rob her, and the Gods, of leverage.

Cat stands for progress, for breaking the old order to make the new, something she professed as multiple times. She wants peace and order, and will stand against everything that seeks to disrupt that by dragging people back to the way things were.

Wonder

Who the is Robert ,Constance? If this is the benefit of stealing the echo of the Intercessor, then how about Cat goes back and steals some more from the Dead King as well? That should give her some boost , right?

KageLupus

I really like the idea of Cat becoming the successor to the Bard, and think that it is the obvious ending to her story.

The Bard is an eternal balancer, a character in service not of Above or Below, but of the Story itself. She is the finger on the scales that makes sure no one pushes things too far and ruins the Game of the Gods before they are ready for it to end. She has fought Black and Cat, sure, but she also prevented a couple of Elves from murdering Akua so that Liesse could be doomed and the Black Queen would be born. She is constantly playing both sides to keep the conflict running, and if she tends to help out the Heroes it is probably because the Villains are better at cheating to get the upperhand.

Cat is setting herself up for a mirrored role in the new world order she is attempting to build. She works with Villains and Heroes to reach her goals, and if she tends to help out the

Villains more it is because the Heroes are better at cheating via Providence to get an upperhand. There is an open question on just how mortal Cat is anymore but she has for sure been brought back from the dead by both Above and Below. So her becoming an immortal mediator for both sides doesn't seem that unreasonable.

The big conflict between Cat and the Bard really boils down to keeping the status quo versus changing it. The Bard represents a world where Good and Evil are lines in the sand and all of the Knights are Black or White. Cat represents a world where Named of all stripes can work together when they need to, where Heroes as well as Villains can be called out for mass murder, where summoning an angel is just as bad as summoning a devil. You still need some big mythical individual to keep things moving in the right direction in both cases. But the actual direction is going to be wildly different depending on who comes out on top during the current conflicts.

Kel the Seer

Cat excels by throwing everything into chaos because she is better at riding that chaos to victory than any opponent so far? One of the much earlier chapter quotes from the hellhound says as much. Thus, rewriting the narrative to throw the plot askew is where her best chances for success in this current Story lie.

Additionally, I can definitely see Cat as a rival for the Intercessor.

Creation itself literally runs on an underlying Story of Above vs Below. The Intercessor is the adjudicator of this Story, and thus immortal as long as it continues. Which is why she is service to neither side, instead keeping them in a rough balance by helping out both sides and ensuring that the countless other stories play out.

Cat is the Render of Stories. Having learned their importance from Black, and that they can be avoided or interrupted, she has learned to spot ongoing or potential Stories and either use them as weapons (becoming a fae noble, etc) or dodge them (GP's multiple plots to kill her during the 10th Crusade). Her personal story is of her learning to harness, escape, or take over stories to undermine the one central to this world.

Aspects like Rewrite (like Steal, but for Stories), Narrative, and Snip (to end them before completion) would make sense as part of her Name. It would also make her one of the most powerful beings in Creation and able to unmake both the Dead King and Wandering Bard.

However, what does it mean for Creation when Cat's crowning achievement is to end the Good vs Evil story with her Truce and Terms? What if WB's tapdancing these many millenia was not for her own survival, but to keep the Gods of Above and Below

entertained enough to not cancel this world and start over?
What happens when Cat is the Villain whose success ends the world in that scenario?

Mental Mouse

I note that when the Gods gave up on Arcadia, they did not in fact destroy it, but left it around for later use. If they create a new world, I suspect things will be much the same.

Oshi

Cat's crowning achievement isn't to end the game. It's to *change* the game. Her rules and her path has always been to make the game less of a blight on creation. She wants heroes/villains to play out their shit without making it impossible for everyone else to live without being involved in some way.

Daniel E

This whole over-the-top detective bit starting to play out has suddenly reminded me of the Futurama jewel heist: "In the end, the deadliest animal of all, was the Zoo Keeper".

Letouriste

Well, I finally caught up!
Will cat burn the whole library? These books are not particularly important after all. I assume someone will anyway given she is meant to be framed and fire is what she is known for. Specially green and black fire

Oshi

Oh god...another fire. She would.

Collide

Oh man, this is really fun seeing Cat running around messing with Name fuckery again. As cool as the warfare stuff is, I missed this more personal type of conflict.

ninegardens

Okay, so disturbing thoughts:

"“I have a theory,” he said. “You see, for someone to truly make a mess on this board, they would need certain qualities. Perception, affinity, knowledge. A combination thereof. You understand my meaning, yes?”

“An awareness of patterns,” I said.

“Exactly so,” Kairos replied. “And, plague as I am by a suspicious nature, it occurred to me that these qualities are as rare as they are useful. That neither Above nor Below are prone

to waste in such regards." "

-chapter-8-veracity

And also:

""A rival? A thief? A successor? " "

And also... Cat just picked herself up a huge bottle of terrible booze.

Yeah... something (maybe the bard, maybe just the lay of creation) looks like its setting Cat up to be the new Bard. Which potentially means that Bard is trying to suicide (by deliberately passing her role off and losing immortality), or that Creation is doing this, and Cat feeling Bard nearby is the nascent threat of her BECOMING Bard.

Or, potentially Bard can detect her successor and is trying to prevent that name from happening. It's really really hard to tell with that one.

moongazer13

So I agree with almost everything you said, with one exception.

I don't think Cat is the Bard's successor, i think she is going to become her opposing Named, her Nemesis. Because The Dead King isn't the Bard's nemesis, not really. The Dead King's aim (as far as i can tell) seems to be usurping the gods and/or making himself a god. He wants to either recreate Creation in his own image, or take over Creation. Whereas the Bard and Cat just want to keep things going, with some changes.

The Bard wants to keep things to mostly the same forever: Heroes fighting Villains, the Gods Above and Below untouched, with the Bard whispering in every ear and shaping every story. Cat wants things to get better, to break the power of those on top and make things more equal. Her entire story has been about revolution against the established powers, whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in creation.

Oshi

Fuck I missed the booze and throw up bit. I was hooping she would go for rival but..oh hell.

Xinci

Well, its nice to finally get a source for how Providence was probably derived. Tapering explains how it might have changed over time and how it is so flexible amongst different kinds of Named yet not quite iterative enough to be an intelligence. Still unsure on the exact nature of Fate at the moment but this does give sources for most of the later iterated stuff(Angels from Demons, Providence from Tapering, Fae from Devils). Also good to

see how that shard impacted Cat while also seeing what came before Masego.

Someone finally acknowledging Cat as a potential successor to the Bard is great, since it gives us a definitive reason in truth for their conflict. Its been a thing for a while, but good to have someone say it straight out. I was rather curious at Cat potentially having a twinned Name, given her current goal of regulation. I suppose once shes shifted Calernia into a new age its a new stage of testing, so things are set up to keep going after she dies.

Oshi

Cat can't kill the name of Bard until she kills the Bard. Once she's in place she destroys thee name and the world goes on without Dead King or Bard.

Miles

If the Intercessor wanted to make me the villain of this fucking story, then she ought to have voted for pgte

<https://www.topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

Guess https has issues on that site...

<http://www.topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

TheItzal

You know, Cat could have turned this right on it's head if she took a different stance. She has yet to do anything wrong in this case so all she had to do was tell mirror knight she was in the process of contacting Hanno and Hasinbach for a tribunal and she wanted to appoint his people as investigators to figure out what happened. Boom now there's someone much more fitting to the narrative in place and everything starts falling apart.

Shveiran

Betting on a story crafted by the Bard being so weak that as to unravel simply because she is actually innocent is a poor bet, I'm afraid.

I don't know how, but it would likely have backfired.

[Javvies](#)

The incoming Mirror Knight and friends (presumably) would most likely simply assume that Cat is at fault and immediately attack (or attempt to), without waiting for an explanation, far less an actual investigation.

Remember, they were just about to throw down with Cat when the Kingfisher Prince arrived and threw them off their game. They're already primed to assume Cat is to blame and want to put a stop to her evil plots ... and her.

Theitzal

No mirror knight was ready to throw down, the others not so much and that's where the trick comes in, a legal ruler appointing a hero investigator, really lay it on about how everyone will trust an impartial review, maybe put Hakrim on his team like she just did to review his findings and point out legalities. Play to his pride and his own pride will have him making sure the law of the land is upheld. What's more as far as we know no one has done anything wrong other than a hero killing a villain who was once her tormentor. And remember, secrets will out when a hero is looking for information, Cat deliberately makes sure her secrets aren't the kind that will screw her over because of that which leaves only the "secret" that the Bard is trying to break the coalition fighting the greatest evil on the continent because she doesn't like the potential results of it's existence.

[Barthumphries](#)

> Cat deliberately makes sure her secrets aren't the kind that will screw her over

Except for, you know, the secret that they mentioned in this very chapter that they never want the heroes to know? The one that Masego is investigating? The one with secret funding? Yeah, that secret is going to come out at the worst possible time.

Daniel E

Why the heck do all of my comments require moderation approval now? I lost the one I posted yesterday 😞 As an aside, Hakram's cursing about becoming investigators for truth & justice was hilarious.

Steven Silver

Why has no one said Cat's name twin is Cordelia yet? She's the only character I know who's refused a name on screen. Unless that refers to Black refusing Dread Emperor.

And the rival, thief, and successor *could* all be different stories she's coopted. Akua was a rival she now keeps close. Hierarch has stolen a bunch of stuff. And Vivienne is her successor. This part doesn't *have* to be about the Bard, though it likely is.

Probably the good end all things considered. I mean she is the villain here, were you guys expecting her to live happily ever after?

So, considering how Cat tried to make a deal with the Dead King to let him out at the beginning of this arc, is it wrong for me to hope for that to be found out at the end of this one and see her hanged for it. I know the Dead King tried to out her at one point but no one bought that one. I'm not asking for a dramatic fight where she gets killed at the end. Just a trial that goes like "Did you go to Dead King with the intention of releasing him for your own gains?", "Yeah fam sorry about that but Malicia got to him first so we cool yeah?", "uhh no. Hang her boys"

Chapter 17: Felonious

"Crimes against a crown are treason, crimes by a crown are a reign."

– Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

And then we were two.

Part of me might have been more comfortable keeping Adjutant at my side instead of Archer, but it'd be a mistake: she was the one who knew her way around this place and the Named within it.

"We need to make an escape," I said.

"Like we used to say in Refuge," Indrani cheerfully told me, "the best kind of invisibility is killing all the witnesses."

She was probably messing with me, but then that *did* sound like something Ranger might say.

"We can't kill anyone," I told her.

"That sounds like a terrible plan," Archer complained.

"But we're probably going to have to fight," I frankly added.

"I never doubted you for a moment," she assured me.

This was hauntingly familiar, I mused, although we weren't in a tunnel surrounded by dead drow with the entire invading army of the Kingdom Under behind us. We must have been skulking through the labyrinthine stacks for almost eighty heartbeats now, but I

kept us going what I – probably mistakenly – believed to be west. It was, at the very least, vaguely leftwards.

“The thing is,” I said, “neither the Black Queen nor the Archer can fight any of these fine heroes coming to foil the plots afoot.”

If the Mirror Knight saw me flee a room filled with dead bodies while leaving an unconscious old man Named behind then there really would be no talking him into the possibility that might not, in fact, trying to undo my own life’s work and doom Calernia because of my inherent dastardliness. *Fucking heroes*, I uncharitably thought.

“I get it,” Indrani said, with enthusiasm that surprised me. “So we, like, put on masks and we’re these mysterious villainesses of cryptic intent. I will be the Peerless Beauty, whose legendary good looks eclipse the sun itself-”

“So we’re going to pretend we’re dead bodies,” I interrupted with great relish.

See, when I’d known Archer for only a few months I might have been tempted to chide her for joking around when this was a rather deadly situation, all things considered, and one that could have drastic consequences for the entire continent. Except that now I knew her well enough to know that, while she did very much enjoy being mocking even rapidly approaching doom, she did these kinds of things for a reason. The back and forth was calming me, I was not above admitting, and back when I’d been made of smoke and mirrors it’d been one of the few things that had me feeling human for a bit. I knew this, she knew I knew this, and I doubted either of us would ever admit it out loud. That did not mean in the slightest that I did not *thoroughly* enjoy shutting every door on her metaphorical fingers that I could.

“Cat,” she said, sounding betrayed.

“Revenants, to be exact,” I blithely continued. “My glamour hasn’t gotten all that better since it stopped being that and became Night instead, but it should still fool anyone without eyes out of the ordinary.”

“Which they’ll have,” Archer noted.

We tread around the messy pile of books left by a shelf that’d collapsed, and I grunted in agreement. This would be the Mirror Knight’s band, and with the amount of heroes there were in this place he’d be able to draw the most useful talents from a rather large lineup he was even halfway clever. And even if he *wasn’t*, he should still end up with at least one hero of extraordinary perception: mages and mystics tended to have a trick or two to

see to that, given the nature of the threats and villains they were born to face.

"Which is why I'll need you to take them out of the fight before they can catch on," I said. "We'll be springing an ambush."

"We're good, but not *that* good," Archer said. "Not if we're staying quiet."

"If we're taking a swing at a band of five on war footing, maybe even with Hakram backing them up, then no we're not," I replied. "So we're not going to do that."

Indrani peered at me for a moment, then smugly smirked.

"We're going to set something on fire, aren't we?"

I coughed.

"It's not the only thing we're going to do," I defended. "It's just, you know, a part-"

"A part that is on fire," Archer sagely continued. "A fire hat you set. You monster."

"Hey," I weakly replied. "I wouldn't keep using it if didn't work all the time. It's not like I have a preference for it, it's just that so many things out there are flammable."

"Inflammable," Indrani haughtily corrected.

"Fuck off," I retorted, "Akua already pulled this bit on me, flammable is right."

"You're taking language lessons from a ghost, and *I'm* the dubious one?" she replied without missing a beat.

Even as the latest bit of back and forth was spoken, we reached what I was fairly sure to be the western wall of the Miscellaneous Stacks. We weren't quite at the back of the great room, but we ought to be pretty deep in by my understanding. And far enough from the Doddering Sage that he shouldn't be at risk of being hurt before one of the heroes rescued him – and he wouldn't be forgotten about, either, not with Hakram joining them. The Mirror Knight was actually the reason I considered setting a fire here to be a valid tactic when I did not yet know if the gas that'd been released had killed the custodians or simply put them asleep. A more... nuanced Named might have been tempted to make the hard decision of sacrificing the people for the chase, but though Christophe was a stubborn ass with half the wits one of those should have, that was simply not his nature. He did not seem himself as someone who'd make that choice, so he wouldn't, and as the leader of his band he'd give the order to start with a rescue. Sure as providence, we'd probably run into

one or more of the heroes and whoever had good eyes was near certain to be of that lot.

But it wouldn't be a band of five, which meant Archer and I would have a lot more leeway to deal with them without tipping our hands.

"Fresh faces first," I said, slowing to a stop.

"Revenants, huh," Indrani mused. "So you want to slap the Dead King's name on this?"

"They won't necessarily buy that," I noted, "but at this point I'm not trying to convince them of something so much as trying to convince them they *don't* know anything."

"Lies and violence," Archer fondly said.

At least there wasn't anyone there to here, I grudgingly thought. One of these days, though, she'd say that in front of some chronicler and it'd be written down and it would all be downhill from there. If those ended up being taken as the words of House Foundling, I was going to drown her in a vat of ink.

"For you I'm thinking the Black Sickle," I said. "Word is Tariq torched his ass good a few months back after catching him sneaking around near Sommont, but he was never actually confirmed destroyed."

And the Revenant in question had, while being somewhat taller than Indrani from what I could remember, used a pair of eerie dark sickles as his weapons of choice. That much I couldn't replicate but while Archer didn't have her bow and even if she did using it would be a dead giveaway, she'd most definitely have knives.

"Do you have any other blades than your-" I started, before closing my mouth.

Of course she did, she was Archer. She had enough blades on her that half the time I got her undressed her actual clothes made as much noise hitting the floor as her mail.

"Stupid question," I finished, "I withdraw it. Just don't use the longknives."

They were not her signature and odds were none of the Mirror Knight's band would have ever seen Archer fight regardless, but it was a risk when Indrani had brought her band into the Arsenal: *those* knew her arms well, and half of them were heroes. I cast her a searching look, wondering what best to anchor the working on.

"You mind if I use your scarf for this?" I asked.

"Don't," she said. "The coat would do, right?"

Considering she wasn't wearing her mail at the moment it was the part of her most likely to be hit – and I couldn't be sure a good enough hit with Light wouldn't break my illusion – but that scarf was one of the material possessions she cared about so I didn't insist.

"Belt would be better," I said, shaking my head.

She conceded with a nod. As for my face, I did actually have an idea that had the potential to get Christophe running in the wrong direction with a great deal of certainty.

"You've seen the Wicked Enchanter, right?" I asked.

"Alive?" Indrani replied. "No. But I did get a good look at his still-warm corpse."

"That might be even better, actually," I mused. "Mind letting me have a look at the memory?"

"Go ahead," she shrugged, leaning forward.

I put a hand against her temple and reached for the Night, letting it flow through me and ever so gently into her. I closed my eyes, sunk into the darkness.

"Think of it," I softly asked.

A moment later she did, with vivid sharpness, and I saw what she saw. The Enchanter had looked rather young, to my surprise. Perhaps in his mid-twenties, though for a villain such appearances didn't necessarily speak much to the truth of their age. Tanned, dark-haired, athletically fit and actually rather handsome he was not the emaciated and sinister figure I'd somehow imagined he would be. But upon closer look, his handsomeness was a little *too* neat. Too symmetrical, and somewhat unnatural for it. Not unlike the Exiled Prince's had been, all those years go. *Name vanity*, I thought with disdain. The gruesome axe wound that'd split him open from the bottom left of his neck to his belly button had spilled blood and guts all over what looked like it might have been a nicely-tailored set of green tunic and trousers with silver linings, the kind of thing a minor Proceran highborn or a wealthy merchant would wear more than a villain.

"Did he use any tools?" I quietly pressed.

An intricate casting rod appeared in my mind, stained with blood and bitten into by a blade. To my distaste, it appeared to have been sculpted in longer homage to the ceremonial baton that Cordelia Hasenbach used on some formal occasions. Her was sculpted as a bundle of twigs tied together by a string, though,

while the Wicked Enchanter's casting rod was instead a knot of snakes eating each other and encircled by chains. I remembered when he'd been brought into the Terms, I'd read the report, and it had mentioned that he was middling conjurer but skilled in 'domination magics'. From the beginning he'd been noted as a potential problem, though also as being something of a coward and so unlikely to misbehave if kept an eye on.

"Thanks," I said, withdrawing the Night back into me.

Keeping the image firmly in mind, I laid a hand against my belt and felt the cool touch of Night wash over my skin. I reached again and tightened my fingers around my staff – which would give away my identity in moments, if it kept looking like itself – but the Night struggled to sink in.

"None of that, now," I muttered. "I did not snatch you from that tree so I'd get mouthed off to."

As if reluctantly, somehow giving off the impression of ill-grace, the resistance ceased and I was left to hold the illusion of the dead villain's casting rod. It wasn't an exact fit, as my staff had been longer, but it'd serve. I wasted no time in laying a hand on Indrani's belt, ignoring the suggestive eyebrow-wagging it earned me. Night seeped into the leather, and as I watched Archer was replaced by a slender figure in ragged robes and a hood that revealed only dark skin and a mouth sown shut. Her knives I didn't change, since it'd frankly be more trouble than it was worth to try and make them look like sickles. I exhaled and gathered Night into me once more time, as I could no longer afford delays: the moment I'd begun using Night, I would have tipped off the heroes as to our presence. I traced a finger against the wood stacks closest to me, leaving behind a trail of flame – natural, not of Night. Blackflame would be a dead giveaway, but it also meant I couldn't outright throw fire around. I dipped a thick leather-bound book into the growing flames and tossed it at Archer, who caught it without missing a beat.

"Spread it around some," I ordered. "We need a proper blaze."

"Gotcha," she nodded, then cocked her head to the side. "And after?"

"Hit and run," I said. "I trust you to set up your ambush."

"I'll see what I can do," she said, airily waving my words away.

She didn't fool me even a little: Indrani was a little pleased as the spoken acknowledgement of something we'd both known to be true, and not putting all that much of an effort into hiding it. It *had* been some time since we last fought side by side, I mused, that was true. But her duties would have kept her sharp and

working with her on the field had always come easy. I saw no reason why that should have changed in the last two years.

"Don't keep me waiting," I smiled, waving her off.

She was gone in a moment, silent as a ghost, and I sighed as I cast a look at the fire springing up to my side. Burning books, damn me: I might as well be burning silver, miscellaneous stacks or not. Still I picked up a heavy tome from the opposite stack and fed it to the flames long enough for it to catch before putting some spring to my step. It'd be quicker with Night, but it'd also risk giving away where I currently was. Another three sources on top of what Archer cooked up ought to do the trick without putting anyone in too much danger, I mused. By the time I'd gone down another two shelves and started a fresh blaze on the other side, a shout of dismay in the distance told me the game was properly afoot.

"Now," I muttered as I hastened my steps and started another fire, "you split up."

Hakram ought to have run into them by now, and if that'd ended up in brawl, I would have heard it. Which meant that in the best case they would be tacitly accepting him as an ally, and in the worst they'd be considering him an enemy best brought with them to keep an eye until he could be counted on to cackle and reveal the depths his perfidy in a surprisingly informative speech. I'd considered villains who actually indulged in monologues to be complete idiots, when I started out, and my father had encouraged that perception. Not without reason. I had a lot more sympathy for villains who indulged now that I'd spent a few years around heroes, though. Some days you just wanted to rub their *utter fucking idiocy* in their faces, like forcing a dog to look at its vomit.

That, uh, burst of opinion aside, Hakram would be sure to mention the Doddering Sage's presence if it wasn't brought up. That meant at least one of the five, headed straight for the unconscious Named. Adjutant wouldn't go along, since that'd carry the risk of the Sage waking up and recognizing him, so that left a group of five. There should be one, maybe to who took care of the custodians – be they corpses or unconscious, and actually I now that I thought about it I should be able to answer that question right now. Was it worth revealing my position for? Yes, I decided, absent-mindedly starting another fire as I kept walking forward. If only so that I could more accurately predict how the heroes moved. Sinking into Night, I reached out for the nearest corpse to raise and found nothing that would serve. Good, all alive then. That meant I could definitely count on at least *one* hero going off to save them rather than coming after me, bringing them down to a peak of four. Most likely three, though, I mused. Less likely to have accidental casualties that way. Which meant

the real question was whether or not Hakram would be one of the three. Time to draw them in close and find out, I reckoned.

I tossed the book into stacks to my right and kept moving without bothering to check if it'd started another blaze or not. By now, when standing at the right angle between some stacks I could see the smoke from where Archer had started fires of her own. Not the flames themselves, given that the ceiling was low the vision obscure and I might, possibly, not be the tallest person alive. The smoke would serve well enough, though, since it told me where she'd headed. Apparently while I'd been headed in a straight line south, she'd gone south-east and been messy about fostering flame: it didn't give a trajectory to follow, not like I had with my straightforward march down. Now, if the opposition was made of fools they'd follow the burning arrow I was lighting for them and wait for me at the bottom. But they weren't fools, or this war would have killed them by now. Well, they weren't fools in *this* particular way, more like, I mentally corrected.

They'd have to send someone there, but the Mirror Knight would be headed into the burning mess Archer had just made. Which meant it was also where I needed to go. It was possible, in theory, that the person who'd be waiting for me at the end of the line I'd drawn in fire would be Hakram, and so I'd be free to just put him through a few shelves and get out while leaving him plausible deniability. In practice, I was the opposition and facing a band of five so it was the eyes that'd be waiting for me there – but close enough to come quick when the scuffle started elsewhere, just in time to stumble onto the scene and unmask me. That sounded like a bad thing, at first glance, but it wasn't. It meant I could dictate the location, make-up and tempo of that encounter. If I couldn't scrap together a win with that on my side, I might as well just slit my wrists and join up with Keter.

A sharp turn to the right saw me heading towards Archer's devouring blaze with a song stuck in my throat. The smoke and heat were licking at my sides, and still I hummed out the tune and words.

"Run the hounds, rides the hunter

His spear in hand, banner aflutter."

It was an old one, this one, though not so old as *Here They Come Again* or *Red The Flowers*. It'd come later, when the struggle against Proceran occupation had begun turning in the favour of Callowan partisans – but not yet so much that the cities were in their hands again, and so there'd been a need to be circumspect where princes' men might be listening.

"Charging that way, this one baying

Trampling the paths, again raging."

Before me, a bonfire of wood and parchment roared. Loud enough it was almost deafening, which meant I wouldn't be able to call on my sharpened senses. But neither would the opposition, and I was the one with something to hide. The smoke would help mitigate visibility, and it was something I'd be able to wield to great use, considering the functional goal here was escape and not actually winning the fight. The heat itself was no great trouble to me, though I felt it rather more keenly than I would have with the Mantle of Woe on my back. I picked out, after a moment to consider, exactly where I was to be 'caught' by the heroes. Further in, between two tall racks already touched by flame but not yet consumed. Enough fire and smoke ahead and behind that I would be half-veiled, but not so much that I would choke. One, two, three times did I lay my hand and only then counted myself satisfied.

On a whim, I snatched up a book from the shelves and smiled when I read the title, written in Chantant: *The Life and Lies of Monsieur Montfailli, A Monk No Longer*. Suitably absurd, I decided, for what was about to unfold. One, two, three times did I lay my hand and seed Night, only then counting myself satisfied. I was ready to begin.

They came for me through the smoke, two of them, even as the refrain of the song caught up with me at last.

"But we know, oh we know,

That in the woods, the fox is king

Yes we know, oh we know

That in the woods, the fox is king."

Alistair the Fox was the closest thing to a trickster-king my home had ever had to boast of, though at times he'd been little more than a bold bandit in good armour. The Mirror Knight advanced with his sword already in hand, silver shield up and living up to the Name. He wore no helm, and his hair was pressed close to his brow by sweat. At his side was the Blade of Mercy, whose hand snapped out as soon as he saw me to clasp the handle of his greatsword and slide it out of the leather straps on his back.

"Who are you?" the Mirror Knight snarled. "Why did you do this?"

The book in my hands I snapped shut, turning to face them entirely and watching both their faces pale when they saw the grisly wound that'd killed the Wicked Enchanter. I'd never heard the man speak, of course. Neither had Indrani, so I couldn't even attempt to imitate his voice. But then, it wasn't necessarily the Enchanter himself I was pretending to be, was it? The Dead King I

was a passing hand at impersonating, from all those lovely little talks he and I kept having at the edge of the world.

"Late again, Mirror Knight," I said. "Do you not tire of always needing better Chosen to take you by the hand?"

"We'll stop you, monster," the Blade of Mercy said, voice shaking. "I don't know what pact you've made with the Black Queen, but-

Oh, *come on*. Really, now I was conspiring with the damned Dead King to sabotage the same Arsenal I'd shelled out gold to help build? At some point these assholes were going to have to explain to me exactly what my plot was supposed to *be* here.

"- it won't be enough," the Mirror Knight grimly said, sword rising higher. "Powerful you may be, but your vessel was not. Even the King of Death cannot grow the dead."

"With men such as you," I said, tone contemptuous, "why would I *need* to?"

First touch, and it would be the most subtle. Just a palm I'd pressed against the back of the stacks to my left, seeding the slightest bit of Night. And as I gestured my veiled staff, I ripped it right out. There was a crack, which was enough to have the Mirror Knight shooting forward at impressive speed for a man in plate while Light engulfed the Blade of Mercy's weapon. The Night hadn't been much, really the barest of seedlings, but then the wood was already burning and breaking down. It was more than enough. The entire set of shelves collapsed, spewing out debris and burning books in a flood even as the Mirror Knight passed. Wouldn't do anything to actually hurt the man, of course. He was the closest thing the Heavens had been able to rustle up to a fortress on legs. But then his strength came from resistance, not, necessarily physical power, and that meant he was still a human-shaped thing of human weight and subject to the same sort of creational forces that would affect these. The point of breaking the shelves had not been hurting him, it'd been *blinding* him.

I took a single, measured step to the left.

The Mirror Knight burst out of the fire and debris, still under the impression I was right in front of him, but now he was a man in plate running blindly and very much intent on stabbing me with his sword. If I'd swung at him with even my full power in the Night, I honestly doubted I'd be able to crack that shining shield of his. But that wasn't my game, not here and tonight. The second touch I'd laid was running my fingers across a stretch of about one foot and a half on the ground, against the warm stone, making the oiliest residue of Night that I could. So the Mirror Knight slipped, shouting, and stumbled forward and past me with a

precise slap of my staff against the back of his armour I tipped him all the way into falling into a pack of shelves already on fire. Now that left the other pest, arguably the most dangerous of the two in the current circumstances – one hit in the wrong place from that sword of his and the illusion making me look like the Enchanter was gone.

“Keeper,” the Blade shouted, “it’s the Dead King, he’s overpowering us!”

The Maddened Keeper, huh? Not who I would have guessed. That might get real tricky if I wasn’t careful. The Blade of Mercy was not content with merely calling for reinforcements, naturally. A little more careful than the Mirror Knight, he sliced through a library stack and then caught the side of it with the flat of his sword, tossing it towards me with a mighty heave. It was a beautiful display of dexterity and skill, the sort no human without a Name would really be able to replicate. It was also a showman’s attack, so obvious in the coming I would hesitate to call that anticipating. And actually, with a little bit of movement. I took one step back to call his aim where I wanted it at the right moment in the swing, then two swifter steps to the right. The Mirror Knight, freshly back on his feet, ate fresh wooden debris right in the face. As for the Blade, who’d followed-up the toss with a dash forward, I almost sighed.

He was moving too quickly, his large and heavy sword dragging behind him. It was sloppy swordsmanship, the mark of a boy who relied on his Name for the kill instead of proper footwork and technique. I’d indulge him with a lesson on how a projectile should actually be used in a fight between Named, out of the goodness of my heart. I leaned forward, waiting until he’d closed distance, and the book I still held in my free hand was tossed at his face. Light flashed over his skin, some sort of protection, but it wouldn’t help: the Night within the book I’d already called on, and the detonation of heat looked close enough to a fireball that it ought to pass. More importantly the flames that went out were not, strictly speaking, magic or Night. Just regular fire, against which Light was no protection. Flame and debris went into the boy’s eyes even as I cast half a glance behind me, adjusted my angle as I took two steps forward and with the side of my staff struck at the Blade’s side. I didn’t hurt his momentum, just redirected it.

The Blade of Mercy tumbled into the risen Mirror Knight, and the two tumbled back into the fire.

It should be about time for the Maddened Keeper to show up, which was good as I was running out of petty tricks. I began to walk away, hearing the roar of power behind me as the heroes extricated themselves from the mess in a fury. The flames had spread, while we skirmished, so it was unpleasant to the ear to

sharpen my hearing but no less necessary. Footsteps could hardly be discerned, but hardly was enough. By the time the heroes were – more cautiously than before – headed towards me once more, I ended the sharpening and waited for what had been arranged to take its course once more. My steps slowed, just as a flickering silhouetted passed the edge of soot-touched stacks with a glinting knife in hand and struck out – missing, for I'd ceased to advance the side of the stacks blocked the deeper angle of the blow. It wasn't the knife that worried me, though, even if it was a Named wielding it. The Maddened Keeper's eyes would be a lot more dangerous to me than her blade right now.

Fortunately, I still had a card up my sleeve.

The long-haired Named withdrew her hand lightning-quick and took half a step into the alley where I stood, prompting shouts of triumph from the Proceran Named behind me, but those were short-lived. With calculated brutality, Archer leapt down from the top of the stacks and her boots tore into the side of the Maddened Keeper's face. The slender woman fell, taken utterly by surprise, and Archer leaned over after landing on her torso to make two quick cuts with her knives. She didn't cut the eyes themselves, as there might be complications in healing that, but instead just above them. The blood would drip down and blind her, but just to be sure Indrani smeared what was already flowing into the to the Keeper's hoarse shout of pain. I turned, cast a disdainful look at the Proceran heroes who were frozen with fear and anger.

"Take care of the rabble," I told Archer. "They cannot be allowed to interfere with what we came for."

Indrani, still hidden as the Black Sickle, did not nod. Revenants were sometimes capable of such things, but the Sickle had not been. I'd pitched my voice just loud enough that the Mirror Knight and his companion should be able to hear me, and watched them from the corner of my eye. *That's right, I thought as Christophe's gaze narrowed, you overheard me saying too much in my utter contempt for you lot. Now figure out that I'm here for something properly nefarious, like turning the Doddering Sage into a Revenant or somesuch.*

"He's here for Hakram Deadhand," the Mirror Knight said. "Blade, run to him. The Dead King's trying to frame us for murdering the Black Queen's second."

That... was not what I would have gotten from that, but Hells I'd take it. Even odds he still thought the Black Queen was conspiring with 'me', though. Well, I got what I'd come for. Now I just had to follow the most honoured of villainous traditions and turn a clear pair of heels to this situation. Archer would delay them for a bit and slip out, there weren't any of them here who were her rivals in those arts. I just needed to make a sufficiently clean break, which without using Night might be... ah,

this would do. I turned a corner around shelves already merrily burning and, discreetly hit it pretty hard with my staff.

It collapsed, and as the fire flooded my back I legged my way out of there.

Right, onto the next part of this. I needed to steal a dead body, then see someone about having a chat with it.

[tkjarrah](#)

havent even read the chapter yet but the title gave me the horrifying realisation that Felonious Monk could be a real Name

[tkjarrah](#)

okay good chapter
cat doing what cat do, lots of fun
i extremely appreciate her bugs bunny antics against the mirror knight

[Stable](#)

Or if you wanted a lazy heroic Name: Good Knight

[Liliet](#)

Ouch, ouch, ouch.

Slice_of_pi

And his opposite, the Night Knight.

JJR

Or a rare named horse, Knight Mare.

mavant

Or one who has a Named horse for a mount: Knight Rider

Shikkarasu

Gods, Above/Below: We're callin' her "Knight." We've always wanted Cat to be Named "Knight".

Christophe: Uh... Gods, Knight is my Name.

G: Not anymore, We're takin' it back! SHE'S Knight!

C: You can't take away a grown man's Name.

G: All right, all right. We're callin' her G.K, "Good

Knight."

C: "Now, Gods, this isn't right. If you call her Good Knight, it's gonna make it sound like I'm Bad Knight."

G: 'Well, you let the stacks burn, didn't you, B.K.?!?'

LarsBlitzer

No, a pair of Named: Silent Knight, and Holy Knight. Not terribly creative, mind you, but as twins they're effective in the field.

[Liliet](#)

i love you

Paxton Johnson

one of them has a calming presence, and the other wields a metric fuckton of the Light

[Mental Mouse](#)

heh heh heh...

Vanir

Felonious Monk: Miroku

M0och123

Great Chapter as always!
Keep up the great work!

flashburn283

And once again, being neigh-invincible robs you of brainpower. How is it fair that a moron like the knight is unbeatable when a hero with brains and the ability to actually do good in the world, like the Sage, has to watch their back at every moment.

Agent J

Neigh-invincible is a great pun cuz he's a stubborn ass.

RoflCat

Well, there's only so many stat points you can spread around.

And sadly most Good heroes tend to drop Intelligence and Wisdom in favor of more Vit/Str because who need to think when the Heaven will do it for you.

The ones that do have Int/Wis build tend to be lacking in Str/Vit so they're easy for sneaky rogue/assassin type to snipe them off.

Mental Mouse

Hanno manages a good balance, and he's got some Dex/Cha in there too.

Liliet

Hanno is Roy from OotS. I'm accepting constructive criticism.

mamm0nn

Hannover is patiënt andere understanding, Roy wasnt even in the first season. Even accepting improving is oft curt andere begrudgingly.

Liliet

Okay, that's a very good point!

NerfContessa

You are switching languages there my friend.

Makes the actually well reasoned post look less so.

As for the chapter, cat at her best.
Nough said.

Letouriste

Yeah but he is the White Knight, the Gods above's champion. Of course they use more points on him. He is meant to be the best one

Liliet

screams in gods-arent-doing-this-they-are-passive-entities-not-responsible-for-individual-named-in-any-way

Shveiran

Possible yet unproven?

Liliet

I'd say we're past the point of reasonable doubt tbh

RoflCat

Hanno basically has the Hero build i.e. points in everything.

And think of each +1 to a certain stat cost more stat points than the point before it. So while Hanno might not be the

strongest or the smartest, his combined total stat is quite high due to not overly focusing on one stat.

Though on the other hand, the min-max heroes really sacrifice a LOT of other stat to squeeze that tiny bit more into their forte.

Halinn

Because the gods don't want anyone actually capable of changing the board

Tenthyr

Easy to forget just how dangerous Cat is until she comes up against actual Named. She's just heads and shoulders above that rabble.

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

Smoothly done, presuming Archer does, in fact, get out safely and without blowing her cover.

Good gods, Mirror Knight is a dumbass.

He thinks Cat is working with the Dead King. Or something. Maybe he didn't think she was working with the Dead King before she gave him the idea; but still, what the hell does Cat possibly gain by betraying the Truce and Terms and the Alliance that she came up with and basically blackmailed the previously Grand Alliance and the Heroes into accepting. She's not fucking Kairos out to stab everyone in the back just to say she did.

JJR

Maybe he's not quite as dumb as he looks here. The accusation might have been an attempt to pull out a monologue. Even Cat has felt the urge to, "rub their utter fucking idiocy in their faces". And the greater the idiocy the greater the urge probably is. So always accuse the villain of the most off the wall and idiotic plot that you can think of, the villain might be so incensed that you were so mistaken about their super artful and perfect plot that they'll tell you exactly how thick you are to have missed it.

This won't work against old horrors like the Dead King or people who trained under Black if course, but it could be a habit.

Or Mirror Knight just is that thick.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Maybe he's not quite as dumb as he looks here. The accusation might have been an attempt to pull out a monologue.

Or just poking at reality.... In our world, it would be a probe, "do they actually have a plan, or are they playing me?" (which she is, mind you).

In the Guideverse, from a powerful Hero, that might well coerce a lesser villain into the Knight's chosen story.... Bad habit to get into though, and it wouldn't do much against DK.

Liliet

> She's not fucking Kairos out to stab everyone in the back just to say she did.

And how does he know that?

Javvies

Among other reasons, she's basically single handedly responsible for the battlefronts and the Grand Alliance not having collapsed in defeat.

There's also her entire history ever since she became Named the first time.

There's also the precedent of her having provided the Crusaders with knowledge about the Hell Egg, and her desire to not have it opened.

Also, there's Pilgrim having Beheld Cat (before he died and was resurrected by Cat's intervention) and her greatest desire being peace.

Also, most Villains have some kind of plan that can be figured out – that is, most Villains have a discernable agenda. Kairos was an extreme anomaly, doing shit because he could, with negligible impulse control.

As noted, what the hell kind of plot could Cat conceivably have that would involve turning against the Truce and Terms and New Alliance that she leveraged the Heroes and Grand Alliance/Crusaders into joining with her, after saving them from imminent defeat, and spending over two years faithfully upholding them and fighting the Dead King.

It's not that hard to recognize that Cat, Villain though she may be, is a very different sort of Villain from Kairos.

Motivations, temperament, integrity, personality, impulse control ... pretty much every metric is clearly and obviously different.

JJR

Given that it was a demon of absence inside that egg, it might well be that no one even remembers she did that. I agree with the rest though.

Shveiran

Can we stop with the “how could he possibly know argument?”

I mean, there are instances where there is a tragic misunderstanding and casualties follow, but this is not one of them.

I was all for giving him a chance, before he started talking a few chapters ago. Now... let's not pretend is ignorance isn't voluntary, please.

Ignoring all contrary evidence is a choice, not a tragic misunderstanding. One that cannot be justified in someone that decides to take a blade in hand to carve the world into a better place. It's akin to a surgeon regularly operating under the influence.

[Liliet](#)

My position is basically “he is a fucking idiot, and I can basically read his fucking mind as I understand *exactly* what is going on in it”

[Javvies](#)

Being an idiot only “excuses” so much.

At this point, any Hero and/or remotely informed person in a position of any kind of power, influence, and/or connections (ie, any noble, and probably a lot of the higher ranking commoners in the bureaucracy and merchants) would basically have to be willfully disregarding a huge amount of information to think Cat is interested in betraying the Truce and Terms or the Alliance to the Dead King.

Hell, I'm pretty sure that even Saint of Swords would disagree with Mirror Knight and company. At least, as far as their apparent motives – Saint of Swords would perhaps agree with trying to take out Cat and all the Villains in the Arsenal on the basis that not immediately stabbing a Villain, even when they're helping fight the Dead King, is bad precedent to set for when the Dead King isn't invading, **especially** if they're sincere about things. On the other hand, Saint of Swords would be straightforward and up front about disagreeing with the entire premise of the Truce and Terms and refusing to agree to sign on with them.

Saint of Swords would be trying to kill Cat and torch the Truce and Terms because she recognized that Cat meant it

and was sincere about them, not because she thought that Cat was trying to betray them.

Mirror Knight is either both a dumbass and willfully disregarding a lot of information, or he's lying about his motives and what he thinks Cat's motives are. Neither is a good thing.

Liliet

I'm pretty sure heroes don't get written reports on geopolitics.

And the one person we know of who'd be in position to inform him, well... Wouldn't be interested in clarifying exactly how much the Black Queen is doing for the Grand Alliance.

Javvies

...
He's a Hero, who has, presumably, been spending the vast majority of his time since the Dead King invaded on the battlefield.

It doesn't take detailed briefings. It's frigging relatively commonly known that Cat got the Alliance the three months of ceasefire from the Dead King, joined the Alliance, came up with the Truce and Terms, and has thrown her weight, connections, nation, and followers into the war effort.

He's a Hero, not some peasant laborer in southern Procer who has never been further from his farm than the closest village market. As a Hero, he's got nigh automatic access to the highest nobles in Procer, the leaders of the Allied Armies (especially the battlefield generals and their staffs), the other Heroes, and access to most information the Alliance has, especially if it's more or less general knowledge – basically there only things he doesn't have relatively easy access to, if not borderline automatic access to is stuff like compartmentalized information, ongoing high level negotiations, internal Drow details, e.t.c.

Plus, he definitely knows enough to know that a deal has been made with the Drow, to grant territorial claims on the surface. There's no way that you can know about that deal and not know any of the context around it.

Plus, presumably somebody had to talk him into initially signing on with the Truce and Terms in the first place. From his demonstrated behavior, that would

have required a compelling case behind it in order to overcome his racial prejudices and his inherent "Heroic" opposition to anything Villainous, Villain-adjacent, or remotely connected to a Villain.

Being an dumbass idiot only goes so far. Especially since there's been at least two years of more or less stalemate and status quo.

Liliet

> and has thrown her weight, connections, nation, and followers into the war effort.

this part? absolutely is not. what people say about politician aligns with actual reality of they are doing NOT A LOT

> As a Hero, he's got nigh automatic access to the highest nobles in Procer, the leaders of the Allied Armies (especially the battlefront generals and their staffs)

no he doesn't, who the fuck has got the time to brief some random hero? especially when said hero spends his days fighting and not fishing for geopolitical information? oh yeah that girl he sleeps with, wouldn't she?

> he definitely knows enough to know that a deal has been made with the Drow, to grant territorial claims on the surface.

I'm not seeing why you're so sure he would know that

> Plus, presumably somebody had to talk him into initially signing on with the Truce and Terms in the first place. From his demonstrated behavior, that would have required a compelling case behind it in order to overcome his racial prejudices and his inherent "Heroic" opposition to anything Villainous, Villain-adjacent, or remotely connected to a Villain.

we know he was opposed but Hanno talked him into it

That Other Guy

Let's not forge that the Wandering Bard is pulling his strings. She is most adept at leading heroes by the nose. MK will make decisions based on the information provided. If that I formation is laced with innuendo and half-truths, or presents the

truth with a bias, MK will be as susceptible to that bias as anyone else.

Belief trumps critical thinking any day of the week.

Konstantin von Karstein

« and has thrown her weight, connections, nation, and followers into the war effort.
this part? absolutely is not. what people say about politician aligns with actual reality of they are doing NOT A LOT »

He knows that Callow and the Drow entered the GA thanks to Cat.

« he definitely knows enough to know that a deal has been made with the Drow, to grant territorial claims on the surface.

I'm not seeing why you're so sure he would know that »

Because he sleep with the stupid princess who asked him to rule said drow-given land with her.

« Plus, presumably somebody had to talk him into initially signing on with the Truce and Terms in the first place. From his demonstrated behavior, that would have required a compelling case behind it in order to overcome his racial prejudices and his inherent "Heroic" opposition to anything Villainous, Villain-adjacent, or remotely connected to a Villain.

we know he was opposed but Hanno talked him into it »

So Hanno still had to convince him

[Liliet](#)

> He knows that Callow and the Drow entered the GA thanks to Cat.

For all he knows, they were going to regardless, and Cat cleverly maneuvered herself into position of the facilitator so she can reap benefits from something that was happening either way.

Kel the Seer

I am reminded of a line from Spaceballs when I think of MK and his lap the blade. "And this is why Evil will always win. Because Food is dumb" Before anyone spends their time quoting the

archive chapters, I don't mean all good Named, but those two seem to have definitely used Int as a dump stat. They assume Cat as Evil is up to something, because "Villains bad". So a judge from WB spends them here, abandoning a front *in the middle of a war* to stop her evil plot.

They already don't want to follow the Truce, and do so only grudgingly, and have likely convinced themselves that it is all some plot because Cat pushed it. Likely to hobble Heroes or something similarly simplistic.

The question is whether these chuckleheads decide to be "Truly Good" by splitting with WK and GP as having been usurped, duped, or in thrall to Cat after this fiasco is settled and draw other similarly intractable Heroes to their cause, creating yet another threat to the Truce and Terms.

Threaten the Truce if the story works, threaten the Truce if the story fails, and guide Cat's forming name down one of a few "acceptable" paths. The Intercessor shows why she is the Gods' enforcer. Never do something for only one reason when you can layer the plot so multiple outcomes are to your benefit.

Shveiran

@Liliet: for all he knows, this was all a conspiracy of the Elves to acquire a monopoly on the production of biscuits in Calernia.

I mean, really. This isn't "protagonist logic", not by this point in the series. The Black Queen is the lynchpin of the war against the Dead King, and the war is the most important event of the century.

To show this kind of willful ignorance in the matter and **still break into the motherloving Arsenal** is... I don't even have a simile for how stupid that is!

Like bullying and plotting and buying your way into imposing an education reform, then going "say, what is this new 'book' technology I hear so much these days? And students are born literate, right?"

The only way he could not know all of this is if he kept his head under the water all the time and screamed "lalalalalalalala" everytime he met a fish.

Konstantin von Karstein

Nice analogy 🙄

Abnaxis

For what it's worth, motivated reasoning is a thing that exists and is quite common. I wouldn't call MK so much stupid as indoctrinated. His world view is built on a set of beliefs that villains can only be unforgivably Evil-like cult followers IRL any evidence to the contrary will only push him further in good beliefs, lest his entire sense of self collapse.

erebus42

I've always had a soft spot for tricksters so hearing a reference to an at least borderline one and seeing Cat engage in outright trickster tactics is a real treat.

She should however be careful. The way she so easily danced in circles around them may give her away.

Also given the revelation from the previous chapter that song, while appropriate, was a little disconcerting.

dadycool

A pseudo-bard singing a song? She's already got the drinking habits down. Let's all just hope she doesn't ever pull out a lute or something.

Letouriste

She would not even need to play well at all. The wandering bard was horrible at that

[TeK](#)

She wasn't when she wanted to. I believe it was in the chapter when Hanno's band confronted the Tyrant. She played and played she did good.

JJR

Potentially they just consider it to be their inevitable first loss in a pattern of three.

If they do, hopefully they don't end up going into what they think is a third encounter guaranteed victory and end up losing hard.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on who it is against 😊

Myainse

Wow. We know Cat's name has a "twin," she has shown a remarkable affinity for songs lately, and she's playing the story, not the actors.
Her nascent name will totally oppose the Intercessor.

Liliet

I have been saying for a while that Cat is a "stage magician" brand of bard and has always been.

Which is to say, she has an affinity for songs and stories and Cha-based fights in general (we kind of get introduced to her via her taunting a dude larger than her in the arena and then kicking his ass bc he falls for it), but she is also a gleeful and stylish stage magician in all her approach. Watch the hands!

Mental Mouse

> her taunting a dude larger than her in the arena and then kicking his ass bc he falls for it

Actually, she didn't win that fight – even had to get her eye healed afterwards.

Liliet

She did win that fight! Yes, she needed to heal a bruise, but she paid for that from her winnings.

> I'd done this before and it would be brutal but Radiant Heavens I was not going to lose – I rammed my knee into his gut and Fenn dropped. Another kick sent him sprawling to the ground, and now the fight was as good as won: I stomped down on his ankle and it broke with a sickening crack. Fenn let out a hoarse scream and I felt a twinge of guilt but mercy was the kind of thing the Pit beat out of you. I was about to cave in a few ribs with another stomp when he raised his hand and panted out his surrender. For a moment all I heard was the sound of blood pounding in my ears but it passed and the numbness turned into the clamor of the masses going wild. I wiped the blood dripping off the corner of my mouth with the bandages around my hand and made my way out of the earthen pit where I'd just broken a man's bones for gold. Well, gold in a manner of speaking: they usually paid me in Imperial silver denarii, which somehow made the whole thing feel even more wretched. The fatigue settling into my bones left me disinclined to mingle with the gamblers who'd struck good betting on me, though I forced a smile anyway.

Shveiran

Patterns of three also require weight and personal rivalry to form, not mere repetition.
This was learned from Amadeus in Book 3.

hakureireimu

For a pattern of 3 to form, the Villain has to strike first; this isn't what happened, assuming the Bard counts as a Heroine.

[Liliet](#)

Are you sure? I got the impression a pattern of 3 can be created in either direction, though admittedly it's been that in every case so far, huh.

JJR

I'm not talking about a real pattern of three though. I only mean to say it might be what the heroes think is happening to explain why they lost the way they did.

The real reason they lost so hard is actually because they were up against Cathrine. Hopefully Mirror Knight doesn't recognize the fighting style from the last time he fought against her.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> The way she so easily danced in circles around them may give her away.

The Trickster's eternal hazard is running afoul of their own scheme.

Agent J

Gods, I miss Kairos. These heroes are just so... hero-y. Heroic? Heroic. It's great. They'd be instinctually feeding him the exact lines he wants them to say. And every time he thought he accounted for their stupidity, they'd bravely, heroically, prove him wrong by doing something so unbelievably brain dead.

He would love it. He'd eat them alive and he would love it. Rest in piece you magnificent bastard.

Juff

Typo Thread:

possibility that might not > possibility of not
doom Calernia > dooming Calernia
being mocking even > mocking even (or being mocking even with)
lineup he > lineup if he

still end > still have ended
A fire hat > A fire that
seem himself > see himself
there to here > there to hear
going do > going to
handsome he > handsome, he
Her was sculpted > Hers was sculpted
was middling > was a middling
sown > sewn
heroes as to > heroes to
pleased as > pleased at
waiting," > waiting."
depths his perfidy > depths of his perfidy
maybe to > maybe two
actually I now > actually now
low the vision obscure > low, the vision obscure,
past me with > past me. With
silhouetted > silhouette
advance the > advance; the
into the to the > into them, to the

ALazyMonster

I love whenever we get these the hammy villain trope moments. That are always gloriously hilarious and show just how incompetent the heroes are because they are used to the story doing everything for them.

dadycoool

"Providence dictates I can't possibly lose to this Bastion of Evil!"

Five minutes of interaction with Cat/Kairos/DK later

"What just happened?"

dadycoool

This was so much fun. It's good to allow Cat to cut loose every once in a while, especially now that the shape of her "True Power" can be glimpsed. We still have yet to behold her True Power, but she's unlocked enough perks to play puppetmaster with a bunch of idiot Heroes.

"We're going to set something on fire, aren't we?" Pure gold, refined and shaped into a gorgeous figurine by the following exchange. This is what I've missed most, the Woe interacting with each other. And hey, when all you have is a match, the world looks like it's made of kindling.

[*boballab*](#)

Now all we need is some goats...

[*Liliet*](#)

guess who's salty as fuck about BURNING BOOKS (it's me)

but this was hilarious (even if it involved burning books)

Cat's a real star and I loved the backup she has from a Callowan story here (I wonder if Alistair the Fox ever burned any books. probably yes i guess)

that clumsiness on the Blade of Mercy's part is literally reverse providence – the exact opposite of what Cat noted during her fight against devils early in Twilight. A clever hero would by this point notice that

clever heroes would be able to take away A LOT from this encounter really:

- Cat's not trying to actually hurt them, and is in fact careful not to (Archer's careful cut ABOVE the eyes was hilarious in context fight me) (even if it was among burning books)
- Cat has definitely got Providence on HER side here and they get nothing (apparently book burning is insufficiently felonious to make her the bad guy here)
- CAT IS NOT THE FUCKING DEAD KING COME THE UNHOLY FUCK ON ;u;

other notes: the custodians aren't dead, which means the person behind this is either a hero or a villain who knows the value of bogging down the opposition with logistics

(even if there's Bard in there she'd be the person behind the person, not the immediate plan maker, we all know that, right?)

(burning books)=)

Oshi

The burning books thing is so painful to read. I'm super surprised there isn't fire suppressant magic here though or a mundane way to manage it.

I'm starting to think this whole business has both a Hero and a Villain in it. It's way too...nice and political.

[*Liliet*](#)

Agreed.

TBF they're in a stone chamber and all the lights are magic. It WOULD have to be deliberate arson, and Arsenal isn't exactly open to the public.

And then Cat goes and just... AAAUGH

Pantakrator

gasp

You could say it was... ARSONAL

Konstantin von Karstein

You're the worst person I know 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

I recall mention of using Night to reconstruct books, but I don't think that was wholesale. There might well be another aspect with appropriate uses.

[Liliet](#)

THAT WOULD BE NICE *eye twitches*

[Liliet](#)

Also I love the "please someone explain what my plot is supposed to BE here" part ♥ ♥ ♥

dadycoool

Yeah, I love how they were like "He's trying to kill Deadhand and frame us! Stop him!" And Cat's like "Wut?"

[Liliet](#)

There is a great deal of appeal to watching the "heroes doing their best but actually guessing blindly and being most entirely wrong" plot from the other side.

I hate it from the inside, but Cat's POV is FANTASTIC.

[wipncrowell](#)

It makes me think that Mirror Knight's problem is being jealous/afraid of strong villain Black Queen/Cat.

ninegardens

To be fair- this is actually a pretty reasonable guess, and (at the very least) shows a great deal of respect for the Deadhand.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hakram had to improvise... freehand deadhand. 😊

[Burlyraven](#)

This chapter really drives home the fact that when Cat's really been Cat, she's definitely leaned towards the Trickster role. While her tenure under Winter did produce some awesome action

sequences, part of the inherent wrongness of it was her being dragged towards brute force solutions. Her powers have always been strongest when centered around cunning and absurdity.

[Liliet](#)

Ysssssss

dadycoool

And exploding undead goats. And Goblinfire. Lots and lots of Goblinfire.

nimelennar

I'm calling "Fox Queen" as her new Name, after that Alistair reference.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which makes it a little weird that Winter dragged her so much towards brute-force – while Winter and Summer has massive power, Winter at least was a schemer as well. Perhaps she was just overwhelmed by the power jump.

Cap'n Smurfy

I really want to see a Mirror Knight pov interlude. I imagine the convoluted thing he calls a thought process will be morbidly fascinating.

[Liliet](#)

I... really don't think so. See one fallacy, see all of them. Human beings are excellent at making reality fit pre-selected narratives, and we all do it in approximately the same painfully boring & cringy ways.

Though it would be neat to know where he got the info from.

Shveiran

On the other hand, he is currently very unlikeable. Seeing from his eyes may help us see him as something other than a moron.

... I don't find it *likely, by this point, but EE could maybe do it?*

I don't know, I'm conflicted. There is a huge part of me that is still screaming "STOP BEING WRONG ALL THE TIME, YOU DAMN DUMBASS, OR AT LEAST OWN UP TO IT!" whenever a Hero is in a scene.

Like, by default, unless the Hero in question redeemed

himself somehow.

It's like they have the burden of proof to show me they aren't morons, by this point.

It's greatly cathartic to see Cat play them for fools, but I know they aren't going to die, and so they'll end up on the protagonist's side in the end, but I think I'll still despise most of them when they do.

And that worries me, because it's not... satisfying as a conclusion?

They still feel so... dumb? Wrong? Bad?

I think I need to stop seeing people like Frederic, Hanno and Roland as the exceptions here or I'll never be happy.

So maybe I want a MK chapter? I dunno anymore.

Liliet

I just feel like "fucking idiot" and "a bad person" are two different qualifiers, and frankly, Mirror Knight might be kind of both at this point, but the distinction is still important. We have no evidence that Antoine (the Blade of Mercy) is a bad person, though he's definitely an idiot. And the Keeper and the Poet might actually be *smart*, just... underinformed.

Shveiran

Any "fucking idiot" that chooses to go around swinging his sword is also a "bad person" in my book.

Killing people without any real understanding of who they are, what is going on, what the consequences are, is not something that has no weight on the moral scale. Especially because if you have doubts about what you are doing, your Name weakens => anyone like Antoine that is still lifting libraries with the tip of his sword must be rather convinced that everything he did was overall alright.

Liliet

Who killed who now?

Auston Varner

Tbh, his thought process strikes me as less convoluted and more sloppy. Like, convoluted would mean he takes a lot of steps and twists and turns, probably bringing in info that's not immediately relevant, but I get the distinct impression that the problem with Cristoph's thought process is that he skips a lot of necessary steps; specifically, all the ones to do with questioning his basic assumptions and the reliability of the information he has. A pov chapter for him might be amusing for

the sheer number of idiotic and unfounded assumptions, as well as for how blatantly poor a judge of character he is (honestly, now I want to see that just to see if he decides that Hakram must be unreliable even to Catherine, because that would be pretty funny), but it would probably be infuriating for all the same reasons

[Liliet](#)

This. He just goes from point A to point Z without bothering with points B, C and so on.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, was he always *that* dumb, that much of a loose cannon? He may well be under somebody's influence (aside from being caught up in a WB story).

[Auston Varner](#)

That's a good question. While I don't have enough information on him to be certain, I would say that he probably is under someone's influence, and they picked him for that specifically because he is that much of a dumb loose cannon. Heck, we saw a few chapters back that getting in bed with a pretty girl was apparently all it took to have him thinking about betraying the drow who are currently handling one entire front on their own and lending raiders to another, with no apparent thought to the political ramifications. Honestly, while I don't think there's enough evidence in the text to be sure as of yet, I would not be remotely surprised if he turns out to be what tvtropes calls a Tautological Templar: "What I do is right because I'm doing it, and if you oppose me you're automatically wrong." Though admittedly, with heroes in the Guideverse it's usually safe to assume that's what they are until proven otherwise, so it's not a particularly bold prediction here

RoflCat

Well, he IS the Mirror Knight.

Self-reflection just isn't his thing.

[Auston Varner](#)

That's awful, have a like 😂

Bellaco

For a moment I thought that the Mirror Knight was saying that Hakram is dead.

Aotrs Commander

Now, Cat, you know what it's like being a DM...

John

There's no need for a simile, she IS a dungeon master right now. This whole fight is literally happening inside an extradimensional dungeon, and among the international coalition which came together to build the place, she's the highest-ranking leader on-site at the moment.

ciara

AND she's making the story up as she goes!

Isaac Martinez

Burning things is not an obsession. It's an acquired taste.

Daniel E

Seeing Cat back in her element got me thinking; What if the Bard isn't really gunning for her? Bard knows that Cat has started slipping, and victory again DK is less certain than preferred. So Bard concocts a scheme to forcefully push Cat back into a proper form.

[Liliet](#)

100% an option

ActionKermit

Hungering Gods, I see it now. Cat is turning into the Wandering Bard's arch-nemesis, the Constant Critic.

seven cats

Vote! ^^

<http://www.topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

That Other Guy

Is it too late to label Mirror Knight's group of 5 "MK Uktra"?

[Liliet](#)

No. No, it's not.

laguz24

You know I wonder whenever someone gets a report about this and reads fire, along with all the other information then why didn't they immediately suspect cat had something up her sleeve. I also

really want to see what the maddened keeper is about, she sounds interesting.

laguz24

Oh, yes and I forgot, I bet WB will get thrown for a loop since she likes very predictable stories and now they are full steam ahead into unknown territory where heroes and villains team up for lengthy periods of time, not temporary team-ups where the villains betray the heroes the minute they get the chance.

[Liliet](#)

> I bet WB will get thrown for a loop since she likes very predictable stories

Source?

[TeK](#)

I believe that Mirror is secretly a very good schemer, that fooled everyone into believing that he is not. Brilliant.

Ernest Pereira

I am very much not a fan of the return to the old way of 'the heroes are really, REALLY stupid motherfuckers who are handed heavenly strength'. I want more of Roland, Tariq, and Hanno, plz.

[Liliet](#)

Consider the difference though: now Cat's trying to guide them into figuring shit out / not getting themselves killed, instead of killing them! This is a MUCH better take ^^

[Mental Mouse](#)

Next up... Cat tries to lead the villains away from their side of the precipice, only to be reminded that's a whole 'nother clowder of cat-herding...

Wandering Bard: "See how both sides are plumb idiots ? Perhaps now you can consider not only the artistry, but the skill and sheer effort involved in my work! Just in time, because I've got a job for you... *mine*. Heh heh heh..."

Well, probably wouldn't be *quite* like that... 😊

Clmineith

I, too, think that the Cat's nemesis will be the Wandering Bard (or the reverse). But the WB *real* Name is the Intercessor.

You know, the antonymous of Intercessor is Adversary. Which would be a great Name for Cat.

And the Adversary is a name for Satan.

Just saying.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Over at The Gods Are Bastards, I'd already drawn a link between Cat and their Goddess of cunning (and exile from the Pantheon, aka "devil")... Cat's style is very much in the vein of Elilial's Cunning. (And of course, what creature is the very archetype of cunning?)

Chapter 18: Clout

"You bargained for my soul, dear devil, and that is what you received. Is it my fault you did not stipulate it was to be my original one?"

– Dread Emperor Traitorous, trading the soul of a single gnat for infernal enlightenment

We shed the illusions like one would shed a cloak.

We'd get more use out of us being the Black Queen and the Archer right now, though there was also an aspect here of knowing I should not press my luck too much. I was a villain who'd just finished the first part of her plan, securing the expected victory, which meant I was due a nasty surprise if I kept going down the path. Best to shake off this story and embrace another before the teeth of it could come around to bite me. Gods forgive me, but tonight I would be following down the path Kairos Theodosian had so brazenly blazed through while he lived: always scheming, always at odds, so that very same thing that should be burying you instead kept you alive. I did not miss the Tyrant of Helike himself, for he'd been cruel and feckless and admirable only in his qualities turned against others, but sometimes I did miss the times I associated him with in my memory. The days where my foes had breathed and there had been an end to them.

"So what are we doing now?" Archer asked.

She'd caught up to me quickly enough, swift on the stride as she was, and shrugged when I'd asked if she had any difficulty shaking off the opposition. I would have given her good odds of

pulling this off even without Creation's favour blowing into our sails, so I was not surprised. None of the Named I'd seen of the band of five so far were made for the subtle side of things – well, neither of the Procerans anyways. I still knew distressingly little about the Maddened Keeper.

"When you asked me for the Harrowed Witch for your band," I said, "you gave me two reasons. The first was that her stealth sorceries were impressive. The other was–"

"Aspasie is good at calling up the dead to chat with," Indrani finished. "Which has been worth more than gold, Named being Named. So who is it we're going to be chatting with?"

"The same man whose body we need to make disappear," I said. "If the Wicked Enchanter has been seen walking around but his corpse is still on a slab, fingers will start being pointed."

"We get my witch or your dead body first?" Archer asked.

She was a practical woman, my Indrani, and I really did enjoy that. Not the kind that would balk at either borrowing – it wasn't stealing if you were a queen, probably – a dead body or calling on the spirits of the dead for questioning. Much as I liked, say, Hanno I suspected he'd not be up for a spot of corpse robbery without several serious questions first being asked.

"The corpse," I mused. "Quiet-like, yeah? The point is to get it to the Harrowed Witch, so we'll avoid being seen bringing her there."

If we showed up there with a known necromancer in tow we'd be giving away the game. I cast a sideways look at Indrani.

"Her dead brother's still haunting her?" I asked.

"Sure, but it's more nuisance than trouble," Archer shrugged. "And I'll answer the question you're building up to before you ask it, spare us both some trouble. She can be trusted, Cat. She's not Woe, won't ever be, but she knows who to close ranks with."

It'd have to do. It wasn't like the villains we'd picked up since declaring the Truce and the Terms were all black-hearted treacherous devils, though admittedly we *had* picked up a few of those. It was just that, as a rule, they tended to be a lot less preoccupied with other people's wellbeing than the White Knight's lot. Villains, I'd learned, were not beyond loyalty. But they had the loyalty of wolves, to the pack that bit and bled for them, while heroes instead had the loyalty of knights: to oath and realm and Good. It didn't necessarily make the champions of the Heavens pleasant people, but on the other hand I couldn't deny that Hanno's side of the fence counted not a single rapist or

thrill-killer. There were days, when the likes of the Mirror Knight's ingratitude and ignorance became so *very grating*, that it was tempting to forget things like that. Tempting to forget that there was more to villains than the Woe and the Calamities, that the banner I'd chosen to bear had flown tall over millennia of dark deeds.

I couldn't afford to close my eyes to that, going forward. Not if the Truce and Terms were to one day be remembered as the prelude to the Liesse Accords, as I so badly wanted them to be.

"I'll take your word on it," I said. "We need to get a move on, 'Drani. There's at least one of that band that'll remember to go look for the Enchanter's corpse as soon as nobody's in danger anymore."

She snorted.

"Wouldn't count on that," she said.

I shook my head. Tempting as it was to take the Mirror Knight and his ilk as all Light and no brains, it'd be a mistake.

"Wind was out our back and the sun in their eyes in there," I reminded her. "We get in scrap with them again, and we'll get what Revenants get. A third time and it'll be *us* with the wind in our faces."

"Won't make them any smarter," Indrani pointed out.

"We fought their two frontliners and ambushed the eyes," I said. "Someone serves as the thinking head of that band, we just haven't run into them yet. Any cart's a bad cart if you take off half the wheels."

Hopefully Adjutant would be keeping whoever that was pointed in the right direction, cleaning up behind any mistakes Indrani and I might have made. Not that we'd be the ones having made the greater share of mistakes in there. The two Procerans here, in particular, had proved significantly easier to handle than I'd expected. It made a horrible sort of sense, now that I thought about it, because though I heard about things the Mirror Knight had done all the time I couldn't honestly recall a single story where he'd been the *leader*. He wasn't even a band's second, most the time: he was the brawns to the Witch of the Woods' magic, Hanno's vanguard or bait for the Silver Huntress. Was this a blunder of our own making, I wondered? *The man's an ignorant ass, but has anyone actually tried to set him straight and teach him to recognize what's going on around him?* It ought to have been his responsibility to see to that, sure, for he was a grown man and few of us had gotten to have our hands held through the process of gaining power. But then was it not undeniably a

blunder to let a hero with that kind of power stew in a puddle of his own obtuseness, growing ever more frustrated and wary?

Something to consider more in depth later, I decided. It would be Hanno's failure more than mine, but I'd never spoken a word about it either and that made for shared responsibility. Indrani and I had been moving even as we talked and quickened our pace further as we fell into silence, her longer stride letting her take the lead as she guided me through the hallways of the Arsenal. I inquired as to our destination and learned that after the Wicked Enchanter was butchered before half a hundred people, his body had been taken away to the Depository. I'd been a little surprised to hear that, considering that was the part of the Arsenal where all the weapons and artefacts were kept in crates until they could be shipped to the fronts: it was a storehouse, more or less. But it was apparently a storehouse with some fairly secure sections, and as one of the parts of this place where no Named resided it'd been deemed as the least provocative of the places to stash a villain's dead body.

"There's going to be guards," I said.

"Of course," Indrani agreed. "But people aren't allowed in and it's a sealed room."

Meaning that if we went in and, after a few moments, popped back out asking the guards where the Hells the body was there shouldn't be anyone able to gainsay us. I could dump the corpse in the Night until we got it to the Harrowed Witch, so we wouldn't essentially be blatantly lying with a dead body strapped onto Archer's back. When we got there the whole affair turned out to be, well, surprisingly straightforward. There was a full line of guards by the door, Lycaonese by the looks of them, and their commanding officer had the key to the wards. I was recognized, even without my cloak, and when I requested entry they didn't even bother to ask me why before accepting. Obviously I had the right, since this was a dead villain and I'd been his representative under the Terms, but I was somewhat surprised at how utterly indifferent the Lycaonese were to the whole thing.

The key to the wards was a simple stone disk that unmade the sealing enchantment on the steel-barded door when pressed into a slot above the handle and it remained in there even as I opened it and slipped inside. The tingle of other wards washed over me as I did – probably a few to prevent coming in by Arcadia and Twilight, and perhaps to prevent summoning within – but there was no other defence. The dead body was in the back, on what was very clearly four wooden shipping crates covered by a slab of steel, thought at least someone had placed a white shroud over it. There was no corpse-stench in the bare stone room, which meant the corpse had been preserved. By alchemy and not enchantment, I noted, since the sharp tang of embalming fluid and something more

like flowers was lingering in the air. Good, the Night wouldn't disrupt anything when I took the body then.

I checked it was the Enchanter under the shroud, sought Indrani's confirmation it was the right man and received it with a nod, then I seized Night a heartbeat later. The body sunk into the darkness I wove under it, and I breathed in through my mouth as I began choosing my words.

Time to raise a ruckus about the theft of the body I'd just stolen.

—

The damned song just wouldn't leave my head, I mused as I poured myself a fresh finger of aragh and knocked it back.

"The henhouse stands unlatched

All within, by the fox snatched."

A fresh change of clothes had done me some good, though that wasn't the main reason I'd done it and ordered Indrani to do the same before sending her out. Smoke had a particular scent to it, and not one easy to hide. At least one Named was bound to notice if we kept wearing garments smelling of a fire we weren't supposed to have been anywhere near. I dressed formally, or at least what passed as formal for me: having a soldier queen's reputation meant I could dispense with a lot of the finery some other crowned heads might be stuck wearing. The heart of it was a high-collared and long-sleeved tunic of dark green, bordered in deep gold and going down to my calves. It was split all the way down to my belly by more elaborate embroidery in the same golden colour, though buttons kept it closed and close against me all the way up to the hollow of my throat – where the sole button I'd left unmade prevented the tunic from digging into my skin.

A broader belt that I was used to in good leather was kept in a complicated knot I'd taken me ages to learn how to make without Hakram's help and ended in a long stripe going down to slightly below the hem of my tunic. The buckles were gilded and a few patches as well though they were inscribed with the Crown and Sword instead of simply polished, lending the whole thing a rather ceremonial look. Trousers of the same good cloth and colour ended in knee-high boots of fine make, which I'd insisted have enough room for a knife to be slipped in. Up the sleeve of my tunic, an old gift from Pickler I more rarely wore these days had been made to serve a again: a complicated set of knots and leather strings that could have a knife falling into my palm a beat later if I flicked my wrist just right. With the Mantle of Woe on my back, my hair pulled back into a long braid and a bare circlet of gold that sat high on brow as my crown, for once I looked like a queen and not a soldier with a looted crown.

There might be more truth to the second of these, in the end, but appearances were too useful a tool to be discarded.

I'd abandoned my rooms not long after making use of them, preferring instead to return to that same small parlour in the Alcazar I'd used to entertain the Hunted Magician. The half-empty bottle of aragh from earlier had been pining for me there, along with what looked like little slices of bread with some sort of mousse on them. It smelled like meat and spices and it tasted delicious, so I polished off a few while waiting for Archer to return with the Harrowed Witch in tow. I was careful with crumbs and stains, since I was not going to go through all the trouble of dressing up regally only for the impression being ruined by mousse on the corner of my lips. The song stayed with me, and as I hummed absent-mindedly my brow rose: someone had knocked at my door. That wasn't Indrani, who would not have bothered herself with courtesy like knocking before entering a room in general, much less a room I was in. I discreetly brushed off some crumbs from my cloak and gathered myself on the sofa.

"Enter," I called out.

So here they go, once again, I hummed under my breath. *Chasing a red tail into the glen.*

Adjutant was the first to step into the room, giving me a bow that told me two things: this was a formal visit, and he did not trust whoever was with him with even the light knowledge of our usual informality with each other. Considering who it was I'd sent him out with, I could understand why. The Mirror Knight entered behind him and I noted with approval he'd been made to relegate his sword and shield before coming into my presence. The staff of yew laid lightly on my shoulder was a comforting weight, even though it was more a focus of my powers than a weapon. Behind good ol' Christophe was not his perennial shadow the Blade of Mercy, to my surprise, but instead a more familiar sight.

The Repentant Magister, Nephele Eliade, was the very painting of what people thought of when talking of a Free Cities beauty. Though her face was sharp in cast and her nose strong, pale grey eyes and luxurious long dark hair would have made her worth a second look even if she'd not been a supple and curvy woman. There was a highborn look to her, in the way she stood and spoke, that'd made it easy to believe she had been born to the highest reaches of the Magisterium of Stygia. The Eliade, I'd been told, remained one of the most influential families in the city-state to this day.

I'd first encountered Nephele in Hainaut, as in the early days of the war against Keter she'd already been our foremost authority on the Dead King's necromantic constructs. Even Akua had expressed admiration when she'd read her work on ghouls, and the shade was rather stingier with praise than Masego. In those days

there'd not yet been an Arsenal, so the Repentant Magister had moved wherever there was a need for her. Her presence was always an easy sell, given that while she was not an impressive combat mage she was an extremely talented healer and capable of making artefacts that more than made up for her lacking offensive spellcraft. I'd found her rather pleasant, and not only because she usually wore tight velour dresses with dipping necklines. I would have expected someone emerged heroic from the horrors of Stygia to be eager to distance themselves from anything and anyone bearing Below's mark, but she'd turned out to be almost serene about it.

That calm certainty, the knowledge of her place in the world, had been damned attractive and I'd begun making polite inquiries about her preferences – flexible, thank the Gods – to what I'd thought might just be a receptive audience when she'd left Hainaut to help found the Arsenal. Unfinished business, all in all, but not unpleasantly so. The kind that might even be picked up should the situation allow. Now, though, I had to consider her in an entirely different way. Already the Hunted Magician had told me that Nephele was part of whatever the Blessed Artificer was up to, only for her to be turning up *here* as well? I couldn't be sure she was part of the Mirror Knight's band of five, not yet, but neither would be it an unwarranted assumption. *What is it you're actually up to, Nephele?* No third hero followed the first two, which I found interesting. It meant there were still three of them out there, out of my sight.

"Your Majesty," Hakram greeted me. "If I may?"

"Proceed, Adjutant," I granted, leaning back into the sofa.

"I present Christophe of Pavanie, the Mirror Knight," the orc said, "and Lady Nephele Eliade of Stygia, the Repentant Magister. They would humbly request audience of you."

The Mirror Knight looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, but he didn't actually contradict Hakram. Huh, I'd not believed he had it in him. Nephele's face was unreadable, not trace of our previous acquaintance there to be found. I poured myself another splash of aragh. Was that a bit of a sting I felt? *We're never as charming as we think we are, Catherine*, I reminded myself.

"Then be seated," I said. "I expect this'll be interesting."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," the Repentant Magister said, bowing slightly.

Gods, that accent. Helikeans sounded like they were spitting out every other word in Chantant, but the Stygian accent was like silk in the ear. Didn't hurt that she had one of those smooth, throaty voices either. The Mirror Knight offered a curt nod and seated himself briskly, the heroine following suit more

gracefully a moment later. Hakram stepped back, standing behind the sofa they occupied and looming as only an orc of his towering height could.

"There is a traitor in the Arsenal," the Mirror Knight gravely said.

My eyes moved to Adjutant, who nodded, then returned to the other two as I cocked a brow.

"I take it you have evidence for such a claim," I said.

"Two Revenants were allowed past the wards," the hero said, "which is impossible without someone on this side letting them in."

My eyes flicked to Nephele, who bowed her head.

"I believe they were not truly Revenants," the dark-haired heroine evenly said, "but instead masking their true identities through an illusion. Which does not change the truth of what Christophe has said: there is a traitor in the Arsenal, and likely more than one."

Well now, wasn't that interesting? Not the revelation itself, as it was a conclusion I'd been inching towards myself for some time – the Bard would need boots on the ground to pull off something like this, there was only so much that could be done without willing hands – but that they'd bring it to me of all people. Nephele had allegedly been sniffing around Quartered Seasons, which for someone with only cursory knowledge of my intentions might very well look like an attempt at apotheosis, and the Mirror Knight both disliked and distrusted me. I sipped at my aragh, considering, and delicately set down the cup.

"I am surprised," I said, "that a man who accused me of plotting murder not a bell ago would now come to me with such tidings. Unless, of course, you mean to accuse me."

The Proceran hero grit his teeth and did not look away from my gaze, dark green eyes matching my own.

"I see what you are, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight said, tone curt. "You have fooled the White Knight and broken the Grey Pilgrim, but *I see you*. Carrion Queen, heiress to a lord of the same: you burrow into the heart and then claim the body for yourself. You stole the armies of Praes, the Kingdom of Callow, the Tenth Crusade and now you would do the same to the Grand Alliance itself. I will not let you make yourself queen of the Chosen and Damned, Gods preserve me in this."

"But," Nephele mildly said.

"But," the Mirror Knight continued, tone reluctant, "you are foe to the Dead King and all his works. This I... recognize."

How kind of him. I was a little skeptical, though, considering that when I'd been veiled as the Wicked Enchanter he'd accused 'me' of having made a pact with the Black Queen. Unless he'd been baiting a monologue? Possible, though he didn't seem like the sort. As far as I knew most of the foes he'd faced since becoming Named had been Revenants, and there was very little subtlety required in dealing with those.

"All well and good," I said. "But it doesn't tell me what brings you *here*."

"We require your understanding, Queen Catherine, in dealing with these troubles," the Repentant Magister said. "We are aware that there are... tensions within the Arsenal, but the situation requires investigation nonetheless."

"You want my permission to run your own Chosen inquisition," I said.

My tone expressed *exactly* what I thought of that without needing to say anything more.

"You are on Proceran land," the Mirror Knight said through gritted teeth.

"Do tell the First Prince that, preferably when I'm in the room," I drily replied. "I've never seen her blush in utter embarrassment before."

The Arsenal was not in Creation and had been made explicitly beyond Proceran rule by multiple treaties besides. Actual laws here were a complicated issue, with nations being responsible for the people they provided and Named themselves falling largely under the Terms.

"We believe," Nephele said, "that your second has already been a target."

My brow rose and I looked at Hakram before returning to her.

"I'm listening," I said.

"You have heard of the fire in the Miscellaneous Stacks?" she asked.

"I have," I cautiously said. "You are arguing that the Revenants were responsible for this?"

"It was an assassination attempt on the Adjutant," the Mirror Knight bluntly said. "You sent him to question the Doddering Sage

discreetly, and it was seen as an opening. If my companions and I had not arrived in time he'd be dead."

Huh. Well, Hakram clearly ought to be grateful at having his life preserved in such a manner by upstanding ladies and gentlemen, I mused.

"That was the plot, Queen Catherine," the Repentant Magister quietly said. "Your second dead on the ground, and only heroes there among the ashes. Someone is trying to set us against one another."

She was very much correct about that but given that I was seated across from two of the blades the Wandering Bard was currently swinging at me I couldn't exactly come out and tell her as much. Still, this was a pleasing turn. I seemed to have accidentally stumbled into the role of authority figure these enterprising investigating rogues might somewhat answer to, which was something I could work with.

"You'll understand," I said, "that while I might believe you speak the truth at least in part, I also have sworn responsibilities. Letting Chosen run amok in the Arsenal and interrogate my lot without supervision would be a gross failure of those oaths."

Nephele was clever enough to see through that, but then she'd been clever before entering this room: she would have known that their request for my blessing to hunt as they wished had no chance of being accepted without some alterations to what had been proposed.

"What if we had one of the Damned with us as well?" the Mirror Knight said. "Someone you can trust."

"You have a name for me, I take it?" I asked, brow raised.

He looked back at Hakram. The same orc whose life he had 'saved', who he would have sent to save unconscious custodians and not been failed by. That decision made itself, didn't it?

"The Adjutant is a good man," Christophe firmly said. "It would not be an injury to count him among our number."

But we know, oh we know, I almost hummed, *that in the woods, the fox is king.*

This would do, I decided. With Hakram following them and serving as my voice I could count on them keeping out of my way while I expunged the Bard's influence from this fortress one pawn at a time. With a little luck, they might even actually unearth a *real* conspiracy that I'd missed.

"Where would you begin?" I said, tacitly accepting.

The Repentant Magister released a long breath, though the Mirror Knight only nodded as this was expected. His due. *Dislike cannot dictate policy*, I reminded myself, *or I would have been at war with every other Calernian nation within a year of my coronation.*

"The Hunted Magician has been seen going in and out of the Workshop at odd hours," the Mirror Knight told me.

Because he's been carrying on two love affairs with heroines, I thought, *the most impressive part of this being that he's yet to lose a limb*. Mind you, if I was the Intercessor I'd consider the Hunted Magician as a good in for the Arsenal: he had an enemy he'd probably do next to anything to avoid being found by, and precious few scruples as a person. If they wanted to dig there they had my blessing.

"It's start," I agreed. "Come back to me when you've found something. I might even have insights of my own to share, as I'm looking into a few things as well."

"It might be," Nephele softly said, "that some of your own trusted have not proved entirely deserving of that trust."

Well now, that was something. A warning, if I read her right. And considering she was one of the Arsenal regulars and there was only one of the Woe who shared that state of affairs? She was warning me about Hierophant. *Quartered Seasons*, I decided. *She's dug up something about Quartered Seasons, and she's decided that Masego is deceiving me somehow*. Or she was trying to sow dissent between myself and Hierophant. Either way, it was a swing and a miss. Zeze honestly didn't care enough about my approval to lie, it wasn't how his head worked. He'd either go through with it anyway or decide it wasn't worth the trouble, deception wouldn't be part of the recipe either way. That the Repentant Magister had said that at all, though, was telling. Masego was fairly open about his intention to one day reach apotheosis on his own terms and *Quartered Seasons* might be seen as a way to that. The Repentant Magister, and likely the Blessed Artificer as well, knew enough about the project to misunderstand. That put the alleged blinding of Masego by the Blessed Artificer in a rather more sinister light.

Someone had just shot up the list of problems I needed to handle.

"I am not," I said, "in the habit of leaving stones unturned. Go, you two. I'll speak with Adjutant a moment and send him after you."

It got a nod from the Mirror Knight and a proper bow from Nephele, though she also carefully studied my face as she moved. I do not know what she found there, but she left looking

satisfied. The doors was barely closed and the courtesies done when I turned a steady gaze to Hakram.

"Who's the fifth?" I asked.

Mirror Knight, Blade of Mercy, Maddened Keeper and Repentant Magister. That made four, which meant there was one left I'd not seen. I would have bet the Exalted Poet, before Nephele's presence was revealed, but now I had doubts. Bands of five were rarely so heavy on Gifted.

"The Vagrant Spear," Hakram replied.

Shit, Archer's second? That explained why she'd not heard armour, but we were lucky we'd not run into her: she likely would have recognized Indrani, glamour or not. Fuck, we actually gotten pretty lucky on that. If I'd not acted to split the band of five, Archer would probably have been outed. *The first step never fails, huh?* I'd been so worried about good eyes I'd missed the greater threat of simple familiarity. A reminder the victory was rarely quite as triumphant as it felt when it was happening.

"What's she after?" I asked.

"I believe she is trying to keep the Red Axe alive," he said. "And was drawn in by the Mirror Knight's impassioned defence of her right to break the Terms for a revenge killing."

The Red Axe had travelled with Archer's band to come here, hadn't she? And as I recalled, the Spear had almost begun a fight with the Hunted Magician over the Enchanter's corpse. I'd need to ask Indrani about this, looked like. The way that Adjutant had phrased his answer told me both what I'd asked and his own opinion of the matter, which was rather helpful of him given how little time we had. I'd need to cut him loose soon else his new companions would ask questions, but I still had a bit more.

"Mirror Knight," I said. "Your opinion of him?"

"There is more him than I had anticipated," the orc gravelled. "Genuinely unambitious, but he clearly sees himself as the flagbearer of Proceran heroism with all that entails. And he's on the edge, Catherine. Sometimes he snaps at the Blade of Mercy and the boy always looks surprised, so it can't be habitual."

I slowly nodded. That made the man even more dangerous, truth be told. People did stupid and dangerous things when they felt they had no other choice. I was glad I'd asked, since that would change how the Knight would need to be handled: *carefully*, in a word.

"On your end?" Hakram asked.

"Going to ask the Wicked Enchanter some questions," I replied.
"Indrani should be here any moment."

"Then I'll leave, they might be waiting for me outside," Hakram said.

And we would not want them to run into each other. I got up to clasp his arm before sending him out, and when the door closed I closed my eyes and breathed out. The song hadn't quite left me, I found as the hum left my lips.

"Yes we know, oh we know

That in the woods, the fox is king."

epokki

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> ,
please do vote, topwebfiction is a big boost to help people find the series. Thanks.

[tkjarrah](#)

can't get that taste, out of your mouth,
can't get the pawprints, out of the henhouse now

[tkjarrah](#)

there's another twist here, there has to be. the vagrant spear just *happening* to be absent is a sign of something being up if ive ever seen one

[Liliet](#)

A better question, possibly: so if the Exalted Poet is not with them, *where is he?*

Shveiran

It's not that it is a bad question, but a LOT of Named are unaccounted for right now. Like, a dozen or so.

[Liliet](#)

Riddle me this: why did he COME here? His Name is bardic, not artifact-making and not magic-theoretical. If he's not

with Christophe, what's he doing in the Arsenal in the first place?

Shikkarasu

Oh... Oh that's good. I didn't even consider the ramifications of EP not being in the Band of 5. I suppose he could have been traded out for someone nearby once he was apprehended two updates ago, but how often is a Band broken that easily?

[Liliet](#)

What is he DOING in the meanwhile? Why did he come if he's not sticking with them?

[Javvies](#)

So the Vagrant Spear is either fully onboard or being played. Also ... possibly being used as cover for Wandering Bard's involvement if Red Axe had expressed her desire to kill the Wicked Enchanter prior to their arrival at the Arsenal. Or could plausibly have done so and they lie about it.

Nothing about this situation is particularly good.

The song impulse is drawing parallels to Cat hearing the Tower's call to climb it in song. And it's concerning me. Might be an indicator of whatever Name she's becoming a claimant to, or connected to it in some way.

haihappen

There are a lot of In's for the Bard. I suspect there are two: One that It contacted directly, and one that is only influenced indirectly.

The latter is probably the Mirror Knight. For the first one, it is probably a villain. The Haunted Magician is a reasonably good bet, assuming he is an excellent actor in playing a bad liar.

I also assume that if push comes to shove, she will use the "reveal" of the 4/4 Seasons project to tip the story at a critical point.

ActionKermit

During the Fae arc, Cat dressed up in a fox-themed outfit intended for the Princess of High Noon, and stepped into a story where the Princess was supposed to challenge the Duke of Violent Squalls to a duel, fail and be trapped. As we all know, Cat refused to play by the rules and turned the chase inside-out, killing the Duke and taking his place in Court. My guess

is that the Bard knows the original story but not how it got subverted this time around.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oooh,,,,, heh heh heh.

Toddmeister1422

I worry about the significance of that little earworm of hers....

haihappen

Maybe she is slipping into the groove of a Trickster role. Wasn't the Fox King the Guideverse's variant of Robin Hood or something like that?

A random thought of mine was that the Bard may try to influence the Name she is getting, or tries to stop it. Or, inadvertently, is speeding up the Name-forming.

Cicero

He sounded more like the Swamp Fox to me...

Cicero

Swamp Fox even has a song:

[www\(dot\)youtube\(dot\)com/watch?v=ADesK3Wa_D0](http://www(dot)youtube(dot)com/watch?v=ADesK3Wa_D0)

Isaac Martinez

I wonder.

Songs are important to people as is story.

So if Cat gaining power from her habit of humming songs (in war, in from of the great Council, and even in Aqua's Folly after living 4 extra lives) I think is a good thing.

Also, Cat will give up her crown to Vivienne soon, so I think is imposible that a song will change that. So a song about a fox in the woods can't be the same as the Girl who climbed the Tower.

[Liliet](#)

agreed very gleefully

Ben Serreau-Raskin

That was fantastic. These longer chapters are well worth the reduced update schedule.

I love that Cat think she's "accidentally" ended up in the role of an authority figure as though her pattern in this story hasn't been to end up in charge of any group she interacts with in an even mildly cordial manner.

dadycoool

Yeah, MK was right about how she stole the Prasi armies, etc. It reminds me of something Black once said, about how anything she can't Take, she will Break. It's almost like it happens naturally nowadays, like when Hanno refused to join her at first: he needed to be brought to a point where he would have no choice, so he lost his Choir.

[Liliet](#)

A different angle on the same thing 😊

dadycoool

It's very ominous to have a Song stuck in your head, especially when you're on the edge of a Name.

And someone needs to take the Plot off the stove, 'cause it's getting pretty thick.

samshadar

Indeed.

The way she's been handling things: gaining knowledge about the roles, the stories, the machinations – and then applying it... She is playing the game on the level of the Bard and the Dead King. Or she's aspiring to anyway. It may well be that her Name will reflect that.

And what are songs if not stories?

[Tohron](#)

So, Alistair the Fox was basically a trickster king of Callow, wonder if Catherine's heading toward the name of Fox Queen?

Big I

That would tie into her command of the Wild Hunt, the "clever foxes" as she called them. Not so sure bout the Queen part of that name though since her long term plan is abdication. Maybe just "the Fox"? Also sounds neutral enough that it can fit into both Hero and Villain stories, like Ranger is supposed to be able to do.

breakingamber

That song... someone's going to recognize that it is the same song from the library. That's going to get her in big trouble.

Mirror Knight is 'genuinely unambitious?' Huh.

Liliet

She was humming it, not singing it out loud, and that's in the middle of a fire. No-one heard it (unless the Maddened Keeper has not only sharp eyes...)

Agent J

I should hope not, given she's Callowan and would likely recognize the tune.

Shikkarasu

Let's not forget, any Named can sharpen their ears. They don't need to be the Saint, or anything. That said, I agree; it *probably* won't come back to bite her. This time.

Some Smartass

...So, how sure are we that Alistair the Fox is still in his tomb?

Juff

Typo Thread:

down the path > down that path
only in his qualities turned (maybe "only when his qualities were turned)
trouble," > trouble."
take you word > take your word
a least > at least
be mistake > be a mistake
in scrap > in a scrap
a little surprise > a little surprised
When we got there (should be new paragraph)
They key > The key
I'd taken me > I'd taken
well though > well, though
days had been made to serve a again > days which had been made to
serve again (also, should be "- an old gift ... serve again -")
relegate > relinquish
someone emerged heroic > someone that had emerged heroic
would be it > would it be
not trace > no trace
nodded as this > nodded as if this
a enemy > an enemy
It's start, > It's a start,
do not know > did not know
doors was > doors were
we actually gotten > we had actually gotten
more him > more to him

ThatOneGuy

A stressed shield, a vengeful spear, a repentant mage, one possessed and possibly failing soul... With a self-righteous blade.

this is the making of a disaster instead of a heroic five or villainous alliance. This is going to end with the arsenal falling as sometimes you just need to trick someone to carry a bomb instead of having them sabotage anything.

Answers that are left are simply left up to those who stand after the ashes fall. So Bard can easily spin whatever tale she wishes of one arsenal and some unwanted pieces were simply... Forgotten.

Our little keeper is unknown and our dear leader forgot about the Demon who erases history having been told to the heroic band... Before the king of the dead declared his war.

[Adrian_V](#)

She is so going to get a new name, this many references to songs remind me to the "girl who climbed the tower" thing.

Also i was totally expecting the body to already be gone, glad that didn't happen, another thing is that i could have sworn it was the blade of mercy who accused Cat not the MK? was that an error the previous chapter?

Oh and what do you think is mor eprobably: that the Vagrant Spear and Red Axe are lovers, a sort of duo (as in those 2 guys kind of thing) or even a sort of mentor disciple thing (like Cat was supposed to have with the apostle RIP)?

[Adrian_V](#)

Arggg i forgot the most important but: my bet is on the Blade of Mercy being the Mole for the Bard, he hates Cat way to much bordering on obsesion, and like i said i remember he was the one throwing wild accusations last chapter, plus that tip bit Hakram mentioned could be that he is behaving different and is bothering the MK.

[Liliet](#)

the other way around: MK is snapping at BoM and BoM is surprised

[Liliet](#)

They both were behind the accusation, doesn't matter who said it specifically.

[Adrian_V](#)

Actually for me it matters, since if it originates from the BoM then it explains why MK is on the party leader role: he fits the criteria for it plus doesn't have enough experience to see through the bullshit, meanin can be lead around, also worth noting that it was MK who came to the conclusion Hakram was the target rather fast, that tells me he wasn't really believing Cat was the culprit here

[Liliet](#)

Huh, yeah.

BoM also was the one who was rude about orcs iirc

[Liliet](#)

oh my god this is such an archetypical story and Catherine is in such a specific role in it GOD BLESS HER

the best part is the ending, but wow I'm loving every minute of it.

Also, prolonged and deep thanks to Erratic for not putting emphasis on the lying and rasing a ruckus parts. Valid plot elements, awful to actually experience reading about in detail.

Can't wait for the heroes to dig up Cat did all of that! We all know that's coming, right? 😊

Big I

How awesome is that Traitorous quote at the beginning of the chapter? He may be edging out Irritant as my favourite Emperor.

gnaruscat

Don't you just love Traitorous? So frustratingly awesome

[Burlyraven](#)

I'm curious as to what the dynamic between the Repentant Magister and Cat is going to do to this situation. Right now, we the audience know they have a mutual interest in one another, despite their apparent inability to see it in the other, but they also seem to be pretty blatantly opposed on many integral parts of this particular story. This might be setting the Magister up as a slow burn romance into Cat's moral anchor, which would be important if Cat's Name ends up being a Trickster type.

Side note: one fun thing about Tricksters is that they're one of the few types that can reliably win (or at least not lose) even when they're in a villainous role.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Their dynamic will prompt the Scorched Apostate to spontaneously crawl out of hell, even more scorched and powered up, no? "Slow burn" in multiple senses.

[Adrian_V](#)

My hopes are that we will at least see his ghost, i mean Cat still has his corpse right?

[Burlyraven](#)

There's been no direct mention of a removal, so I'm expecting some variety of shenanigans to occur, especially now that she's added yet another body to the Night.

[Burlyraven](#)

I just had a very dark thought that involves Wicked Enchanter and Red Axe both being Dead King plants, and this entire situation being a convoluted setup to get Cat to pull the Enchanter's "corpse" into the Night.

But that's getting into red string conspiracy theory territory.

ninegardens

So wait...

Cat has a song stuck in her head...

in a situation, where two of her likely enemies include a poet, and a bard.

: |

Oh no.

Sykomantis

Does rap exist in Calernia?

[Adrian_V](#)

Yes, remember the drows rap game xD

dadycoool

Oh, God. Queen of Rap?

Lurch

So, a few things people have said above have got me thinking about what kind of name Catherine is coming into. Someone mentioned how she tends to take control of groups she has been in, whether she intends to or not, and usually despite her own

intentions. How many times has what she was accused of been her ultimate end, often despite the intent to do anything but that. How many times has she been accused of reaching for power and, despite her own initial lack of willingness to do so, ended up having that power by the end. Often because no-one else could, or should, have taken up the roles she plays. Sometimes, more often recently, she's seen the way things are heading and accepted that role. Because someone needs to do it gods dammit and if no-one else will pull their finger out she will.

And someone else mentioned the idea of her becoming the Fox Queen (or perhaps some other cunning ruler name, it might not be exactly that). This sounds pretty damn plausible, especially with the song stuck in her head. And they also pointed out that that could well be a name that fits as both Villain and Hero depending on where they need to fit into the story.

And the Mirror Knight has now outright accused her of planning to "...make (her)self queen of the Chosen and Damned..."

Catherine already has the title of "Queen of Lost and Found". Lost? Villains could be said to have lost their way. Found? Heroes are often said to have found themselves, or found purpose. And even though she is definitely going to be stepping down from the throne of Callow, that doesn't mean she might not still have a throne. As a (rather frustrated) leader and arbiter of Named, being neither Hero nor Villain. The finger on the balance of the Accords, tipping either way as needed to keep things in check. Trusted just enough to not truly be one of Theirs, even if she's not really one of Ours. Because it seems like someone needs to do a job like that to keep Named in line. And no-one else is going to do it properly...

dadycoool

I remember Kairos laughing right before his Final Monologue because every time the Choir of Mercy bends to her will, the more that becomes a precedent. Between that and the words of this chapter, it makes you wonder just how high she'll go.

[Walter](#)

I think one of the band of five isn't really part of it. At a guess, Repentent Magister is only an ally, Bard is the actual fifth, and Hakram being assigned to their band is the next step in her plan.

ActionKermit

I recall that during the Fae arc Catherine went to the Duke of Violent Squalls' ball in an outfit with a Fox mask. This may be a reprise in the mortal world of the events there.

Mike E.

Haven't even read the chapter yet, but just need to say that the opening epitaph is awesome.

[Liliet](#)

epigraph

[Auston Varner](#)

"It didn't necessarily make the champions of the Heavens pleasant people, but on the other hand I couldn't deny that Hanno's side of the fence counted not a single rapist or thrill-killer. There were days, when the likes of the Mirror Knight's ingratitude and ignorance became so very grating, that it was tempting to forget things like that."

That's, what, the second or third time in this book that the narration has called out the comment section? Although this is also acknowledging that yeah, MK is pretty annoying at times. I actually kind of liked him this chapter though? Like, he definitely is way too stuck on the old ways of hero vs villain with no regard for the details, but he still has some sense of priorities and can bend, just slightly, when he absolutely has to. Doesn't make him particularly easy to like, nor does it mean he's a particularly good person, but it's a potential seed of character development. Reminds me a little of GP, actually; he starts out absolutely opposed to Cat, and ends up deciding that she's not so bad after all

laguz24

Yes, but GP was able to talk to her for five minutes and MK is stuck in a groove where bard can use him and then lose him to her heart's content.

WuseMajor

I'm honestly not sure that you can say that the heavens don't have any "thrill killers" among their heroes. Some of them seem a little too gung ho at the "smiting anything they perceive as evil" for me and they're often prone to moral absolutism and charging into situations half cocked. All of that is a good recipe for creating problems and doing evil.

dadycool

Saint of Swords, anyone?

erebus42

Yeah, I agree that that's probably a load of horseshit. The fact that they usually focus on acceptable targets like

monsters, undead, and Villains would just mean that their predilections would go under the radar.

dadycoool

It can be very hard to remember how evil Dark can get when we're constantly shown essentially the Batman of Calernia. Just because someone adopted the darkness doesn't mean the people born in it, molded by it, aren't far worse.

Shveiran

Worse is comparative. Worse than what, the Heroes?

I think that comparing categories in a vacuum is not really helpful. If all we had was say, serial killer Villains on the prowl and detective Heroes hunting them down to stop them, sure. Who cares if the detective roughs up a few witnesses, if he stops the serial killers from killing again? And even one who cared wouldn't go so far as to argue they are worse than serial killers.

But that is not how the game of the gods works. We saw there are Good and Evil COUNTRIES, and countries are made of people. When you have Heroes and Villains warring on one another, and Good is not always the invaded, and most of what Named do is either enabling their side to kill more people more effectively, or kill a lot of people on their own... is there really a difference?

There is no comparing a Hero going to repel ratlings in the north to someone like the Hunted Magician that just looks after himself. Of course there isn't.

But that is not what most heroes spend the most time and energy doing, is it? Because those stories are boring, and thus the narrative pushes them to seek something else to fight. And when you have these huge conflicts, and invaded countries with Named spearheading the assault or the guerrilla resistance... can you really say "this side good, that side bad"? Or even "that side better?"

On average, as a category, the Heroes are probably doing more good than the Villains. But really... it doesn't look like that big a margin.

Someone that goes around murdering, pillaging and raping like the Wicked Enchanter sounds terrible (and, well, is), but when you consider how much murdering, pillaging and raping can be caused by a pack of Heroes enabling an expansionist Good country to invade another (invasion of Callow, Humbling of Titans...) you need a LOT of small-time Villains to come even.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The thick plottens.

beleester

I feel like the traitor has to be someone Catherine knows or trusts. A common trope in these stories is that the authority figure has a blind spot towards the villain and that's why the hero can see something that the authorities can't.

Now, clearly Masego isn't the traitor – all the Woe are loyal, and as Cat notes, Masego doesn't lie. And we've already done the "Masego has fallen to the dark side and we have to retrieve him" bit, anyway. But Quartered Seasons is still a major source of suspicion. It's something that the Bard could easily turn into a story against Cat – she admits it looks like another attempt to claim godhood. And it's something completely off the books, where Catherine is basically just signing the checks and not looking at the details.

What I'm saying is, just because Quartered Seasons is a legitimate, Catherine-backed project with worthy goals doesn't mean it can't **also** be something that was corrupted by a dastardly traitor.

Shveiran

Corrupting Masego's project without him noticing (unless he is under the influence and you are freaking Dead King besides) sounds kind of impossible, honestly.

Either Masego has personally twisted the project which I don't buy for a minute – or it's working as intended.

It being misinterpreted is, of course, completely possible.

IDKWhoitis

I'm willing to bet that Mirror is bound to take a swing at Masego. He probably gets told by his friends about Quartered seasons, and then he decides Cat is either stupid or in on it, so she won't grant permission anyways.

The actual question becomes if Masego and possibly Idrani are enough to survive heroic assault. With gifted who have been building counter Masego artifacts.

JRogue

A "counter Masego artifact" is exactly what I thought when that whole thing went down.

Why, of them all, did they single our Masego to use that light on? I'll tell you why, to test it, to see the limits of what his glass eyes and abilities can do. I think they want to assault him over what they perceive is Masego going rogue. Even the Repentant Magister hinted at the betrayal, which Cay knows better.

4/4 Seasons being "off the books" make Hierophant look very suspicious. If it were the White Knight or Grey Pilgram there, they would know better, because they know what Masego went through, but not these people.

Another possibility is that the Repentant Magister is a lot sneakier than she is letting on, either for or against Cat. I think she is like the Rogue Sorceror, and willing to operate in a grayer area, seeing the bigger picture and does not have the bias of MK.

I am enjoying this arc a whole lot, feels like it back to basics.

Why isn't this a published novel yet?

jesdynf

Man, I'm just thinking of all the people this trick wouldn't've worked on.

"Masego, who set the fire?"

"Catherine, of course," he replied, then paused. "What fire?"

superkeaton

Wheels within wheels, Cat. There's more to this. The murder feels like a smokescreen, I'm betting Quartered Seasons is the real target.

Shveiran

Not a smokescreen; a stage.

Isaac Martinez

The Red Axe. I wonder if it will end with a cursed heroine. They can't kill her, that would arise heroic insurrection, but let her get away is not an option, that would break the Terms.

Maybe it will end with Cain's Curse, or something like that. She will no longer gain help from signatories of the Terms, nor protected, but whoever damages her will receive double the pain until the Dead King's war ends.

hakureireimu

MK is failing his sense motive check so hard...

samshadar

I don't know about that. Hakram is very much a very good man, just maybe not a Good one. 😊
And he does indeed want the investigation to succeed. That is, succeed in uncovering the real killer and the real plot...

[Liliet](#)

Nah, he's actually passing it, for once. Hakram IS a good dude.

Shveiran

Not... really? He's a great friend, but he doesn't seem to be overly concerned for the well being of people just because they are people.

He's not out to help those around him, is what I mean. He cares about his own buddies, which is what most do. He is awesome, but... he is not really how to improve the world nor anything.

[Liliet](#)

Actually Cat fired him up by getting him angry at the world's injustice and that's his basic motivation? He didn't just fall in love with her or something, her opposition just pissed him off and he decided to show them all.

Hakram also held Cat back from something she would later have been horrified by when he stopped her from killing the Helikean cataphracts. He has a pretty fine discernment for what ethics are, even if he's mostly following them for other reasons, he IS following them.

Consider the low, low, low bar for villains that Kairos, Wicked Enchanter and their ilk set.

Shveiran

Again, all true, yet...

... he got angry at a very specific injustice, he's not out to ensure the well-being of people. I'm just saying, if this makes him a good guy then anyone that has a cause other than himself qualify. Very few of those think it's not helping someone.

... Hakram held back Cat from making decisions in anger that would have sabotaged her long term or that she'd have regretted making down the line. He was looking out for her, nothing less, and nothing more.

Cat's own morality was the paradigm he used, not morality itself.

[Liliet](#)

> ... he got angry at a very specific injustice, he's not out to ensure the well-being of people. I'm just saying, if this makes him a good guy then anyone that has a cause other than himself qualify.

...yes?

See also: really, really low bar for what heroes expect of villains.

[riantiada](#)

hiya EE – just dropping into say that I've been reading this work since it was still in Book 1 (so four and a half, coming up on five years now?) and I've never ceased to be impressed with each and every new update. haven't commented before because, well, that's just not my usual style. but now that the end of the journey's in sight, I'd be remiss to not drop in to voice my appreciation.

also, I made you some art. took forever to finish it (over two years) cause life's wack but I think it was worth it in the end.
<https://www.artstation.com/artwork/8lJlxE>

really eager to see how this story pans out and will definitely be following whatever you decide to work on next!

Shveiran

Very nice, well done

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ohh, nice – if you haven't already, you oughta put that on the Wiki and/or the Discord's art channel.

[onedollargum](#)

Cat being unable to get rid of songs is not a good sign for how she's handling the shadow of the wandering bard.

mamm0nn

Hm, I've never noticed EE adapt the story this much based on the comments from the previous chapter. Guess he didn't expect people to dislike Mirror Knight this much for his actions to so often add subtlilities and spreading of responsibility and guilt around.

hakureireimu

I seriously doubt that; how do you know that's not how the was going in the first place.

[Mammon](#)

Because while usually the comments and the story that follow aren't too conjoined, this time I noticed some things that didn't seem that much in EE's ordinary writing style and didn't quite fit the pace and flow of the story. Kinda just, adding them in. Making me think that maybe EE read the comments and saw a trend that he never intended, thus patching it up quickly after reading comments like 'Before it was a matter of perspective, but now I'm fed up with the Mirror Knight, he's beyond redemption now.' or whatever. In response EE might've written things like

"Was this a blunder of our own making, I wondered? The man's an ignorant ass, but has anyone actually tried to set him straight and teach him to recognize what's going on around him? It ought to have been his responsibility to see to that, sure, for he was a grown man and few of us had gotten to have our hands held through the process of gaining power. But then was it not undeniably a blunder to let a hero with that kind of power stew in a puddle of his own obtuseness, growing ever more frustrated and wary?"

Especially the italics (which unfortunately weren't copied along) sounded very out of place for the pace and tone of the story that EE has been setting up here. To so openly and suddenly step out of the story to address something that happens to align a lot with the comments of the previous chapter and which contrasts the tale Cat is in now and her Role and mindset, it seems like our comments might've been the cause of these additions to avoid MK to be too ostracized. And there were a few other places in this chapter where I noticed such subtle diversions, though none as clear as this one I think.

Letouriste

It's sloppy writing to adapt a story based on what the readers think. It's somewhat ok to not kill a specific character because of his fanbase (so long it make sense and he still is relevant to the plot).

EE would not do this. Actually I would be surprised if he did not have 10 of so chapters made in advance to keep his sanity intact

[Mammon](#)

See my post to Haru on the foundations. But there's a difference between adapting a story on what the readers think, and seeing in the comments that you unintentionally screwed up someone's reputation to something that shouldn't be this negative and viewed in the way that it was. There were several parts in this chapter in too stark contrast and fitting the last chapter's comments too well to be truly natural. I think EE never intended to have Mirror Knight be dropped by the audience as an outright idiotic pariah instead of just a frustratingly heroic lad like Pilgrim was. Which events like him asking if Cat were working with the Dead King solicited from the audience last chapter, only to see in this chapter that they refer to that with a hinted solution to hopefully redeem things a bit back into an acceptable grey.

And it needs not be a completely rehaul, just some sentences added to an already written chapter.

[eamondemarsh](#)

gotta say, as much as people in the comments sometimes forget just how evil below tends to be, its not that the mirror knight is annoying, it's that he was seconds away from drawing swords on cat, had left his post in the middle of a war, was going to deliberately break the Truce and Terms over someone who had previously done so as well, and Start a heroic inquisition with no authorization from Hanno inside a weapons factory staffed almost entirely by non-combat names.

like there's a whole host of valid reasons for people to hate his ass beyond "his personality bad"

gnaruscat

Interesting that Cat jumped to Hierophant as the possible traitor, completely ignoring Archer.
I doubt Archer is a traitor, but Cat doesn't even consider the possibility

[Mammon](#)

Repentant said it was a regular of the Assembly, and Archer is a visitor same as Cat and Adjudant. Only Hierophant is a regular staff member of this place. Going on what RM said he was the only Woe that fit, Cat hasn't gotten any Name advice from anyone about the other two. When talking about a traitor in general then Cat might suspect Archer as 'quickly' as Zeze, but for the specific clue and context given there's no reason to suspect her based on what Repentant said. And Cat wouldn't have considered Zeze at all either if it weren't for that hint to begin with.

Personally, if there's a traitor in the Woe then it might be Adjutant. While Cat is completely unaware and unwilling to entertain the thought, Vivienne's extra chapters and some hints sprinkled through other extra chapters and interludes actually hinted at (their suspicion of) him being a schemer and inevitable traitor to be.

Javvies

If Adjutant has treacherous schemes and plots going on ... they aren't aimed at hurting Cat.

He got his Name based on helping her and facilitating her desires. I'm fairly confident that knowingly and/or intentionally betraying her, in addition to being wildly out of character, would damage his ability to use his Name.

At worst, Hakram is likely to do something that he thinks is in Cat's best interests without telling her about it or even against her implied or stated wishes. Ie, the interlude/extra chapter where Hakram goes to have a chat with Thief after Cat makes her an offer after (re)taking Laure, in the process terrifying the hell out of Viv, and laying the groundwork for Hakram cutting off his hand to reassure Viv post the Woe's expedition to Keter while Cat and Archer are in the Everdark. Or the extra chapters that involve the attempted assassination of Hakram and some of the other members of the 15th's leadership cadre close to Cat in Ater, and their attempt to deal with it without getting Cat involved (who they thought would likely react poorly and overreact).

Shveiran

Agreed.

Personally, even that I find extremely unlikely after they got to see Black and Scribe falling out because of that kind of mess. I doubt he'd follow in her footsteps, especially since her actions didn't actually get him anything good.

Mammon

You should read Vivienne's Extra Chapters again. Adjutant scheming against Cat seems to be exactly what EE is hinting at, even if this may be a red herring or Vivi being misdirected or even seeing ghosts that aren't there. However, she and others (I think Tyrant and Akua but I could be wrong) have hinted at there at least being the possibility in EE's mind and thus the story.

gnaruscat

Oops, misread or misremembered the implication. Never mind

laguz24

The real question here is who is the fox? Bard or Cat?

[Liliet](#)

I'm still going with 'they are the same side, Bard is just neglecting to inform Catherine about that'

violentink

NO CAT!!!! You do not want to slip into the role of disliked authority figure to a band oof maverick heroes investigating a conspiracy... not when you are lying and hiding things from them. Because the story will MAKE THEM UNCOVER THAT. Genre savvy on noir fiction she is not...

Shveiran

...the revelation of what she is hiding actually absolves her, so... it's not really an issue?

violentink

You have greater faith in the reasonableness of the mirror knight et al. than I do.

Chapter 19: Spectral

"I'm afraid that that old saying about resting when you're dead has proved overly optimistic, my good fellows."

– Dread Empress Malevolent III

Having a dead body splayed on a table in an otherwise nice room was oddly nostalgic, I'd admit. It made me miss my sappers, who back in the old days had brought me the corpses of my enemies much like cats brought home chewed-up birds. It'd been too long since I'd sat down with Robber and Pickler in person, though in truth I might be able to see them before too long: if we went on the offensive in Hainaut to take back its capital and secure the shores, I'd want them both as part of the attacking army. There wasn't anyone quite like them when it came to getting the job done.

"The spirit still has ties to the body," the Harrowed Witch told us. "I can summon it back for a time, Your Majesty, if that is your wish."

The villainess looked nervous around me, as she'd been ever since I'd made it clear I could see through the enchantments she used to hide. I couldn't, actually, but the Crows could and I was not above the occasional lie to obscure the true scope of my abilities. Brown-eyed, brown-haired and rather drab in both clothes and conversation the other woman had a slight hunch in her shoulders that never quite went away – like she was expecting someone to slap her hard in the back at any moment. As I understood it the brother she'd murdered and now haunted her could not directly touch her, but as his strength waxed and waned the wraith was capable of speaking to her and sometimes even throw small objects.

Archer was inexplicably fond of this one, though I supposed Aspasia might be an acquired taste. Indrani herself was lounging on the edge of the sofa, having stolen the last of my bottle along with the nice little snacks the servants had put out during my absence. Admittedly the Wicked Enchanter's corpse had taken up the table where the plate had been waiting, but that was no excuse to just steal the whole thing and begin tearing through them.

"Is it actually the soul you call back?" I asked, genuinely curious.

In theory, necromancy was capable of doing that. In practice necromancers tended to prefer setting up wards to prevent the souls from passing on or even outright binding the soul to the body before killing the individual – as Masego had once done for me, before First Liesse – since calling back a soul gone past the veil of death was tricky at the best of times. The only mages I'd ever heard of regularly doing such a thing were the Twilight Sages of the drow, who were long gone and their knowledge destroyed. The Sisters had seen to that, and thoroughly.

"The priests say it isn't," the Harrowed Witch hedged. "That it's just some spirit called up from the death and the echo of the mind."

Said priests had declared me an abomination in a Salian conclave after I'd tricked a resurrection out of the Hashmallim, so I was inclined to take their assertions with a grain of salt. Though calling back a soul was hardly resurrection the House of Light in the west had always jealously guarded what it saw as the sole domain of the Heavens, and thus theirs. Proceran mages having been squeezed out of the healing trade was proof enough of that.

"And what do you believe?" I asked.

"Even if they're right," she shrugged, "there's not much difference, is there? Whether the spirit's fresh or old, it's still got the same stuffing."

"Praesi believe it's the soul," Archer told me. "And that the imperfect memory is because you can't drag one back without damaging it some, not unless the formula is perfect in a way no one's managed."

Yeah, well, just as the Proceran priesthood had a vested interest in claiming this to be spirit-work it could be said that the Praesi had an interested in claiming the opposite. The Wasteland was fond of claiming its ways would make you as a god, if you were good enough at them. And if someone could master life and death, while it might not make you a God shouldn't it make you at least the lesser kind?

"So long as I get my own questions answered, that one we can leave to the Wasteland and the priests," I said. "Do it, Witch."

"By your will, Black Queen," the villainess bowed.

She knelt by the Wicked Enchanter's corpse and laid hands on his face, peeling open the sightless eyes and prying open his mouth. Two fingers she pressed against the black and swollen tongue, whispering urgently in the mage tongue, and the same again on the ear of the left side and then the right.

"Three black pearls were granted unto me by the spirits of the land, and I bestow upon you their use this hour," the Harrowed Witch said, her Chantant fluid and beautiful and ringing of something that was not Chantant at all. "One that you may hear, and in death obey. One that you may speak, as I bid you now. One that you may know once more, heedful and waking. I know the secrets of the sleeping stones and I have heard the echoes that outlived the word: I am mistress among the lost, and I command you to *return*."

The last word reverberated with power, with will, and though it was neither aspect nor Speaking it was the culmination of a skilled witch's craft: the weight of it was not to be trifled with. A burst of cold wind passed through the parlour even as the Wicked Enchanter's corpse took a ragged gasp, as if the corpse had somehow sucked in the air, the brown-haired witch laid a hand atop the corpses' brow. The shadows in the well-lit room somehow seemed longer to me, and deeper in their darkness.

"I have him," she said, brow furrowed in concentration. "Ask your questions, and swiftly: he struggles against the call."

I cast a look at Indrani, who seemed only mildly interested by all of this. Not her first time up close to such a thing, I imagined. Well, might as well get this over with.

"Are you the Wicked Enchanter?" I asked.

"I am," the corpse rasped.

He twitched, as if trying to say more but being prevented by the Witch's firm grasp.

"Have you ever spoken with, or been spoken at by, a woman named Marguerite of Baillons?"

"I have not," the corpse rasped.

I frowned. Had the Wandering Bard changed face and name once more? No, perhaps my mistake had been of a different sort.

"Have you ever spoken with, or been spoken at by, the Wandering Bard?" I asked.

"Yes," the corpse rasped.

My veins thrummed with something that was neither fear nor excitement, for though I was not cowed by the notion of tangling with the Intercessor neither was I looked forward to it. I already had too many deadly enemies. And yet I would not deny that I was also relieved. Until that single word, it'd been possible that I was just putting up my own fears on a blank slate. Now I knew my enemy, and the war could begin in earnest.

"What did she tell you?"

"She warned me that I had been noticed," the Wicked Enchanter's shade told us. "And that my joys in the wilds would come to an end."

As I recalled, the dead villain had been the one to seek out the Grand Alliance and not the other way around, though there'd been some rumours of his existence in the far south.

"And this convinced you to seek out the Truce and Terms?" I pressed.

"Eventually. I brought my court to another three villages first."

So there it was, I mused. There was a story, back home, about one of the petty kings that'd ruled in Callow before the Albans united the realm. An old man, said in some tales to have ruled over Liesse and others in Dormer, but all agreed he'd been as harsh a tyrant as they come. But his knights had stayed loyal, and kept him from knives in the back, and for subtler threats he had bargained with a wizard. For great favours he'd won an enchanted amulet that would glow when in the presence of poisons, and so for many years the tyrant had ruled safely in his castle. Until one day a clever cook, whose kin had been killed on the tyrant's whim, arranged for a particular plate to be served: grilled mushrooms, the savoury kind growing in stone shadows known as the 'False Wings'.

The tyrant ate, for the amulet had not glowed, and then drank of his favourite mead as he every meal. The mushrooms, the False Wings, were not a poison. Neither was the mead. Yet mixed together, as they were in the tyrant's belly, they became a deadly mixture. The story went that the tyrant did not die of the poison, actually, but went so mad from the pain eating his insides he'd thrown himself off the highest tower of his keep.

The Wicked Enchanter was not, by himself, poison for the Truce and Terms. Scum, there was no denying that, but even scum was worth marshalling when the King of Death was on the march. The Truce being extended to the likes of him was the price of being able to pull in villains not quite so vile, who otherwise might wonder exactly where the line was drawn and elicit to instead remain in hiding – or, worse, make troubles at our back. *And it's necessary for what is to come*, I thought. The Liesse Accords must apply to everyone, even the worst of us, and if their predecessor-treaty had been used as a way to execute villains many of Below's would see them as a tool of heroic control and nothing more. Yet the Wicked Enchanter would have been tolerated, if he lent his Name and skills to the war against Keter.

He only became poison when the Red Axe was added to the meal: a heroine born of his very depredations, fated by her Role to slay him. And when she'd fulfilled that role, well... There would be time to consider the full breadth of that blow later, I told myself. First there was one last piece of information that I must extract from the dead. While it was possible the Bard would have relied on mere chance to have the two fated foes encounter each other, and chance did tend towards a certain theatrical certainty when it came to Named, the way the killing had been described to me smacked of it being arranged. It'd taken place in the Knot, the central halls of the Arsenal, when they were filled with people and other Named were not too far – yet not so close that they might be able to intervene.

The Intercessor had boots on the ground, like as not, and I wanted to know who was filling them.

"When you encountered the Red Axe," I said, "where were you headed?"

"To the Repository."

My brow rose.

"Why?" I asked him.

"A supply convoy had come the day before," the corpse rasped. "The red orchid I paid for would be stashed in the usual crate."

"I can't hold much longer," the Harrowed Witch hoarsely said.

I nodded in acknowledgement. Smuggling, huh. I supposed I shouldn't be surprised: this place might be a wonder, but in the end people were people. I'd see to it this leak was plugged and whoever was involved got the noose, but what had been mentioned was not familiar to me. Red orchid, was it? I cast a curious look at Archer, whose own brow rose.

"Drug," she told me. "Hard stuff, expensive and from the Free Cities. Hard to kick when the hooks are in, too."

Probably illegal in Procer, I mused. An addiction – particularly one to a substance even Indrani seemed wary of – was an obvious lever for the Bard to use, I thought, but there would have been need for another Named to arrange the practical aspects of it. Possible well in advance, I thought, which was a disquieting notion.

"How did you hear about smuggler?" I asked the corpse.

"I was told by the Concocter," the shade of the Wicked Enchanter rasped.

And there went the last detail I'd needed to know.

"Thank you for your service," I told the dead thing. "You will receive your dues under the Terms, even from the grave."

And not an inch more, I thought. I gestured at the brown-haired witch, signifying I was done.

"Kill the girl," the corpse hissed. "*Killkillkillkill-*"

"I release you," the Harrowed Witch gasped. "Begone."

Wind blew out violently, rustling my cloak and pushing back strands of my hair, but in its wake the room seemed settled. There'd been a weight in the air, a tension, that had now been released. Sweat beaded the villainess brow, and she was panting like she'd just fought for her life.

"What a charmer, that one," I nonchalantly said. "But at least he was talkative, thanks to you. You've done me a good turn, Harrowed Witch."

"I know to keep my mouth shut, Your Majesty," she weakly replied. "There is no need to present the stick now that you've dangled the carrot."

"Archer's already vouched for you," I said, "else I would not have asked you at all."

Aspasie shot Indrani a surprised look. I sympathized with her there, as Archer's actual affections tended to be rather opaque. I tended to blame that on the Lady of the Lake, but honesty

compelled me to admit it might have been in part natural inclination as well. Indrani replied with a smile, or at least tried to: she'd stuffed the last snack whole in her mouth, so her bulging cheeks rather undid the intended effect until she swallowed.

"I meant what I said," I told the witch. "Consider how you'd like the favour repaid and return to me when you are certain."

"You're powerful enough to simply compel my service," Aspasia said, sounding genuinely bewildered. "Why make this offer when you have nothing to gain?"

Because if you never reward siding with you, the only rewards to be won are in siding against you, I thought.

"Forced service is always mediocre," I said. "And I've no patience for such things. I'll use you, I won't deny that or pretend we are equals, but you will also gain from the use."

The Harrowed Witch slowly nodded, looking abashed, and hesitantly rose to her feet.

"I will keep your words in mind, Your Majesty," she said. "And return to you with an answer."

Archer from the side, finished licking up the last of the mousse on her fingers and snatched up my bottle of aragh. She tossed it at the brown-eyed witch, though she was too slow and only caught it after it'd hit her sternum and dropped into her outstretched hands.

"Archer," she complained.

"I know how your head gets after a restless calling," Indrani said, almost gentle. "Drink up, or you'll have a pounding headache by the time you get to your rooms."

"I'll still have one if I drink this," the Harrowed Witch said, "I'll simply be drunk as well."

"It'll take the edge off, at least," Archer snorted. "You still got your fancy herbs?"

"Julien scattered them," she mourned.

Her brother, I took it. The realization seemingly drove the decision to pull at the bottle, though she choked on the Praesi hard liquor and had to force herself to gulp it down.

"What is this, the Dead King's piss?" the Witch moaned, then had a moment of panic when she looked at me. "Um, I mean, Your Majesty--"

"Taghreb delicacy," I told her amusedly. "Consider yourself lucky you never tried dragon's milk."

"I might have something for your head," Indrani mused, "I'll pass by your rooms later."

"If you're just bringing a hammer again, that ceased being even slightly funny after the third time," the brown-haired woman complained.

I smothered my chuckle with all the practice of a woman well-acquainted with Indrani. It was a dismissal, even if one delivered by Archer instead of myself, and the villainess treated it like one. She made her courtesies and departed swiftly, my bottle still in hand. I blew out a long breath after Archer closed the door behind her.

"The Concocter, huh," I said.

"She'd a shady, haughty prig," Indrani said, "always has been, but I don't think she's your traitor Cat. Hells, what would the Bard have to even offer her? She doesn't care about politics, only that she can keep making her potions."

I wasn't inclined to romanticize the Concocter having joined us without prompting, myself. Much like the Beastmaster she'd only come to us because Refuge had collapsed after Ranger's disappearance, though her concerns had been more direct than Beastmaster's: without a pack of Named to trade with, the Waning Woods had lost much of their appeal for her. It wasn't like she was going to be hunting for manticore hearts or elderwood snake fangs herself. The Arsenal had been what she was after, the funding and books and safety of it, and she'd certainly thrived there. She'd gone from trading healing poultices in the woods to being able to order her pick of ingredients from Mercantis through Proceran envoys, and she'd been judged useful enough to be made the informal lead of one of the secret projects: Sudden Abjuration might also be under Roland, who was higher in the pecking order of the Arsenal, but it was ultimately an alchemical pursuit and so her word carried more weight than his.

"She's involved with the smuggling, at least," I replied. "And she brought in the Enchanter. I'm not saying she's an ardent partisan of the Bard, but do you really think she's above cutting a deal?"

The Intercessor had been studying human nature since the days where Calernia used bronze. She was a very, very skilled temptress when she put her mind to it.

"Dunno," Indrani reluctantly admitted. "The Lady was always keen on reminding us that fucking around with your betters was a sure way to get burned, and we all learned that lesson some, but the

Concocter was always clever. She got ahead just by trading, and she used what she had to get away with a lot. It's always been her, then everybody else. I don't think even Lady Ranger knew her real name."

"I have questions for her," I said. "How nicely they'll be asked, that depends on her."

Indrani put up her hands in appeasement.

"Don't misunderstand, Cat," she said. "We shared a camp years ago, that's all there is to it. If you want to cut off a few fingers to set the mood, I'm not protesting. I'm just saying that the Arsenal is a wet dream come true for her, so she'd be careful about not mucking it up too much."

I grunted in acknowledgement. To my understanding having shared the tutelage of the Ranger wasn't really the kind of shared history that bound people together closely, save perhaps in shared mingled fear and admiration of the woman, but I still knew precious little about Indrani's years there. She was rather tight-lipped about it, save for a few well-worn amusing stories she was always ready to dust off around a campfire when the drinks got flowing.

"Would she say more if you went knocking alone?" I asked.

"Would she be less wary if the wasn't the fucking *Black Queen* popping up unannounced?" Indrani said, sounding amused. "Who knows? It might just be one of those unsolvable mysteries of life."

I sighed.

"Fine," I said. "Go ahead, see what you can get out of her. But 'Drani, I need those answers. If you don't think you can-"

"I *can*," Archer assured me.

I searched her face for a moment, to see if it was stung pride talking, but she seemed certain.

"I'll get harsh if I have to," Indrani continued when I did not answer. "Cat, you can trust me with this."

But this was important, I almost said. This was the Bard, and I could not take risks, and... *You were warned by Adjutant that you could only take so much on your shoulders without running yourself ragged*, Akua's voice echoed, over the broken corpse of a boy and the bitter taste of failure. *You did not heed his words*. I couldn't handle this alone, guiding every moving part. Hells, having trusted allies might genuinely be the single absolute advantage I held over the Intercessor. And still it felt like a

mistake to let Archer go alone, because what if *she* made a mistake? There was trusting someone, and then there was trusting them to win. I clenched my fists. *This is fear*, I thought. *This fear speaking through my lips, a worm slipped into my mind through my ear. And once fear rules, she is the mother of defeat.*

"Go," I said. "And ask about the gas in the Miscellaneous Stacks as well. There are others here who could make those, but she would be the best hand for the work."

"I'll get it out of her," Archer promised. "I know that look, though. Where are you headed?"

"A pretty blonde invited me for a drink," I told her. "Figured now as good a time as any."

"You're pulling my leg, you wench," she grinned.

"I speak no lie," I grinned back. "If I'm not here, then look for me in the rooms of the Prince of Brus."

Now, I'd never actually paid all that much attention to the arcane rules governing Proceran wine drinking so I had to wonder: which was it that went with asking a stranger to commit what was *technically* a spot of treason, a red or a white?

—

"And you say this liquor is called *aragh*?" Prince Frederic Goethal said, sounding delighted.

I made a mental note to order a raise for the Callowan quartermaster here who'd ensured there would be a decent reserve of Legions and Army liquors. The Taghreb drink was actually a favourite among even my countrymen these days, the taste for it having spread from the former Legions officers to the men and women they'd trained.

"Indeed," I replied. "I developed a taste for it when I trained at the War College. It was quite popular amongst the cadets there."

The Prince of Brus was no longer in armour, having instead traded it for a riot of silk in red and blue whose shape and cut somehow evoked wings splayed across the Proceran warrior-prince's chest. I availed myself of what was being displayed, namely some very nicely muscles on an otherwise slender body. The accompanying silken trousers were tight enough they made clear the calves under them were iron-hard, which they were very clearly meant to. Prince Frederic had been quite surprised by my unannounced visit but proved to be an amicable host, leading us to the little salon attached to his rooms and dismissing the servants so that we might speak alone.

"Ah, the famous War College," the blond mused. "I have heard many tales of it, most of them I suspect of being splendid lies."

He popped open the bottle and laid down the cork on the table between us – once again a low one between two sofas, the Proceran basics had very clearly been used as a standard for decoration across the Arsenal – before offering me a smile.

"Unless, Your Majesty, it is true that you once defeated an army with an exploding goat?"

I coughed.

"It was only a company, and the goats were part of a greater strategy," I confessed.

"Dear Gods," Frederic Goethal mused, "if I return home with word that Special Tribune Robber is not a complete and utter liar, the Morgentor itself might well fall over from the shock."

That little shit, I thought, not entirely angrily. A quarter of the continent away, and still he was finding ways to be a pain in my ass.

"Tell me he's not doing plays anymore, at least," I asked.

"Their all-goblin rendition of 'The Election of Blessed Clothor' saw several of my courtiers weep openly," the Prince of Brus cheerfully denied.

I noted he did not specify whether the weeping was at the beauty of it or the sheer horror. Truly, the man was a skilled diplomat. I gestured to offer to pour from the bottle and he conceded, rising instead to fetch the very crystal glasses with gold rims. Gods, I hoped those were his and not the Arsenal's. If my kingdom's taxes had ended up pitching for gold-rimmed glasses, someone on my side had been botching their job. I poured him a generous measure, and a smaller one for myself – I'd already had a few, after all. Besides, from what I recalled Proceran court etiquette dictated that women should drink daintier cups of strong spirits. Larger cups of wine, though, strangely enough. Something about men having stronger stomachs but women better palates.

"Prince Frederic," I began.

"Frederic," he insisted. "I've told you before, Your Majesty."

"Catherine, then," I replied.

It was a false closeness, this, but not one that was particularly unpleasant to me. I suspected that if I got to know this man, I might actually grow to like him.

"It would be my pleasure," the Prince of Brus smiled, perfect white teeth and stunning eyes taking me aback. "Might I offer a toast, Catherine? To the Grand Alliance!"

He raised his cup.

"To old enemies, and new friends," I replied, touching his glass with mine.

We both drank, and I noted with approval that he did not choke and his eyes did not water. It was always pleasing when a man knew how to hold his liquor. Our glasses touched the table, and the Prince of Brus leaned back.

"I believe," he said, "that I might have interrupted you. I offer apology, and willing ear."

I mulled over that a moment, choosing how the subject was to be broached,

"Are you fond of stories, Frederic?" I asked.

"A complicated question," the Prince of Brus said. "As a boy I would have mocked it, but I have learned better in the years that followed. It would be a lie to speak of like or dislike, perhaps. In the end I take stories to be much like the finest of paintings: a thousand men and women can look at the same and find different sight, yet none of them are entirely right or wrong."

"Ah," I mused, "but there lies the power of it all: for a thousand men and women, there was something there to be found."

"I have known the right truth to give a man wings, Catherine," Frederic Goethal quietly said. "I do not deny the power of stories."

"That is comforting to hear," I said. "Now, if I spoke of *intercession* to you, would the word mean anything?"

The Grand Alliance was aware of the Wandering Bard, the enigmatic Named that had not joined the Truce and Terms and could not be trusted – I would have had her known as a foe outright, but the Grey Pilgrim had been bitterly opposed. Knowledge of the Intercessor, though, was more sparse. I had shared much of what I knew with Cordelia Hasenbach, and in turn she had shared the insights of the Augur, but I did not know how broadly she had spread that knowledge. Considering Frederic Goethal was both a prince of Procer and Named, though, he struck me as likelier to be warned than most.

"It would," the man murmured. "Agnes Hasenbach is a woman of deep and painful wisdom, whose word I will not gainsay."

"Knowing both these things," I said, "do you understand how a ruler who is Named might sometimes act according to rules that are not the rules of Creation's shallows?"

I'd asked Vivienne about Prince Frederic Goethal, about his reputation in Procer, before he became Named. He'd garnered some interest from me since he was the only southern royal to have marched his armies north instead of south. The report had mentioned some things that were well-known, like the fact that he was wildly popular among Lycaonese as well as northwestern Alamans and apparently considered to be among the finest warriors and generals in Procer, as well as more discreet truths. He was considered to be one of Cordelia's fiercest loyalists and had once proposed to her, but within the Highest Assembly and Proceran royalty at large he was considered rather indifferent to politics. He'd survived this long dealing with cutthroat princes though, I thought, so he wouldn't be slow on the uptake. In the highest reaches of Procer, even standing still required a great deal of cunning.

"The kind of action," Prince Frederic slowly said, "that an unenlightened observer might consider... harmful to one's position, I imagine. Yet most sensible according to a different set of rules."

Gods, but I did enjoy dealing with intelligent allies. It was always a treat not to have to drag people to the right conclusion kicking and screaming.

"I would not want a request for such an action," I said, "to be taken as having another, baser purpose."

"I am not blind to the corpses you have left behind you, Queen Catherine," the Prince of Brus softly said, "or to fell deeds done by your hands. But I also remember the stench on the fields of Aisne, and that men had never needed Below or Tower to make butchery of themselves. I also know that if it is the destruction of Procer that you sought, the most required of you was not to do a thing at all. We are allies, Catherine Foundling. If you need my help, I will do what I can."

I looked at him steadily and tried not to let out that I was actually rather impressed with the man. After a moment I cleared my throat.

"I'll be direct, then," I said. "I need you to break out the Red Axe from where she is currently being held, then protect her from what is coming."

"And what is it that is coming?" the Kingfisher Prince asked, eyes gone hard as steel.

"I cannot yet name it," I said, "but I know this: were stand atop a mound of sharpeners, and the death of the Red Axe is how the match is struck."

epokki

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> , please do vote, topwebfiction is a big boost to help people find the series. Thanks.

Insanenoodlyguy

"I cannot yet name it," I said, "but I know this: we stand atop the rankings of topwebfiction, and the votes of the dedicated readers is how the slot is kept."

Frivolous

Really good update. Nice and enlightening depictions for the first time of the Harrowed Witch, Aspasia, and again of Frederic, the Kingfisher Prince, who really does seem to be a jolly good fellow. Cat would be difficult to fool at this point, her judgment is pretty good.

Also I like that Cat has (I believe correctly) deduced that killing the Red Axe is the aim of the Intercessor.

[Javvies](#)

No, killing the Red Axe isn't Bard's goal. But likely just means to the end goal of destroying the Truce and Terms, any hope of establishing the Accords, and most likely killing Cat.

Frivolous

Sorry, I thought it went without saying that the Red Axe is not the ultimate goal of the Intercessor, just a way station on the way to the doom of Cat's hopes and the Age of Order.

Let me clarify, then: I think the Intercessor's ultimate goal is to avoid having to learn to navigate an entirely different set of stories than the one she has spent millennia learning, the set of stories typical of the Age of Wonders.

Cat's Age of Order (so named by Amadeus) would be very different in terms of the stories it would favor and the ones it would disallow, and the Intercessor would fear and hate that. She'd be rendered at least a little bit irrelevant, because her instincts would be all wrong. Like re-learning to

run when the rules of physics you've known all your life have changed.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I'm still onboard the 'she's helping, honest' train 😊

[TeK](#)

What if WB was the good guy all along?

Shikkarasu

Just because you are Good Guy, doesn't mean you are good guy.

[Liliet](#)

That's basically what I'm going with :3

NerfContessa

Yeah, she's only been halping for 3 millennia, obviously....

And the prince continues to be my favored hero and proceran.

Sakul_A

I would even go farther.

The Intercessor role is to keep the balance of power within the Age of wonder.

The moment the age of order truly manifests this role will be lost and this would mark the end of the purpose of the Intercessor.

Cat is in the process of becoming named again and we learned that there is some connection of succession at play.

It might be possible that under the accords a new name will be born to keep the balance and that Cat might replace the Intercessor.

So to allow Cat to become Named again she first has to win against the Intercessor. With this the Age of Order wins over the Age of Wonder.

[Javvies](#)

In this vein, Cat may be being lined up for a mantle of power along the lines of "Arbitrator" instead of "Intercessor".

The Intercessor maintained the status quo of the Age of Wonders, while the Arbitrator will establish and enforce the Age of Order.

Although, as a successor to the Intercessor, the Arbitrator might not be a normal Name as we understand it.

erebus42

Frederic seems like an intelligent and reasonable sort which is quite refreshing. His presence is a bit perplexing though. It seems like the work of providence but it would appear to work against WB's plan. That would seem to imply that two opposing stories were being pushed or at least that an out was provided. But by whom? I was under the impression that while she could nudge things along and broker deals on behalf of the Gods, WB was incapable of working at cross purposes with them. Maybe Frederic is really a hidden ace in the hole for WB. Maybe WB made a miscalculation. Maybe the Gods are just stirring the pot on a whim. I'm sure all will eventually be revealed in appropriately dramatic fashion.

[Javvies](#)

I'm pretty sure that Frederic is here because Augur sent him here, most likely with the intent of stopping Bard's plots and helping Cat protect the Truce and Terms.

[Liliet](#)

Consider: what if Bard's goal is in fact to set Cat up to handle the sharper before it explodes in a worse way without her around?

Like... come on. The nemesis problem was going to come up INEVITABLY. Bard's not arranging something that WOULD NEVER HAPPEN WITHOUT HER MEDDLING, here.

Shveiran

This pretty much boils down to the old argument of Bard actually being on Cat side. A different take on Tariq's own speech back in book 5: "the Bard put you to the test, but because you survived that's proof she thinks you are a good person and thus is on our side".

Likewise, the argument here is (simplifying, obviously) that since WB is the mistress of schemes and plots and narrative and Cat has been sailing those winds to victory time and again, doesn't it make more sense that she is doing with Bard's help behind the curtains rather than against her will?

And I mean... it's not like it is a flawed argument. I don't find it persuasive, but it's not like there are objectively wrong things in that reasoning. Basically, we know so very little about the Bard for certain, that most

theories can make sense if you take a little time explaining all her known actions in the novel so far.

I'd argue this from a meta point of view, though: would that twist be satisfying?

Because... honestly... I don't see how it could ever be.

Bard's fingerprints have been all over the story ever since book 3: if it turns out Bard is working against Cat, winning is Cat's triumph; if Bard is working with Catherine unbeknownst to her, this becomes Bard's triumph through Cat. We know she has been dueling the DK as an equal, if she is on the Alliance's side... it's not Catherine's victory anymore.

It's the Bard either finding a good horse or outright breeding one to finally win.

Maybe, if there were more books coming, I could see your twist working. But now? Even if Bard was to bit it in this narrative arc, that still steals the thunder from everything Cat has achieved so far, and leaves us so very little time for her to step up to the challenge and have a satisfying conclusion.

I'm sorry, I just don't see it working from a narrative perspective. It would be so very unsatisfying.

[Liliet](#)

We'll just have to see, because I find the narrative of "Bard cannot actually do shit without someone doing all the actual work of their own will" pretty compelling in potentia.

mamm0nn

I don't think providence has been shown to be that absolute, with foresight and complexity. William couldn't be beaten by normal foes and was likely even more protected against Black, back when Cat was destined to be killed by him, but with Tyrants swan song Providence kinda just gathered a lot of Named in one place from which most were not used at all.

Providence can influence but not completely control, lest you let it. Frederic might be just one of those Named gathered here just to have another playing piece nearby if needed, simply attracted to the weight of events same as Tyrants swan song. Or his intended Role might have just been interrupting a premature fight between Cat and MK, without providence assuring he would leave immediately after.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Frederic seems to have been sent by the Oracle, who is a known ally against Bard's manipulations. I think he's meant

to be a spoiler for the fight plot – a charismatic, smart hero who even the Mirror Knight will back down for, and who Cat can recruit for “solving the mystery” and the associated parlor scene.

WealthyAardvark

In all likelihood he’s here for the all-staff meeting. Everyone is coming, and those who can’t are being scried with the Mirage. Archer and Catherine were merely the first to arrive.

...It occurs to me that we saw the Repentant Magister and Blessed Artificer mucking about in the depths of the Mirage during the Terms interlude (supposedly having something to do with Cat and Night), but Masego left without doing the inspection he intended to do. I’m suddenly worried that if Cat enters the Mirage there could be disastrous consequences.

Agent J

I’ve been eyeing that gun on Chekhov’s wall for some time now. That the Artificer blinded Masego when he came is highly suspicious for a slew of reasons.

[Mammon](#)

We were already told that because of that action the Artificer is filing a compliant, Cat essentially has a free pass to talk to her now (one on one if need be) and be accusing towards the Artificer’s whole schtick with legitimate cause of items, her attacking her superior unprovoked, etc., without this being illogical or mere Good vs Evil, though quite likely this could be a Bard scheme same as luring Cat into the library just before it getting gassed.

WealthyAardvark

Ah, it’s beyond likelihood. I just glanced at the Terms interlude and found this line.

“Twilight’s Pass sent the Kingfisher Prince to speak in its name, but neither Princes Rozala nor the Iron Prince will be able to make the journey.

So he does have a legitimate reason to be here. While it’s still possible he is here as part of a scheme, I see no reason to suspect him of anything at the moment.

Shveiran

Uh, good catch. I’d missed that. Than providence factors in just the timing – which, you know, is a hero’s due.

Taylor

The last line is almost poetry, I love it

Nuke_The_Earth

It is so fucking refreshing to meet a guy on the other side who knows when to shut his mouth and Get Shit Done.

Anomandris

Might still be a trap....

JJR

I wonder if we're about to see some symmetry breaking in the Above Below dichotomy. Until recently there was only the good/evil axis. Perhaps going forward we get to see a law/chaos axis form.

Anomandris

Somehow, Robber putting on plays didn't surprise me at all.

Beware the Goats!!

mamm0nn

Why are you using dog actors for the goats when you have goats you're using as horses? What strange goblin theatrics, such exotic culture.

Halinn

The subtleties and intricacies of a goblin play are truly enough to make a grown man cry

[Javvies](#)

Fucking Bard.

And, I think that is likely confirmation (or as close as we're likely to get) that Frederic was probably sent by Augur to spike Bard's plots and assist Cat in the maintaining of the Truce and Terms.

Fucking Bard.

ravedthrad

Based on all that's happened, here, I think it would be interesting if it turns out that it's the Red Axe who will go on to kill the Wandering Bard.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It would be ironic, but I'm afraid that's the only thing it has going for it. By either *our* sotry or (inferred) status in the Guideverse, Red Axe is a bit character who popped out of nowhere to kill another bit character. Which is fine for setting up a trap for Cat, but not remotely in the league for "finally kills off the Eternal Kibitzer after 10,000 years".

flashburn283

That would be the one thing she didn't see coming, what kind of story is it where a no lines bit part suddenly cuts the knot?

It's not a story at all, it is plain old reality coming in and doing what it wants, and the Intercessor has no defense against that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Just so – it's our world's reality, not the Story-bound metacausality of the Guideverse. Probably not an option for Cat, or the Bard either.

RoflCat

Physical death doesn't stop Bard, she'll simply get a new identity each time.

As much as Severance/Severity has been sitting there like a Chekhov's Gun for a while now, unless Cath's punishment for Red Axe is to be a test subject for 'how to wield the sword made of angry grandma' I doubt Red Axe will get to use it.

Also it'd require Cath (or more likely, Frederick here) to somehow convince Red Axe that her being Bard-led into killing her tormentor was a 'bad' thing and that she should take revenge for it.

Isaac Martinez

"Forced service is always mediocre," I said. "And I've no patience for such things. I'll use you, I won't deny that or pretend we are equals, but you will also gain from the use."

Do you think that this form of thinking was what gave form to the not-undead when she was the Ice Queen?

mamm0nn

The not-undead were likely fey spirits. Not quite fey with a body and Name, more alike the commoners of their realm. It was a fey thing, not a Cat thing.

Juff

Typo Thread:

and now haunted > that now haunted
wee long > were long
right," she shrugged, "there's > right"—she shrugged—"there's
Queen," the > Queen." The
air, the > air, and the
corpses' brow > corpse's brow
was I looked > was I looking
and elicit to instead (something wrong here)
that I must > that I had to
about smuggler > about the smuggler
ben a weight > been a weight
villainess brow > villainess's brow
Archer from the side, finished > Archer, from the side, finished
"She'd a shady > "She's a shady
traitor Cat > traitor, Cat
if the wasn't > if there wasn't
This fear speaking > This is fear speaking
wench," she > wench." She
lie," I > lie." I
nicely muscles
fetch to very crystal > fetch very crystal (also, is very crystal
intentional?)
pleasure," the > pleasure." The
broached, > broached.
were stand atop > we stand atop

[Liliet](#)

Okay, so... seriously, Cat? You did not see this coming?

The poison metaphor is great, but two nemeses being both brought in on the agreement is not exactly an unlikely combination? Like, the king wouldn't have ever eaten those two things together if the cook hadn't set it up, but THIS WAS GOING TO HAPPEN INEVITABLY AT SOME POINT. Bard accelerated the timetable and likely determined the precise time and place of the explosion, but – CAT. WOULD. HAVE. NEEDED. TO. DEAL. WITH. THIS. EITHER. WAY

JEEZ CATHERINE

anyway yeah I love how Frederic is awesome and I love how he understands that Catherine is an ally ♥ of course he of all people would ♥
(also Cat still kind of sucks at subtle, but that might just be me)

luv this next step of hers, too :3

hakureireimu

It became a problem only because it happened in the Arsenal with too many witnesses. Otherwise if the Wicked Enchanter is killed out in the boonies they can just cover it up, assuming they even find out in the first place.

Liliet

“Covering it up” is not a long-term solution to a systemic problem. “So what happens if I run into the person I swore to kill” is a legitimate question for heroes to ask upon joining, and “so what happens if I run into the person who swore to kill me” is a legitimate question for villains.

John

Truce and Terms are meant as a temporary measure, only needing to last until the Dead King has been dealt with and a de facto unified Calernian government is established. There is no time or money for eternal perfection during an all-out war, and so the adequate fix would normally be to compile a roster of who’s feuding with who, then simply assign them duties within the larger military machine such that they need never interact with each other.

The longer-term system is likely to tolerate personal vendettas – or at least consider them a local, rather than strategic, concern – so long as they end with a nice tidy duel and maybe some weregild, rather than burning cities or otherwise needlessly endangering innocent bystanders.

Javvies

More specifically, the Truce and Terms are really only supposed to last for the duration of the war plus a finite period of time to negotiate a post war order, which will include the Accords.

And under the Accords, Heroes and Villains can and will be able to go after each other, with some limitations on what they can do and to what extent they can pull non-Named people into disputes between Named.

That is, the Truce and Terms are intended to keep everyone focused on the Dead King, without needing to worry about getting stabbed in the back by their supposed allies. The Truce and Terms aren’t supposed to stop all Named conflicts. They’re just supposed to put them on hold while dealing with the far greater mutual and existential threat that is the Dead King, plus some extra time to allow for negotiations to take place about post war international structures and rules governing post war Named conflict. Plus a degree of trust building measures so that those post war negotiations and the Accords are more viable.

As a real world analogy, think World War 2 China – the communists and the nationalists mostly stopped fighting each other when the Japanese invaded. They focused their efforts on fighting Japan, until Japan had been defeated, and then postwar negotiations between the communists and nationalists collapsed and the civil war restarted. The Truce and Terms are a formalization of a similar truce and de facto alliance against a greater mutual threat, here in the form of the Dead King, and hopefully lay stronger foundations for additional and more successful post war negotiations and agreements.

The long term, hopefully permanent, Accords cannot, will not, and were never supposed to prohibit all Named conflicts, just put restrictions on them to minimize collateral damage.

Oh, I'll grant that if/when Cardinal is established, there'll probably be strictly enforced rules about Named conflict within its bounds, above and beyond those that apply elsewhere, but there'll also be a dispute resolution mechanism for those covered by those extra restrictions.

And, sure, maybe the Accords will include clauses that allow for reactivation of a temporary prohibition on Calernian Named conflict in the event of a major threat to Calernia as a whole.

But again, that kind of prohibition on Named conflict is always going to be of finite (if not necessarily always pre-, or easily, determined) duration and everybody knows, or should know, that to be the case.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> The long term, hopefully permanent, Accords cannot, will not, and were never supposed to prohibit all Named conflicts, just put restrictions on them to minimize collateral damage.

> Oh, I'll grant that if/when Cardinal is established, there'll probably be strictly enforced rules about Named conflict within its bounds, above and beyond those that apply elsewhere, but there'll also be a dispute resolution mechanism for those covered by those extra restrictions.

The other thing that the Accords will provide is a method and structure for judging cases and deciding who gets to deal with violations.

E.g., Some lord comes by saying: "The Prasi lord that attacked my land threatened that if I didn't pay them protection, they'd summon a demon against me..." Somebody needs to check the credibility and truth of the

allegation, if upheld then they decide who gets to go and take out the demon-summoner.

Essentially they're trying to upgrade things from individual vendettas, to at least the level of vigilance committees.

Liliet

> compile a roster of who's feuding with who, then simply assign them duties within the larger military machine such that they need never interact with each other.

and is it Intercessor's fault that they did not do that?

Mental Mouse

That's not just professional, but expert, personnel management – in context, Name-level.
Not so easy, nor consistently available.

Shveiran

Plus, Red Axe is a newcomer and information sharing is still limited with regards to wandering murderous vagrants- I MEAN Bands of Five. Indrani knew about the Wicked Enchanter – Red Axe issue, but she didn't know that WE would be at the Arsenal.

This is not a flawed system (or rather, it isn't a system with a big flaw someone should have seen coming), it's just a system that has several mobile parts required to deal with the DK and the war, that even when willing to have logistical difficulties talking to each other. Things slip through the crack.

With that said, the system is just meant to make it easier to put grudges aside.
When the system fails, it's not like you are forced to act on it: it is still a choice.

So we are back to the fact that at the end of the day the Red Axe dropped the ball. I can sympathize with her conundrum, but the moment where she drew her weapon was the one she decided that killing that SOB was more important than the Truce that's keeping the continent afloat.

And I don't know about Heroes, but that is not what a hero does.

Liliet

We still don't know how the confrontation actually went. I don't DISAGREE with you per se, just that

there's several moving parts in it that might impact the overall estimation of Red Axe's actions.

Mental Mouse

I'm with hakureireimu: Something of the sort was inevitable, but having it happen just as Cat arrives, with a full party of heroes warned in advance and showing up on cue... that's pure Story.

Shveiran

Yes. Simply imagine it happening in a way that allows Hanno and Cat to discuss the matter and taking action together. It would still be a thorny issue, but far less dangerous.

Liliet

Yeah, now imagine it happening when neither Hanno nor Catherine are there. Which, given that this is Cat's first visit to the Arsenal in two years...

Mental Mouse

If it comes in as a report, that goes right to the Hanno & Cat showmeeting. Routine if regrettable business, optionally with mystery sideplot, but our buddies are ready for it.

Way different from "Hello—" "Shh! There's been a murder. Come around the back way." "HALT MISCREANTS!" "Who are *you* calling miscreants, barging in here like that?" "Ahem. What's all this then?" 😊

Liliet

We'll see how much of a powderkeg this place is.

Liliet

Just... I am not sure this would actually go better as a report to Cat&Hanno. Going to be like 'so a hero killed a villain and then everyone else killed each other and the place burned down despite being made of stone. sorry'

Mental Mouse

The point is, that wouldn't be a story in itself, it would basically be "sling and arrows of outrageous fate", sent to divert Cat's attention from the main fight, or at least open a new front (and we're late in the game for that).

But this is in fact her story, so instead, it kicks off just when she shows up, for her to deal with in realtime, not just investigate in retrospect.

Shveiran

I'm with Mental Mouse. This happening here and now has momentum, a gang of fanatical heroes serendipitously appearing on the scene "to prevent a murder that has just been even considered", the presence of the creator of the T&T, secret investigations over Fantasy-Manhattan project, and an incoming gathering of the bigwigs.

Without all this?

What gets to C&H table is not the report of a mass murder that destroyed the Arsenal, but rather a breach of Terms with a body on the floor.

That ends with a "You broke the Terms and killed an ally; is there something we can do to make you more comfortable before executing you?" talk, and even the fanatical heroes are stuck arguing with the Blade of Judgment over what is right rather than accusing the former Archeretic of the East.

Really not quite the same.

[Liliet](#)

Remember how Vagrant Spear had to be pulled off Hunted Magician?

[Auston Varner](#)

It seems less like she didn't see the nemesis thing coming at all, and more that she didn't predict the extremes of it. Another aspect of the story: if the mushrooms and mead had been mixed before the king ate them, it wouldn't have been a problem, because the goblet would have lit up to indicate the poison. Similarly, most of the time, nemeses could have been kept apart or convinced not to kill each other until the fight with the Dead King is over, but having such utter scum as the Wicked Enchanter run into a heroine who witnessed and may have been personally victimized by him, with no preparation, in an area full of named where the conflicts would be less expected to turn violent (after all, combat named like the Red Axe, who would usually be the type to swear vengeance, would generally be expected to show up at the war camps, not the Arsenal) is an unexpected problem. I can legitimately see the idea of nemeses itself coming up as a "we'll cross that bridge when we come to it" problem for the Terms, only to arrive at the bridge and see that it's already on fire with a pack of monsters on the other side and more coming up behind you.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, surely without Bard's intervention the best case scenario would have happened ;|

[Auston Varner](#)

Fair point, though I would argue that while Bard's involvement isn't necessary to make a mess of this, it most likely would have been much less of a mess without WB. The thing I personally find most unbelievable about this scenario isn't that the Terms as written didn't include a measure for this particular situation, but rather that this hasn't come up in the whole, what, two or three years thus far since the agreement was signed. Like, getting longstanding enemies with a variety of viewpoints and cultures working together is always going to be difficult, and I could easily see this being something that came up at the negotiating table only to have a pin put in it due to disagreements over how it should be handled threatening to derail the talks; "we'll work something out for this when it's not getting in the way of working everything else out," or something along those lines. After all, even without the difficulties mentioned above, they were on a deadline for the fight with the Dead King resuming. But nemeses never killing or trying to kill each other this whole time seems very far-fetched to me. That might just be that EE didn't think about it (they tend to catch most important details, but nobody's perfect), but I can also see it being meant to imply that they had some sort of workaround that kept problems to a minimum until now. Or, alternatively, the Truce and Terms might actually be a very bare-bones agreement with provisions for frequent amendments; that would actually fit well with their role as a prototype for the final Accords, as a good way to prototype is to start as simple as possible, then figure out solutions to problems as they come up, and once the rate of new problems has slowed you go back, refine everything, and integrate the various solutions with each other so the final product isn't a cobbled-together mess. I don't think that's actually what's going on here, because I've gotten the impression that the Truce and the Terms are pretty in-depth, but I couldn't make a citation to back that impression up, so it could be an option. Or you could be right and Cat actually just didn't think about it. Wouldn't match well with how thorough she was being about the Accords, but everyone has dumb moments

[Liliet](#)

I honestly get the impression it's bare bones yeah.

And honestly the fact nothing blew up until Cat went to the Arsenal for some downtime is part of what is

suggesting to me that Bard is helping, here. As in, is actually being helpful from the sidelines.

Auston Varner

That does make a lot of sense. I mean, the Bard has been fighting DK longer than anyone, and if I'm remembering correctly, he got something he could use against her when he was controlling Masego, so this could be her attempt to rebalance the scales.

ninegardens

And then we found out WB had spent the last two years preventing this pot from boiling over, and finally got sick of it and was like "Fine, we'll boil it over when Cat is there to clean up the bloody mess.... now who deserves an execution this week?"

Liliet

That was likely his knowledge of the angel weapon plan.

Halinn

> also Cat still kind of sucks at subtle, but that might just be me

What are you talking about? She's amazing at taking subtle and smashing it to bits

Burlyraven

It really does feel like Frederic is here as an outsider to the current story, but not necessarily in a forced way. My best guess is that he was sent by someone like Augur to be a disruptive influence. He's cunning and informed enough that he could possibly have seen around a story even Cat might have missed, heroic and noble enough to have beneficial if sometimes unpredictable reactions to events, and even handsome enough to play passive spoiler to any honey pots the Bard might set (like the Repentant Magister, say). While I don't necessarily hate the story it seems Cat's being goaded towards, it's still very likely a story of the Bard's construction, and therefore very unlikely to be good for Cat's health.

Mental Mouse

Oh, he's an Outsider in the current story all right – specifically, he's the Golden Hero sent by the Oracle to Save the Day™, with background chops and personality to properly fill those boots.

Captain Amazing

Hanno doesn't judge. He is the designated arbiter for the heroes and. He. Does. Not. Judge. The villains can only view this as a betrayal, especially with the Mirror Knight running around saying she must be spared. The Red Axe isn't meant to die at all. She's meant to live. I think Red has to be convinced into a heroic sacrifice against that bridge Neshamah is building. Along with maybe the Bard's mole if they're a hero. Possibly the Poet, considering the circumstances of their arrival? Anyway, if Catherine says something about wastefulness the villains will be appeased. Execution by heroic sacrifice bites against the heroes too. The heroes would also be fine as she voluntarily went there and so obviously wasn't executed.

Shveiran

"I am not blind to the corpses you have left behind you, Queen Catherine," the Prince of Brus softly said, "or to fell deeds done by your hands. But I also remember the stench on the fields of Aisne, and that men had never needed Below or Tower to make butchery of themselves. I also know that if it is the destruction of Procer that you sought, the most required of you was not to do a thing at all. We are allies, Catherine Foundling. If you need my help, I will do what I can."

Finally.

Finally, FINALLY, FI-NA-LLY, Fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinally, fiNAlly, F.I.N.A.L.L.Y, *finally*, **finally**, **FINALLY**.

Fuck.

I mean, I think I've been waiting 4 Books for this. Possibly 5, and maybe even 6.

Was that too hard, godsdamnit? Was this too high a bar to clear? WAS IT? WAS IT REALLY???

I'm good now.

Thank you, Frederic, for cleaning up after all the other imbecilles in your team. That would be all, I believe, take the day off and enjoy the aragh. Your job is done.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yup. Is it too soon to start shipping Foundric? 🤔

[Liliet](#)

Nah, a pretty good time really.

Shveiran

It is. Because I ship Frederic with myself and I will not tolerate rivals.

I will absolutely write awful self-insert fan-fiction if need be.

Eh, who am I kidding? I already have.

[Mental Mouse](#)

So..., after the war's over she could retire up north with him, close to her Drow and far enough from Callow to still qualify as The Queen ~~Under The Mountain~~ Up North. Maybe even produce an Offspring of Doom or two. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Amen.

P.S. don't forget to take Red Axe with you first! XD

Morgenstern

Hm. I wonder if the summoning of a spirit in this place could be enough to give the DK a sliver of access to the Arsenal... (If so: Ouch.)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Probably not, since it's her Aspect rather than a spell of his tainted school.

[Liliet](#)

She's a witch. DK doesn't hold domain over all necromancy.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Frederic may also redeem Cat's view of Proceran heroes. The one's she's met before now have not impressed her...

Chapter 20: Hook

"Fate is not the river but the fisherman: run wild as you will, it will reel you in before the end."

– Queen Edda Norland of Summerholm, shortly before the surrender of her crown to House Alban

I was a city girl at heart so hunting had never been something I thought all that fondly of.

Not that I hated it, either. Out in the country, away from walls and merchants, a good stag or a few geese were a good way for my people to feed their families. One that'd become increasingly common after the Conquest, actually: with the removal of most nobles in the kingdom, there were no longer great forests and fields reserved for the sole hunting right of aristocrats. The Empire had required a yearly fee in silver for the right to hunt in a governor's jurisdiction, but otherwise been largely indifferent to the practice. I'd maintained the policy, and why wouldn't I? It was a good way for my subjects to put meat on the table, especially those who might not have otherwise been able to afford it. But that'd been in the country, not in Laure.

There hunting had been a leisurely pursuit for the wealthy and the *noble*, practiced by great trains of riders and multiple packs of hounds. Sometimes the animals being hunted were not even edible: by ancient law foxes could not be hunted for sport in Callow, but wolves and bears could and frequently were. It'd been a great deal of pageantry and gold pissed away on reminding people that even under the rule of the Dread Empire the rich and highborn were still important and worthy of awe. The coin would have been better spent ensuring that the basins the street drains emptied in near Nelly's Alley didn't fill up after rain and so end up becoming an open-air sewer that stank up a good dozen city blocks like you wouldn't believe come summer sun, in my humble opinion, but what the Hells did I know?

I'd had them properly dug anew and done during my first year as queen, even though Ratface had howled about the costs.

Still, general distaste for the spectacle or not it'd been impossible not to pick up a few things about hunting being born in Callow. It wasn't as simple business as riding a swift horse after a stag and running it down with a spear, else highborn would not get to be so bloody pretentious about the whole thing. You had to tire out the beast, set dogs after it so it'd run itself to exhaustion. Only when it was on the edge of collapse would it turn and fight, antlers down as fear turned to despair, and only then was the kill to be made. If the nobles had gone after the stag themselves from the start, their horses would have tired out long before the stag would. I was after a beast of my own, here in the Arsenal, so I'd used a method not so dissimilar to that of my countrymen: to get the enemy running, I'd sent out a pack of baying hounds.

The Mirror Knight's band was even now chasing down a conspiracy to bring it into the light, though perhaps not the conspiracy they believed they were. They were a cacophonous bunch, but for all that I believed they'd be able to shake *something* loose. They certainly had the power and numbers for it: four heroes and the Maddened Keeper, with Adjutant to keep an eye on them and ensure they did not end up misusing the authority I'd granted them.

They'd begun their investigation with the Hunted Magician who, all things aside, we could all agree was a shifty fellow. Whether or not he'd been up to any sort of wickedness was not of too great import, as far as I was concerned: more crucial was that the heroes would be seen digging, and word would soon after spread it was with my blessing. There was someone in the Arsenal with something to hide, and ruby to piglets that little tale would get them moving. With such fine hounds out in the woods someone's never was going to crack, and they'd want to make sure their tracks were covered.

Following them should neatly reveal exactly what it was that was being covered up.

Mind you, the hand behind the opposition was not some ingrate prince with more greed than sense or a heroine fresh off her first nemesis' death and looking to sink her teeth into another victory: it was the Intercessor pulling the strings here. Just because she'd already struck blows didn't mean she was going to stop hitting me below the belt. If anything, it'd be the opposite. So I had to see to my own defences, which meant keeping the goblinfire away from any open flames. The Red Axe was a natural target there but seeing to her protection myself would make me directly involved in her death if it happened, which would be *considerably* worse than her simply dying. No, someone else needed to be charged with that else I was running into the risk that my personal involvement had been the desired object from the start.

The Kingfisher Prince was of high rank, popular with heroes and his word would mean a great deal to the likes of the Mirror Knight if he vouched for me. That he'd been demonstrably competent and receptive to the concept of the manner of war being fought over the Arsenal had sold me on the notion for good, and so off he went to see the Red Axe with a signed set of orders from me granting him permission to do so under the Terms. Gods help him, mine and maybe even Above if they were to share a win instead of pissing in the communal porridge bowl out of principle.

Now, it wouldn't be enough to simply wait and see now that the hunt had been sounded. Which was why Archer was hitting up her old acquaintance the Concocter for answers, a conversation that should end up with the latter spitting out a part of the Wandering Bard's design here. It had to have been a long-term scheme, I figured: the Red Axe and the Wicked Enchanter had been tools of opportunity, but the tools to use *them* had already been in place. The smuggling, the precise timing used to guide the Enchanter onto the path of the heroine that'd kill him? That'd been arranged long before, one of no doubt many levers to nudge along the happenings within the Arsenal. After that it was just a

matter of the Intercessor getting the right Named close enough, and she could get it all to begin rolling downhill.

The Concocter wouldn't know the whole web, I was aware of that: there should be at least one outright accomplice to the Bard in here, as well as several agents unwitting and not. But by dragging into the light what she knew, I could get a glimpse of what the levers were meant to accomplish. And once I knew that, well, I could smash the Intercessor's game to pieces with a sledgehammer and force her to swallow the broken shards with a smile. So there we were, I'd considered after the Kingfisher Prince had set off. The Mirror Knight's band were out there turning over primarily – one hoped, at least – stones, Archer was finding me a thread to tug at so the net might unravel and the charming Prince Frederic was making sure this wasn't about to violently turn on me.

Now, the Bard would see those stories in motion same as I did. The question was: if I was her, where would I strike at?

Setting the Mirror Knight after the Kingfisher would have been obvious, except my little letter and Frederic being trusted had cut that disaster off before it could start looming. The Concocter wasn't officially one of mine, but with what Indrani had told me about her I could easily unmake any attempt to claim that 'the Black Queen's agent was persecuting a heroine'. The Mirror Knight's band could be tricked I figured, even with Hakram keeping an eye on them, but there wasn't a lot that could physically threaten them. At this point I'd be willing to let them encounter an early setback without intervening, anyway, since that should ensure they later brutally crushed whoever had beat them this early in the pattern.

My trouble, right now, was that I could not see an easy way the arrows I'd loosed could be made to swerve. Out in the open the Intercessor couldn't beat me, because even if I was distrusted I was still recognized. A figure of authority, backed by other figures of authority. Yet Archer should be unearthing part of her machinations where I'd sent her, and using violence to prevent her of doing that would reveal part of the machinations as well: whoever struck at Indrani would be one of the Bard's trusted hands, and pumping them for information would be even more useful than shaking some insights out of the Concocter. There probably were ways to beat my hand, but I didn't know what they were and that meant I couldn't prepare for them. Or, at least, prepare in specific.

There was going to be an answer, and I would have to react to it. While I could not prepare for the specifics for the unknown, I could prepare *for* the unknown. Practically speaking, that meant assembling a team to handle whatever came crawling out of the woodworks on the Intercessor's behalf. Calling back anybody I'd

sent out would be a mistake, unmaking the story they were playing out, which meant if I was to gather some sort of bastard band of five I'd need to pick from the rest of the Arsenal's Named. Four comrades, huh? I could do that. First, I'd naturally needed a trusted second.

Thankfully I had a spare lying around.

—

"I've just had to put out a library fire," Roland of Beaumarais, also known as the Rogue Sorcerer, mildly told me as he washed his hands free of ash. "I don't suppose you'd know anything about that?"

"I know lots of things, Roland," I vaguely replied.

His hands left the now-clouded water of the basin and he methodically dried them with a cloth.

"Books, Catherine?" he said, sounding agonized. "Castles, armies, ancient architectural wonders, I can make my peace with them all. But *books*, Catherine? A line has to be drawn somewhere."

"If such a thing had been done, it would not have been done lightly," I said.

"You haven't even been here a whole day," he complained.

Actually, I mused, this could also work.

"You're right," I said. "I'm a reckless, dangerous woman who'll do anything to win."

He cocked his head to the side.

"Have you been drinking?" he asked.

Well, yes. But that was not related to this. I decided, for the sake of tactics, to ignore his rejoinder.

"Which is why you should come with me," I said. "Be the voice of reason, keep me out of trouble. Prevent me from burning more libraries."

A beat passed.

"Not that I've done that," I added.

Another beat passed.

"But hey, the day's young," I added with a hopeful smile.

He twitched a little. Still, under the harried exterior I could see something sharpen in his eyes. The understanding that none of this was as casual as it looked, or without calculation.

"The way Archer tells it, your last designated voice of reason once stole the entire sun," Roland said.

"She's still complaining we never got to pawn that off, isn't she?" I sighed.

"I expect sooner or later the litany will be put to verse," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Still, large boots to fill."

He shrugged.

"I've nothing else planned for the day, however," he said. "So I supposed I might as well."

"That's exactly the kind of spirit I'm looking for," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Come, Roland, we have an important task ahead of us."

He shot me a steady look.

"I don't suppose you could tell me a little more, that I might equip myself accordingly?" he asked.

I hummed, then thoughtfully clasped my chin.

"We're going to cram as many potential traitors as possible into a band of five, then dabble into some stirring heroics," I replied.

"Ah," Roland of Beaumarais nonchalantly said. "We'll have to take a detour through the Workshop, then. It's where I keep my war artefacts."

Good man, I thought, and smiled.

—

"Her name is Adanna," Roland said as we walked, "and she was born, as she tells it, in Smyrna."

"It's got roots in Mtethwa," I noted. "Not a common Soninke name, though. You said she's highborn?"

"She certainly behaves like it," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Though there is a distinct Ashuran bent to her manners."

"What colour are her eyes?" I asked.

"Golden," he replied. "It is quite unusual, even for a Chosen."

I let out a low whistle.

"That's not just highborn, that's from one of the old lines," I said.

Born in Smyrna, was she? It was one of the two cities of the Thalassocracy of Ashur, its capital. Hells, that must have been quite the tale. It would have been a point of pride for the Wasteland family they'd fled to have them assassinated, and old families like that tended to have a few grimoires' worth of nasty tricks to pull.

"She's made her disaster for the Dread Empire and all those who dwell within it quite clear," Roland said. "It has been one of the reasons she so frequently clashes with Hierophant."

Which was why Masego wouldn't be part of this band, among other things. I also wanted him free to be a source of knowledge and wisdom for any of the three stories I'd loosed, which he couldn't be if I was dragging him along for mine.

"Hierophant's not here," I said. "And she requested an audience with me, you said. We can have words as we move."

"I expect that was not quit what she wished for," Roland said, "but regardless, here we are."

That last part had not been an outburst of fatalism on the Blessed Artificer's behalf but instead Roland informing me we'd reached the Artificer's quarters in the Workshop. We'd already picked up the Rogue Sorcerer's artefacts, which were now stuffing his pockets and sleeves, and it'd not been a long walk from there. The bare stone hallways here were little different than anywhere else in the Arsenal, and though I would have enjoyed visiting the great workshops of *the Workshop* – birthplace of wonders that it was – there was no time for sightseeing. Instead we found ourselves in front of a neat wooden door, and without ceremony I knocked against it with my staff a few times. Mere moments later it was wrenched open to my surprise.

"I've told you already, I won't-"

Adanna of Smyrna, wearing small spectacles over her golden eyes and garbed in clothes I would have expected more of some kindly toymaker than a powerful Named, was visibly taken aback when she realized who it was standing at her door. Realizing that the Rogue Sorcerer was at my side did nothing to help he confusion.

"Good evening," I said. "I see that look on your face means I won't have to bother with introductions, Blessed Artificer."

"I am, yes," the dark-skinned woman said. "I know of you, Black Queen. And Roland as well."

"Splendid," I said. "I've need of your services for a bit, as it happens. I'll give you a moment to change and equip yourself."

"Equip myself?" the Blessed Artificer blinked. "For what?"

"Trouble," I vaguely said.

Yeah, looking more closely at her she had that highborn look down to the bone: quite literally, as those high cheekbones were one of those telltale marks of Soninke nobility. This Adanna of Smyrna had not quite inherited the inhuman good looks of Wasteland aristocracy, though she was far from ugly. I supposed having met Malicia in person and spent years in Akua's presence had rather skewed my standards when it came to beauty, anyway. She'd definitely not inherited the Wasteland social schooling, anyhow, as it took her a full three heartbeats before she recovered from the onrush of surprises.

"I do not recall agreeing to lend you my aid, Black Queen," the Artificer said, chin rising. "And if you believe that the Rogue Sorcerer's presence will be enough to bully me—"

"I do believe you've just indirectly called me a tool," Roland noted, though he sounded rather good-humoured about it.

"— into compliance then I assure you, you are sorely mistaken," the heroine finished.

She had that look about her, like a cat ready to hiss the moment a hand was extended, but then that in the first place she'd assume I would need Roland to bully anyone told me exactly how I needed to handle her.

"Please lend me your aid," I bluntly asked.

Ah, so she *had* been taught to hide her emotions some. She wasn't great at it — Gods, but they would have eaten her alive in Praes — but she did smooth out her surprise after a moment.

"It is for a noble purpose," Roland told her.

Noble might be a bit of a stretch, I mused, but did not contradict him.

"And you requested an audience, as I recall," I said. "We can see to some of that as we walk."

The golden-eyed Named hesitated.

"What is it you require of me, exactly?" she asked.

Gotcha, I smiled.

—

In what I hesitated to call a stroke of luck, given the amount of Named in the Arsenal, the last two Named I'd decided on were in the same place.

"You know I respect your judgement a great deal," Roland murmured, leaning towards me.

"People only ever say that sentence with a but implied," I said.

He shrugged, not denying me.

"This seems like it will make a terrible band of five," the Rogue Sorcerer assessed.

"Yes," I grinned, "just genuinely terrible, wouldn't it be?"

He cursed under his breath in what I recognized to be tradertalk.

"Last time I saw you that savagely enthusiastic, I was thrown off a balcony," he complained.

"If a villain throws you off it, it's really more of a cliff," I said, echoing an old foe.

One who'd deserved both better and worse than what she'd got, but that'd been the lesson of the Proceran campaign hadn't it? That I was not facing righteous steel things glinting of Light but people of flesh and blood, with all the complexities of character that implied. Though we'd been quiet in our little talk, we'd not been *that* quiet: the Blessed Artificer overheard, and was not shy in offering up her own assessments.

"One's useless, the other is *drunk* and useless," Adanna of Smyrna said.

Well, I couldn't deny the drunk part at least. The Arsenal held within its walls hundreds of people, who while they might not have been forced to come here had not been aware of exactly how long or *where* they would be. Given the concerns about the Dead King's inevitable interest in this place and the fact that relative secrecy was the Arsenal's best defence, we'd known from the beginning that people would only rarely be able to leave once they'd been brought into the fold. As a consequence, aside from what had been tacked onto the seat of Grand Alliance's research and artifact-crafting to fill its secondary role as a communication relay for rulers and high officers, thought had been given to the *entertainment* of all the men and women we'd cram into here possible for years on end.

That was the niche the Frolic was meant to fill, in essence. Accessible only through the central halls of the Knot – as well as a discreet tunnel coming from the Alcazar – that part of the Arsenal had been built as a sort of ring made up of diversions.

One section was essentially a sprawling tavern, another a private little brothel, a gaudy strip was a gambling house and there'd even been a fighting pit tacked on. Callowans and Procerans were fond of dogfights, but the more exotic beasts Levantines liked to throw into pits had been deemed too expensive and dangerous for consideration. Duels and brawls, though, were allowed. Only to first blood and with healers in attendance, but a few hundred people could not be squeezed in tight between walls for years without some fighting erupting.

Better to give a clear and controlled outlet for that strife than let it erupt out of sight, where there'd be no healers waiting.

What I was looking at, though, was not anger being settled with first blood. It was a crowd of maybe half a hundred cheering at one of the sloppiest fistfights I'd ever seen. The part of me that remembered fighting for coin in another pit was almost offended by how fucking terrible these people – these Named! – were at hand-to-hand combat. The three of us stood in the shadows of the entrance hall, looking down at the fighting pit and the rafter above it, and let the sound wash over us.

"Fallen," the crowd howled. "Fallen, Fallen, Fallen."

The Fallen Monk was one of Indrani's band, and one of the villains on our rolls that heroes tended to react the most violent to. That was not because his sins were so great compared to the rest of Below's lot, but because once upon a time he'd instead been known as the *Merry Monk*. A Proceran hero from their southern lands, whose very public fall from grace had been the talk of Salamans for year: it wasn't every day someone force-fed one of the Holies until her belly literally burst. Archer counted him as better at sneaking around than Vivienne had been back in the day, and good as a bloodhound when something needed to be found in a town. When it came to fighting, though, aside from being able to take some punishment and being quite useful against Light-users she'd never considered him anything all that special for a Named.

Fortunately for the overweight and very clearly drunk middle-aged man in cloth robes, his opponent was even worse a brawler.

The Exalted Poet's face paint, which had been a neat affair of black and red when I first saw him today, and since been damaged by a purpling black eye and an amount of sand that really could only have come from having his entire face *shoved* into it. His lack of shirt made it clear that they made them muscled in the Dominion, but for all that he was built like a warrior he certainly wasn't performing like one: the punch he threw at the Fallen Monk's face was met with a mirror on the other side, the two of them rocking back when they hit each other. The Monk stayed up though, if rocking on his feet, while the Poet took a dive and had to hastily push off the sandy ground of the fighting

circle before he could get kicked in the ribs by the fat fallen priest. By the amount of empty bottles the audience had carelessly left around in the stands, they must have been at this for some time now.

"It is written in the Book of All Things," the Fallen Monk shouted red-cheeked for the audience, "that those who are worthy of the love of the Heavens will be blessed with their golden love. Bless me, you mighty asses!"

The watchers cheered on, and someone threw a wineskin at the villain for what was evidently not the first time this afternoon. The former priest guzzled down what looked like some pale wine, even as the Exalted Poet got back on his feet and charged – even when tackled in the belly, the Monk kept drinking as he went down.

"They are perfect," I solemnly announced. "Exactly what I was looking for."

"It cannot be that hard to find a fool and an idiot," the Blessed Artificer replied.

"The Monk has a body count of over a hundred, as I hear it," Roland noted. "Though I suspect close quarters were not involved."

Actually, the more I watched those two the less I was convinced that he was right. Sure, the Monk stumbled around a lot and got tackled and took punches. Yet, almost as if by happenstance, never at an angle that'd hurt him much: bruises might ensue, but little more. Either was damned good at taking hits, or he was a better fighter than what he was letting on here.

"If I fetch them myself, Black Queen, can we then proceed to more important matters?" the Blessed Artificer asked me. "You have yet to hear the complaint I mean to lodge."

Somehow, I suspected that if I let her handle that we'd not have five Named up here but three down there. Roland suddenly stiffened, which caught my attention, and he discreetly gestured to our common right – though somewhat behind me. Up there, sitting on a bench and leaning back against the wall, another Named was reading a book. Sallow-skinned and thin-haired, the Sinister Physician had always looked to me like the last person you'd ever want to let cut you open. His skills as a healer were beyond dispute, though, if not his occasional indulgence in taking vitality or souls as payment or even his clear obsession with immortality.

"They've observed the rules, then," I murmured at Roland. "They're meant to have a healer at hand."

I saw no need to seek the other villain out, as it happened. I'd not come for him. But that he was here, though, was interesting: at the very least, it meant he wasn't *elsewhere*. At first glance anyway.

"Check if it's an illusion," I told the Rogue Sorcerer.
"Discreetly."

"You are ignoring me, Black Queen," the Blessed Artificer impatiently said. "If that is all you sought me out for—"

"I'll see to it myself, Artificer," I replied.

Her open irritation I didn't particularly care about, or even the threat to leave she'd obviously been building up to. I knew an empty threat when I heard one: for all that the heroine at the very least disliked me and had some axes to grind with Roland, she was too curious about where this was headed to leave now. I'd not missed her constant not-quite-subtle glances at my staff, either. While it was my understanding that Light and miracles were her wheelhouse and the length of yew I'd retrieved from the heart of Twilight after its birth was not exactly either, neither was it simply a staff. And as there was no sorcery at the heart of that difference, perhaps her interest in that undefined otherness should have been expected. A halfway clever Named could do a lot, with the undefined.

"So?" I pressed the Rogue Sorcerer.

He released what he'd been clutching in one of his pockets, breathing out.

"Not an illusion," he confirmed.

Good, that was one more Named accounted for. Time for me to get bring in our last two comrades, then. The audience that'd been cheering for the two brawling Named all the while had not noticed the three of us, as we'd stayed in the shadows of the hall, but when I began to limp down the stairs a few caught sight of me. My face might not have been all that recognizable, but even this bare a crown and the Mantle of Woe were enough for exclamations of Black Queen to shiver through the crowd. I ignored the attention and made my way to the edge of the pit, looking down at the two Named whose brawling had ceased when silence spread. I flicked a look at the people up here.

"Dismissed," I said, voice ringing.

Not one argued otherwise, and they filed out with a rather subdued mood hanging over them. Of the two Named below, only the Exalted Poet looked embarrassed at having been caught slugging it out in the sand with a stranger.

"Your Majesty," the Fallen Monk jovially greeted me, his Lower Miezan crisp and perfect, "a pleasure to meet you in person."

He raised a wineskin, not even the same one I'd seen thrown at him earlier.

"I hear from a common friend you're partial to the pales, so it would be my honour to surrender this triumphant bounty to you," he continued.

I snorted.

"Tempting," I said, "but I've had enough to drink for a while. I'm here to inform you that Archer has lost you to me at cards."

The middle-aged man cocked an almost incongruously delicate eyebrow.

"On a good hand at least, I hope," he said.

"Half a good hand," I said, then added, "seen double."

That startled a laugh out of him.

"I am in your service for the day, then," the Fallen Monk bowed, adroit for all his impressive girth. "Though I cannot think of what you might require an old priest like me for."

"You'd be surprised," I said, and turned my stare to the Exalted Poet.

Sadly enough, he'd put a shirt on again. He bowed very graciously, though, so I'd allow it.

"We meet again, Black Queen," the Levantine hero said.

Yeah, that voice was still like getting honey poured in my ear – and drawing on Night just the slightest bit ensured there was no sorcery adding on to the impression this time.

"So we do," I replied. "As it happens, our common acquaintance the Monk was not the only man I am here to look for. I've a need for your particular skills."

"Indeed?" the Poet replied, sounding surprised. "I am most flattered, Honoured Queen, yet also befuddled. What is it you might need them *for*?"

I reached for my pipe, in the inner pockets of my cloak, and took it in hand while I went fishing for a packet of wakeleaf. I was about to tear it open, when a tremor went through the Arsenal. A second happened a moment later, stronger, and I felt the very stone around us shiver. *You horrid wench*, I thought towards the Bard, *you could have waited until I actually lit the damned pipe.*

"Don't you hate it when a question answers itself?" I said, matching the Exalted Poet's eyes.

I had my answer about how it was the Intercessor would avoid the story arrows I'd loosed at her, at least.

If you couldn't move the arrows, I supposed instead you could move *everything else*.

breakingamber

So, new 'traitorous' Band of Five consists of the Fallen Monk, who is an ex-Hero and had his Name changed – I wonder if he got new Aspects? – the Blessed Artificer, whom we know and love, the Exalted Poet, who is as smooth-tongued and attractive as the Repentant Magister, the Sinister Physician, who is sinister, a physician, and apparently has some skill with illusion, and ... the Rogue Sorcerer? She did say traitorous...

Roland suspects Cat of burning down the library? Wonder if he'll let that slip by accident.

Wonder what the Bard is actually doing. Might it be the Dead King, even?

devildragon777

Roland less suspects and more *knows* that Cat lit the library on fire. He's also aware that Cat did it for a reason, which puts him head and shoulders above most Named =P

ThatOneGuy

He also got away with stealing our favorite mage's magic. The lie spoken of so long ago might end up hitting him from behind during this conflict.

Only question is how many unwanted secrets will end up being spilt here?

Letouriste

What? What do you mean?

It's not the dead king who stole masego's magic?

[Liliet](#)

It is, and not stole but destroyed.

There was a hypothetical plan where Roland would take it, but that never happened. I think people are just confused.

[Liliet](#)

...And on reread, he knows because he asked and she answered. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?" could conceivably be answered with "no actually that wasn't me", Cat's the one who essentially confirmed it with her answer.

T R U S T

hakureireimu

Cat is part of the band, and the Sinister Physician is not.

ruduen

I believe Catherine's including herself, so the Sinister Physician isn't being included in the band of 5. I also think it's too early to qualify as a 6th addition for this line, so the Physician is more likely to be either a red herring or to have a different role soon.

As it stands, I believe the arrangement is Catherine, Sorcerer, Artificer, Monk, and Poet.

Mengha

I believe the Sinister Physician may be the "Sixth Power-Ranger" here.

[ayon96](#)

the Sinister Physician isnt part of the Band

[onedollargum](#)

Not yet, but if Cat steps out then he's good to fill the gap.

Shveiran

Not necessarily? It's not like all Bands of Five are actually Bands of Six. That's why they are called Bands of Five. I think she could bring him in if she wanted, sure, but it's not like she has to and my read is that she is not planning on doing so.

Insanenoodlyguy

No see, it's not that he's the sixth ranger, but there's a decent chance he's the replacement.

They are, after all, looking for a traitor. We know for sure it's not Cat, the rest are still suspect. If one of the others does indeed prove to be unsuitable, oh look, there's another named who happened to be around who can take their place on the team. WHAT A STORY.

[Liliet](#)

Roland knows exactly what Cat did, and it seems he knows exactly what she did in Twilight, too. Give or take specifics. He reads her very well, bless the entirety of him ♥

Theitzal

Ah no from what I can tell the other 3 are the potential traitors, when looking for Roland she mentioned she needed a lieutenant she could trust to watch her back

Konstantin von Karstein

I doubt Roland is traitorous, but I hope we will learn more about him, especially what lie the Tyrant saw in him. And also why he is called the « Rogue » Sorcerer.

EmptyPockets

Roland is called the Rogue Sorcerer because he is a "Rogue" that is also a "Sorcerer". In this case Rogue is a synonym for "Thief", not for "Independent". He steals magic, that's why his arsenal of magic is frequently commented on as being impossibly diverse.

Alex Straughan

The answer to both of your questions is that he is in fact not a sorcerer at all.

Konstantin von Karstein

We don't know that

Miles

We know that he can't use magic except by stealing it. What don't we know about it?

Konstantin von Karstein

We know that he **can** steal magic, not that he can't use his own. I think he is a true mage, probably not that powerful, but who can also steal that of others.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, the 'not Gifted' is a common theory, and one I buy into personally, but it's not actually confirmed unambiguously.

Konstantin von Karstein

We know that he can steal magic. Nowhere is it said that he can't do magic on his own, it's only a supposition. He could be a true mage, who happens to be able to steal other's magic.

[Javvies](#)

Indeed.

The only thing we know definitively that he cannot do is utilize High Arcana, but then, neither can most mages.

And, let's be realistic, Roland's Name is, at the very least, definitely a mage/mage-adjacent type Name, not one that's more ambivalent about the skillset of the Named. I suspect that it would be very difficult to get a mage Name without being able to use magic before/without the Name itself. One wouldn't necessarily have to be very strongly Gifted, knowledgeable, well trained, or proficient, but something would need to be there. And I also suspect that a hypothetical Name that allowed a non-mage to pass as a true mage would most likely be a Villain type Name gained after successfully making people believe that one truly was a mage ... not a Heroic type Name.

[tkjarrah](#)

roland continues to be the best

ruduen

And as always, vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

dadycoool

So now begins the adventures of the Drunk Queen and her Merry Band of Idiots.

All these mentions of Hunting, combined with the Fox King song paint an interesting picture.

[Burlyraven](#)

Merry Band of *Apparent* Idiots. Every single member in this party uses an overt personality to cover hidden cunning.

Liliet

Except Adanne, I expect. She is, I would guess, Exactly What It Says On The Tin – opinionated scholar convinced that being an expert in her field makes her an expert in everything, and also damned adorable.

Burlyraven

It would make sense, considering fate seems to have decided she and Masego are meant to be rivals. I'm hoping for her sake that she does have hidden depths, as I don't know if she has the chops to be either the ditz or the straight woman comedy relief in the story to come.

Liliet

I think "straight woman" + "actually straightforwardly competent at the specific thing that's her job" should do it tbh.

It'll also be funny if she ends up being the only one there who DOESN'T have a hidden agenda (or just her and Roland)

erebus42

I do believe Cat is attempting to Ragtag her way through whatever dastardly surprises the Bard decides to throw at her

boballab

I think she is going for one of the 101 Axioms: Send in the comic relief first, the Gods won't allow them to die that easily.

Shikkarasu

"by ancient law foxes could not be hunted for sport in Callow"
Yaas, Fox Queeeen!

dadycoool

exactly

Big Brother

The Fallen Monk. Looks like he might be a Monk of the Drunken Fist, and that's a very dangerous fighter in the party. Always appearing sloppy and unstable, but using the erratic movements to redirect, absorb or dodge blows. AND he's a Hero-turned-Villain? Hells yeah!

JJR

It makes me wonder if he became a villain to dodge a story.

LarsBlitzer

If I'm any judge, I'd say it was a tragic one. Given that he's the Fallen Monk, he must have had to swerve pretty severely to avoid a more definite fate. The Bard probably had her hand in it somewhere.

KageLupus

I doubt it. Most Named aren't as meta-sensitive as Cat, Black, and the Bard. Chances are it was just a normal bit of Story and not anything to do with dodging one.

The Merry Monk discovered some dark secret, probably not even a Dark Secret, and became disillusioned with the local House of Light. Considering what we know about the Proceran Holies and how they play at politics it doesn't seem that unreasonable. He took justice into his own hands, brutally punished the offender, and was promptly labeled a "Villain" for the trouble.

Morgenstern

... or someone just made fun of his girth / appetite one time too many. What with all the stuffing food into them until they literally explode and him ending up a Villain, major V. Would be pretty dark, though. 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, I think it's more poetic than that. "YOU ARE FEEDING OFF THE PEOPLE! EAT THEN!"

Sparsebeard

With the Bard positioning itself as the villain of this story, it can't end well for it.

Miles

The Bard is never part of the story, she's the one telling it. Since ****Wander**** lets her cheat death by making a new character sheet and another aspect only lets her exist in the interesting parts of the story, this won't be an end for her at all.

erebus42

I'm sure Kairos is looking up at her from somewhere and smiling...

Djinn O'Cide

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon. I hate it when I have to post instead of just lurking. But if no-one else is going to remind you to vote, then I will. Sheesh.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Burlyraven

So every single member of this party is hiding some hidden cunning, Roland included. If this particular party starts running a murder mystery dinner story, I won't be surprised.

erebus42

They certainly would be vultures at the feast: Knives out, beaks bloody.

Liliet

Well, Roland isn't hiding it much, but it's certainly easy to overlook if he isn't casually revealing he knows exactly what you did right that second :3

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, we have seen Roland since book 4, and we don't know any of his Aspects. We don't even know if he really is a spellcaster.

Sun Dog

One Aspect, the one that lets him use any magical artifact, and as apparent byproduct allows him to employ contradictory magics. Made to thought USE was an Aspect of deceptive depths.

Konstantin von Karstein

He also has one that make him able to steal magic, not unlike **Take**. But we don't know exactly what it is, when we know both Tariq's and Laurence 's Aspects

Shveiran

I think we know it is, just that he uses aspects to bridge the gap?

During the Skein brawl, I remember Catherine describing his exploits as impressive but unrefined, mentioning he was bleeding a lot more energy in his workings than someone like Masego would.

He didn't have his magic rod for the fight (Tyrant) so I think it proves he is able to cast spells without trinkets... he's just not in the Big league without them.

Konstantin von Karstein

We don't know for sure, it is only an hypothesis. And when he spoke with Masego at the beginning of book 6, it was mentioned that he could use every style of magic, but no one said, even obliquely, that he could not use his own magic. So we don't know

Shveiran

Technically true, but after spending so much time under Masego's scrutiny I think the reveal that he is not a mage would have come out? If nothing else, not being a mage probably means he'd be more useful in the field rather than in the Arsenal. I feel it's safe to assume that theory has been proven true, by this point.

[Liliet](#)

Roland is useful in the Arsenal as an artifact maker, not a researcher.

And how much scrutiny do you think Masego really has to spare for something as uninteresting as people, really?
:3

And would Masego even have cared if he noticed?

Also note: yes, Roland is a spellcaster. He does, in fact, cast spells. He is a practitioner regardless of whether he has the Gift.

wabbitking

And just like that after months of reading I've finally caught up and have to wait a while for a new chapter.

I wonder what the Holy did to make the Monk mad enough to kill them like that? I wonder If it's a Seven kind of deal or the Monk just wanted to be cruel about it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Welcome to the present! Storywise, the Holy's offense would have to be something in the way of gluttony or greed, perhaps something like "reserving" wartime food aid for the priesthood.

[Liliet](#)

Assuming the Monk was acting on a 'justifiable/ understandable' level of villainy and not Wicked Enchanter style.

Honestly, he probably was. IMHO, odds are in his favor here.

Javvies

...
So that can't be good.

I'm more than mildly concerned that Bard has managed to move the entire Arsenal. Even with inside access, prep time, and at least one coconspirator.

I'm even more concerned about where Bard might have moved the Arsenal to. Just back to Creation in the same place it left? To Arcadia proper? To the Twilight Ways? One of the Hells? Or back to Creation, but not where it came from?

I'm also somewhat worried that Bard anticipated that Cat would sidestep the first few layers of attacks the way she has (in general, not necessarily the specifics), and has laid mines for Cat to trip over in the sidestepping.

Thorium

I'm pretty sure the Arsenal wasn't actually physically moved. It was more like a metaphorical table flip, moving the entire board.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I was a city girl (needs a linebreak on top)
ruby to piglets (maybe rubies)
someone's never (not sure what this should be)
nemesis' > nemesis's
that else > that, else
popular with heroes and > popular with heroes, and
sae > save
Red Axe with a (extra space)
primarily (wording seems odd)
unravel and > unravel, and
prevent her of > prevent her from
I'd naturally needed > I'd naturally need (also, imo naturally reads better at the end of the sentence)
So I supposed > So I suppose
dabble into > dabble in
fled to have > fled to to have
her disaster (distaste?)
not quit what > not quite what
far form > far from
but then that (maybe but then, the fact that)
Gotcha, > Gotcha.
"Yes," I grinned, "just > "Yes"—I grinned—"just
known form > known from
seat of Grand > seat of the Grand
here possible > here, possibly

for year: > for years;
I first saw > I'd first seen
and since > had since
Either was damned > Either he was damned
where her > were her
could to > could do
get bring > bring
then," the > then." The

Sir Nil

Oh dear, Cat's using Bard's own pattern of being the drunk lady assembling a ragtag band of five for a higher purpose.

RubberBandman

And of course Bard countered *that* by stealing Cat's gambit of just wrecking fucking everything to deal with complicated and reactive plans. It's a wonderful mirroring of them learning each other's tricks and using them to out-fox the other.

LarsBlitzer

Main difference here is that the Bard only has experience as the Bard. Even in the echo that the Woe saw she was like that. Cat, on the other hand, has years of experience flying by the seat of her pants, cobbling together an effective force out of the strays sent her way. Remember the field exercise at the War College? I'm sure she's drawing on that. I'd bet you dollars to donuts there'll be a reference to those good ol' days before long.

Shveiran

Bard has a LOT of experience being the Bard though.

I wouldn't call her at a disadvantage.

Miles

Oh dear, constantly singing, now organizing a party from a tavern-like setting,

Cat's new Name is going to be Wandering Bard, isn't it?

The ultimate trick- if you can't beat em, recruit em.

[Adrian V](#)

I wonder what tales the new named (that work with Cat) are going to end up telling, also their reactions when they figure out what is hapening and who they face (if they know the who)

pagesbe

Bard's planning is interesting. In a non-narrative based world, her plans would be absolutely terrible, so many moving components that hardly any of them would actually reach the end intact.

Being in a world where narrative controls a huge number of things makes her plans work much better... but she's still vulnerable to the spanner in the works. Like Agnes spoiling her plot to force Cordelia to become a Named, and then Cordelia rejecting the opportunity when it came. Or how Kairos, by virtue of unpredictability, foiled her plans on more than one occasion. Or the Dead King being willing to sacrifice a part of his soul to make sure he received the knowledge of the Bard's plans.

That doesn't mean she ineffective, and her plans are robust enough to survive a bit of shaking from players who she understands can act in different ways, but I'm betting that she hasn't done enough. She predicted some movements from Cat, but in the end she'll fail.

[Mental Mouse](#)

... or the Oracle tossing an extra Named in the mix who "really is all that", and can get along with Cat to boot!

JJR

"But books, Catherine? A line has to be drawn somewhere."

I like Roland, he speaks to me.

[Liliet](#)

Things I don't love here: aww, maybe Bard isn't helping after all
)=

Things I LOVE STRONGLY here:

– Roland knows exactly what Cat did. That time and now too. He just sees through her instantly and uses it to complain and tbh their friend chemistry is in the top half of the Woe;

– also Roland voiced the EXACT complaint I had and FUCKING BLESS;

– I LOVE ADANNE INSTANTLY. It's the spectacles that seal the deal on what archetype she is, and I could follow her as a protagonist forever and never get tired of it. Complaining, judgemental, but too curious to leave the story? BEST FOREVER;

– the Monk is probably a terrible person who didnt have a good reason for what he did (they cannot ALL be perfect aaaa - convinces myself-) but he is also so fucking delightful;

– Catherine's drunkenness seems to manifest in increased amounts of ogling and I love her forever;

– welp, there's the Poet. Let's see what the fuck is going to explode!

erebus42

You always did have a soft spot for Heroes.
As for the Monk, you never know. Given some of the behavior we've seen displayed by some of the Holies, she may have had it coming. He could also have just done it for shits and giggles, either way at least he's fun...

[Liliet](#)

See yeah exactly that person could have totally had it coming-

anyway yes I love guide's Heroes 😊

Wonder

Oh come on Intercessor!! Why did you have to move the Arsenal back into the Dead King's reach?

What exactly do you even want ?

[Liliet](#)

We... don't actually know that's what happened.

Konstantin von Karstein

Procer or the Golden Bloom seem more likely

Shveiran

I'd throw in Praes as a possibility... that Narrative will need to be resolved eventually, and being relocated might offer an excuse.

Not likely, IMO, but still. A possibility.

Sir Nil

I really hope the traitor in the end isn't Masego or something. The downside of having the Princes Graveyard get broadcasted by heaven itself is that everyone knows of the story where the Hierophant is manipulated by a god like entity while doing something that is slightly related to Apotheosis. The souls of Liesse had enough weight to reach it and Quartered Seasons was said by Cat to look like an attempt at a cursory glance.

Sir Nil

Not to mention from a meta perspective, the Blessed Artificer would fit perfectly into the source of an unexpected revelation, given that Cat doesn't trust her after she blinded Masego and I suspect she wouldn't be able to lodge her 'complaint' while the whole goddamn Arsenal is going under.

Liliet

> is that everyone knows of the story

Story weight does not, by itself, *compel* people in most cases. This story is not archetypical, specific and major enough for Hierophant's identity to actually impact what he does or feels like in any way.

(The opposition with Blessed Artificer is sewn much more deeply into his Role)

blubber

hold up, who has the balls to call the fucking black queen a friend. That monk suddenly is hella fucking suspicious. So whod call catherine a friend? bard, dead thing, hanno sve noc, robber, king and queen of acradia possibly, tho mostly just the king... anyone i missed? black possibly? soooo, drunk monk who despises all and himself has a common friend with the likes of the black queen, a common friend who knows her well enough to sort her by wine. Thats akua, black, grey pilgrim and hanno the dead king and bard, those are all that should know her wine tastes, well and malicia i guess, huh holy crap. This could be her instead of the bard. holy moly. still, that monk is hella suspicious. and now even with catherine is esstially warning the reader with ,hey he might be stronger than he looks.

ciara

Archer is the "common friend" that the Fallen Monk is referring to.

Morgenstern

It was even Cat who started that banter, what with telling him Archer lost *him* to her in a card game.

Cap'n Smurfy

Dear Gods this is the most treacherous and backwards Band of Named in existence! We've got a thieving sorcerer, an ex-Praesi priest, a fallen hero, a soul-stealing healer, a mind controlling 'hero' and of course that most heroic of Villains, Catherine Foundling herself.

I don't think anyone here could be any worse at their Roles if they tried.

Cap'n Smurfy

So, what are the odds the Arsenal has just been thrown into where ever the Golden Bloom is? If you're looking for a clusterfuck of epic proportions, that seems like the place do put it.

Konstantin von Karstein

It could also be in the middle of Procer

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC, the Golden Bloom goes to Arcadia. Most likely destination is the real world.

Shveiran

the physician is not part of the Band. Cat was just glad to see him because now there is one less unaccounted Named around.

Cap'n Smurfy

The band doesn't even have a healer? That's even worse (better)!

WuseMajor

Well, Of Course they couldn't pawn the Sun.

It's way too hot.

maximillian999

Go home and think about what you've done, WuseMajor.

Big I

Seems to me that Cat's putting together the comic relief. Wasn't one of the Two Hundred Axiom about how the comic relief always survives? The Artificier's obviously there as the straight man for the gags.

Interesting that foxes are a protected species in Callow. And I'm calling it that Roland's the traitor; he's friends with most of the Woe, and it's always the guy you left expect.

More_Dakka

Could be a double bluff. Spend time laying hints there is a traitor so people are paranoid and more vulnerable to other plans

In more divided groups like say a group of heroes and villains it could cause a them to kill each other out of fear and mistrust

Aotrs Commander

That would be unfortunate, since Roland is one of only two (MAYBE two-and-a-half) of the so-called Heroes that actually genuinely seems to live up the name and be an actual reasonable person and not a complete unlikeable censored expletive. And thus firmly cement the fact that Heroes Are Unilaterally Antagonists in the meta narrative.to the readers – or at least some of us anyway.

It'd be a bit akin to if you as DM set up one of the PC's NPC companions/friends/supporting cast/etc. to Have Been A Traitor All Along (for the Big Shocking Dramatic Reveal) more than once, (or at most, once in a decade or two) the players will then start to never trust/befriend/etc. any NPCs again.

I mean, this doesn't mean you're WRONG, only that it would send a meta message that would be, as I say, unfortunate.

Konstantin von Karstein

There's still Hanno, but it would indeed be bad for the Accords

Aotrs Commander

He's the MAYBE half.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'd guess Roland as the chump. In any case, it's not like he'd sell her to the Dead King, but remember that he might not be completely convinced about the Bard's hidden eldritch-horror status.

[TeK](#)

Am I the only one who feels as if the quality is taking a bit of a nosedive?

Maybe EE you should take a bit of break if you need it.

Better than an alternative.

Author of Mother of Learning had slowed his pace of chapters near the end like tremendously

That is an ending.

The hardest part.

It's good you took biweekly rate now.

But maybe slow down more?

Or just take a break somewhat.

It had been what, three months?

magesbe

Well I don't know if you're the only one but I'm enjoying myself as much as ever.

[TeK](#)

Guess my depression is talking then.

Ky rose

What a rollercoaster this is

reader

I am reading too much. I realised that hunted magician and rogue sorcerer aren't the same just this chapter. It's hard

[Liliet](#)

And when Masego mused about the two best Proceran practitioners not getting along, you assumed Roland had a split personality?
XD

Xinci

Hm good, we are starting to get a framework on how Adanna became Blessed. Above isn't above stealing power from other sources, and a child of escaped highborn is a fairly good route. What she was supposed to disrupt is a bit vague beyond a possible contingency for what Malicia was going/did do to Ashur and a general disruptor to its relationship with Praes. Though her ability to flexibly artifice miracles with constructs that can interact with and subvert principles like Summer, definitely makes the Light and presumably other forms of miracles more flexible for problems like Alchemy. Along with the nasty methods that were presumably used to attempt to assassinate her while she was young. After going through such conflict her disdain for the wasteland makes sense even if her judgment overall doesn't seem the best as of yet.

Also glad to know the method she got/created the staff did indeed not count as Sorcery. I wonder if Twilights own effusive qualities at its Creation helped it be less defined than other such dimensions/apotheotic concepts.

[Liliet](#)

> What she was supposed to disrupt is a bit vague beyond a possible contingency for what Malicia was going/did do to Ashur and a general disruptor to its relationship with Praes.

This does not seem even remotely related to her Role, considering she did not come up until now at all.

Daniel E

Roland's resigned acceptance of Cat's method's is a delight to read. In terms of relationship to Catherine, he's a perfect Heroic mirror of Masego.

ninegardens

Pretty sure Bard is doing/planning something dangerous/bad with "Severance"...

DementedLiar

So i started thinking it last chapter but with her level of meta insight, which is so strong it was mentioned early in one of the books, i think the new Name Cat has been leaning into is to become the new Intercessor.

Pethrai D'arkos

I can't believe it's been a day and nobody has brought up the obvious connection between the Blessed Artificer and Akua's great uncle. You know the one she said stole from the family vaults and then fled to Ashur.

[Javvies](#)

That's because it came up in an earlier chapter, when we first learned learned about Blessed Artificer being of Praesi descent.

And Blessed Artificer being a descendant of that relative of Akua's seems likely from a narrative sense. Especially if Blessed Artificer was being set up to oppose Heiress/Diabolist if she had beaten Cat and succeeded in her attempt to restore Praes and the Dread Empire to the Age of Wonders.

[ErraticErrata](#)

Huh, I didn't think anyone would actually catch on to that. Congrats!

Miles

No! Why? There are too many chapters to revisit and find the other such things.

[Liliet](#)

OOOH WOW.

I thought of this possibility too but didn't think it was likely! Shows what I know, NICE

Imrix

"The coin would have been better spent ensuring that the basins the street drains emptied in near Nelly's Alley didn't fill up after rain and so end up becoming an open-air sewer that stank up a good dozen city blocks like you wouldn't believe come summer sun, in my humble opinion, but what the Hells did I know?"

Funny thing, historically speaking regular hunting for nobles was actually of serious value. Serious MILITARY value, so Cat should know this; in pre-modern warfare, knowing the terrain is paramount, and studying a map just doesn't cut it. You need to know the details, where the little dips and rocky patches are, and nothing replaces first-hand experience for that. So, in turn, commanders and warriors need to practice the skill of taking in a stretch of ground and understanding the lay of it in the space of a glance. Chasing a hostile beast across untamed ground is pretty good training for that.

Shveiran

Interesting, though I'd still argue it is in character for her to feel this way: she never faced a noble opponent on their home turf where this kind of thing would have helped them, and her solution to that need is likely field exercises which we know the armies (and by extension their scouts and commanders) regularly take around Callow.

Still; I learned something new today.

Imrix

Nah, it matters even then. Any commander on the attack would want to examine the field before battle, even if all they could do was cast their eye over it from out of bowshot range while their army dresses ranks behind them. The defender would certainly have more opportunities to do so, but that just makes it all the more important to claw back as much advantage as you can – you're probably marching over that ground to get to grips with the defender, you need to know what you'll be walking on!

The War College probably replaced this with dedicated field exercises, but it still feels like something Cat would know.

Shveiran

The knowledge is necessary, the method is not.

It's interesting to learn that was not just a huge waste of time nobles indulged in, but it's not like it is the only way (or the most time and cost efficient way) to gain that knowledge and skill.

It's a given the College includes classes on the subjects (since we have seen graduates being good at this kind of stuff) and we know both the College and the Army of Callow

have frequent field exercises.

If Cat was presented with a very efficient way to solve this need, it's not that strange for her not to be aware of the way the kingdom solved it before the Conquest. She can't know all, after all, and even on the subject of war, her instruction was mostly practical or self-learned. She has read on the subject of war through the centuries, sure, but it's not like that has been her main focus... and even with Learn and Fey-Not-Sleep, she has left her Tavern only a few years ago, and she has been very busy in the mid-time.

SITB

Would she though? Amadeus was pretty successful in ending Callowan nobility, and later on Cat joined the War college and was further molded by Amadeus' personal distaste for nobles. Roughly the first person to defend the usage of hunting would be Talbot, and he only became trusted around the end of book 3.

I think it's reasonable for Cat to be ignorant in this matter given her tutelage.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed with what STB said: it's perfectly in character of Catherine to be unaware of this. During her lifetime it would not have served this function any longer, given nobles where no longer leading armies in the first place in Amadeus's system.

Thanatoss

No, no, no, im very sure that Cat wanted Roland to just check if Hierophant still has his magic/gift. He didn't steal it. Dead King made sure to destroy Masego's gift.

More_Dakka

Dead king was retreating and didnt have time for a passing strike as they would kill a part of his soul. Bard timed it to ensure that Masego's gift was destroyed along with the soul piece

Bard is responsible for the loss probably to make Masego blame the dead king and plan diecide

Shveiran

Bard is responsabile, but only because she ensured the Dead King would not have been extracted before he had time to cripple Masego.

The direct cause of the harm was still Neshamah.

The Dead King is the one that hit him on the head, the Bard was the one who purposely stopped the ambulance from intervening in time for him to recover with full functionality.

[Liliet](#)

Roland isn't regardless.

fbt

good installment, tyvm!

Chapter 21: Line

"Turn back, Emperor, for if you venture further west the sole stretch of land you'll have of me will be six feet long and three feet deep."

– King Jehan the Wise, before the famous Battle of the Sparrows

I tapped the side of my pipe, seeding flame, and drew in a long breath of wakeleaf.

It was a good gambit, I decided as the Arsenal shuddered again. Shuddered like a wall taking trebuchet fire, like a gate being touched by the ram: someone, something was trying to force its way in. An obvious outside threat would draw in the Mirror Knight and his lot like a moth to the flame, and in the ensuing chaos a move could be made against either Archer or the Kingfisher Prince. Hells, if the mess got big enough a ruthless schemer like the Intercessor might just be intending to tie up all her loose ends through casualties. My choices in giving answer were limited, each an opportunity I could not easily discard. Fighting at the Mirror Knight's side now might earn trust I'd need down the line, but intercepting enemy action headed for Archer or Prince Frederic would pay greater and more immediate dividends. I breathed out the smoke and offered a calm glance at the Named assembled around me before turning to the side.

"Sinister Physician," I called out.

The man had closed his book and risen to his feet the moment the first shiver went through the stone around us, but aside from a small bow to me he'd shown no interest in being involved with this situation.

"My queen," the villain replied, turning and indifferent gaze on me. "How may I serve?"

"Head out to the Knot and prepare to receive wounded," I ordered. "Set up a temporary infirmary. You have my full backing to requisition whatever you might need."

A glint of interest appeared at that, though not particularly deep. Still, unpleasant as the man was he'd be able to handle this without trouble. The Knot was the centre of the Arsenal, a mess of winding hallways, but it would have the benefits of being accessible no matter where the enemy struck from and being some distance from the fighting itself: it struck me as the best location to set up our healers.

"It shall be done," the Sinister Physician said. "If I might take my leave?"

"Do," I replied. "As for the rest of you, we'll be headed elsewhere."

So, should I see to the front door or the back? I mused. Either way I'd be taking a risk. Hells, given who I was up against it might be that there was simply no good decision to be made here. Perhaps instead of thinking in terms of avoiding mistakes, I should be thinking in terms of picking the mistake whose consequences I could deal with more ably. No, that was still playing the Bard's game. Getting stuck in a story, digging in my heels. A defensive mindset would inevitably lead to my loss when facing an opponent whose understanding of the terrain was superior to my own. I'd already sent out Archer and the Kingfisher Prince, I must now trust in their skills. Where could I *attack*?

"A defence must be organized," the Blessed Artificer seriously said.

"Catherine?" Roland asked, eyes meeting mine.

He'd always been a sharp one. He must suspect by now we were fighting on more than one front and that I'd gathered this band of five as much to make sure it wasn't out of my sight as to make use of it. *Which means heading into a fight wouldn't necessarily be the best move*, I thought, but then breathed in sharply. Not, I corrected myself, it absolutely would be the best move. Sure, as a fighting band we'd be highly dysfunctional at best: both the Exalted Poet and the Fallen Monk would be better against people than the sort of things we were likely to face, and the Blessed Artificer wasn't a frontline Named. Furthermore, while the Rogue Sorcerer and I were both forces to reckon with, neither of us were in the habit of being in the thick of it these days. We'd grown used to relying on martial Names to take the frontline. But

that only mattered if the objective of the fight was victory, which it wouldn't be here.

If any of these people had served or were serving as agents of the Intercessor, given the stories we had unfolding they were likely to be very difficult to kill even when by common sense they should be thrice-dead and buried. Creation would nudge things to help them might survive, so that in the last act of the play they could be unmasked by the triumphant heroes. The quickest way to ferret out an answer, I thought, would actually be taking this bunch into a fight far beyond what such a purposefully shoddy band of five would be able to handle. Good, I mused as I breathed in wakleaf and smiled, that meant I could attack and defend with the same stroke. I spat out the smoke, Roland batting it away so it wouldn't linger near his face.

"This is a distraction," I said. "We need to intercept the enemy before they get what they came for. Roland, which would you believe the most likely target for destruction among our potential war assets?"

He grimaced.

"Either the Severance or that one theoretical exercise," the Rogue Sorcerer said after a beat. "I'll add that the former is significantly better defended."

So either the weapon that might possibly end the Dead King or the first steps of Quartered Seasons. The aspect I'd taken out of the Saint of Swords' corpse and which had since been forged into a sword was unique, and thus would be irreplaceable if lost. The other was technically recoverable, since while losing Masego's set up here in the Arsenal would set us back some months the truly important part was the surveying artefacts we'd seeded across several realms. It'd be a pain to re-establish connections with those again, but hardly impossible. Of those two tools it was my opinion that only Quartered Seasons' ultimate results would feasibly be able to harm the Intercessor, but that didn't necessarily mean that was what she'd be going for. The Dead King had implied, back at the conference in Salia, that some aspect of the Intercessor's plans hinged on the corpse of Judgement the Procerans had dredged up being used.

I'd worked on Hasenbach enough that I knew she'd not pull that trigger without having no other option left, so I had to wonder if that was the Bard's game: peeling away every other alternative, until that was left was oblivion's approach and a finger on the trigger.

"The sword is in the Repository," I said. "The other is..."

"Belfry," Roland said.

Masego's quarters in that part of the Arsenal, then. He'd never quite understood why anyone would separate their life from their work, as he saw little difference between the two.

"And for those of us slower to catch on," the Fallen Monk cheerfully said, "might an explanation be provided?"

The Exalted Poet cleared his throat in support.

"Please," he politely added.

"Isn't it obvious?" the Blessed Artificer sighed. "They believe someone's making a grab for the most dangerous projects in the Arsenal: the Severity and the Hierophant's own private research."

Wait, had she called the sword the Severity? From what Roland had said, I'd thought it was the Severance. Didn't matter, I decided. Especially not given what she was trying to pull here.

"That research is secret by the order of more crowns than any of you can afford to defy," I mildly said. "Do have a care about those loose lips, Artificer."

"Light ever cleanses," the Blessed Artificer replied, uncowed. "Those who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear."

"I must have been unclear," I patiently said, "if you ever talk of that subject again, within the hour I'll have an order signed by every high officer of the Grand Alliance to have you executed without trial or appeal. You have absolutely no idea what you're trifling with, and your ignorant swaggering is a potential existential threat to this continent. Congratulations, Blessed Artificer. There aren't a lot of people alive who've had *apocalypse* counted as a possible consequence of their blind arrogance."

Adanna of Smyrna reared back like I'd slapped her across the face, which to be fair I essentially had. I did not regret it, for I had rather limited patience for unearned self-importance these days. Especially from heroes.

"I," she said, "I didn't-"

"Think?" I coolly replied. "Consider this matter with a thimble's worth of commonsense? Evidently not."

Harsh as I might have been right now, there had been ways to handle this other than sneaking around investigating and then trying to force my hand by talking about it publicly. If she'd brought her concerns to the White Knight earlier, or Hells even to the First Prince, then this could all have been dealt with by the mechanisms we'd put in place for that very purpose. Instead she'd blundered onwards, heroine to the bone, and become yet

another ingredient in the poisonous brew the Bard was trying to pour down my throat. My gaze swept across the rest of the gathered Named.

"I expect I won't have to repeat myself," I added.

"Already forgotten," the Fallen Monk said, raising his wineskin.

"My Chantant is lacking at the best of times," the Exalted Poet said.

Roland said nothing, only inclining his head. He didn't know the specifics of what Masego was looking into, since there was no need to, but he'd been made aware since the beginning that if Hierophant required time to spend on Quartered Seasons instead of other duties he was always to be granted that request.

"Good," I said. "Now, let's get moving. The moment we've ascertained where the breach will happen, we'll--"

There are limits, Bard, I thought even as the Arsenal shuddered once more and then a massive cracking noise sounded as the wards were broken through, *to having a nasty sense of humour.* My senses weren't anywhere sharp enough to tell me where the breach had taken place, but then I was far from the Crows and surrounded by wards. Someone who'd helped put those up, though, would have a better idea.

"Roland?" I asked.

"West," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Near the Belfry and the Workshop."

Opposite of where we were, unfortunately.

"Then to the Belfry we go," I ordered. "Prepare yourselves, my friends. This could get interesting."

—

I let Roland see to the Artificer's rustled feathers while we moved, the two of them taking the lead as we sped through the halls as quickly as we could. I wove Night through my leg to numb the pain so I wouldn't slow us down too much, but even so I had to stay in the back with the Fallen Monk and the Exalted Poet. I didn't mind, since it was as good an occasion as any to get them talking.

"So I heard you killed one of the Holies," I told the Monk. "In a pretty grisly way, too."

The villain laughed. There'd been no deep emotional reaction to the mention, not on his face anyway, and his weight made it more

difficult to gauge his body language. Especially in such thick robes when it was a man I did not know well.

"You refer to my first, though not my last," he fondly said, Arlesite accent thickening slightly. "I got my hands on three before the Saint of Swords began popping up around the region and I had to flee. I slipped into the Dominion through the Brocelian Forest, and I'd made it as far as Levante when the war up north erupted."

Ah, I thought. So that how he'd survived as a villain west of the Whitecaps contemporary to the Saint and the Grey Pilgrim. I knew for a fact the House of Light in Procer had records on both, he might just have been keeping an eye out for them from the start.

"I heard rumours," the Exalted Poet said, a little too casually to be casual, "that around this time, several lodges of Lanterns disappeared after venturing into the Brocelian."

The Fallen Monk smiled, friendly as a beloved brother, but there was something about him... there was nothing comical about his weight then, his size and lumbering demeanour. It was like looking at a predator that'd gotten large and slow by devouring, feeding again and again until it weighed him down.

"Does the Book of All Things not preach that the righteous must answer kindness with kindness and wickedness with wrath?" the Monk pleasantly said.

The Poet stiffened.

"That is blasphemy," he hissed.

"To quote the Book of All Things?" the Monk chuckled. "What interesting practices the Dominion keeps to, if that is indeed true."

It was always nice, I thought, when Named made friends. If only it weren't so fucking rare.

"Can't cast stones, I suppose," I noted, "I was proclaimed an abomination for a few years, and Arch-heretic of the East for a tad shorter. What did they do to piss you off, anyway?"

"They called themselves holy," the Fallen Monk said. "That was, all things considered, more than enough."

"A Proceran priest is still a Proceran, after all," the Exalted Poet conceded.

In a sense, was ragging on the Principate not the foundation of international diplomacy? It'd yet to fail me, anyway, not even with actual Procerans.

"Can't argue with that," I snorted. "Mind you, Hasenbach seems to be cleaning house there."

She'd named some kind of spy lay brother her Lord Inquisitor with the coup attempt as a pretext then used him to rip out the fangs of the House in the Principate, the way the Jacks told it. She'd even done it carefully enough they'd had to just lie back and take it, which was damned impressive given the pull the House of Light still had in Procer even after their leaders got caught backing a coup.

"A cleaned pigsty does not become a temple for the cleaning," the Fallen Monk shrugged. "Though I suppose peeling some jewels off the pigs is laudable work."

Godsdamn, I thought, reluctantly impressed. This one would get along splendidly with the House Insurgent if they ever got introduced.

"Lanterns know better," the Exalted Poet proudly said. "They have a single lodge in Levante, and it does not involve itself with politics."

And if you believe that, there's a house in Hannover I'd like to sell you, I thought. The Lanterns had kept themselves from being squeezed under any ruler's thumb since the founding of Levant, and that wasn't the sort of thing that could be done by keeping your hands entirely clean.

"Right," I said, keeping my skepticism off my face, "you lived there, didn't you? As one of the Hidden Poets."

The man looked surprised at even this bare bone knowledge of him, though perhaps I should not be surprised by that in turn. We had never met in person until today, and as both a recent addition to our roster and one without impressive martial skills he'd warranted precious little attention from me.

"That is true," he said. "Though I am one of them no longer, as I have left the Old Palace and taken up paying work."

"I heard of the Hidden Poets claiming an entire street's worth of brothels for their use a full day and night, when I was there," the Fallen Monk slyly said. "Though no doubt that was mere vile calumny."

"No," the Exalted Poet assured him, "it is quite true. It happens every spring, as part of the Feast of Many Sighs."

Why was it that all these southern nations seemed to have those delightful customs involving a lot of beautiful naked people, when all that Callow could measure up against them was harvest festivals where everyone got drunk and made poor decisions? It

was a little unfair, in my opinion. Anyhow, the Monk had been trying to tease by relying on a cultural need for discretion in such affairs that was very Proceran in the first place. Levantines, though, were remarkably forthright about sex even by my own Callowan standards.

"So what is it that moved you to leave the Old Palace?" I asked. "Sounds like a pleasant enough life."

"It would have been shameful to remain there as Bestowed," the Exalted Poet said, "given the call to war by the Holy Seljun. Besides, I have been thinking of composing an anthem of my own."

Bold, that. If I grasped what he'd said correctly, he was referring to the Anthem of Smoke: the founding epic of the Dominion of Levant, verses recounting the legendary hero-led rebellion that'd thrown out Procer and created the nation that still stood today. Mhm. This little chat had done nothing to move me towards believing those two were or were not pawns of the Intercessor, unfortunately. The Fallen Monk's fairly open hatred of the Proceran House of Light didn't necessarily make him an ally, since it wouldn't be impossible to use the Dead King as a way to break it without breaking Calernia itself along with it. If you had the right ally, anyway. Obviously he wasn't shy about getting a little blood on his hands or even killing to make a point, but then he wasn't one of Hanno's. My lot rarely had clean hands to show.

As for the Poet, he remained opaque to me. The Dominion's distinct fondness for honour and debts meant their Named had obvious levers for the Intercessor to use, but he did not seem quite as stuck in that rut as most of his countrymen: he'd backed down instead of dug in, when I'd pushed against the Mirror Knight's band right after its unexpected arrival. In a sense that only made him harder to read, though, and considering how straightforward Dominion Named tended to be that had me warier of him than not. I knew myself to be a fair hand at assessing people, it was a skill that'd saved my life more than a few times, but I had too little to go on here. For both of them. Until I got a finger on the pulse of what it was that drove, distrust was the order of the day.

Nothing new in that, sadly enough.

The Belfry was one of the more unusual parts of the Arsenal, in the sense that its existence was only possible because of the peculiarities of this place. In one sense it was exactly what it'd been named after: a belfry tower as could be seen in most temples of the House of Light, if a particularly large one. There could be no such thing as a view of outside in the Arsenal, though, as there was no outside. The pocket dimension this place was built in was very precisely tailored to what had been needed, as anything more would have been a waste of resources. To put it

simply, the entire facility had been carved out from the interior of single stolen Arcadian mountain, using existing caves that were now the Knot as the start. It accounted for strange, sprawling and yet stratified lay of the Arsenal, which had been designed in a way that would have been absurd in a place not surrounded by stone on all sides.

We'd reached the broadly square base of the Belfry a while back, and been greeted by the first sight of the Arsenal I'd really consider to be worthy of story: where in a temple's belfry there would have been an empty hollow for the rope and bell, instead hung a long sculpted stalactite of what might once have been stone but was now quite different. The material had grown translucent from the sorcery poured into it, almost like a sort of crystal, and it offered a gentle glow that I recognized from some of the magelights in the rest of the Arsenal. Fourteen floors of a great library swept upwards around the former stalactite, which now hung more like a chandelier than anything else. It was the single greatest repository of books in this Arsenal, but the lay of the stacks also filled with writing desks and research nooks and even places to sleep. A few discreet hallways on different levels even led into personal quarters carved outwards from the Belfry, one of them Masego's. The stone railings on every floor parted to allow for a stone path leading into the crystalline hanging hear, which itself had been hollowed out and could serve as both stairs upwards and way across.

The truly beautiful part, though, was the lights and sights echoing within the translucent stone. They were not from here, as it happened. Though the Belfry's tallest heights reached the summit of the mountain the Arsenal had been carved in, there would simply have been nothing to see outside the windows. Just an endless void which had been described to me as desolately empty yet somehow oppressive, like a ceiling too close to one's face. It was the kind of thing that chipped away at one's sanity if looked at long enough, regardless, so the 'windows' at the highest ring of the Belfry instead showed something entirely different: they were great silver scrying mirrors looking instead at the beautiful vistas of Arcadia and the Twilight Ways, at the seas and sky of Creation. There were smaller mirrors on lower levels showing such sights as well, all of them angled so that what they held within might echo in the central stalactite.

It was genuinely wondrous to behold, and I'd cast more than a few looks to the side in fascination even as we went up the first floor and onto the second. Masego's quarters would be on the thirteenth floor, and they where the enemy was most likely to strike, so I'd been prepared for the long hike up. My steps slowed before we could even come close to the third floor, however, same as Roland's in front of us. I cocked my head to the side, strengthening my senses with Night. The entire Arsenal was walled in by wards and had been raised in a pocket dimensions

created and maintained by sorcery, which permeated the air and made sensing anything but the ambient power a difficult task, but the both of us had recognized a twinkle of what was coming up behind us.

"Enemies," Roland said. "It seems we arrived first."

"Fae," I added. "And if I can feel them from this far out, in this place? They're titled."

Not a weak title, either, which meant this was going to get rough. My otherworldly senses were too muddled by the surroundings for me to be able to put a finger on exactly what manner of fae was headed our way, but there could be no *good* answer to that sort of question.

"We should make our stand at the stairs leading up from the first floor," the Exalted Poet suggested, sounding rather enthusiastic. "Hold the line there."

"It'd be pointless," I grunted.

Roland nodded in agreement. I wasn't sure if he'd tangled with fae before, but at the very least he'd been in a few scraps with the Tyrant of Helike and his bloody gargoyles. The lessons to learn were not entirely dissimilar.

"Ah," the Blessed Artificer breathed out, quick to catch on. "They fly, the stories say."

Everyone's eye's turn to the empty space between the central crystalline structure and the railings. If they could go right up flying where we could only go on foot, they'd make it to Masego's quarters long before we did. Assuming they knew where those were, and that was truly where they were headed for. Wasn't a risk I could afford to take, regardless.

"Rogue Sorcerer," I said. "Head in there, find a good vantage and try to keep them from going straight up. I'm leaving."

The Blessed Artificer? Not a fighter, but potentially bearing useful tools to clear out a swarm of lesser fae. Dangerous for the same reason, though. The Fallen Monk would be next to useless save as a bodyguard – and couldn't be trusted for that anyway – while I knew much too little about the Exalted Poet's combat abilities. He had the Gift, though, and unless you were cooking up a ritual putting all your mages in the same basket was typically a bad idea.

"- the Blessed Artificer with you," I said.

She was the most likely to be able to crack open the wards Hierophant would put around his quarters, if she was the traitor.

Roland already knew I'd gathered potential traitors here, so he'd know to both keep her at hand and keep an eye out for a knife in the back.

"Understood," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, catching my gaze and dipping his head.

I did enjoy working with Roland, no two ways about it.

"I will do what must be done," the Blessed Artificer grimly said.

Fair enough, I thought, so long as that didn't involve a knife slipped between mine or the Rogue Sorcerer's ribs.

"And the three of us, Black Queen?" the Fallen Monk asked me, a theatrical gesture extending the question to include the Poet.

"You two should run down to the entrance as quick as you can, we'll contain what we can there," I said.

"You will not be coming with us?" the Exalted Poet asked.

"I'll be taking another way down," I said. "Get moving, would you? There's no time to waste."

Though I could tell neither of them were convinced, they didn't manage to talk themselves into asking about it either. Keeping a good distance from each other, as if making a point of it, they doubled back at a run towards the stairs we'd taken up to get here. As for me, I waved off Roland and the Artificer and went fishing for my pipe again. I'd not finished the wakeleaf from earlier and it had gone quite cold, but a touch of blackflame saw to that. I limped my way to the railings and propped up my staff against them, leaning forward as I pulled at my pipe. A stream of smoke left my lips as I waited, patient, for the enemy's first blow. Unlike what I assumed to be the rest of this little band, I was familiar with fighting the Courts. Though Winter and Summer had preferred very different tactics, they'd had a few in common. There were, I imagined, only so many ways to make use of similar assets.

Which was I was not surprised when, before either the Named I'd sent down could make it down to the entrance, a winged silhouette shot out of the floor below and began to ascend the gap at a breakneck pace. A titled vanguard, hard enough to take a few hits from a powerful foe but not so powerful it'd be a great loss if their heads got caved in early. Classic fae, that.

"Not a prince or a duke," I mused, gauging the amount of power wafting out of the humanoid shape. "A count or a baron?"

Hard to tell, but I'd be more inclined to bet on baron. Regardless, it was time to act. I snatched up my staff and used

it to deftly pull myself atop the railing, calling on Night and beginning to weave it even as I estimated the right angle. I leapt down, pitch-black power beginning to erupt from the top of my yew staff and hurtled down towards the fae heading up. It could see it – no, her. Decked in dark brown armour styled like a coat of branches, translucent wings batting as her long golden hair flowed behind her, the fae offered me a mocking smile even as she veered off to the side and avoided me entirely. Leaving me, without a word or care, to fall towards the ground.

“Mistake,” I noted around the mouth of my pipe.

Taking my staff up by both hands I snapped it forward like a fishing rod, and so the rope of Night I had woven snapped forward as well, snatching the fae passing me by the neck and smashing her down.

“How dare-”

The golden-haired fae passed me as I continued to fall down in a descent barely slowed, mouth open to scream in anger, but I took a hand off my staff and pulled at the Night-rope. It tightened around her throat and I dragged her close even as my teeth clenched around my pipe, then gripped her throat and forced her further beneath me. Using my staff as support I shot a painful jolt of Night into her body, disrupting her wings, and used her twitch of pain to flip her around. We kept falling, but I was now above her back and holding a makeshift rein of Night to guide our descent.

“- am the-” the fae forced out before I tightened the rope again.

I eye the rapidly approaching ground beneath us, counting in my head how long we had before impact and disrupting her wings with further jolts of Night another two times as we dropped. Only when we were a mere count of two from the ground did I allow her wings to form again, and our descent to slow as I impacted her back from the gathered momentum and she swivelled down and forward a bit before stabilizing. We were a mere six feet above the ground, and in the hallway in front of us what looked like a raiding party of fae were fast approaching. Best to finish this before they got close.

I laid a hand on the Night leash and poured further power into it, turning rope to flame, and with a twist of will sent it to eagerly devour the fae’s throat. The neck turned to ash in an instant, the head plopping down unmoored and the wings winking out. The corpse dropped below and as the Mantle of Woe fluttered around me I adjusted my fall, landing on my feet a heartbeat after the corpse did – the head hit the ground a moment later with a wet sound, rolling half a foot towards me by happenstance. I brought to a halt with my boot, taking a last inhale of wakeleaf before all that was left was ash, and with my foot

angled the fae's head so that I could empty my pipe into the silently screaming mouth.

I put it away after, smoothed my cloak and turned a winning smile into the incoming fairies even as the Fallen Monk and the Exalted Poet emerged from the stairs to my right.

I blew out the smoke, let it wreath my face as the fae emerged from the shadows of the hall.

"Good evening," I said. "I can't help but notice you've taken something of a wrong turn. Do you need some help in finding the way out?"

I'll take that as a no, I decided as a raging thunderstorm erupted in answer.

Anomandris

Roland's such a bro....

dadycoool

"*sigh* You're crazy, but I know I'm crazier for following your every order."

[Javvies](#)

Blessed Artificer is foolish to keep pushing Cat. And, seriously, if she had concerns about Masego's research, why didn't she bring them to a higher ranking Hero?

Bard is using the Fae. How interesting. And depressing. I wonder what she's told them to get them to move against the Arsenal.

Thunderstorms could be either Spring or Autumn, but the description referencing bare branches makes me think Autumn is more likely.

The unified Winter/Summer Fae are unlikely, but remain possible. Their existence and creation could also be related to how Bard motivated these Fae to attack the Arsenal.

[Javvies](#)

The hell wordpress?

This was supposed to be stand alone.

[Liliet](#)

Quartered Seasons, from what we've heard of them so far, clearly involve fae power in some way. And fae seem to be going straight for that.

AceOfSword

It has to be autumn, the Hunted Magicians was running from the autumn court. The Bard didn't choose to use the fae randomly, she choose them because she could use the story.

caoimhinh

To be fair, there were wind, lightning, and storm titled Fae in both Winter and Summer, remember?

Cat got her position on the Winter Court by killing the Duke of Violent Squalls, while soon afterward she fought lightning-throwing Fae from Summer.

My bet is them being from the Unified Court, but *originally* from Autumn since the Hunted Magician has a debt to one of their Princes. They might be using the "coming to collect" Story as an excuse to launch their attack.

Of course, since Quartered Seasons takes up from Arcadia as one of the "Realms of Power", it might have attracted the whole Arcadian upper echelon's attention. That is potentially a weapon to kill immortal and gods, so the Fae might understandably be wary of it and Hierophant.

IDKWhoitis

Betrayal requires trust. And I'm scared of all this trust Cat is investing in Roland. I'd like to believe he would be an unwitting pawn, but we never got to know the guy...

I hope I'm just paranoid.

Sean

You notice that Roland switched his name for the sword to Severence, with Artificer calling it Severity? I wonder if that's a subconscious division for Villains and Heroes and Roland has "switched sides" with a potential for other betrayal motives there.

Bevan

Oh god this comment made me realize by story logic he would be the traitor, I really hope not that'd be unfortunate

Daemion

Badass move, Cat. That's exactly the style a ranking villain should have.

Decius

The banter is starting to get dangerously monology.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, it's still sufficiently short to pass as one-liners.

Also, Cat is fairly drunk, which I'm sure gives some leeway there~

dadycoool

Oh, by the gods. I had forgotten about that, that she's viewing the world around her through a slight haze. that makes everything several times better.

[Liliet](#)

YEP

Raved Thrad

Meanwhile, the Monk's going "She got *that* drunk on aragh? I have to get me some of *that*."

Shikkarasu

SSStylish!!!

[onedollargum](#)

Wacky wahoo pizza queen =D

Cpt. Obvious

But she didn't do a hero landing!
Even with night keeping her knee together I guess that was too much to ask for...

She did however do it all with a dragonbone pipe in her mouth, which is a significant bonus multiplier. And knocking out the ashes into the mouth of the decapitated head of your enemy was worth a truck load of cool points.

dadycoool

Cat knows the best ways to make an entrance. The perfect blend of sinister and badass, with a massive serving of Suave to finish it off. All while playing 5-D chess with Creation itself, using pieces that she knows will turn on her at the worst possible time.

erebus42

Theres nothing quite like a good entrance.
I find myself liking the Monk more and more.

[boballab](#)

Especially when dealing with the Fae, screw their story up and all that power is worthless.

KageLupus

This is going to be one of those stories about Cat that are so ridiculous everyone is going to assume it is made up. Like that time she dropped a lake on an army and drowned thousands of soldiers in minutes.

"I hear she once rode a Faerie into battle against other Faeries. And not that spooky horse either, an actual person. Faerie. Whatever."

"You are drunk and there is no way that is true."

[Mental Mouse](#)

"I'm not drunk but she was, and it's totally true!" "Arrgh!"
"Yes!" "Huh?" "That's what she'd been drinking..."

ByVectron!

Oh, this is going to be quite the scrap, isn't it? We the Fae calling on the Hidden ...dude, the guy who owes the debt? Is that the reason they we able to gain access/enter the story?

ByVectron!

Are the Fee coming for...

Taelel

Hunted Magician i believe his Name is

Insanenoodlyguy

Probably. Thunder and storms sounds like Autumn to me.

[Liliet](#)

Hunted Magician.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Chased-Around Magic-y Dude. On another note, Amadeus was once the Sadtimes Armorman.

[feministfringenz](#)

Other notable Named include the Shinybright Armorman, the Magic-y Person of the Tree Area, the Very Brave Winner of Things, and the Person Who Uses a Bow

Adrian_V

Cat still has style right? And i hope the “newbies” (as in don’t know Cat) saw all of that because it was awesome!!!!

Mmmmm i hope this isn’t something where the traitor is the one whose betrayal hurts the most emotionally (i mean Roland if it wasn’t clear) because i am honestly drawing a blank as to who it could be, we know too little about the 2 guys and BA is too obvious (wich might just be me overhtinking it...just as the author/bard planned, maye).

And mmm BA naming the sword different could e a clue...or just something related to her name? like a part of it that lets her determine the ailities and properties of the artefact more easily? or maye she just thought the original name was lame xD

Darkening

There was mention during Masego’s perspective that the name was still up for debate among the people working on it. Severance because it cuts things, or Severity because... saint of swords.

Liliet

In addition to what Darkening said: Roland used the name Masego preferred, while Adanna used the name Roland preferred :3

Cicero

Blessed Artificer is acting like someone duped into a scheme, not a willing and knowing co-conspirator.

Mental Mouse

And of course the choice of name will have narrative effects...

Soronel Haetir

I was hoping it was going to be Larat that showed up.

Oshi

Larat is unbound and not Fae anymore. That was the whole point of his gambit. He’ll be a whole new world of nasty.

Soronel Haetir

Un-bbound I agree with but I somehow missed the not-Fae bit.

dadycoool

No, he's still Fae. He's simply learned from his Queen how to properly wield the Stories that act as chains. Personally, I'm waiting for Cat's new Name to have the Aspect Hunt, at which point Larat and his party will return with something like "Good to be back. Wanna see our new tricks?"

Zggt

I'm still kinda figuring Cat is going to be the Rogue Queen, take the place of the legendary Callow who solves riddles by stabbing people (for the good of Callow, of course). At its core is a name that fits her very well. She gave up her crown and is setting up Callow to rule itself without her, which would effectively make her a queen without a nation. Catherine will still be a queen due to the massive armies, powerful connections, the ability to change the actions of entire nations, and her repeated stabbing and/or burning of important things). She generally handles diplomacy in what can kindly be thought of as roguish rather than noble manner. And most of all, I don't think Rogue Queen is by definition a Heroic name.

There's a philosophical idea calling modern day humans Homo-Narrativus; we recontextualize our lives according to our internal monologue. In this case, there's a case that Cat has been the Rogue Queen in all but Name for a long time now.

Despite the name, she has been forging herself into her new role for years now, and the dramatic reveal will turn a sure defeat into victory at some point. Perhaps Catherine has been preparing that as a weapon of last resort, one surefire victory. And perhaps this is the Bard's play, making sure that there will be no way out for her as she takes down the Dead King, pushing her into "noble sacrifice" territory (because she knows Cat would if it came to that).

WealthyAardvark

Larat and the rest of the Wild Hunt are no longer Fae. What they are hasn't been studied or named yet as far as we know, but they're no longer Fae.

Larat held not a speck of power within him. And fae, Masego had once told me, were little more than power made flesh and shaped by stories. The inevitable conclusion of that sent a shiver up my spine.

"Do you even know," I softly asked, "what you've become?"

"Something... unprecedented," he said, smile broadening.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/06/12/chapter-47-tenet/>

Jawsh

"Good evening," I said. "I can't help but notice you've taken something of a wrong turn. Do you need some help in finding the poll?"

<http://topwebfiction.com/?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Juff

Typo Thread:

turning and indifferent > turning an indifferent
in term of > in terms of
must suspect > must have suspected
make us of > make use of
Not, I corrected > No, I corrected
wakleaf > wakeleaf
necessarily meant > necessarily mean
that was left was > what was left was
commons sense > common sense
both, he > both; he
Things?" the Monk > Things?" The Monk
noted, > noted.
cleaning," the > cleaning." The
it was a skill (this part should have – instead of commas)
that drove > that drove them
of single > of a single
for strange, > for the strange,
stacks also > stacks was also
hanging hear > hanging heart
they where > they were where
a pocket dimensions > pocket dimensions
eye's turn > eyes turned
either the Named > either of the Named
I eye the > I eyed the
descent to slow > descent began to slow
dropped below > dropped below,
brought to a halt > brought it to a halt
wreath > wreathe

WuseMajor

Next one is going to be "Sinkers." Which means either Cat is going to find out what this trap looks like with her face in it, or she's going to trigger something and get to punch the Bard.

Haven't even finished this one yet, but next one is gonna be big.

Shequi

Hook, Line, Sinkers, Rod, Reel and Copy of Angling Times, Sir!

[Liliet](#)

Yep. Love how it can be either!

Mammon

Or the Bard is the one doing the hook, line sinking. Things have been going just a bit too smoothly for Cat thus far, after all.

Hellspirit

I like how we got to see the petty naming conflict. It just grounds the story.

[Javvies](#)

Blessed Artificer is foolish to keep pushing Cat. And, seriously, if she had concerns about Masego's research, why didn't she bring them to a higher ranking Hero?

Bard is using the Fae. How interesting. And depressing. I wonder what she's told them to get them to move against the Arsenal. Thunderstorms could be either Spring or Autumn, but the description referencing bare branches makes me think Autumn is more likely.

The unified Winter/Summer Fae are unlikely, but remain possible. Their existence and creation could also be related to how Bard motivated these Fae to attack the Arsenal.

[Liliet](#)

> And, seriously, if she had concerns about Masego's research, why didn't she bring them to a higher ranking Hero?

Because heroes don't have a ranking, and the more influential ones have clearly been bamboozled by the wicked Black Queen's minions. Obviously.

[Javvies](#)

I meant higher ranking in the organization of the Grand Alliance and the organization and enforcement structure of the Truce and Terms.

Y'know, the things that are responsible for the very existence of the Arsenal and funding Masego's research.

Or, to put it another way, someone with a higher security

clearance, or someone empowered to arbitrate Truce and Terms disputes.

She basically fucked up big time with how she handled her suspicions of Masego's research.

[Liliet](#)

No, agreed, I just can say that I understand exactly why.

RoflCat

Because as much as she respects Hanno, he is likely to take Cath's side (and he should be part of the know about the project)

So when that happen, when a respected Hero take a villain side, what do other Heroes do?

1. Assume they're being misled
2. CLEARLY the villain have them corrupted and under influence and thus can't be trusted (see: Pilgrim after the Twilight event)
3. I CAN HANDLE THIS ALONE

[Javvies](#)

We know that Hanno is almost certainly aware, to some extent, of Quartered Seasons.

Blessed Artificer doesn't know that. Alerting Hanno to this secret Evil project could be just what's needed to free him of the Black Queen's influence, or start the process. Or maybe if he does know about it, he knows more about it than Blessed Artificer does and can give her answers about it.

Or, she could go talk to Roland, the Rogue Sorcerer – he's the top Hero in the Arsenal, and if Heirophant is keeping this project a secret from him, that's grounds for a Truce and Terms and Grand Alliance sanctioned inquiry into this secret project and Heirophant. Alternatively, the Rogue Sorcerer is aware of the project and can tell her about it.

For that matter, Blessed Artificer is assuming that Heirophant's secret project is Evil and needs to be stopped on the basis that she doesn't know about it and he's keeping it a secret from the rest of the Arsenal.

Oathkeeper32

Night lasso...

Yippie ki yay motherfucker!

[Mental Mouse](#)

The two top heroes are both in Cat's orbit, as are several of the upcoming B-rankers.

Miles

Because the Bard mentioned something to the BA to make her think any communication to Hanno is going to get intercepted or is for some other reason a bad idea?

[oracleindex](#)

Welp, Roland is the traitor. Only thing that makes sense, story-wise.

[Liliet](#)

Not necessarily!

KageLupus

I don't see it. Roland is coming up on honorary Woe status at this point, or at the very least one of the inner circle of non-Woe. He has fought side-by-side with Cat and knows that she really is trying to make things better. He has worked side-by-side with Masego enough to know that even if he is digging into something dangerous it is almost definitely a weapon against the Dead King. And at this point he should have been part of enough conversations to know that if the Wandering Bard makes him a deal it is for her own ends and not the good of everyone.

Turning a trusted ally is going to be hard, both because of that trust and because it is such a cliché. Much easier to have someone like the Concoter setup a smuggling operation in a roundabout way, or the Panted Blade get word from some other Hero to disrupt things for Heroic Reasons.

broadaxe

using the argument that its a cliché, is not exactly great when it comes to the guide verse though :3 it being a cliché is, exactly why its even more likely 😊 though ofc cat has learned to navigate stories in such a way that we are still surprised despite tropes and clichés being the standard, so i think you right that it wont be him of it is, there will be something to it we didn't see coming :3

[Liliet](#)

Cat be like "hey Roland would you mind being traitor bait again?"
And Roland be like "geez okay"
Love them ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which will retroactively get funnier if he is in fact the "traitor".

[Liliet](#)

'funnier' is not how i'll describe that

Letouriste

Well, that's a way to make an entrance for sure

[Burlyraven](#)

Man, that scene only gets better when you realize Cat's still in her royal-casual outfit.

Also, the casual idea drop of the Fallen Monk potentially becoming a religious leader with the House Insurgent is somewhat disturbing and awesome, because his motivations actually seem to line up with Callowan ideals. Kinda hoping he's not the traitor or hiding the type of darker appetites religious individuals can be linked to in our world.

[Liliet](#)

Oh yes, it's pretty important to remember Cat's still wearing the royal pajamas!

And is also still drunk.

(And the 'darker appetites' seem to be more along the lines of what he turned on the Holies for)

OfScience

Yeah, force-feeding someone to death seems like very pointed commentary on gluttony to me. His comment about punishing them for calling themselves holy only reinforces it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Maybe with their combined powers they can resurrect Tankred, or Scorchio as panchoAdrenalina has dubbed him.

[Burlyraven](#)

I still haven't given up hope on that boy, but considering the story that theoretically would revive him would largely be decided by Cat's emotions at the time she starts it... let's just say I bite my nails a little every time she displays a negative emotion.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The bigger problem is that *he* didn't earn a resurrection nohow. Killed in his bed (and raised as a revenant) by a sneak attack, before accomplishing anything more than killing a town to save its neighbors? Nope, that's not a winning story.

Burlyraven

Back when I started meming about the idea, he had most of the markers of a shounen protagonist, but even those have fallen off, so at this point basically his only story is as Cat's monster. Maybe if she waits until the war is over he could have a second chance, but that's an even weaker story than what's happening now.

Dread Emperor Ridiculous

Pog.

Also, I keep seeing allusions to Cat's meeting with the Duke of Violent Squalls.

Wonder

Catherine is badass crystalized. For a moment there I thought she was gonna Take the Baron's wings .

Hook Line Goblinfire/badassery

M0och123

What an entrance...

That I think was the best entrance this book has had, bar none.

Shveiran

I refer you to her striking a match at the Princes' Graveyard.

panchoAdrenalina

the dead king killing scorchio had a bigger effect. is like "you motherfu***r!"

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"Scorchio"

I love it.

Agent J

Black rode in on an undead suicide stallion. This Fae didn't even explode.

Noldo

I think that the connection between Autumn court and Hunted Magister is too obvious and Hunted Magister is unknowing pawn in the game. He is the bait used by Bard (or Bard's associate) to lure fae to storm the place as a tool of opportunity (I wonder how much Bard is hating that she has to spend that asset for this plot due to Catherine's earlier actions).

So in that structure fae would be a mere distraction meant to keep Catherine busy.

I wonder whether the revelation of Masego's project to the band of five could have played a critical role here. Could we see the traitor trying to make a move towards the project because it was revealed by Blessed Artificer? That would naturally require that either Poet or the Monk would be the traitor and so far neither really fits.

Cicero

The Monk seems most likely. He's a former hero, turned villain because... because he went vigilante? That seems strange. No one objected when the Sword Saint went vigilante. Out of all the characters he's probably the one most open to a "for the greater good" argument from the Bard if she pitches it right.

Magicturtle

What i dont understand is why is the bard against cat in the first place. I know the truce/terms might be dangerous for her but it seems almost imposible to disrupt them when cat is such a high-level schemer, with super strong backing. Seems more useful to use cat to clean up DK. It only makes sense if the truce terms is something that might kill her, as she is making it easier for DK to win.

Javvies

Bard has been against Cat since Cat was the Squire. Or her actions and statements certainly imply as much.

Her explanation to William the Lone Swordsman was that Cat represented the success and heir to a new tradition of pragmatic Evil – one that could actually win. And that's why Cat the Squire was "worse" than Heiress.

Admittedly, the reliability of those statements as regards Bard's true perspective and motivations is very much in question.

Let's also remember that Bard stopped two Elves from taking out Akua while she was still toeing the line as Governor of Liesse. This was before the Fae showed up.

For that matter, we still don't actually know why the Fae invaded Callow in the first place. IIRC, it was implied that Winter followed Summer's lead into Callow, and then Winter King was able to take advantage of the opportunities posed by non Fae in breaking the status quo, but it was never truly clarified as to why the Fae started entering Callow in the first place. Bard could have meddled there as well. We don't know.

We know very little definitively about Bard, one thing we do know is that damned near everything about her is a mystery wrapped in an enigma made up of puzzles covered in lies.

> [I]t was never truly clarified as to why the Fae started entering Callow in the first place. Bard could have meddled there as well. We don't know.

We do know that the Winter King wasn't supposed to think that way in the first place, as Cat mentioned to Malicia it was scaring the other fae. You're definitely onto something, as both his behaviour and Larat's calling together the Hunt during a season it wasn't supposed to emerge are suspicious, especially from the timing.

Now I'm wondering whether the King's suicide by marriage is related to Bard's desire to escape her own purpose, and his position as an equal to the Queen is reflective of the arrangement that the Accords are leading to, if the Sage was right about the resulting Role.

Morgenstern

Summer invaded because Akua hunted them for her Liesse project, as I understood it. Winter then mirrored them and the Winter King used that opportunity for his very own play, which had nothing to do with either.

Now, why the Wandering Bard stopped the Elves ... that seems the most interesting question from my viewpoint so far.

Morgenstern

The momentary Winter King's and his most-often replacement Larat's (being Prince at this time) new thinking was at least implied to stem from Arcadia mirroring Creation = aka, being created by what Maddie and Co. started with their long-term streak of rational-practical Evil. It seems to have infused the Fae with new ideas they weren't meant to get.

[Javvies](#)

Nope.

Akua only started grabbing Fae after Summer invaded. Remember, plan (A) was the Angel corpse, plan (B) was grabbing a dozen Deoraithe of the Watch and using them to tap the power source empowering their abilities. And Plan B was working just fine from Akua's standpoint. Using the Fae started because they're pure power, which made using a noble as a sacrifice a lot more efficient than anything else.

Daniel E

I'm still not buying that Bard is legitimately taking a swing at Catherine. Yes Cat flies the banner of Below, but she's not evil in the traditional sense. Really more of an anti-hero, and I don't think that will upset the balance.

Gamer7956

That's the entire problem – she's an antihero at best, and a well intentioned extremist at worst. She's not a clear cut hero or villain. Her very existence means that the very shape of stories that occur on Calernia may soon shift dramatically. The Intercessor has spent millenia learning how to manipulate stories to get exactly the effects she wants – and we know it was a learned skill due to her screwing up with the role of Hierarch. Cat is the catalyst to thousands of years of experience being rendered useless – of course she wants to get rid of her.

To the Intercessor, the Dead King is an enemy she'll be able to beat eventually, as she has no way to truly lose. Cat poses the possibility of a significant – if not final – defeat.

Mike E.

Cat's entrance reminds me of this (remove the spaces):

`https : // www . youtube . com / watch ?v=YYyWd9UacvE`

[Mental Mouse](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYyWd9UacvE)

Cool scene, but please don't break up URLs that way, they are a pain to decode! Use `<code>code</code>` tags, so the address comes out as: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYyWd9UacvE` .

Mike E.

Ah, thank for the tip. I assumes any/all html would be not printed (or mangled)...nice to know wordpress has a way around that.

[Mental Mouse](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYyWd9UacvE)

WordPress allows for an HTML subset; **B</bIUS stylings (but not, alas, super/subscript), HTML entities, selected embedding-related tags, probably more formatting stuff too.**

[Mental Mouse](#)

And naturally I blew the tags.

Mammon

The Black Queen is a Villain, we must stop her!

Why?

She talked to some Villains and bad fae before and defeated a Villain who turned an entire city of hers into a wight-infested floating fortress but didn't do it in the name of Above!

We shall henceforth call her the Arch-Heretic

The Fallen Monk is okay though.

Why? Didn't he force-feed several priests until their stomachs burst open as an extremely painful and gruesome way of murdering them?

Yeah, but he did it because they call themselves holy which is sacrilegious and by choosing to be part of this organisation that doesn't give them the choice of title or the opportunity to join a different healing cleric organisation in their country due to monopoly, meaning that it's okay outside of Procer.

I see, makes sense.

Morgenstern

Whoever said the heroes are ok with the Fallen Monk turning Villain? It seems to me to have been highly implied and in places kinda been spoken out aloud that the heroes all around were/are very much NOT amused by that, but hate his guts more than Villains that were Villains from the start...?

Morgenstern

... more than the guts of Villains that... (wordpress, when will you finally "invent" being able to correct posts..)

WealthyAardvark

Literally last chapter:

The Fallen Monk was one of Indrani's band, and one of the villains on our rolls that heroes tended to react the most violent to. That was not because his sins were so great

compared to the rest of Below's lot, but because once upon a time he'd instead been known as the Merry Monk.

Mammon

That was a jab at how the Poet seemed to be okay enough with the Monk's reasons because haha Procer sucks to everyone but Procer, the kind of windfall even half-hearted and as a joke like this that Cat has never received from Heroes before ever.

Agent J

We met him while he was engaged in what can only be described as an honour duel against a Levantine Hero. We learn in this very chapter that he had to flee Procer like a sick gazelle lest the Saint of Swords sinks her fangs into him.

Where are you getting the notion that heroes are in any way okay with him?

Mammon

Two comments that took my highly sarcastic comment serious? Have people spontaneously forgotten the difference between a clearly non-serious joke and genuine comments? How can you guys even see a serious comment in my initial post at all? Baffling.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

Ah, someone has never heard of Poe's Law

Hellarion Angelus

Am i the only one who keeps thinking that the Blessed Artificer getting interrupted each and every time she tries to bring that subject up is suspicious? I mean, it has the feel of the story thread 'advice/piece of information from an unlikely source' that Cat went to the doddering sage to get in the first place, meaning it can no longer function as that. Also there is the personal flaw cat got about the underserving arrogance from the heroes that keeps tripping up, and she is starting to take more and more mannerism from the black knight.

Javvies

We know that Hanno is almost certainly aware, to some extent, of Quartered Seasons.

Blessed Artificer doesn't know that. Alerting Hanno to this secret Evil project could be just what's needed to free him of the Black Queen's influence, or start the process. Or maybe if he does know about it, he knows more about it than Blessed Artificer does and can give her answers about it.

Or, she could go talk to Roland, the Rogue Sorcerer – he’s the top Hero in the Arsenal, and if Heirophant is keeping this project a secret from him, that’s grounds for a Truce and Terms and Grand Alliance sanctioned inquiry into this secret project and Heirophant. Alternatively, the Rogue Sorcerer is aware of the project and can tell her about it.

For that matter, Blessed Artificer is assuming that Heirophant’s secret project is Evil and needs to be stopped on the basis that she doesn’t know about it and he’s keeping it a secret from the rest of the Arsenal.

Javvies

... dammit wordpress.
Replied to the wrong post somehow.

Mental Mouse

Cat is running into the limits of secrecy here. She is *trying* to maintain the project as the equivalent of Top Secret, in a world where that’s not really a thing, and so she gets to enforce it personally.

Kel the Seer

Do we have a pool going for Cat’s new name? I think that the Errant Queen is fitting. Errant both in the sense of “travelling while seeking adventure” (when was the last time she got to sleep in her own place?) and in the sense of “strays from the proper course” for her penchant to derail stories.

Someperson

Uh. After Cat stole an entire *court* and then fed it to some Crows, I would never bet on some Fae in a fight against Cat. She’s practically made of stories about their demise. Considering the Bard isn’t an idiot, that means this is a distraction. Probably a dangerous enough distraction that ignoring it would be disastrous, but still ultimately a distraction.

Someperson

Also, I’m guessing part of the Fae’s purpose is to be a wager. Storywise, there has to be symmetry. If Bard wins, the Terms and Truce are unmade, so Cat has to get something if she wins. In this case, what she probably gains is everything needed to move forwards with her Quartered Seasons plan, whatever that entails.

Onos

Possible minor inconsistency – an earlier chapter has Cat muse about the Arsenal being carved from a mountain of the Twilight Ways, but here it's said to be stolen from Arcadia proper.

Chapter 22: Sinker

"Know mercy for what it is: the plea of the ant to the boot."
– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

They were a lovely sight, in that terribly foreign way that was the mark of the fae.

Seven of the Fair Folk attacked under cover a rain and thunder, each of them some painter's wild dream made into flesh. The vanguard came as a matching pair, swift in their stride and a pleasure for the eye to behold: their skin like honey and their eyes a pale grey, they wore cuirasses and vambraces of copper so perfectly burnished they looked like the surface of a still pond. Beneath those a long robe ending in skirts had been woven of dead grass in grey and yellow, the colours perfectly matching those of their long and flowing hair. Each bore a single long blade, fashioned whole from what seemed like a single strand of dead grass – the straight edges of the blades crooned as they touched the winds, though, as if they were so keen even the storm was cut by their touch. They were titled, both of them. I could feel it. Yet they were not among the greats of whatever Court had sent them, servants of higher powers.

One such power stood behind them. Towering in height but slender in his build, the fae was a splendid sight: an armoured and tunic of woven brass and bright-red flame, glittering with rubies, went down to his thighs, loose and long-sleeved. Below, long skirts that were a netting of gold filled with brass yet as supple as cloth swung over black-skinned bare feet. What little skin was left bare by the slender helm of brass and smouldering charcoal, its long cheek guards of carved red opal going down to a round collar of gold touched with flickering embers, was just as dark in tone. As if the two burning red eyes set in the elegant face had charred the fae entirely, I thought. In his right hand was held a rounded kite shield, woven together from frozen bright-red fire, while in his left he held a bastard sword hilted in gold and ruby but whose blade was pitch-black and smouldering.

I caught sight of the last four, before the storm swept over me, but only glimpses. A tall woman bearing a great antlered helm, or perhaps antlers, face painted with streaks of blood-red and bone-

white as she wielded a spear of twisted bone. A small figure, almost childlike, trailing long strands of straw like a dress or a cape and whisper-swift on its feet. A calm-faced man wearing a strangely nostalgic smile, sprouts of green twisting around him like a bandolier and a quiver. And behind them all, an amber-eyed woman with a sizzling grin, messy hair swept around by the wind as lightning crackled up her frame and she guided the storm. That one was the most powerful among them, I sensed, and if she was not at least a Duchess I would eat my own hand. There was no time to consider that in depth, though, for the wind and rain and lightning hit me like someone had thrown a damned wall at me.

I took half a step back, cursing, and had to shift my weight so I wouldn't be outright blown off. My mantle flapped like a banner behind me, and I dragged my crown down on my brow so it wouldn't fly off. This wouldn't do, I couldn't see a bloody thing in this wind and rain and –

"Bordel de merde," I swore in Chantant, throwing myself to the side even as lightning struck.

It still singed the edge of my face, and I grimaced at the burning of my skin. My hair might well have caught fire, if not for the rain. I rolled up into a kneel and drew deep of the Night as I brought up my staff, only to smash it down on the stone. The thing with Night was that, for all its wondrous flexibility, it tended to fare pretty badly in straight-up fights against other powers. Light most of all, but sorcery tended to come out on top as well and I suspected that the work of the fae would behave just the same. Night was the power of a thief, not a soldier, and always shone best when there was no struggle to be had. Which was why even though these days I probably had as much raw might to throw around as my current opponent, if not more, I did not try to unmake the storm. Instead a bursting bubble of darkness spreading out created an oasis of calm within it before fading but leaving the boundary maintained. I rose gingerly to my feet.

"Come now," I said. "If I know a single thing about the likes of you lot, it's that you literally *cannot* refuse an invitation like this. Don't be so coy, my lords and ladies."

A rich chuckle answered me as the dark-skinned fae that wore flame like cloth strode out of the storm in front of me, bare feet not even a whisper against the stone. His sword stayed pointing at the ground, his shield loose in his grip.

"It is my honour to make your acquaintance, Queen of Lost and Found," the burning-eyed fae said. "Your cavalier grave-robbing of Winter is legend among our kind."

Distraction, I mused. He might as well have it carved into his forehead – which meant the twins were either about to flank me or already using the storm as cover to burst out and make a run at

Masego's quarters. If it was the latter, I could only trust in the ability of Roland and the Blessed Artificer.

"And who is it that I speak to?" I replied, clicking my tongue. "What Court boasts such poor manners?"

Dead grass, fire, harvest, hunt and storms. Though the spread of those displayed dominions was not small, it did bring a season to my mind over others. Best to have it confirmed by fae tongue, though.

"Manifold apologies, Your Majesty," the fae bowed. "I am the Count of Ravenous Flame, presently at your service and ever to that of my master, the Prince of Falling Leaves."

Fuck, I thought. So they really were here to prove the Hunted Magician's epithet was well-deserved. Yet beneath the dismay there was something like triumph: Masego, that glorious bastard, had been right once again. Somewhere out there the ruling mantle of the Court of Autumn still existed. There was evidently a lot more power left to it than we'd believed, if there were enough nobles left to call on to assault the Arsenal, but the *principle* of Quartered Seasons had been sound all long even if we'd been unable to prove it.

"You've given me a greater gift than you know, Count," I grinned. "So I give you this in return: if you flee now, I will not pursue."

To my surprise, the nobleman bowed.

"Your capricious arrogance was everything I hoped it would be," the Count of Ravenous Flame replied, "count no debt here, Queen of Lost and Found, for anything I might have gifted by happenstance has been repaid twice over."

The moment he began talking I knew where this was headed: as the Count spoke the last word of his superficially friendly answer, I took a sudden step back and avoided getting skewered by two crooning blades as they thrust where I had been standing a heartbeat before. By the height, the blows would have slid between two of my ribs and punctured my throat. I was almost admiring: fae were rarely so precise in their attempted murder, or so flawlessly synchronized. I was not, however, so admiring that I did not immediately punish that predictable flair for the theatrical: the rightmost of twin fae in copper and grass was smashed in the back of the head by my staff, which sent it stumbling into the other's way. They both spun away towards the Count, smooth in their recovery, so I tossed a handful of blackflame at the left one's grass skirts and watched the flame take with some satisfaction. It cut away the grass-cloth before the burn could spread, but by then I was gathering Night and our

little skirmish had borne more pressing developments. The Count of Ravenous Flame entered the fray.

"A spark, a birth," the Count sang, his voice soothing like the warm crackling of bonfires.

As he strode forward, he trailed sparks. I would have interrupted whatever it was he was doing but the rightmost twin kept me busy: its wings burst to life in a flicker and it used a beating of them to help itself into a backwards leap that would have led it behind me, blade at the ready, if I'd not traced a trail of blackflame in the path. The wings beat again, ending the leap, but by then I'd positioned my staff under it and let loose with a concentrated burst of Night. I caught only its shoulder, but that much I tore right through. The fae screamed in pain, but by then then Count of Ravenous Flame had gotten just enough time to proceed unimpeded.

"A hunger, a swell," the Count sang, voice gone the way of the blaze. "I command you, dimming fire, herald of plenty to lack: devour all you behold, *ravenously*."

The sparks had strengthened, turned to flame, and been swept up in the thunderstorm around us. Only instead of being put out by the rain the fire had spread, as if the very wind was oil, and a howling blaze surrounded us even as the ember-eyed Count of Autumn laughed.

"Perish," he told me, "so thoroughly that naught of you is left to be lost or found."

Damn, I thought, reluctantly impressed. That was a pretty good line to kill me on, if he could pull it off. Already Night was coursing through my veins and as the Count of Ravenous Flame raised his black blade high, heat and fire swirling around it as he commanded the blazing storm, I began shaping my answer.

"The hand in greed can only clutch sand,
Even exquisite passion, the lover's brand
Is a vainglorious army headed for rout:
Ardour fall spent, the flame gutters out."

The verse was spoken in Chantant, barely more than a whisper against the roar of the blaze, and yet it slithered through the burning storm like snake. I knew the voice that'd recited it, that deep and resonant tone that was decadently pleasing to the ear, and the sorcery it was laced with ate at the gathered fires like spreading rot. Even as the Count of Ravenous Flame fought to keep hold of it, the Exalted Poet's verse tore at his work like some divine candle snuffer. An opening, I thought with a wolf's

smile, and abandoned the spinning threads I'd been about to shape Night into in favour of something with a little more bite. When the twin fae came for me this time, wielding their blades of grass, I was ready for them and without a distraction to handle.

One came high, leap aided by wings as its blade whistled down towards my skull, while the other came low: knees bending low beyond what a human body would have allowed, its sword whipped out aiming for the femoral artery on my left leg. It was a close thing, spinning my staff so that the lower part went up and swatted aside the strike about to cut into my skull while the upper part going down nudged the other blow to pass harmlessly between my legs, but worth the risks: with the two fae over-extended in their strikes, neither of them were able to avoid my reply. Two small tendrils of Night sprang out of my staff, shooting out and puncturing the skin of the fae near the throat. The moment they did I dumped all the power I'd gathered, in just the right way, and I got maybe two heartbeats before the fae managed to retreat far enough the tendrils broke.

"You may consider this end," I told them, "courtesy of Mighty Urulan, once of Great Lotow."

I'd never seen anyone melt from the inside before, but considering the sheer amount of acid I'd pumped into their veins it was no surprise that within moment the two fae were bleeding, broken corpses-to-be falling apart as they tried to crawl away. As I'd thought, that was a particularly nasty trick to be on the receiving end of when your body wasn't entirely made up of smoke and mirrors.

"*Dieux du ciel*," the Fallen Monk hoarsely said, sounding sickened.

The Exalted Poet's trick – had that been an aspect or was he potentially more useful than I'd thought? – had killed the flame and the storm with it, restoring a broader line of sight to me. The Fallen Monk, looking more than a little singed and bleeding from messy wounds on his shoulder and belly, threw a wineskin into the path of a sapling-green arrow loosed by the fae adorned in vines I'd glimpsed earlier. The arrow sprouted wild growth as red wine sloshed all over the ground, a young tree falling on the stone and spasming a few times before it began to swiftly wither. That explained the messy wounds, I thought. The Monk had been quick enough to rip the arrows out before *that* could happen inside his body. Good on him, Named or not those roots would have shredded muscles. The Exalted Poet himself was bruised and battered, but there was a reason he'd been able to ply his tricks: he was currently without an opponent.

Given the lack of corpses and two missing fae – the childlike one wearing straw and the antlered huntress in blood and bone – I'd bet that they had casually slapped him down before making a run

upwards. The telltale noises of battle sorcery being used further up good as confirmed it, Roland seemingly making a gallant effort of swatting the fae back down. The real threat, though, was the fae still in the back. The grinning one with the amber eyes, who'd opened the games by casually throwing an entire storm at us. She still there, grin broader than ever as she watched us struggle. *You're the most powerful of this pack*, I thought, *so you have to be at least a Duchess*. A Count would not defer to her otherwise. So why was I finding these opponents so... lacking? Perhaps it was simply that I was no longer a squire or a bastard duchess of my own, and that I'd faced greater monsters since, but I'd just ridden a Baron of Autumn down a drop and killed him without much effort.

Something was wrong here.

Boots squelching wetly as I walked through the dissolved remains of the twin fae, I rolled my shoulder to limber it.

"Poet," I said, "help the Monk. I'll be handling our friend the Count, and the kind lady out back if she'd care to introduce herself?"

A lie, I did not intend to have them fight any of these three right now if I could avoid it, but it was a useful lie so long as the grinning fae heard it.

"You presume much, mortal," the Count of Ravenous Flame chided me.

His long blade rose, and his shield rose with it. I flicked a glance at the Exalted Poet and got a nod confirming he'd heard. Good, I could put most of my attention on the last two then.

"Where's all that sweet queen talk gone, Count?" I grinned. "Still, if you keep talking for your lady I'll have to assume she's a mute – or that you have the right to choose her words for her."

The Count seemed to shrink on himself at that. Fear, I judged. That'd been hard, blood-curling fear at even the possibility that the fae behind him might take offence to his behaviour. That went some way in confirming the pecking order, at least. The Prince of Falling Leaves might be his ultimate master, but where there was a captain there was a lieutenant.

"My dear Aedon is guilty of only eagerness to serve me," the amber-eyed fae laughed. "But your point is taken, Queen of Lost and Found. You stand before the Duchess of Rash Tempest."

"Delightful name," I smiled, all pretty and friendly with just a little too much teeth. "Would you mind ordering your servants to

cease attempting to murder mine as long as we are talking? It's most uncivilized."

"Alas, oath was given," the Duchess shrugged. "I cannot recall those I have sent."

"But our green-clad friend here..." I suggested, gesturing towards the fae archer facing the Poet and the Monk.

"That boon I can deliver," the Duchess of Rash Tempest grinned, "for a price."

Ah, and now we came to the bargaining. If I could keep her talking, and the two fae with her down here with us, then I might be able to send my own two companions upwards to help Roland and the Artificer before all of us came down to tangle with these three together. The key to keeping control of this would be offering terms before she could make demands, since letting fae pick their careful words was a good way to get stabbed by them.

"I'll offer you the last words of a king," I said, "and the dream of a hard-fought defeat, not a decade old."

The Duchess went still. *Yeah, I've dealt with your kind before*, I thought with grim amusement as something like greed seized those amber eyes. *I know what your lot is hungry for.*

"A generous offer," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said, "perhaps too generous."

So she wanted to avoid being in my debt if I was judged to have overpaid, huh. Fair enough.

"I would consider us even, given the might of your servants and the feebleness of mine," I replied.

I heard the Fallen Monk let out a snort of laughter, and the Exalted Poet an indignant yelp – though he took an arrow in the thigh not long after, and I was interested to see he produced a strip of parchment as he sang a verse in what I thought might be Ceseo. Though the sprout-arrow savaged his flesh, by the time the verse had been fully recited it had turned to dust and the Poet's flesh was healed, if heavily scarred.

"Then by these terms I strike bargain with you, Queen of Lost and Found," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said.

"Bargain struck," I agreed. "You two, hurry up and help the Rogue and the Artificer with-"

There was a blinding flash of light, or perhaps Light, and something like a massive thudnerstrike sounded, followed by an inhuman scream.

"That," I completed. "Help them with *that*."

"At your service, mistress," the Fallen Monk said, sounding deeply amused.

"Are you certain you would not like me to remain and record-" the Poet began, then I turned a dark look onto him, "- your wisdom touches me, Black Queen, and so I promptly heed it."

They moved, and for now I put them out of my mind.

"Amusing," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said. "Yet you tarry in fulfilling our bargain."

"I would never," I smiled, then added in Crepuscular, "*My crown I abdicate, and let the worthiest of you bear it.*"

Larat had been king for a moment, after all, even if his first and last decree had been one of abdication.

"I do not know this tongue," the Duchess hissed.

"Then you should have bargained more precisely," I chided her. "But perhaps this will be more to your taste?"

I wove a bubble of Night carefully, using strands of the vision Sve Noc had given of the battle between the Dead King and Vesena Spear-Biter's sigil, and blew it towards her. I had no intention whatsoever of giving her any of *my* memories, even if she might have taken that from the sentence. Disappointment flickered, but hunger won over it soon enough. The Duchess of Rash Tempest's lips opened in a sigh, as the bubble landed on her palm, and she laid delicate fingers against the Night.

The bubble popped.

I'd offered her the dream, not the right to see it, and if she had been unable to keep that dream once given that was hardly my fault, was it? The Duchess turned her amber eyes to me, her face gone frozen with hate.

"What a clever creature you are," she said.

"Nah," I denied, "you're just not as good as this as you think you are."

"Neither are you, I'm afraid," the Duchess replied.

The bowstring twanged and a green arrow whistled as it was loosed at me and I was forced to hastily duck out of the way. Ah, true. While I'd bargained for her servants to stop fighting mine we'd never said anything about them fighting *me*. The Count of Ravenous Flame sprung forward, bare feet unseemly quick as his eldritch sword and board came barrelling towards me.

"Hey, Duchess," I grinned, even as I gathered Night. "Wanna make a bet?"

"Why would I, when you've proved such a feckless debtor?" the amber-eyed fae replied.

The Count was on me before I could answer, sword down and pointing towards me as his shield crackled with the sound of flame. At the last moment he shifted his footing a step and a half to the right, revealing the green arrow whose whistle the crackling had been meant to hide, and clove at my side. I swallowed a curse, for it'd been clever work, but with my free hand caught the edge of the Mantle of Woe and swept it around me. It caught the arrow, but my hasty attempt to push back the cleave with a strike of my staff had me on the losing side. I was thrown back two paces, rolling only to rise into another arrow, perfectly aimed at my throat. A lash of Night erupted from my hand to torch it, but once more the Count of Ravenous Flame smashed into me from the side. A staff was not a sword, with a guard and a proper grip, so even though I caught the blow again the strength of it had the Count's blade sliding down and biting into the flesh of my hand. I half lost a finger there and felt something unpleasant slithering into my blood from the wound.

"Back," I snarled, and Night flooded my veins.

It purged the poison, feeling like ice coursing through me. I struck my staff against the ground, Night billowing out like a wave, and the arrow loosed at me was swept aside even as the Count of Ravenous Flame retreated out of range with a wing-aided leap backwards. I forced calm onto myself, even as blood dripped down my knuckles.

"I get it," I told the Duchess of Rash Tempest, "you don't believe you'd be able to get the best of me, if we had a wager. I sympathize, it's a regrettably common affliction."

"You are attempting to goad me," the amber-eyed fae said.

"I am *succeeding* at goading you," I corrected with an unpleasant smile. "To quote a clever creature of my own acquaintance: a well-laid trap does not rely on surprise but on the opponent's nature."

She had to accept a bet, if I offered it and it looked like she might win. Because she was better than me, greater and cleverer, and she must always get the last laugh with us poor mortals.

"You witty little thing," the Duchess laughed. "What might you even offer as a wager worthy of my time?"

"A duel with Count of Ravenous Flame," I said, "where I will be considered to have lost if I kill him with either Night or my staff."

"You insolent *insect*," the Count snarled.

"Those are all you have," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said, and then looked like she had swallowed a lemon. "I accept, you fool."

How unpleasant it must be, to be able to see the shape of the snare but be driven by your nature to step into it anyway.

"Should I win I want you to answer me five questions, fully and true," I said.

"Should you lose I will have your name, freely given," the Duchess replied.

Ambitious, but then if it got to that the odds were better I'd die.

"Bargain struck," I said.

"Bargain struck," she echoed. "My Count of Green Apples, do head upwards."

Count of Green Apples? No, it wasn't the same. It was the *Duke* of Green *Orchards* that we'd fought at Dormer all those years ago. And yet when my gaze found the fae in question, he offered me a sly smile before wings bloomed at his back. His face... It'd been a while since I'd thought of the opponent of that night, the creature who'd butchered my Gallowborne and burned Nauk into a mere shadow of himself, but I was nearly certain there was a resemblance there. That was troubling, considering I'd been very thorough about killing that Duke and Hierophant himself had pulverized what had been left of the remains. I didn't have the time to ponder that any further, though, because the moment the bargain had been struck my duel with the Count had begun. I breathed out, settled myself.

A duel, huh.

"Gods," I murmured, "it's been a while, hasn't it?"

The Count of Ravenous Flame advanced in his full splendour, armour glittering in the eerie light of the Belfry, a flick of his long sword gathering bright-red flame along the edge. It was tempting to watch the feet, for against all sorts of opponents the footing told a truer tale of intent than the guard, but against fae it was next to useless. Their bodies did not entirely work like those of mortals, and wings allowed them to further differ from what even Named could accomplish. My right hand was slick with blood, but the same numbing of sensation that had

prevented my leg from hampering me kept the throbbing pain of it quiet, and as I widened my stance and drew a foot back I seized the long staff of yew like a spear without a tip. Far above us sorcery crackled, and voices both human and not mingled in war cries.

"Burn," the Count of Ravenous Flame hissed.

He swung his sword and a wave of flame followed, hiding him from my sight, but I'd seen that tactic used before. Used it myself, even back when I still had ice to throw around. Night gathered at the tip of my staff, forming into a full circle hovering just beyond the wood, and when the Count burst out of his own obscuring wave of flame with his sword half-swung and shining red wings behind him, it was to eat a blast of pure Night in the stomach that smashed him back. My turn. I slipped through the opening in the flame, Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, and even as Night gathered at the tip of the staff I thrust at the Count's chest. He recovered in time, though, shield covering him and the small burst of power that followed impact slid off harmlessly. He raised his shield, smashing down the point of my staff, but I deftly withdrew and slid in a strike just over the rim of his descending shield.

It was slapped away with the side of his blade, followed by a beautiful pivot to turn that slap into a backswing straight at my neck. I ducked low, swing passing overhead, but my unstable footing was punished by a hasty kick that hit my chest and had me falling backwards. I abandoned the staff to break the fall with my hands, weaving Night and leaving it to clatter against the ground even as the red-eyed Count adjusted his footing and prepared for a thrust that would go right through my throat.

"Gotcha," I smiled, pulling at the slender strings of Night connecting my hands to the staff.

The length of yew smashed through the back of the Count's feet, toppling him, and by the time he'd broken the fall with his wings the staff was in my hands and pointed right at his head. A slender arrow of Night, not powerful but quick and piercing, tore right through the golden round collar and into flesh. Not so quickly it was not slapped aside by a strike of the shield before it could go through the fae's throat, but that was the opening I'd been waiting for. In striking, he'd exposed his shield arm – the arrow released, I wielded the staff to hit his exposed elbow before releasing a small burst of Night. Not enough to hurt, but enough to continued feeding the momentum of the movement. He kept spinning, sword arm rising to stabilize his footing, and there I struck again: the piercing arrow of Night went through the wrist like a harpoon, I dragged him back in a spin and the sword the fingers had been grasping went flying.

Without hesitation I threw my staff down onto his knees, impeding his attempt to twist around. One, two, three limping steps to the side, and even as Night flowed through my veins and lent me unnatural precision the Count of Ravenous Flame turned, just in time to watch my fingers close around the hilt of his sword. Burning eyes widened in fear as I stretched out with a grunt and turned that catch into a descending thrust. The shield went up, or would have if my free hand had not pulled at the strings on the staff to smack its length down onto the fae's wrist. It slowed the defence just long enough that my thrust drove deep between those lovely red eyes, finding a deadly sheath. Silence followed in my wake, as I flicked my wrist and ripped the sword clear of the corpse.

"Damn me, but I I've missed this," I admitted with a sigh.

The enemy and I in the pit, fighting to the death, without any of the unending shades and subtleties that my life held these days. Just steel and cunning and the desperate need to live. My eyes went to the amber-eyed Duchess, finding her looking furious.

"You owe me five questions," I said.

"Ask them," the Duchess of Rash Tempest snarled.

"Who rules the Court of Autumn?" I asked.

"No one."

Which meant the mantle was laying there for the taking, if we could just find it. My blood thrummed with excitement. It could be done. The second part of Masego's theory, the one that made a weapon of the crown, it was *possible*. We might yet kill a god, or do something a great deal worse.

"Why have you come here?" I asked.

"To collect a debt left unpaid," the Duchess said.

I waited patiently.

"And to repay that which we owe," she added.

Been hoping I'd ask the next question before she was finished answering, huh? It wasn't my first time interrogating her kind, I wouldn't fall for that.

"Who do you owe that debt to?" I pressed.

"She who told us where the Hunted Magician is," she grimaced.
"The Wandering Bard."

Fucking *finally*, I thought, satisfaction welling up inside me. I'd gotten it out of the mouth of fae, entities that literally

could not lie: the Intercessor had attacked a villain protected by the Terms. Even the Grey Pilgrim would have to bend his neck now. Every single Named in the Grand Alliance would get a warning about the Bard being a hostile and dangerous entity. A warning backed by the most prominent heroes of the age as well as my own not inconsiderable reputation, let her try to talk her way out of *that*.

"In what way are you to repay the debt?" I asked.

"We are to destroy the contents of a certain room," the Duchess of Rash Tempest said, "and break a sword."

Shit, they're going after the Severance as well, I realized. Had I been right, was the Intercessor really just trying to strip away every path out of the deeps we were swimming in except the one she'd let Hasenbach find? If so, this was just the beginning of our troubles.

"Do you have any allies in the Arsenal that are not fae?" I asked.

"Yes," the Duchess said. "Though I know not their identity, only that they can make themselves known to us through a certain phrase."

I supposed keeping the fae in the dark about the traitor Named was only natural, given the number of mages here we had that'd be able to rip that information out of them.

"Victory is transient," the Fallen Monk said, sliding a dagger into my jugular.

breakingamber

Well, that didn't take long.

How convenient. Stupid Monk.

Cat is probably going to be fine? I hope so. It would be quite a twist if the rest of the book focused on the heroes and villains attempts to solve the murder of the Black Queen, the foremost villain of their age, the Queen of Lost and Found, and stalwart opponent of both the Intercessor and the Dead King.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, my previous theory now seems more likely.

The Sinister Physician wasn't introduced as a scooby doo villain, seen just long enough to be recognized at the end... he's the story's provided spare. When the traitor (or at least the first traitor) is revealed and dealt with, you are going to need a new fifth member. How convenient that said member happens to be a healer.

nick012000

Cat has the Night, and one of the Night's tricks is the ability to come back from the dead, slightly weakened.

General Chaos

No way she's going to die. Hook, Line and Sinker, remember?

Miles

Murder? Nah we're coming full circle. All he did was trigger a name vision.

[MadeThisAccountJustForYou \(@MadeThi54U\)](#)

Nah, this was basically the plan. Intercessor had compromised someone and aimed them at the red axe, and they were supposed to betray Cat by implicating her in the death. But Cat drew all the most likely traitors together and narratively forced the traitor to blow the betrayal they'd have got out of the story on literally stabbing Cat in the back instead. The bard's plan for the story is successfully derailed. Or at least that's how I read it

[tkjarrah](#)

i bet the monk is about to find out that it Sure Fucking Is!

[Javvies](#)

The Fallen Monk disappoints me.

On the upshot ... Cat should have access to secrets of Night based healing or whatever you want to call how the higher tiers shrug off apparently mortal wounds.

Hmm. One of the Traitors being a Villain is both good and bad. Good, because it'll give Cat the opportunity to demonstrate that she's entirely willing to kill Villains when they cross the line, that she's not just out to kill Heroes when they do and give Villains a pass. On the other hand, it's bad because it's a Villain doing the betraying, which plays into all kinds of preconceptions about the inherent untrustworthiness of Villains that Bard can utilize.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think “preconceptions about the inherent untrustworthiness of Villains” are par for the course, Cat’s row to hoe, the albatross around her neck <ducks> okay, okay, but you get the idea. 🙄

pyrohawk21

I think you’ll find it is indeed Fallen Monk.

[onedollargum](#)

Good fight!

RubberBandMan

Oh boy, here we go again.

“My vision was blackening. I could feel life leaving my body. Serenely, I smiled.

Gotcha, I thought, and died.”

From Victory in book 2.

[onedollargum](#)

The Bard just managed to both make the rivalry official and immediately feed Cat a Victory. Will draw and defeat follow?

Insanenoodlyguy

I was wondering about that, but hasn’t Bard already fought too many times? She’s part of the party that drew against Cat already way back during The Lone Swordsman’s party, though perhaps those clashes don’t count because they were other people’s storys and now it’s a direct clash?

[amit27592](#)

They were not a mirror of each other during those clashes so they don’t count. Pattern of threes only occur in rivals. Kinda like how Grey pilgrim’s previous draw/defeat didn’t count in his pattern of three against Cat.

[Tohron](#)

Well, the Grey Pilgrim did try to start a Pattern of Three against Cat after having previously fought her in the Battle of the Camps, so it’s presumably possible.

Sir Nil

I have a theory that the seasonal courts are to some extent, regional. The continued existence of the Autumn court (and likely

the Spring Court) seems to prove this. During Cat's first apotheosis, she was able to see the true nature of Summer and Winter and their dynamic, that is, Winter being a hungry thing which tries to steal Summer's prosperity to sate it's unending hunger, with Autumn and Spring continuing this dynamic in the interim. I originally thought that this matched very well with Black's description of Callow and Praes' dynamic, how the pattern of Praes is to be hungry and grasp and Callow is to be prosperous and be grasped.

It is already stated that Arcadia mirror Creation to some extent, but this implies that either the dynamic between grasped and grasping is uniform across the entire world, not just Calernia or that this dynamic is something regional to Calernia or even just Callow and Praes.

What sorta sealed the deal of this theory for me, is the original Winter King being a mirror to Black and Malicia, who are characterized by their desire to break the pattern between Good and Evil. Who accomplished this, by bringing in its Good counterpart, Callow to their side. Which was why I found it incredibly fitting, that Cat, the girl trained up by Black to be a Callowan Villain in order to solidify Praes' relationship with Callow, was the one that united Summer and Winter.

If this theory is untrue, then that means the old Winter King, was Winter King across the whole world, which either means that in every major region outside of Calernia, there are people who are exactly like Black trying to destroy the dynamic between Good and Evil, or that the Fey, have more power over choosing what sort of patterns they embody then previously implied.

caoimhinh

From Book 4, Chapter 27:

"Masego, how is this possible at all?" Hakram asked. "I was under the impression that Arcadia spanned the whole of Creation as a mirror of sorts. Was the Dead King so powerful all the world shook from his transgression?"

Hierophant clicked his tongue.

"That is a misunderstanding," he said. "Consider Arcadia as a single object being looked upon by an infinity of perspectives. To every one, it is a different realm. Across the Tyrian Sea, it likely has a completely different name and seems inhabited by completely different entities. Even the marriage of Winter and Summer is contained within the span of our gaze only, unlikely to have tremors beyond. It is so with this echo as well. Something that was momentous on our understanding of the world is not necessarily so elsewhere."

"And so Triumphant wept, for she ruled but a fraction of the world and knew it to be vast beyond her reckoning," Vivienne quoted softly.

Sir Nil

Huh, did not know that was already confirmed, either way that means there may be multiple Seasonal Courts out there, which may be why Autumn is still kicking despite supposedly being consumed to make Winter and Summer's union. Either that or the power of the seasonal courts can't be consumed or destroyed in the traditional sense. Cat combining Summer and Winter didn't consume Autumn or Spring but instead created a new power which overtook them. Perhaps this is what Quartered Seasons is, the assumption that combining or altering Seasons lead to something new, without necessarily destroying or consuming the original Season.

Miles

Spring and autumn are born from winter and summer respectively when their conflict ends. The winter king married into the summer court, taking most of the winter court too. But, cat was granted secession from winter and truce from summer as thanks for enabling the union. Technically there were still summer and winter then. The union was summer and Cat + the wild hunt was winter. Cat traded away her fae part to a being too powerful to become fae just from taking the mantle while the Wild Hunt learned from their queen and cast away their fae nature. As there are no winter fae left the conflict was finished and fall was born.

Not sure if there is a spring now. Maybe not because all fae were summer, or maybe the courts got reset to their original teams.

Anyway, fall wasn't consumed in the sense of a dog eating a bratwurst, rather, it was never going to be born again because the technical courts were under truce forever and unable to antagonize each other because of their nature and the bargains they struck.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, nicely put!

Sir Nil

Huh, that was a very clear way of explaining it. But that still means that Cat effectively created 2 new courts, Twilight and Summer Winter Union, without destroying the power in the previous 4 Courts. Sure she made them inactive, but she made a net positive gain of 2 courts.

Sir Nil

Well, that is if we assume Winter and Summer are still kicking at the current moment, Twilight certainly is but that court is completely empty save for the Pilgrim's technical status as its king.

[TeK](#)

I just figured that there must be kitsune somewhere in this world. As in actual catgirls.

[TeK](#)

Well, foxgirls. Not the point.

Pethrai D'arkos

I've always been partial to huldra myself. Though given their respective mythologies it's easier to call them the Arcadian version of kitsune rather than the other way around.

caoimhinh

We can only hope.
They are probably somewhere around Yan-Tei.

erebus42

Well shit.
On a more positive note it was deeply satisfying to see Cat out-Fae the Fae

erebus42

Additionally the Poet's little contribution there was pretty cool. Very Tom Bombadil.

[Liliet](#)

Note: mortals outwitting otherworldly entities by relying on precise wording or even just twisting it so they get confused (Табличка стоит посреди двора: приходи за деньгами вчера!), is a well-worn staple of a trope.

There's a reason Diabolist was smug against the fae and Malicia considered them to be a fun diversion from the court.

That said, this was REALLY REALLY satisfying, bless this trope
♥

erebus42

Oh it definitely is, she just seemed to be acting particularly fae-ish about it, especially in the ways she

screwed them over. I guess you can't be a Faery queen for several years without picking up a few things.

Liliet

I would say there are two distinct manners in which fae screw bargainers over and in which humans screw bargainers over, and Cat did both.

Her first one was a human thing: note how the duchess worried about being left in debt if Cat offered too much, but Cat had no qualms cheating her. There are rules that only fae need to be wary of, and tricks that only humans can resort to. This is a 'clever bridge bulder letting a goat cross the bridge first' genre of trickery.

Her second one, on the other hand, was much more fae typical: make a wager that seems impossible, then just fucking brute force your way through it 'cause that's just how tough you are.

TeK

It is also a trope that Fae will fuck you over if you attempt to bargain.

As in, entire Arcadian Campaign was Cat being fucked over by Winter King plus a little bit of Larat.

ALazyMonster

I did not see that coming... I feel like I should have given the number of betrayal and mystery tropes going on here but still didn't see it coming

farbeyondc

I'm 99.999% certain Cat's going to be fine.

The .001% of me that isn't is morbidly curious as to what the reaction to Cat dying here would look like, though.

Mental Mouse

> What little skin was left bare by the slender helm of brass and smouldering charcoal, its long cheek guards of carved red opal going down to a round collar of gold touched with flickering embers, was just as dark in tone.

I'm sorry, but this sentence needs to go into surgery stat, its parenthetical description of the helm is longer (and far more florid) than the actual description of the fae's skin. 😊 This chapter in particular seems notable for run-on sentences... is that the fae at work? 😊

Pethrai D'arkos

I don't see what's wrong with it. The helmet is certainly more visually interesting than the fae's skin.

Point Point

That particular sentence is rather long sentence, yes, and it could use some surgery, but I didn't notice a single run-on sentence in this chapter—even when an unusual number of clauses are joined in a single sentence or clauses are joined in unusual sequences, they are joined using proper punctuation, which makes them proper sentences.

And to nitpick that particular sentence, the parenthetical description is almost exactly as long as the non-parenthetical portion of the same sentence (if you count words, it is one shorter, and if you count letters, it is one longer). I don't think that's a problem in and of itself, but that particular construction is a little hard to read.

That sentence would be better if it described the helmet, followed by the skin revealed beneath it.

flashburn283

Well, I suppose we must give him credit for bravery. Utterly stupid about it but what can you do. First the Dead King tries to assassinate her assistant and sow discord, and now a Paresi traitor attempts to murder the queen.

Oh dear, this will galvanize all the heroes and villains into cooperating and force the Mirror Knight onto a path of good.

[TeK](#)

Fallen monk is neither Paresi nor Praesi.

[Javvies](#)

The Fallen Monk is a Proceran. He's not from the Dread Empire.

Some Smartass

There's rather less difference between them than Procerans like to pretend.

[TeK](#)

How dare you! First of all, unlike tyrannical absolutist Empire, the leader of Principate is democratically elected out of prominent local leaders and whose power is checked by the assembly of such leaders.

Second of all, unlike the warmongering Praesi, Principate is

known for launching constant peacekeeping operations ensuring the stability of the nearby realms. So there. You are completely and utterly wrong.

Mammon

First off, chill. You come off very aggressive about this, way more than a fictional franchise's politics should cause.

Really more a matter of what label you slap onto it than a true difference. Nothing democratic about a literal and direct war being fought over and over again by not-democratically chosen royals until one stands on top of their own alliance of war and opportunity.

Procer isn't evil, but it certainly isn't a pure kind of good or democratic either and it's only because Cordelia tries to uphold the freedom and equality of the rules made by her predecessors that it truly feels like a democracy rather than a pretence of allowing the people you control to vote on things you allow lest you get them back elsewhere. Plus all the death conscripts, fatassins, hunger, poverty all for the greed of princes, none of which hurt any less to the actually affected because it was Good doing it.

Which, if you remember all of the non comically Evil that Praes had back when the story still lingered there, is much more alike the great Evil country than what we may remember of it now. Don't forget that there are kindness, cultures and people behind the Wasteland. Don't forget that the stories of flying fortresses, intelligent tigers and orc slavery stories were the ones memorable even after all these years while the true nature of everyday Praes may have faded from our emotional memory of the place.

Procer is a lot less good than its system suggests it should be, and Praes is a lot less evil than you're remembering it. Meaning that they are closer together than you might think.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, Poe's law.

I'm pretty sure this was transparent satire, which is what the overwrought pathos was meant to hint at. I mean the entire mention of 'peacekeeping operations' is blatantly poking at Procer's colonialism mirroring Praes, considering absolutely nobody in-universe ever used that euphemism. And "elected out of prominent local leaders and whose power is checked by the assembly of

such leaders" is a description of the High Council with barely a stretch.

[TeK](#)

While I was writing it, I actually thought that Praes is more liberal than Procer. They didn't even dismissed man-eating tapirs from succession without a trial, while I doubt a peasant could ever become a First Prince.

Now granted, those are both just barely sapient animals, but the principle of the thing is so important. In Praes, everyone has a shot at being an Emperor, even a Hero. Unless it's a Duni.

And now I have a personal headcanon that Emperor Benevolent was a Hero trying to reform Praes from inside.

[Liliet](#)

Ouch, ouch, ouch lmao

And nah, Benevolent was far too selfish for that, from his quotes. "Morality is a force, not a law". He was just trying to harness the tropes into bending reality in his favor, not actually trying to do good, and the difference is audible.

NerfContessa

You both naturally mean "will be" utilizing tropes and such.

As black has not yet ascended to dread emperor status ^^

[Liliet](#)

> You both naturally mean "will be"
Why would I? "Will be" is future tense, and Benevolent existed in the past relative to the narrative.

Also, beside how obvious that is, while it's honestly up in the air if Black will be a Dread Emperor or not, one thing that's determined for certain is he's not going to be telling High Lords about how they can slip the noose with him. That's like the exact opposite of his entire thing.

Mammon

Actually, I think that Procer is just the US. Like, literally just the US as perceived by most of the outside world but in fantasyland.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, it's what Americans WISH it was perceived as.

Non-Procerans have actually uttered "Procer is the bulwark against Evil". Nobody outside the US has ever said that about the US.

Zoe

Procer's pretty obviously a fantasy-Europe as seen by an American. Like, down to different regions being coded as German, French, Spanish etc. through the use of names and place names.

This is kinda hilarious if you know the real places – Tenerife, for instance, is a Mediterranean island with a rep for boozy parties by British tourists, so I can't really take the Princess of Tenerife seriously...

[TeK](#)

I am awed at how you did not pick up on my sarcasm. I actually used the words "peacekeeping operations", and you thought I was serious?

Mammon

Ah, I see. While there are indeed parts that suggest sarcasm, be aware that the use of "First of all," is something that often suggests a serious writer and rant. If it weren't for that part, I would've indeed seen it as sarcasm based on the preceding "How dare you!" But at least from my experience, those that go firstly... (even if there's never a second following later) are quite serious in what they're saying.

[Liliet](#)

What's the point in being sarcastic if you DON'T imitate how people talk when they're actually serious? XD

Juff

Typo Thread:

cover a rain > cover of rain
armoured and > armoured

down on my brown > down on my brow
Tough the spread > Though the spread
Majesty," the > Majesty." The
Count," I > Count." I
nobleman bowed (maybe add again, since he bowed previously)
thrust where > thrust through where
almost admiring > almost in admiration
of twin fae > of the twin fae
then then > then the
Ardour fall > Ardour all
like snake > like a snake
bending low beyond > bending beyond
She still there > She was still there
me," the > me." The
name," I > name." I
given," the > given." The
deliver," the Duchess of Rash Tempest grinned, "for > deliver"—
the Duchess of Rash Tempest grinned—"for
thudnerstrike > thunderstrike
then I turned > before I turned
onto him, > onto him.
never," > never."
Duchess," I > Duchess." I
"Gotcha," > "Gotcha."
I I've > I've
laying > lying
is," she > is." She

dadycoool

Ah! Betrayal! Most unexpected and all the more foul for its most trusted source! How could anyone have ever reasonably predicted such an action?

It was nice that Cat was able to get herself trapped in a one-on-one fight with someone superior to herself. It has been a while, and I think we've all missed this.

[Liliet](#)

...well, decidedly not superior, considering she offered an actual handicap to make this remotely resemble a fair fight.

dadycoool

Several handicaps, like drunkenness, various physical disabilities, and the "no killing with my staff or Night" rule. Still, a toddler could beat up a pro wrestler if the wrestler was hogtied. The wrestler would probably still win, like here, but I think the point is still valid.

[Liliet](#)

Well, she certainly got herself trapped in a fight, and she definitely DID manage to make herself into the underdog with some creative wrangling, it's just the specific 'superior' phrasing I'm contesting XD

[TeK](#)

"Though I know not their identity, only that they can make themselves known to us through a certain phrase."

"Victory is transient"

That is an interesting choice considering the following quote:

"Victory is transient. To seek it is to remain so. I have seen the face of that which is eternal, and it stands beyond struggle." – Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

[TeK](#)

I personally love Dead King quotes in epigraphs, they resonate with me unlike anything else.

They were probably disseminated through the Book of Darkness as a means to convey the concepts he considered formative in the teenage years he wrote it, like "I stared into the abyss and found what stared back... wanting."

[TeK](#)

Now I imagine the teenage Dead King. "The world is darkness and so am I..."

And people say it's Larat who is wielding the edge itself.

DC

It is worth pointing out that the question she asked was specifically "Do you have any allies in the Arsenal that are not fae". This question does NOT specify that the allies in question also be aligned with the Wandering Bard.

Thus, it's possible that the Monk (and anyone else using that specific phrase) has instead sold them out to the Dead King (or just been compromised by him in general) at the same time that everything else is going on.

[Javvies](#)

That would require these Fae to be working with the Dead King. And for the Dead King to be aware that the Wandering Bard was sending them into the Arsenal.

Also that the Dead King has assets inside the Arsenal in the first place and that he's willing to risk their being exposed by Fae activities. The former is unlikely, since one hopes that they've been careful about who they allow into the Arsenal, and I would expect the latter to be even more improbable, as I very much doubt that the Dead King would risk an asset that difficult to acquire and/or place inside the Arsenal on someone else's plan.

[Adrian_V](#)

Mmmm i think Bar choose that phrase for 2 reasons A)if heard it could link the dead king with all of this so it shift blame to him, B) she finds it funny to use his own phrase in this xD

Big I

Just as planned.

caoimhinh

That ending!



[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, I'm just going to type out all of the thoughts that occur to me after reading this chapter.

The Exalted Poet seems to actually be the heroic version of Masego. Both appear to have powers focused on usurpation and neutralization amplified by speaking in rhyme. While the Blessed Artificer seems to be designated as the rival of the Hierophant, I wouldn't mind seeing the world warping wrap battle that could go down between Masego and the Poet.

The Fallen Monk being the traitor is kind of disappointing in how obvious it was. The only reason I didn't want him to be the traitor was because of how entertaining his future interactions could have been, but it is true to form for a man who betrayed his own gods to keep betraying others. I'd feel satisfied in the knowledge that it's not one of the more likable Named, but the Duchess did say that they have multiple allies.

And finally, if Cat's actually killed here, then she's going to need a resurrection. The Night may provide here, but there is also the brief introduction of the Sinister Physician to consider. Either way, why just stop at one resurrection (*cough* Tancred *cough*)?

Burlyraven

Meant rap battle, not wrap battle. I do not wish to see either preparing presents for festive events.

Dome Zasrekh

NOW i do! 😊

Liliet

competitively preparing presents for festive events...

...now *I* want to see that...

TeK

Masego would be insulted to the very core of his being for even thinking in such vein. The Poet does not have a proper understanding of magical theory and is an *artist* of all people.

Dome Zasrekh

Him and BA exist only to annoy him! It will be the greatest test of his resolve yet!

Also, *WHERE* is Masego in all this?

ReverseMountain

I have never agreed more viscerally with a comment before this one

Liliet

For powerful Night wielders, having their throat cut barely counts as a flesh wound.

Adrian_V

I think sinker here has 2 meanings: 1 is how the Fae just can't resist the whole hook thing and always bite, the second is that this whole thing is at the core made to draw the spy out and he just did, wonder what nasty surprise Cat has prepared, i mean i bet that isn't a jnromal knife so just regeneration wouldn't be enough.

Point Point

I had a long comment written up in reply to this, but I accidentally deleted it.

In short, I think "hook, line, and sinker" could refer to two things.

First, and more obviously, there is Catherine's plot to expose the Bard's agent, which was successful in the last sentence of this chapter.

Second is a possibly plot by the Bard to kill Catherine. She may have set the situation up so that Catherine would put herself near the traitor, leading to a story of the villain's lieutenant betraying her in her moment of victory.

I think the first interpretation is stronger, but it depends on what happens next. If Catherine was prepared to be stabbed, then the traitor has fallen for her trap. If she wasn't, she's fallen for the Bard's.

Regardless of how it turns out, I think that both readings are likely intentional, even if only to leave us hanging, unsure of what will happen next.

Wonder

People, why am I not fretting about the knife in our Queen's throat?

The knife wound might have something to do with Her death in the series or she earns an aspect here .

Either way, Fallen Monk and Wandering Bard are fucked.

Thorium

It is quite interesting. The chapter litterally ends with Cat taking a killing blow yet nobody here expects her to die. Not

because of plot armor but because “the Black Queen has another game afoot”.

Are we Callow now?

Mental Mouse

Also because we’re only on Chapter 22...

Liliet

TBH, considering how helpful this attack is to Cat’s research, I remain skeptical of the Bard being an actual determined antagonist here.

I’m getting the impression Cat’s getting a “now strike me down, student!” now set up properly where Amadeus utterly failed :3

Anyway, Night can heal worse wounds on weaker Mighty.

KageLupus

Yeah, my impression of the Bard this whole time has been that she is an unwilling, or at least tired, servant to the Game of the Gods and that her ultimate goal is to quit. Assuming that she can’t just get out the normal way (dying) it doesn’t seem like a stretch that the only way for her to stop being is to find some other poor schmuck to take her place.

Of course, Cat has a different idea of what that role looks like in general, and the Bard knows that. So setting Cat up as a replacement is also something of an FU to her former bosses.

Dr.D

From the mouth of the Doddering Sage – “A rival?” he muttered. “A thief? A successor? You keep stories within you that neither your ear nor eye ever knew. Shapes and beats and the sound of the knife kissing flesh.”

Now, in the original text “successor” was in italics, and only that...

Was “the knife kissing flesh” a foreshadowing to the knife in jugular being the tipping point to Cat’s new Name?

And is it a Name that somehow the Intercessor is trying to line up as being her replacement, her “successor”, or is it one that is something new and unique and totally Cat’s, as has been hinted at... or could it be both?

Was the part of the Intercessor left Cat’s mind actually become more of a seed to a Name?

We know the Bard wants a way out, wants to end seeing things over and over again like she has for the eons since creation was new.

[TeK](#)

Waiting for a Gambit Pileup.

Aha! The member of your team had stabbed you!

Aha! I saw your betrayal from the very beginning, your knife is ineffective!

Aha! I saw you preparing for his betrayal which is why I made your way of making knife ineffective ineffective!

Aha! Hiw predictable! I knew you would do so, which is why I was prepared to die and go on as a walking corpse!

Aha! Trying the same trick twice? Who the hell do you think I am? I saw your trick and preemptively sokd you out to the Dead King. Try walking now, bitch!

Aha! I knew you would conscribe him into your efforts, which is why I had made a bargain with him before you to screw you over together!

Aha! I knew you would do it which is why I had sold your private alliance to every Hero and now you are an accomplice of Dead King! Just as planned.

Aha! Trifling Wandering Bard, you dare? I knew that was your plan all along, which is why I had discussed that with heroes beforehand. Now that you had cooperated with Dead King, you are an enemy of an entire Grand Alliance!

Aha! You fool, that is what I wanted you to do! For you see...

JT

It is INCONCEIVABLE to read that without being reminded of The Princess Bride. 😊

[TeK](#)

Oh and, for the "WB is good" camp. What if she planned this attack to help Cat with Quartered Seasons, while at the same time crash-testing both the defenses of the Arsenal and the legal structure of T&T? At the same time weeding out potential weak links and possible traitors, and at the same time uniting the rest against common threat, while planting the seeds of doubt about Cat's default evilness in Heroes mind? Also maybe there is a lost hurt puppy somewhere in the Arsenal who wouldn't be found if not for all the commotion.

[amit27592](#)

Then there should not be a need for subterfuge or hiding anything from Cat/Hanno. Otherwise it's just playing games with lives for no good reason.

[TeK](#)

Maybe she is not allowed to do this directly. The Gods are tying her hands, remember?

[Liliet](#)

Bard has been antagonizing Catherine for no particular discernible reason for a while now, starting with her appearance at Second Liesse. There was literally nothing she did there except smile and wave – Cat wouldn't have known it was her and her break with Black would have been harsher according to her own words. The conversation in the campfire arc, too – Bard went all hammy villain on Cat, and honestly that had approximately no result except cementing Cat's antipathy.

Bard evidently DOES have a motivation to rile Cat up against herself, for whatever reason.

...and she seriously appears to be helping 0.0

matesbe

The question is, is she helping because of herself, or in spite of herself?

RoflCat

I think it's because a villain you know is easier to deal with than one you don't.

By revealing herself/her motive (or rather, the one she want Cath to know), Bard led Cath into certain mindset instead of remaining a loose cannon.

Much in the way she made herself 'undeniable' ally to Heroes that led Pilgrim to basically 'backstab' Cath by siding with Bard in crucial moment.

Of course Bard isn't omnipotent, as Augur and Tyrant were able to outplayed her in their way, Augur by reading what Bard want and mess up the timing so the result will be different, while Tyrant hid the Hierarch until he came to his name.

Basically Cath was an unpredictable factor, so Bard made herself the antagonist to make Cath more predictable.

[Liliet](#)

Cat would not have trusted her as an ally, but she is far more trusting in someone's antagonism... R I P

[TeK](#)

Oh and also she is getting rid of that hanging time bomb around Enchanter's neck.

[Liliet](#)

Hm?

TeK

The Fae that attacked Arsenal came after Haunted Magician. So now he gets to finally get out of his pursuit and guess whom will he owe that to?

Liliet

Hunted, not Haunted, and nobody with the Name Enchanter is involved, which is why I was confused.

Anyway, yeah, agreed. This accomplishes that alongside dissolving the potential bomb of deadly rivalry going off when Cat isn't around and can't get there in time to handle the situation.

dadycoool

By pointing the Autumn Court at Cat, she points Cat at the Autumn Court, which we all know she'll triumph over eventually, killing the owners of his name and freeing him of obligation.

daegone823

So is this fae with the bastard sword the same fae who killed all the gallowborn now he has a different title so he is happy for revenge?

Is Cat going for apotheosis again this time with a name?

If the fallen monk came back...(sob) the poet had indeed died tragically. I should have seen it when they spoke about there backstories past chapter. It was a death flag.

Is it weird that the fallen monk carried that wineskin throughout the whole fight lol. Just saying super cool sad to see him go, Cat has a reputation of killing anybody that betrays her.

Mental Mouse

> So is this fae with the bastard sword the same fae who killed all the gallowborn

Probably his son, or eldritch equivalent.

dadycoool

Oh no. A "You killed my father" flag?

JT

"I am the Count Of Green Apples. You killed my father, prepare to die" Hmmm urge to watch The Princess Bride...

dadycoool

Yes. Give in to your nostalgia.

ohJohN

I thought the fae were essentially recycled between seasons, so presumably some remnant of the Duke's essence reformed into the current Count. Didn't someone from Winter, early on in the story, mention something about past lives in previous cycles (maybe the King or Prince)?

Big I

The King of Winter mentioned that the crown goes to a different Prince or Princess each cycle. He recalled his life as a Prince when speaking to Cat.

[Liliet](#)

Why do you think the Poet died? There's no reason he'd be stopping the Monk from going back even if he's not also a traitor.

Xinci

It was the Fae with the vine arrows. He's the Fall version of the one they fought in the south earlier. He shot arrows more grew from any wood surface.

[Erik V. Smykal](#)

well.

shit.

Thank you, that was one of the best in a while, & the bar has been high.

your grasp of 'what the Fae should be' in fantasy fiction is superb.

ActionKermit

Wait, did Cat just renounce her own Crown by telling Larat's last words to the Fae? If she's the dark mirror of the Grey Pilgrim, we may have just witnessed the counterpart to the moment when he gave up the title of the Holy Sejun.

[TeK](#)

Nah.

[Liliet](#)

No? King's, not queen's, for one.

beleester

Catherine: I'm going to gather all the traitors in one place so I can keep an eye on them.

Traitors betray her.

Catherine: *surprised Pikachu face.*

Letouriste

Pretty sure she is not surprised tho

[Liliet](#)

Catherine: All according to keikaku

*keikaku means plan

Cicero

Wow, I actually called it that the Monk was the traitor.

[TeK](#)

So did Catherine...

Mammon

Cat: *Inner monologues a couple of chapters ago that she put her sleeve-knife back in her arsenal after all these years.*

Cat: I shall defeat this Count without using either my staff or Night!

Duchess: But you have no other weapons...

Me: *Expects what's coming up*

Cat: *Kills the Count using his own sword*

Me: Did... Did EE forget that he narrated that part to us before?

[Liliet](#)

Nah, it's just not a convenient weapon in a duel. Doesn't have reach that sword and staff do.

Thorium

Not like she ever started a fight by whipping it out. It is a finisher for when the enemy is off balance and expecting an empty hand.

Still more useful to keep in reserve given the density of enemies and traitors around.

Liliet

Also, finishing the fight by using the opponent's weapon is more in the spirit of the "I can beat him with my hands tied behind my back" wager, a sleeve knife is decidedly less cool.

And cool, as we all know, very much matters ^^

Relyt118

Possible explanations:

Drunk Cat is forgetful Cat.

Sleeve-knife doesn't have the "oomph" to down a Count without Night backing it up, which she can't use here.

How someone wins can be important in a story, and Fae are all about story. Pulling out a hidden knife could be clever, or it could be treacherous. Defeating your enemy with his own sword could show strength and skill. One of those is much more likely to bite you in the was story-wise than the other.

Javvies

There's also the quite likely possibility that Cat is holding onto the sleeve knives (remember, in the early models, there were at least two knives) for dealing with traitor Named.

I'm pretty sure that the only people in the Arsenal who know about Cat's sleeve knife rig are Masego and Archer. Arguably Bard has the possibility of knowing because she's full of hax and bullshit, but I don't think that Cat's ever used it where Bard definitely would know.

It's been literally years since she used it – in all honesty, the vast majority of proje in the Arsenal won't have a clue about its existence – they won't know that Cat's ever had the sleeve knife, far less that she might be carrying it now. It's a very good secret weapon/holdout for when traitors think that have the upper hand on her and/or that she's been disarmed, or for when idiots are being played and think the same.

RoflCat

Probably because, narratively, it wasn't a moment the knife's surprise reveal was meant for.

The Count fight practically guaranteed to result in her favor because she was a 'detective' working to find clues and the bet against the Fae was to get info (the 5 questions)
Now we get the reveal of the traitor, maybe a captive Batman

(Catwoman?) moment while the villain gloat and THEN she can pull out the hidden knife to free herself or something like that.

ohJohN

Nobody posted the voting link yet?! I guess...

Voting is transient 😎

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Xinci

Fascinating that he used the code phrase of the DK's realization after his interactions with Bard. Bit surprised Cat is surprised at seeing the same Fae again once it transitioned. Fairly sure we got several mentions of how they come back for each cycle, with the main changes being their role in the story of that cycle. Given she had a whole theory on things still being intact its a bit weird, well I guess it was Masegos and she doesn't pay that much attention to metaphysics.

agumentic

I wonder if we will see Larat again, before the story ends. His outstanding move was exceptionally sleek, and it could be nice to see his cunning, now unbound by oaths.

Dome Zasrekh

I would love to see What he become now that he is not fey! And where would he stand in this conflict? How does he handle his new freedom?

Mike E.

Cat's execution of the flame dude was awesome, and a reminder that even though she is mortal again, still a badass in one-on-one fights.

Satan

I see she didn't ask if there are any other outsiders attacking the Arsenal. Although to be fair I suspect that aspect will be mostly resolved by the time she resurrects. Seems like the type of job for Masego. I don't think MC can die this early in the story, but it would be a power move by the author if she did.

Interlude: Rogue

"It takes two hands to clasp in peace, only one fist to strike in war."

– Taghreb saying

Roland had not been forced to dig so deep into his reserves for years and had not missed the sensation it brought in the slightest: like sandpaper against his insides, his very soul rubbed raw and bloody by sore **Use**.

The Rogue Sorcerer pointed the dragon oak wand at the latest fae to land on the railing, the artefact grown sluggish from being fired repeatedly, and swallowed a curse. Another piece of his collection, going up in smoke. The red-veined wand trembled, the last of the dragon blood the tree's roots had once drunk unleashing its nature in the form of a narrow, powerful ray of flame. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest, childlike face serene, winked mischievously at him right before the sorcerous flame tore right through yet another damned fake made of straw. The bait was gone in a wisp of fire a moment later, as Roland dropped the wand before the angry embers it burst into could savage his hand.

If that one had been a fake, then the real Lord must be the tone trying to break through – before the dark-haired man could finish his thought, another shape bearing the Lord's appearance unleashed a torrent of golden power against the web of crackling Light that Adanna had unleashed around the spire, preventing the fae from ignoring them and simply flying up. The fae's blow stretched the web back, but as Roland mustered a hard smile he already saw how it would end: the web stretched but held, and as if made of rubber it shot back the golden power at the flabbergasted fae that'd struck with it. The Blessed Artificer it had to be said, was abrupt at the best of time and often judgemental.

She was also *ridiculously brilliant*.

"It is too soon to smile, mortal."

Roland did not bother to look behind him, where the voice of the Baroness of Red Hunt was coming from, instead immediately vaulting over the footbridge's railing. *Beloved Gods*, he prayed even as a burst of some sort of power passed just above him and set every hair on his body affright, *for the curse of brag you laid on these creatures, I give many thanks*. Hands already digging in his pocket, the dark-haired man fished out a small engraved copper ring and shoved it onto his finger. The old Arlesite artefact woke eagerly, itching to be used even after centuries, and Roland clenched his belly in anticipation. Though Pelagian artefacts tended to be remarkably long-lasting works,

since they'd been made from an understanding of sorcery derived from the Gigantes they tended to also...

Stomach lurching as his momentum was forcefully reversed and instead of dropping down to the bottom of the Belfry, where going by the sound of it Catherine was having a merry old time slaughtering eldritch creatures older than the written word, he instead shot upwards. Roland swallowed a scream and an emerald-studded bronze bracelet on his left wrist, shaped like a snake – which many in the Free Cities considered a symbol of healing and protection – broke like a cheap bauble. Better the Stygian artefact than his spine and most his bones, as would have been the case without the harm-gathering bracelet's effect. Gigantes sorceries were effective but unfortunately they were also made for, well, Gigantes. Living titans who'd barely notice the kind of forces that would snap poor old Roland of Beaumaraais like a twig. Ligurian sorcery, and its Pelagian offspring, as a rule did not usually bother with the protective measures for the caster common to any other family of the Talent.

There was a reason the Jaquinites now held in sway in most of Procer.

Sadly, though he was going up instead of down the Rogue Sorcerer was not unaware that he was still, to used the academic parlance, damned screwed if he did not act. There was only death to be found in the air, when fighting the Fair Folk. Reluctant as he was to call on such a precious resource, Roland reached for the small orb within himself that was the sorcery that'd once belonged to the Hateful Druidess. A mere sliver was unleashed, in the shape of a burst of wind erupting from his back with precise aim that allowed him to stumblingly land back on the footbridge between the sides of the Belfry and its central crystal spire. The Baroness of Red Hunt, though, had been quicker on the move than he. Already she was there, spear of bone raised and the stripes of red going down her face grown vivid. That could prove tricky, Roland noted.

"Crouch," Adanna of Smyrna yelled.

He did, without hesitation, but alas so did the Baroness. Yet the fine line of Light that shot over his head did not simply pass beyond the fae, instead stutteringly halting over the Baroness and then shooting abruptly down onto the fairy's back. Another penitence box, Roland realized even as from the point of impact a hundred small lines of Light spread out and covered every inch of the Baroness of Red Hunt in a shining webbing before locking down. How many of those had the Artificer actually brought? She had to be running out by now. Still, this would be by him at least thirty heartbeats – though the Light cut both ways, protecting as well as imprisoning – before the penitence box broke and the Baroness was freed.

Adanna herself was in a spot of trouble, Roland saw as he turned. The Blessed Artificer used Light much as an enchanter would use sorcery, at first glance, but the Rogue Sorcerer knew better. One of the weaknesses to the blessings of priests – and Chosen – was that they lacked staying power. An object could be made to lastingly have the properties of Light, like holy water or the famous armour of Callowan knights, but Light simply could not be used the way sorcery could be through wards and enchantments. Which meant that while Adanna, like him, relied heavily on artefacts the abilities of those artefacts were nearly always temporary in nature. When the Light ran out, so would they. No trouble, when comparing a wand using magic and one using Light.

A great deal of trouble, however, when comparing the twenty three continuous layers of magical defence Roland currently had on his body compared to the single fading globe of Light that'd been all that separated the Blessed Artificer from the vicious blades and tricks of the Fair Folk. The shell vanished, and in the fading glow three silhouettes were revealed.

Adanna of Smyrna, tall and proud in her loose white button-up shirt and black vest covered by a long apron in striped shades of grey, golden eyes cold behind her spectacles. In her right hand she held a dull sword of iron, roiling with Light, and in her left a phial of coloured glass glowing like a torch. To one side the Lord of Plentiful Harvest was perched on the railing, looking small and childlike in his sweeping cloak of straw but with golden power already gathering above him in the form of a blade. The other fae perched on the other side was an unpleasant surprise, however, for it meant a third lord of the Fair Folk had joined their struggle. Wearing green vines as cloth and quiver, the green-winged fae looked eerily calm as he shaped a long spear out of what looked like young green wood. For a heartbeat, stillness held between the three of them.

Roland's hand went for the doubling of his enchanted coat, fingers closing around a small steel knife heavily inscribed with Mavii runes. A flick of the wrist spun it into the proper grip even as he went for one of his pockets and pressed his thumb on the correct rune for the pocket dimension to present him the handle of his second finest casting rod. The three-foot long rod felt warm against his palm, and even as he swung it forward in an arc began gathering blue flames.

"Mabethe," the Rogue Sorcerer roared in the tongue of the Taghreb.

Scatter, it meant. An imperious incantation for an imperious people. Streaks of blue flame thundered down along the arc he'd traced, shaped like five great furrows, and the dance began anew. The green-winged fae struck with the swiftness of a viper, green

spear darting forward, but the Blessed Artificer grit her teeth and shattered the vial of coloured glass in her grip.

"Flee from the Light," she snarled.

Bloody shards dripped down, but they revealed a blooming sun of many colours – Roland was forced to close his eyes, lest he go blind, and even so the glare was burned into his pupils. The fae screamed, and when he found he was able to see again the Lord of Plentiful Harvest was seared and howling. The other, though, had merely retreated into the air past the railing. And was nocking an arrow, aiming at a still-blinking and seemingly unaware Adanna. Had she blinded herself with her own work? The Rogue Sorcerer broke into a run. His flames had been blown away by the great burst of many-coloured Light, but the ornate casting rod was still in his hand. Pulling at one of the dozens of spheres within him that had belonged to mages from the Army of Callow, the Rogue fed the sorcery through the casting rod and let the artefact shape it.

Still at a run, he slashed the length of lapis-lazuli and gold at the winged bowman. A notch of blue flame was spat out, sizzling in the air as it flew towards the fae. The creature disdainfully flew back with a beat of wings, adjusting his aim with the bow as he did, but was visibly taken aback when the blue flames *followed*. Adanna traced a streak of blood along the length of the dull iron sword she held, speaking soft words, and in the beat that followed Light bloomed once more: a great construct of it, shaped like a massive sword around the small one she held. The shine reflected against her spectacles, but the Blessed Artificer's hard grin was not to be mistaken for anything but feral as she turned towards the recovering Lord of Plentiful Harvest.

Even as Roland closed the distance between himself and Adanna, the green-winged fae shot a greenwood arrow into the seeking blue flames with open irritation. There was a strange growth of the wood within the blaze, which to the Rogue's disappointment was enough for both fire and arrow to peter out. As it was one of his better bread-and-butter spells, it was disheartening to see it fail so easily. Still, he'd gotten there in time. Adanna carved through a fake fae made of straw, the railing beneath it and even a chunk of the footbridge while she was at it, but the sword of Light would not dissipate on a single blow. It would last for a few more moments, at least, which left the Rogue Sorcerer free too... The arrow streaked forward, but fresh blue flames devoured it even as Roland leapt and his foot landed on the railing.

The green-winged fae was just out of reach and retreating quicker than he could catch up, damnation. He'd been just a little too slow to leap, and now-

"Sweet the sorrow, the heady rue

That has my hand aching of you."

The Exalted Poet's voice sounded like the plucking of a harp, its sorcery filling the air. It sunk into the fae effortlessly, seizing him whole.

"Thank you," the Rogue Sorcerer hollered without turning.

The bowman fae had frozen in apparently transfixing sadness for just a few heartbeats, but it was enough for the Rogue Sorcerer to tackle him in the air. The fae's garments of green vines boiled angrily as the two of them dipped in the air and Roland pressed the casting rod against the side of the fairy's neck before pushing through blue flames.

"Unwise," the fae calmly said.

Well, that'd be nothing new. Even as vines grew wildly and tore the rod out of his grasp, putting themselves between the fire and fae, Roland smiled for he'd not been holding on to the casting tool. His hand on the fairy's shoulder, ignoring the pain of biting vines that broke through the Praesi shielding tool he'd obtained at great cost, the Rogue Sorcerer rammed his steel knife into his enemy's back. A beat passed.

"Mine," Roland confessed, "is a most greedy Name."

His lot was take and keep and use, though he would never become what he had risen to correct. The Rogue Sorcerer would take only from those deserving: those who misused their talents, the gifts the Gods had given them. And there was another word, for such a thing, one that had become part of who Roland of Beaumaraais was: **Confiscate**, his soul whispered, and Creation whispered with it. Like a hungry leech, his aspect sunk its hooks into the power at the heart of the fae. Ah, a Count of Autumn were we? The Count Green Apples, for that was his name, struggled and trashed impotently as his very nature was exsanguinated. The Rogue Sorcerer might die or go mad, if he took too much of the power within him – especially a power so utterly alien as that of the fae – but then that was why he'd brought the knife.

The runes shone, and blood both human and fae mingled as a the greater part of the power of the Count of Green Apples passed into the steel knife.

"What are you?" the Count gasped.

The wings faded, swallowed whole. The pair began to fall, still intertwined.

"The sole charlatan among a parade of demigods," Roland told the noble. "Smoke and mirrors, my good count. Or rather smoke, mirrors and a *knife*."

Ripping the runic blade free, the Rogue Sorcerer kicked off from the fae and then kicked him again in the face so the creature would drop his leg. He still had a hand free, and a small window as they both fell, but there was no artefact that would *quite* do the trick. Gritting his teeth, Roland shaved another sliver off the Hateful Druidess' power and wove a quick wind that tossed the powerless Count of Green Apples into the first story of the Belfry over the railing, to impact with great fracas against a writing desk. The ground was swiftly hurrying towards Roland, and there seemed to be an unfortunate amount of fire down there, so he promptly began to **Use** the knife that'd drank so deep of the fae noble. His coat and clothes suddenly shivered, and the hand holding the knife was seized by massive pressure as he tried to coax out power from within.

A set of three enchanted black pearls on a string of dried seaweed, an Ashuran acquisition, immediately blew up as the power that tried to force metamorphosis onto his hand was kept from succeeding – the dark-haired man still cursed profusely as the many tiny shards drove through the skin of his ankle. The Rogue Sorcerer succeeded at making green wings bloom from his back, focusing through the pain, and immediately stopped drawing from the contents of the knife. The pressure faded. The knife he kept in hand, as a tool for control, flying crookedly back up to the footbridge on fae wings. For lack of knowing how to land, Roland instead positioned himself above the bridge and ceased using the knife. The wings shattered and he dropped, landing on his feet. Yet it felt like he'd forgotten something, the Rogue Sorcerer mused as he rose to his full height. It came to him a heartbeat later.

"Mautedit," Roland swore. "My casting rod."

It would have dropped all the way down and the odds it'd broken in the fall weren't low. Still, even if it'd shattered into a few pieces it could likely be repaired by Hierophant or the Blind Maker.

A heartbeat later Night billowed out at the bottom of the Belfry like a massive sea of power unleashed, lapping at the walls and the base of the spire. Roland let out a whimper. How was it that every time he fought at Catherine's side, he ended up losing a priceless and irreplaceable artefact? That casting rod had been crafted in Thalassina, which didn't even exist anymore. Gods, if she'd burned down a slice of the Belfry's library while she tangled with the fae they were going to need to have words. Cross words, even. It would have to wait, however, as now it seemed like the tide might be turning against the fae. The Baroness of Red Hunt had been freed of her prison of Light and come to reinforce the Lord of Plentiful Harvest – who was now missing an arm, and sporting a furious sneer – but now that the Exalted Poet had come, the Chosen finally had numbers on their side.

Odd, Roland thought, that Catherine would have sent up one of the Named with her but not the other. The Fallen Monk would no more be able to withstand existing in the general vicinity of the Black Queen taking a fight seriously than the Exalted Poet would have, which was why he'd assumed reinforcements had been sent at all. Both fae turned, watching him like hawks as the last wisps of his stolen wings dissipated. Yet they were not striking, and neither was the pair of Chosen facing them.

"Unmake your web, witch," the Baroness of Red Hunt said.

Adanna, in her own way a delight, took a moment to realize she was the one being addressed and not the Exalted Poet.

"I think not," the Blessed Artificer stiffly said. "I offer you this instead: surrender now and your deaths will be swift."

Roland would need to have a conversation with her about how the Grand Alliance did not, in fact, endorse the execution captives but he was willing to chalk that one up to a lack of practice in heroic banter. The Artificer was not young to her Name – she'd had it for a few years – but she had been... sheltered. Treasured for her intellect and miraculous abilities by the Thalassocracy, she'd been privileged and protected to the extent that she had faced neither a villain nor a disaster before coming to join the Tenth Crusade. No wonder her first taste of war at the Red Flower Vales had seen her shy from the frontlines and embrace the concept of the Arsenal wholeheartedly.

"You need not bleed for this," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest told them, voice warm and reassuring. "We seek no death, only to prevent a great danger that threatens us all."

The hateful sneer from earlier was gone from the childlike face, but some ugly glint of it still lingered in the fairy's eyes. Roland trusted not these creatures, and his fingers began inching towards another artefact from his trove. The polished orb of quartz he'd picked up in Dormer, imbued with three Callowan war-spells, was slippery against his sweaty palm but Roland cupped it against the side of his pocket and managed to seize it without giving away the game.

"Your fellows downstairs were not so eager to treat with us," the Exalted Poet said. "This is petty trickery: Splendid are the eldest children of deception."

"Your lives were not bargained for," the Baroness of Red Hunt said. "They will only be lost if you persist in this fool's errand. *Let us through*, lest we all pay for the madness of a single man."

"Whether or not your intentions are laudable no longer matters," the Rogue Sorcerer said, fingers tightening around the orb. "You

have attacked the Arsenal, and in so doing become a tool of Keter and Gods knows who else. For that, there is only one end awaiting you."

"The thief speaks at last," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest jeered. "You'll have no more of us, usurper. Your words are wind, and in the end what you stole will take from you."

"What splendid diplomats you make," the Rogue Sorcerer drily replied, fully intending the second meaning. "Begone, creatures."

Will taking hold of one of the sorceries within the orb, Roland let it loose with a thought. He cut the side of his hand at the antlered baroness, a long streak of chittering lightning lashing out forward. Wessen's Fork, as it was called, had been the invention of an ancient Wizard of the West of that name. It was a clever piece of work, a bolt of lightning that – ah, and there it was. The Baroness of Red Hunt threw her spear of bone at the sorcery, but instead of being shattered by the greater power the spell split into two streaks of lightning both still headed towards the fae. A heartbeat later Adanna tossed up a disk of clay covered in High Tyrian writing, which began to spin and shot out a long blade of Light. The two fairies elected to retreat, pushing off the railings and dropping below.

The spear of bone fell into dust and vanished, but Roland wouldn't fall for that trick twice: the Baroness would have the thing in hand when she next reappeared.

"They are not attacking anew," the Blessed Artificer noted. "Perhaps they are retreating."

"That would be a stroke of luck," Roland said, implicitly disagreeing. "Poet, how fares the fight below?"

"The Black Queen triumphs," the other man shrugged. "And requires not the assistance of my verses in her struggles."

"But the Fallen Monk's fists suit her better?" Adanna said. "One cannot account for taste, I suppose."

Roland kept his eyes on the Poet as the Artificer talked, looking for a reaction. He found only indifference there, as if the matter did not truly concern him. Roland knew little of the Monk, save what Archer had mentioned in passing. The man had talents useful against those who used Light, and a knack for stepping lightly. As befitting, the Rogue Sorcerer supposed, of a villain who'd been able to very publicly murder several of the Holies and then escape Laurence de Montfort's pursuit. The dark-haired man went through his pocket, finding a slender wand of ebony. It was petty work but its sole enchantment, one that spewed out a fist-sized blow of kinetic force, tended to be useful in all sorts of

situations. Roland twirled it absently around his fingers, feeling the sorcery within lapping eagerly at his skin.

"Your aid here is welcome," Roland agreeably said. "For when they will return."

"If they return," the Blessed Artificer insisted.

"I expect they will, my lady," the Exalted Poet said. "Yet I have something of my own prepared that might wound them, a fresh work inspired by what I glimpsed below."

The Rogue Sorcerer joined up with the other two, shoulder brushing past the Poet's as he kept half an eye on the empty space around them. But only half, for he had not forgotten this band's true purpose.

"I look forward to witnessing it," the Blessed Artificer said.

"I will endeavour not to disappoint," the Poet laughed. "Yet it might be a verse of some potency. Do either of you have any defences I should beware of hurting?"

"Yes," the Blessed Artificer noted. "My web is maintained by a-"

"Stop," Roland ordered, eyes on the Poet. "Leave it at that, Adanna."

There lay hidden beautiful diamond spinning top that formed the web of Light blocking the fae from going upwards would keep feeding it so long as the top kept spinning and there was Light within it. It'd been covered by illusion of his own – more accurately, of a travelling illusionist with some truly unpleasant habits Roland had briefly encountered – and had been stashed away in a nook within the spire to their side, where it should be beyond harm for now.

"If he does not know, he cannot avoid disrupting it," the Blessed Artificer lectured him.

"I do not know what I have done to earn your mistrust, Lord Sorcerer, but I can only apologize for it," the Exalted Poet told him, though he sounded at tad aggrieved.

"Why aren't the fae attacking, Poet?" Roland asked.

"Who can know the minds of the Splendid?" the Poet replied. "Perhaps they are waiting for us to be distracted, or even striking at the Black Queen's back."

Then why can't I hear any noise coming from downstairs? the Rogue Sorcerer thought. Not a single noise at all, not since there'd been that massive wave of Night.

"What did Queen Catherine say when she sent you up and not the Monk?" Roland asked.

"She simply ordered us so, and we obeyed," the man laughed. "Who dares argue with a such a woman?"

That laugh had come just a little too quickly, the Rogue Sorcerer decided. And Catherine was commanding, true, but in no way above explaining her reasonings when asked. If anything Roland had noticed she tended to think better of the people who *did* ask, if the situation allowed for it and the tone was not confrontational.

"Of course," Roland said, smile tugging at his lips. "I would have done the same."

His fingers tightened against the ebony wand. He could not prove it, but his instincts were screaming. There was a band of possible traitors, Catherine had made clear to him, and Roland fancied he'd just sniffed one of them out. It was the silence below that worried him. The Black Queen at war was many things, but *quiet* was not usually one of them.

"It has been a long day," the Rogue Sorcerer apologized. "The web is maintained by an artefact I hid under illusion, Poet, I'll allow you to glimpse through it."

He gestured, calling on one of the spheres within him, and crafted an illusion of a little box of glittering gold in the middle of the footbridge. One only the Levantine should be able to see. The Exalted Poet's eyes flicked to it, which was when Roland casually pressed the tip of his wand against the man's throat.

"Don't move," the Rogue Sorcerer mildly said.

"This is becoming absurd, Lord Sorcerer," the Poet protested.

"Roland, put that wand down," the Blessed Artificer ordered. "Your suspicions are getting out of hand."

"I do not understand what is moving you to violence," the Exalted Poet told him. "And the fae could return at any moment."

"The Count of Green Apples that nearly killed the Artificer," the dark-haired man said, "did you get sent before or after he flew up?"

Roland was not unfamiliar with clever sorts, women with glib tongues or witty men with laughing eyes. Liars of one shade or another, especially Named, were used to being able to talk themselves out of anything. That could be used. And in this particular case, the burly Levantine might have the frame of a

warrior but as far as the Rogue Sorcerer knew he only had sparse fighting experience under his belt. That was a weakness in knowledge, paired with a proficiency and tendency at lying.

"After, naturally," the Exalted Poet said. "I assumed I was sent as reinforcements."

Except that Catherine would have known that the Count would get here long before anybody sent up by the stairs, considering the wings, so that decision made no tactical sense. It would have been better for her to drag back down the Count of Green Apples with Night while her two helpers kept the other fae at bay long enough for her to pull it off.

Without hesitation, Roland fired the wand right into the man's throat.

The Exalted Poet blew over the railing, toppling down with a surprised scream.

"*Roland*," the Blessed Artificer screamed.

He turned to find she had pointed a short stave of charred wood at him, eyes gone grave behind her spectacles.

"Two out of three are traitors," the Rogue Sorcerer noted, for the Poet had covered for the Monk with his words and the conclusion to be had was obvious. "I wonder, will it be three?"

"You're the one who just threw an ally to his death, you madman," Adanna retorted. "Put down the wand, Roland."

"If you are, your game is deep enough I can hardly glimpse it," Roland admitted. "But I will not surrender my wand, Artificer."

He would not disarm himself when the enemy was not about to return. She'd understand soon enough, anyway.

"You leave me no choice, then," she grimly replied.

A heartbeat later a spear of bone pierced up from under the footbridge, tearing through where Roland had woven the illusion of a golden box. The bait had been taken. The Baroness of Red Hunt burst through in a storm of rubble, red wings bright as Adanna's face fell.

"You laid a trap," the Blessed Artificer said, catching his eyes.

"Nothing," the fae shouted. "It was *nothing*, you useless worm."

"That would have been it for the web," Roland replied, ignoring the creature.

The end of the footbridge opposite the spire shivered as a glamour went down, revealing the Exalted Poet – throat visibly bruised – and the Lord of Plentiful Harvest at his side.

“It does not have to be this way,” the Poet rasped. “They are right, Artificer, you already know it. You were shown the truth, weren’t you? They play with powers beyond their understanding, and they will doom all the world.”

“Traitor,” the Blessed Artificer replied in an indignant hiss. “I stand with Above, now and always.”

A moment of tense silence passed.

“Her wonders will break if she dies, most likely,” the Exalted Poet said, tone reluctant.

The fae looked unamused, both of them.

“A pinnacle of uselessness,” the Lord of Plentiful Harvest sighed, face displaying a childish moue. “We knew this already.”

“Wrong,” the Blessed Artificer said. “You know nothing and less.”

“I know this, child: the Black Queen is dead,” the Baroness told them. “Take down your web now, if you do not wish to follow her in this.”

Roland’s fists clenched. They could not lie *knowingly*, he reminded himself. Which still meant there would be no reinforcements. It would be a hard fight, even with the fae lord crippled and the Poet’s throat hurt.

“I’ll take the Lord of Plentiful Harvest and another,” the Rogue Sorcerer mused. “Do you want the Poet or the Baroness?”

A wreath of blinding Light came to life around the charred stave in the Blessed Artificer’s hand, crackling like lightning and growing into a great spear.

“I’ll take both,” Adanna of Smyrna snarled.

Well, who was he to argue with a lady?

[ErraticErrata](#)

First update of the month, which means extra chapter in the eponymous tab. This one is the first half of a two-parter, titled “Charlatan I”. The POV is one I’ve not used before!

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Interlude isn't showing in the TOC – the Bonus chapters generally don't, but the Interludes usually do – just not this time.

[ayon96](#)

You forgot to add this chapter to the side bar of the site

[Mental Mouse](#)

Now the Interlude is showing in the TOC, but apparently in the wrong place, between Hook and Line. By either publication date or plot points it should be after Sinkers. (As of Sinkers, Cat hasn't sent the Poet back up.)

pagesbe

Of course we get an interlude. I am honestly not surprised. Hopefully we don't get another, though I won't hold my breath. That dang cliffhanger.

dadycool

I think they come in batches of up to...six? Either way, it'll be a couple weeks before we get back to Cat. Or whatever she's become this time. It's entirely possible that she'll be a feature in someone else's interlude, like a couple times when we've had Abigail's POV, or she could feature in the Big Reveal like in Iserre right before she went to rescue Masego. We'll just have to see.

[Liliet](#)

There are single interludes, too, though this does seem likely to be a series where we check on the rest of the clusterfuck before coming back to Cat 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm... maybe a Hakram POV coming? Yum!

RoflCat

I'm hoping for Artificer to reveal who was the 'informant' that told her about Quartered Seasons and her eventual realization that she's been used and the anger that come with it.

The girl is in Arsenal pretty much full time, so if it's Bard then it implies Bard can intrude into Arsenal without being found out.

[Liliet](#)

YESSSSS

...Bard teleports. I don't think Arsenal is special for her, in any way other than 'easier than most because of the sheer quantity of Named in the same place'

Sparsebeard

We still need to know what happened with the other raiding party though...

Anomandris

Man, Roland's so in sync with Cat....Can we just adopt him into the Woe already?

Plus Confiscate and Use seem at first glance to have a... teaching quality. To use them well, I would assume that you need to sharpen your mind a lot over the years (instead of just throwing your power about)

Oh, and the Blessed Artificer has got to be the most naive Named we've seen in the story....

[Liliet](#)

Naivete is apparently a common heroic quality, though it would of course naturally fade with years.

Adanna is a GIFT and a DARLING, she's just so fucking pure???

Tenthyr

Masego has expressed genuine admiration and amazement at Roland's abilities, which says a lot. It's almost charming Roland thinks he's 'just' smoke and mirrors when it comes to his aspects. I would eager Cathrine would have a lot to teach him about what power being nothing but smoke and mirrors in this world is.

[Liliet](#)

(stage magician bard, that's what she is)

(while Roland identifies more as a rogue class lmao)

(NO WONDER THEY GET EACH OTHER SO WELL, SIBLINGSHIP MADE IN HEAVEN)

[numberlen](#)

I think this chapter has conclusively shown that Roland is just a rogue that pretends to be a sorcerer through UMD and lots and lots of wands and magic items.

Mental Mouse

> Roland thinks he's 'just' smoke and mirrors

Roland didn't say 'just', quite the opposite. Indeed, that line is so awesome I'll just quote it:

> "Smoke and mirrors, my good count. Or rather smoke, mirrors and a knife."

That's not dissing illusions and misdirection. That's a "prepare to die" line. I wonder why he tossed the weakened Count into the balcony rather than letting them drop into whatever was below, but there are arguments both ways given he doesn't *know* who's won down there.

cainerahlld777

Smoke, Mirrors &nnnd a Knife🔪

Spinner335

ROLAND IS BEST BOI!!!!

SpeckofStardust

I now like both of these heroes.

thearpox23

I spent half the chapter expecting Masego to finally wake up, walk out the back door, and put an end to this carnival. I can now only assume that he is somewhere else and I've completely forgotten where it was discussed.

Because with the Arsenal under direct attack from the front, and supposedly triple-fanged strike at its back (Quartered Seasons, Severance, and that heroine,) the arguably most heavy of heavyweights present in the area would play a significant role. Yet we seemingly have everyone important accounted for EXCEPT for him.

dadycool

Pretty sure Cat wanted him as a librarian/wise man type of resource for any band that needed info or wisdom.

thearpox23

That was to be his role in a heroic detectives story. Then a fae invasion happened, (EXPLICITLY to disrupt that,) and

considering that the Arsenal is effectively his pocket space, his actions are rather integral to how that is gonna go.

Being in the role of a dispenser of wisdom doesn't suddenly null his other traits.

Morgenstern

Actually, Cat was STILL counting for that story to trump that little invasion, letting her merry little band of misfits survive what they usually could *not*, because they still have a story to fulfill... If that story is truly still going on and Masego is playing that role (unwillingly/unwittingly or not), he might very well still be caught up in that story fully.

thearpox23

RE: "Being in the role of a dispenser of wisdom doesn't suddenly null his other traits."

[Liliet](#)

Naw, these stories are going concurrently. "Fae invasion disrupting investigation" is still part of the investigation story.

thearpox23

Did I claim they weren't? Your point does not conflict with mine.

[Liliet](#)

> That was to be his role in a heroic detectives story. Then a fae invasion happened, (EXPLICITLY to disrupt that,)

I'm contesting this one. In my understanding the fae invasion disrupts the investigation within the framework of the investigation story, it doesn't disrupt the investigation story as a whole. A much larger calamity would be needed to derail *that*, and Bard either cannot or did not cause such.

thearpox23

I suppose I did imply that the Fae happened explicitly to disrupt Masego's Role. Editing mistake on my part. I was referring to Cat's counter-schemes as a whole rather than Masego specifically.

Also, you see to be fighting me on semantics. To disrupt something (in intrigue) does not mean to

completely derail, it means to delay or shift the balance to where the thing loses importance. Such as the fae invasion introducing elements that reduce the importance of things Cat depended on while increasing the importance of elements she skipped out on. That disruption can lead to a shift in priorities for some Named, shift in Roles for some, (especially those that haven't yet been brought into the story,) , shift in the stakes, and so on.

Unrelated to my point, but your statement that the calamity isn't large enough to completely derail everything I find funny because that is only because it is currently failing at its goals.

If the Quartered Seasons gets sabotaged Cordelia gets cornered and Bard no longer needs her current plot. (Not that she'd stop it. She'd just have a much bigger lever.)

If Cat gets sniped the whole thing is doubly unnecessary.

If Masego gets sniped who knows what happens to the Arsenal and the fallout is worse than with Quartered Seasons.

And if enough named or regular people die here, the murder mystery won't matter as well because the Grand Alliance will lose faith in this pet project. No one wants to stay in a 'Bad Happenings Place,' and The Haunted Magician is absolutely at fault here for not revealing the danger he carried with him. From there, it is a short walk to be cautious of every mysterious Named that drops by and the whole thing falls apart.

Does the Bard expect any of those to actually come to pass? Probably not. But the threat is very real and Cat already made one mistake in this book. This is like your argument with the dagger where you ascribe regular assassins inability to murder Cat to plot armor rather than well-trained security, surrounding Named with skill points in detection, and her constant paranoia. Do remember that things like providential plot armor are crutches for those who lack the skills but still resonate with their Name.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has specifically noted that the loss of Masego's notes on Quartered Seasons would not be irrecoverable. Now if Masego were to die, yes, but I'm not getting an impression of a threat to him so far.

Anyway, I wasn't arguing that this wasn't dangerous. I was saying the story is still happening, which is a neutral observation that-wise.

thearpox23

There are more ways to mess with the Quartered Seasons than just messing with Masego's notes. I was being general on purpose, since I don't want to turn every minor thing into an essay.

>Anyway, I wasn't arguing that this wasn't dangerous. I was saying the story is still happening, which is a neutral observation that-wise.

Yup. Investigation still (unless stuff deteriorates too much) happening overall. Still mostly put on hold for now because fighting. Still being purposefully disrupted. Will likely have tonal/leads/roles shift after disruption ends.

And if you don't have issues with any of the above sentences than I am Still not sure what your original point was. But okay.

[Liliet](#)

See, the thing is, I don't think the investigation is put on hold. Specificallly, Catherine used the fighting FOR investigation – as a means of flushing out traitors.

We, uh, don't have definite data on how well that went. But it's definitely something she did.

thearpox23

Ok, I see where our problem lay.

You have the meta narrative of Cat pulling strings while figuring out what is going on, and then you have the verse-narrative that Cat jury-rigged with the Mirror Knight in the lead role while Cat was the Authority Figure. You're mixing those up.

Stopping Cat from advancing what she knows is virtually impossible. She can twist any situation, see the lines connecting it to other things, and make deductions. Bard knows this, and therefore nothing she did was an attempt to disrupt Cat herself but to disrupt Cat's work she built up; her narrative and plot hooks. One of the win

conditions would be to reach the point where Cat is screwed no matter what she knows.

I checked back to my original post and I did explicitly namedrop the "Heroic Detectives story" which obviously refers to the heroic band of five, so I think you just misread my point. Granted, I also managed to imply that the fae invasion happened to disrupt Masego role in the heroic investigation in particular, which is just a weird point to make, and I probably should have been called out on that if anything, so there's that.

Liliet

His presence would disrupt the drama so yeah he's presumably somewhere he cannot hear/sense what's going on. Narrativium takes care of those things.

Decius

He's still working on quartered seasons. If someone wanted his help they would have sent for him.

And he is going to be cross when he is interrupted.

thearpox23

In other words he can't hear the commotion going literally outside his front door? I'm not surprised he's got everything sound-proofed, I'm just surprised he didn't get himself an alert system for such events.

The invaders MUST have some plan to neutralize him though, and I'm curious as to what that is. Otherwise the whole thing amounts to a bad joke. (Cat getting stabbed aside. But having an intrusion just to snipe those who would defend against the intrusion is more of a Neshamah thing.)

Mental Mouse

Given that Masego survived eye-to-eye with Queen Summer, I'll be impressed if the invaders have a plan to avoid getting rendered down for power supplies and spell reagents.

WealthyAardvark

Quartered Seasons might be his secret top priority but it's not like he's spending all of his waking hours on it. It'd hardly be a very secret project if that was the case; people would have started asking questions about what he's up to ages ago, instead of only a couple of weeks ago after being tipped off.

And unfortunately just because there's a story afoot doesn't mean Masego's been relinquished of his normal duties at the Arsenal. There's a hundred reasons he might not be in the Belfry right now, from working in the Workshops, inspecting the Mirage for the upcoming meeting, gathering crafting materials, training new mages, or assessing the damage from the library fire.

Just because he's not right here doesn't mean he's not been up to something important. This place is huge, he could have been practically anywhere when the assault started.

WealthyAardvark

Additionally, Masego has no idea that anyone knows anything about the Quartered Seasons project that shouldn't. He sent the Hunted Magician to meet with Cat but didn't accompany him to the meeting. Cat hasn't spoken to him since she found out people had been sniffing around at QS; she's only been at the Arsenal for like at most five or six hours at this point.

As far as he knows the project is as safe as it can be in a fortress that's under assault. Maybe he ran off to protect the super-sword instead.

Burnsy

The Blessed Artificer continues the long standing Praesi tradition of being a superior Bitch no matter what the calling. She and Akua would hate each other and I want a dozen scenes of them bickering.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, Akua would love her, which would only piss her off more, which would delight Akua more, and so an infinite circle of ABSOLUTE DELIGHT FOR THE READERS WHICH I WOULD LOVE TO SEE

Burnsy

The Blessed Artificer continues the long standing Praesi tradition of being a superior Bitch no matter what the calling. She and Akua would hate each other and I want a dozen scenes of them bickering.

zfglx

Roland is basically Calernia's sorcerous version of Indiana Jones isn't he?

thearpox23

'This belongs in my pocket! And I'll make sure to put my essay on this in the museum as well.'

JJR

In his POCKET DIMENSION specifically.

Frivolous

"I'll take both." = Adanna wants a threesome. Who is Roland to argue with that? Especially if he gets to watch.

[Adrian V](#)

And Adanna is feeling like she was taken for a fool (by not realizing there were traitors) so now she has righteous fury on her side, those 2 are fucked xD

And of course we have Roland origin story after this, i wonder how Erra plans these things.

As a bonus either Roland was more adventurous than we thought or he has fought quite a few revenants since the war started, maybe both.

Oh and i almost forgot but i bet the angle the Bard used with these 2 is the old "things man was not made to know" thing, and they are both probably fundamentalists

dadycool

Yes! We finally get to see Roland's badassery in action! Looks like the Artificer has her own Badassery to display here, not that we should be surprised considering she was even able to blind Masego for a second. One of the questions raised by the end of last chapter got answered here, too: How did the Monk get away from the Poet?

Roland's right, though. When the Black Queen goes to battle, "quiet" is not a suitable adjective.

agumentic

Well, I believe someone called that today's update was going to be an interlude. Good call, and a very good interlude – it's nice to see Roland and his Munchkin deck of artefacts in battle directly.

Daniel E

LOL. Now that you mention it, his collection of magical gadgets does remind me of a Munchkin game. He might even surpass Kairos for random effects, if not necessarily in quantity.

Liliet

Oh my god how good is Roland's narration. This is Catherine tier of constantly funny while also having a very distinct and different voice. Wow. Just wow.

Adanna is a precious gift: naive and without combat experience (blinding herself with her own trick!) but a powerhouse and not an idiot. SO GOOD.

And they were both traitors lmao. CAT CHOSE WELL

hakureireimu

I don't see any evidence for her not being an idiot yet.

Liliet

1. She caught on to the fae striking at Roland's illusion and what it means. 2. As Roland has commented, she's a genius enchanting-wise.

Liliet

P.S. 3. She did not listen to the fae and let them through mid-fight, even though what they were saying aligned with her preconception. Yes, it's a very very low bar, but we're talking about 'not an idiot' here, so...

Liliet

Also, I find it notable how non-greedy Roland is. He spares a thought for 'why do i lose artefacts every time I fight with Catherine' but he doesn't think anything similar for the stuff he expends, only what was lost without expending the charge. He minds waste, but using up? He's clearly attached to his stuff, but not... he doesn't PRIORITIZE it in any sense.

Also, there's someone who's clever eh 😊

Mental Mouse

Well, he does seem to have an issue with dropping casting rods into a melee. (Admittedly, he did get to use the *first* one to the dregs.) Of course "oops, dropped my magic wand" is a basic trope for any device-based magic-user, so it's really on him to do something about it.

Liliet

Like I said: he has an issue with losing stuff. But expending its charge? He didn't even bring Catherine up in the first part of the fight.

Shveiran

Well, he is in a life and death situation, playing out in a field that could cause the destruction of the weapons the mean to use to win the war.

I mean, I'm glad he sees it this way and all, but this is not the kind of situation where you DON'T spend your single use items.

I like him, don't get me wrong; but it's a pretty low bar we are complimenting him for clearing, here, no?

Liliet

Nah, the thing is, Catherine brought him into this fight in the first place

Mental Mouse

Yes, using it up == good (thrifty, effective). Losing it when you *weren't* done with it yet == bad (wasteful, he's short a weapon, one of the fae might even turn it against him).

Mental Mouse

Also: Not the first time this has happened, he lost a casting rod at Liesse III. I forget if there was a similar incident at Liesse I (?) when he was on the other side...

Liliet

Battle of Camps?

At Liesse III, he didn't JUST lose a casting rod. He got robbed for everything he had because Catherine deliberately made him bait to Kairos, with twin goals of channeling Kairos into something at least predictable and getting her hands on something Roland was carrying – Amadeus's soul.

I'm getting the impression Roland is very well aware of what happened, and while he's never letting Catherine live it down, he's not holding a grudge either.

Mental Mouse

Well, that was a separate incident from dropping his rod during the demon melee.

Liliet

...demon melee? You mean devils?

His rod fell down there cause Kairos threw it away,
and the reason he had it was because see above.

Mental Mouse

Having reread the section, you are correct.

Juff

Typo Thread:

the tone > the one
Artificer it > Artificer, it
Gigantes they > Gigantes, they
instead of down the > instead of down, the
would by him > would buy him
would used > would use
artefacts the > artefacts, the
doubling (should this be doublet?)
burst if > burst of
was take > was to take
Count Green > Count of Green
drank so deep > drunk so deep
execution captives but > execution of captives, but
lightning both > lightning, both
triumphs," the > triumphs." The
work but > work, but
hidden beautiful > hidden a beautiful
upwards would > upwards, that would
by illusion (extra space)
at tad > a tad
obeyed," the > obeyed." The
anything Roland > anything, Roland
enemy was not about to return (shouldn't this be "soon about to
return")

hakureireimu

I keep wondering how she is supposed to be a match for Akua as
Magnificent when she has 0 points in intrigue.

Liliet

Heroes counter intrigue with brute force, typically.

RoflCat

Akua doesn't need intrigue to deal with Artificer, just her
poisonous tongue that cowed the beastmaster.

Basically the latter half of this video: [https://
www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDZX1z-yn7w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDZX1z-yn7w)
But with more of that smirking villainess touch.

Mental Mouse

She might be a match in story structure, certainly not in ability.

Javvies

Agreed.

Blessed Artificer versus Akua (as Heiress, Diabolist, or Dread Empress) would have had Blessed Artificer riding a truly massive Narrative/Story wave.

Not just the standard Hero bonuses, but also bonuses connected to being a family member, descended of a branch that was thought to have been ended by the family.

laguz24

One of these days bard is going to get stabbed.

Liliet

She'd be delighted, I imagine

Mental Mouse

If you remember, she just teleports or disappears when her life is threatened. Black tested it: first two times he shot at her she just blinked to elsewhere in the room, the third time she disappeared (and didn't harass him again until after he'd lost his Name).

Javvies

Huh.

Good news is that Blessed Artificer appears to not be an intentional or knowing traitor, so she was probably just played by Bard and/or Bard's proxies.

Bad news ... Bard has gotten to a lot of people inside the Arsenal. At least two knowing traitors.

On the upside, if Cat can prove that Bard is behind this, it could prove to be a key opening wedge to separate the Heroes from their automatic trust of Bard, and to weaken Bard's influence elsewhere.

I mean ... if it can be proven that Bard is responsible for traitors inside the Arsenal and helping the Fae attack it, every Grand Alliance member is going to have to put a price on her head.

Liliet

Note: this band is not exactly a representative sample of knowing traitor frequency. Cat *tried*.

Javvies

Sure, Cat was looking for traitors ...

But just the two that we know about constitute about 10% of the Named inside the Arsenal.

And there's probably at least one or two more Named that are working directly with Bard, not counting the ones who are being played by Bard and don't realize it.

Liliet

Honestly I'm not sure there are more. Maybe Concocter, but any more are just... not necessary.

ayon96

Someone invited the fae into the Arsenal and it can't be those two cause they were with Cat when it happened. Also things usually come as threes. So I think there is still one more willing conspirator working with bard on the loose.

WealthyAardvark

Someone tipped the Magister and Artificer off about the unexplained holes in the budget that comprise Quartered Seasons. Someone also got a message to the Mirror Knight and the other Named who arrived with him in Chapter 14 about the Wicked Enchanter and the Red Axe that was almost certainly sent before the killing happened.

The Fallen Monk is part of Archer's traveling band, and the Exalted Poet arrived with the Mirror Knight. Neither of them has been in a position for those actions. Given that it's been stated that the Concocter is probably at worst a tool of the Bard, there's going to be at least one more traitor around.

Of the heroes who are Arsenal regulars remaining we have the Blind Maker, the Repentant Magister (probably a tool), and the Bitter Blacksmith. Of the villains, the Hunted Magician (unlikely) and the Sinister Physician.

hakureireimu

That someone can be the Bard herself, since she can talk.

Liliet

Consider: non-Named personnel exists.

Also, anonymous tips have great power.

Liliet

Fae forced their way into the Arsenal, remember the whole mini-earthquake?

Mental Mouse

Yeah, but they don't show up without some cause. And there's no actual indication that they came for the Hunted Magician....

Liliet

"“Why have you come here?” I asked.

“To collect a debt left unpaid,” the Duchess said.

I waited patiently.

“And to repay that which we owe,” she added.

Been hoping I'd ask the next question before she was finished answering, huh? It wasn't my first time interrogating her kind, I wouldn't fall for that.

“Who do you owe that debt to?” I pressed.

“She who told us where the Hunted Magician is,” she grimaced. “The Wandering Bard.””

Mental Mouse

OK, so the Bard used the debt to the Magician to sic the fae on them. It's interesting to wonder how the fae incurred a debt to the Wandering Bard in the first place, but I suppose the fae are pretty easy to set up for something like that.

Javvies

These Fae owe Wandering Bard because she told them where to find the Hunted Magician and how to get inside.

Plus, it appears that she's also claiming that Quartered Seasons is an existential threat to them, and warning them about said existential threat to them, plus where and how to get at it may well constitute a debt as well.

Mental Mouse

She's not necessarily wrong about the existential threat – Masego in particular has already broken off a chunk of Arcadia, and has previously

vivsected fae. (In one case with her consent, but still.)

Javvies

On the one hand, yeah, it's possible that Wandering Bard was telling the truth.

On the other, it's probably more likely that she still selectively informed them of certain specific details while leaving out others, effectively leading them to come to an exaggeration of a worst case scenario and misleading conclusions without telling an explicit and demonstrable lie.

Ie, Quartered Seasons is a project on behalf of the individual responsible for the Summer and Winter Courts no longer existing. Technically true ... bit leaves out one hell of a lot of important details.

Or, maybe Masego thinks that there's an infinitesimal chance that Quartered Sessions could kill a Court if aimed and utilized against the Court at the exact right moment under the exact right circumstances, but has explicitly not ruled out the possibility, however improbable he says it is, gets turned into "they think this can kill a Court"

Mental Mouse

Thanks to Cat's influence, Masego is slightly more considerate of collateral damage than his father, but that's not saying much. Even if he's not specifically thinking of the fae, the project itself is explicitly part of his research on how to kill a god.

It would be ironic if the point of this was in fact to make sure Quartered Seasons did in fact get turned against the fae... in response to their attack. Ironic, but foolish – I'm pretty sure story-logic (And DK's capabilities) would make a test run for such an Ultimate Weapon self-defeating, since DK would get the chance to see and analyze its effects.

Javvies

Masego is far more careful about collateral damage and deciding who to kill than Warlock was. Though, true, that wouldn't take much, and Masego can have eccentric notions about what constitutes

sufficient grounds to kill someone. On the other hand, he also largely applies Cat's theories about the world working better if people aren't assholes – that's paraphrasing heavily, admittedly. Plus, I'm pretty sure Masego would subscribe to the theory that causing collateral damage means you were sloppy.

At any rate, I'm saying Bard is more likely to have heavily spun a carefully edited selection of truths into something that bears no resemblance to reality.

Ie, if Masego has said that Quartered Seasons would most likely prove entirely ineffective against a Fae Court, even under hypothetically optimal conditions in all ways, but didn't explicitly and definitively rule out even the remotest possibility of success, Bard spun that to the Fae as "this thing can kill a Court" and carrying the implication that it is intended to be used against the Fae.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except at that point, she's simply lying, and that lie becomes a dagger to be used against her. She's too smart for that, and she's powerful and tricky enough that she doesn't have to.

Note also that destroying the sword and the contents of a room (presumed but not confirmed to be the QS workshop) are explicitly part of paying their debt, meaning those are *Bard's* goals. The fae's own goal is collecting the Hunted Magician's debt to them.

[Javvies](#)

Bard is fully capable of twisting the truth into a metaphorical pretzel without lying.

In doing so, she can craft her statements so as to leave the impression that Quartered Seasons is something other than what it is, and if the Fae have misinterpreted her statements, she need only not correct their misunderstandings while not confirming them.

Ie, Quartered Seasons is being supported by Cat, is easily turned into Quartered Seasons is being supported by the person who ended the cycle of the Summer and Winter Courts ... and it's not that hard to get from there to Cat could be supporting Quartered Seasons in order to end the Spring and Autumn Courts as well.

Sure, taking out Quartered Seasons is something Bard wants ... but it's entirely possible that Bard also fed them a story that would make the Fae not try to weasel out of meeting her request with a minimum effort/minimum damage technicality.

[Liliet](#)

I think they owed her for telling them where Hunted was

Opointmass

The debt that the Fae owe to the wandering bard, is simply because she told them where to find the haunted magician therefore they owed her for it. I think she was clever enough to phrase it like this: " I know where you can find the haunted magician but you will owe a debt to me which i'd like to cash in immediately, thank you very much". Or at least that's what I think went down.

[ayon96](#)

Guess Fae might have forced their way through. Someone still sent the message of murder ahead of time and arranged it to happen. Could be Concocter but she seems to obvious!

[Burlyraven](#)

So the two members of Cat's traitor party that happened to not be traitors both happen to be magic item/artifact specialists. And one of Cat's main skills is the ability to create artifacts. This particular grouping is starting to feel like a bonding exercise with more over-arching story importance than first expected.

[Liliet](#)

Ooooh nice

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, the non-traitors are also long-term staff of the Arsenal, which for obvious reasons is packed with sorcerous gadgeteers.

Mental Mouse

As far as "bonding exercise": Let's see, we've got Rogue Sorcerer, Blessed Artificer, Cat herself, and probably Masego will come out for the next act. The question is, who'd be the fifth? Sinister Physician has been tagged and left behind already, but more to the point, they'd need a physical brawler. Archer would do, but either the Mirror Knight or the Kingfisher

Prince would provide an “outsider” presence. The Red Axe would also be a possibility, offering a redemptive-sacrifice plotline for Cat’s quiver.

Burlyraven

The Kingfisher Prince and the Mirror Knight seem to be the two most likely individuals to wield Severance, so that’s where my brain was going. And I’m unsure on Masego l, really; he might be taking on a more offset role as something like the wizard in the tower that responds to the annoying sounds of battle by just kicking everyone’s ass as a matter of discipline (kinda where I’m seeing this particular arc going, honestly).

Mental Mouse

Possibly, but in this company he might not be far enough above the scrum to pull that off. Unless he uses Quartered Seasons, which as I note elsewhere would probably be a mistake.

Hmm, having *both* KP and MK would give them both sorts of brawlers, but at that point Archer is a candidate again.

sengachi

I love how Roland relied on the assumption of Catherine’s tactical acumen to spot out a lie. He’d sooner believe a fellow Hero is a traitor than that Catherine made a basic tactical error.

Also I love how no one I’ve seen in the comments so far even mentioned Catherine’s presumed death. It’s just taken for granted that a simple knife to the throat isn’t enough to put her down, or that the Night’s stolen resurrection tricks are enough for her to walk it off, and that’s a whole basket of fun,

SpeckofStardust

Cat dying would lead to the dead king winning. As there is yet a belief in story that they can win with everything they currently have, much less losing one of the 5 major things keeping the mega alliance in one piece. + the 5 or so major problems that caused cat to come here in addition to the 3 or so problems she’d found out when she got here. Meta? Even if she just straight up died she’s likely going to be back again.

Shequi

We have had quite a few repetitions of the simple fact: Death is not enough to stop Catherine Foundling.

If anything, dying and overcoming it again just enhances her story of overcoming death, and it's that story that has her on course to beat the King of Death.

Decius

What's her death count up to now? 3?

No, not her kill count, that's WAY higher.

[Liliet](#)

3 officially, but if you also count that one time Black fucking stabbed her, for example,

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh, she's no Gabe and she eventually returned the favor anyway.

My very own name

I need this crossover. Feed it into my veins.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Alas I don't fic, but I was musing a while back about a Cat vs. Natchua conflict.

[Liliet](#)

I mean in her dream she was run through completely and the sword was stuck in her. People die from that. And we just never get a follow-up on what that meant physically in the material plane.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Dream-logic is a little different. IIRC it was clear that in the real world she was wounded, but not fatally.

[Liliet](#)

It wasn't clear that I remember, no. It wasn't actually clarified.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Her last estimate was "three, I think". It remains to be seen what her condition is now.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's the main character and the book ain't going to be cut this short.

thearpox23

A simple knife is perfectly capable of finishing Catherine off, but no one is concerned for the same reason you love Roland. She is one of the most consistently capable characters I have ever had the pleasure of reading, and I'd eat my boot if she made a traitor-heavy party without accounting for a possible knife in the back.

Javvies

Under the present circumstances, I am not actually sure that a simple knife actually can kill Cat, given her strength in the Night and her probable (nigh-certain, really) knowledge of at least some of the Night-based techniques for shrugging off seemingly mortal injuries, or what would be mortal injuries on someone else.

But yeah, sure, in the appropriate circumstances, where Cat's ability to use Night is significantly constrained, then, yeah, sure, a simple knife in the right spot could kill her. These are not those circumstances

Liliet

Y e p

Mental Mouse

Killing off Cat would take a blade, and a wielder, far more heavily freighted with Story. Even as an agent of the Bard and/or fae, the Fallen Monk simply doesn't have the mojo. Similarly, "traitorous henchman" just isn't enough story, especially given Cat already was looking for the traitors.

Shveiran

Please, the Fallen Monk was introduced what, four chapters ago? Five?

He has the same chances to be the one that finally kills the protagonist of the series *in the first third of the sixth book* than I have to adopt a dragon.

Sigh. Stupid draconic Family Ministry refusing my letters.

Draconic Family Ministry

Look, we've told you a dozen times, you need a proper lair for them, and enough of a hoard to give the hatchling a

proper start. Sticking a forge in the basement just doesn't cut it, and that collection of jewelry was just pathetic!

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's also her nascent Name in play. Given that "wave of Night", I could easily believe that the fae found some way to expel all her Night... only to discover that she has yet another well of power. (That's assuming that Sve Noc haven't gotten involved directly... they could certainly rez her, they've done it before.)

[Mental Mouse](#)

And Roland was right!

Vagabond

Loved the chapter! Love Roland! Deeply satisfied to see his perspective!

Captain Amazing

These are just such great chapters omg.
If there's two traitors my guess is there's five as Bard had whole lots of time to prepare. If so I peg Sinister Physician and Red Axe as members. The Physician is greedy for immortality and Red has the obvious lever of her nemesis. The fifth member might be the Bard herself in a dramatic reveal I dunno.

JJR

"“What splendid diplomats you make,” the Rogue Sorcerer drily replied, fully intending the second meaning.”

Does anyone here know which meaning of which word is being referred to here?

WealthyAardvark

They're Splendid (Fae) diplomats, but also splendid (talented) diplomats. If Cat heard him make a pun like that she'd probably punch him in the arm.

Morgenstern

... i rather heard sarcasm in the "talented" meaning of "splendid", lower case ^^

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Gigantes sorceries were effective but unfortunately they were also made for, well, Gigantes. Living titans who'd barely notice

the kind of forces that would snap poor old Roland of Beaumaraais like a twig.

BTW, that really has to be internal magic of the Gigantes. In the real world, large creatures are far *more* vulnerable to whole-body forces – famously falls, but this sort of sudden yanking about would certainly qualify. Q.v. Haldane’s classic essay, *On Being The Right Size*.

Xinci

Presumably like Dragons or Elves they have enough weight to change how the Laws of Creation interact with their bodies. Given their whole scheme is basically integrating themselves into the many many interactions of Creation it makes sense they would develop some form of intrinsic resistance to getting torn apart by such forces.

hakureireimu

Maybe the force is constant and doesn’t scale according to body mass?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmmm... maybe, but that would make for a rather poor fall-protection spell for a large race. In particular, those “safeguards” Roland mentions would in general be even more important for the Gigantes themselves.

I mentioned Haldane’s essay already – the basic issue here is that both functional and structural strength scale to the square of length (cross-sections of muscle and bone), whereas body mass (and thus inertia and impacts) scale to the cube.

This was also my complaint back when the Skein showed up. As I noted back there, a “30-foot tall rat” is the size of one of the sauropods, and should not be able to *jump* anywhere.

Xinci

I mean a bigger aspect in all of this is the trifecta of features around respiration. ie. energy, structural support(bones), and structural movers(muscles). If they can gain energy by integrating with other forces the muscle and bone structure can then have a lot of room to be shaped in ways that would be too energy-intensive for other species. Energy is the big limiter on size as structural adaptations to larger and larger sizes tend to bring issues with keeping that tissue, flesh, etc actually capable of movement and being capable of finding nutrients from other sources. Given EE did note that Horned Lords have to hibernate most of the

time due to how much energy they burn I presume this to be the case.

Also in the case of Skein (and to a degree some of the other monsters), his cage probably helps circumvent certain rules that would have made things harder for him. Given we had Warlock note that certain creatures couldn't be shapeshifter into due to not following certain rules it could also be assumed that certain inset "natural" laws are tweaked or missing in effect for creatures like Horned Lords. Seems to just be part of this all being a constructed scenario

Letouriste

Nicely written!

Was a bundle of fun to see the interactions between everyone. Good fight too, as usual:)

Interlude: Archer

"The kindest mirror is an old friend, the cruellest an old foe."
– Callowan proverb

The smell was, impossibly, just the same as Archer remembered.

That sweet, high odour that came from too many different herbs being hung to dry for even a Named nose to be able to tell them apart. Deeper in, Indrani knew, the lingering potion fumes would add a lingering tang of sourness: it'd been near impossible to get rid of that even out in Refuge, where there was nothing but open air around the Concocter's workshop, and a room of stone would fare no better. Gods, it was like she'd never left Refuge. It felt like any moment now Alexis might turn the corner, covered in twigs and dirt, eyes looking for the fight her mouth wouldn't admit she was picking. Like John was just out of her sight, with those *stupid* bells and the tasteless tattoos he'd be so damned proud of, like Lysander would be getting a fire going for the fresh stag he'd caught with the latest beast he'd brought to heel. But there was no time for reminiscence, for memories fond and not. The smell had only come when the door was yanked open and the Concocter's dour face was revealed.

"Archer," the other woman said, general dourness turning into a proper frown. "What do you want?"

"That any way to talk to an old friend, Cocky?" Indrani smiled, all nice and toothy.

She hated being called that, always had, but then she'd refused to give out so much as a fake name to any of them. Even the Lady, who'd been amused enough at the novelty of being refused something she'd never pursued the matter. As children the other pupils had made a game of picking the Concocter a name and half a hundred must have been thrown around, few of them clever and all of them mean. She'd invited it, in much everyone else's opinion: Cocky's disposition was what a poet might call just fucking awful.

"Funny," the Concocter thinly smiled, even as her purple eyes narrowed. "Stop wasting my time. What do you want, Archer?"

It was amusing to see the eyes were purple now. When Indrani had left Refuge they'd been bright yellow, and last time she'd been at the Arsenal they'd been an unnatural shade of green. The hair was still black – had been for a few years, though the more sober colours these days would never make up for that memorable month when they'd been thirteen and Cocky had thought she could pull off platinum blonde – but it was now straight instead of curly, and long enough to be pulled into a thick topknot behind her head. The colour of her skin she'd never tinkered with, a pleasant southern tan that could be from anywhere south of the Waning Woods, but where other women might paint rouge over their lips Cocky had simply turned her own the same shade of purple as her eyes. It was one of her more striking appearances, Indrani admitted, if far from one of her wildest.

"I'm here on behalf of the Black Queen," Archer replied. "You fucked up, Cocky, and you were even sloppy enough to leave a trail. So now I've got questions and you've got answers."

Indrani let her smile harden a bit.

"It's up to you how polite my getting those is going to be," Archer said.

"She's no queen of mine," Cocky said, rolling her eyes. "My terms were reached with the Grand Alliance. If you want to ask me questions, come back tomorrow after making an –"

Indrani kept it measured: a light jab in the throat had her choking, but it wouldn't do lasting harm. The Concocter stumbled backwards and Archer elbowed the door aside, her old acquaintance tripping all over her grey robes as she tried to retreat. Wasn't this familiar too? Indrani felt a surge of grim amusement pass through her. When she'd been young and fresh off bondage, fresh into the Lady's care, she'd once done something much like this. Only instead she'd beaten the Concocter for the purpose of

ransacking her stores of anything Indrani might fancy without any need to do something like *trading*.

Cocky had taken it when it happened, she didn't have much of a choice, but then that same night Beastmaster and the Silver Huntress had jumped Indrani in her cot and savagely beaten her within an inch of her life before returning the goods to the Concocter. They'd got paid with manticore bait and sedative for Lysander and a full set of tailored physical supplement potions for Alexis, both of which were near impossible to get from anyone else.

The Lady had said not a word, no more than she had done when Indrani robbed the Concocter. The Ranger did not play favourites.

"You've got ties with smugglers," Indrani said. "We've got proof, so you have not a damned thing to hide behind."

Cocky, one hand clutching her throat, backpedalled deeper into her rooms. Where Masego's were the amalgam of a workshop, library and bedchamber as conceived of by somehow who genuinely saw little difference between the three, these were openly a potioneer's brewing room with a small nook to sleep in. Between the seven cauldrons, the several cabinets of ingredients and the lines crisscrossing the room with herbs hung on to dry, it was a miracle a writing desk could fit in there, much less the silk panes delimiting the space where Cocky's bed and clothes trunk had been stashed. It was all real candles in here, as magelight might disrupt more delicate brewing, but enough strange humours had seeped into the wax and wick that half the flames seemed to burn in blue or green. Those flickering lights played against the Concocter's face as she tried to reach for a vial of green liquid in a rack, though she froze before she withdrew it.

Indrani's knife at her throat had seen to that.

"None of that, now," Archer said. "I told Cat I could get answers out of you alive, I'll look like a real tart if we have to call up your shade instead."

She paused, meeting purple eyes.

"But the more you try your hand at this the more I'm feeling tartish, get me?"

Cocky scoffed.

"You haven't asked a thing," she said. "You're just looking to hurt something, as usual."

"Tell me about your smuggling friends," Indrani said, taking back the blade.

"Did you think just because you shoved a few hundred people in a box they'd stop wanting things?" the Concocter snorted. "A few flake addicts from the guards were already looking to get their fix in quietly, a few strings were pulled and it got broader and organized. If your mistress had any sense, she'd look away and let it go. No one can live off only what's brought in on inspected supply wagons."

The thing was, Indrani tended to agree. Flake was pretty gentle, as far as alchemical drugs went, and the infamous side-effect of your skin flaking off in chunks when scratched only happened if you'd been taking it regularly for years. Otherwise it was just euphoria in a bottle, which might go a long way towards making daily patrols in this boring grey hell liveable. It was inevitable that people in the Arsenal would want, once in a while, to partake of a little something without it first coming across the desk of the likes of the *First Prince of Procer* in a list. It was healthy, even. Keeping your head down all your life, toeing the line to the letter, it killed something in your soul. On the other hand, she could see where Cat was coming from too: people were smuggling things into the dimensional fortress where all the god-killing weapons and the nasty frontline tricks were being made, and that meant *risks*.

The kind that you just didn't take when it came to Ol' Bones, unless you wanted a city or two to die screaming.

"And when did you get involved with them?" Archer asked.

"Well, Indrani, haven't you become just the most devoted hunting hound I ever did see," Cocky sneered "How does that work, anyway? Throw the Archer a fuck, she brings back a few corpses? I suppose even she can't stomach you for long, if she has to pass you off to the H-"

The Concocter went still as the tip of the longknife hovered a mere hair's breadth away from the surface of her left eye, afraid to even blink. Anger was good, anger was warmth in the blood and something like satisfaction when you finally butchered the thing that'd made it burn in you. But anger wasn't going to get her those answers, so Archer made an effort to master it. It wasn't true, she knew that, and it wasn't like some words from a woman long a stranger would make her doubt it. But to have someone speak in such a vile way of ties that were so important to her almost felt like a sort of defilement.

"You don't really need two of those to keep brewing," Indrani said. "And you don't need either of them to answer my questions. I wouldn't forget that if I were you, Cocky. I certainly haven't."

"You wouldn't," the Concocter said.

Indrani smiled at her, the knife's tip still as the grave.

"You know me better than that," Archer simply said. "If I have to repeat my question, I'll be taking something as recompense."

"Maybe a year ago," Cocky said. "I needed some ingredients that'd get me unwanted attention, they needed the kind of clout that comes from having a Named in your corner. We scratched each other's back, that was it."

It would have had to be something truly unpleasant, Indrani knew, for the Concocter to not have wanted to put it to ink in requisition form. There were very few lines the Grand Alliance was not willing to cross, these days. The desire to survive had lowered the standards of what people were willing to suffer to exist, or even enable. But Archer was not here for Cocky's old tricks, she had greater prey to hunt.

"You introduced the Wicked Enchanter to them," Indrani said. "Why?"

Catherine didn't know Cocky the way Archer did, didn't understand that for a stranger there really weren't a lot of levers that could be used to move a woman like that. So Cat figured that the Bard had found an ally here, but Indrani didn't. The Lady had raised all of them to know better than to make a deal with any entity you didn't know how to kill.

"Because he seemed like a man who'd use the service," Cocky said, rolling her eyes. "And he might have become useful when-"

The longknife flicked down, finely slicing through skin from below the eye to the bottom of the Concocter's cheek. Blood began to bead before the point had returned to hover above the eye, and the other Named swallowed a moan of pain.

"Lie to me again and it'll be the eye," Archer coldly said. "We called up his shade, Cocky, and we dug into things. We know a lot more than you think."

"Fine, it was a favour called in," the Concocter hissed out. "Happy?"

Indrani's face tightened in dismay. Had she really struck a deal with the Bard? Gods, one of the Lady's own? They'd been taught better than that, than to let themselves be made pawns and pieces in the Game of the Gods.

"Whose favour?"

"You know who," Cocky said. "The woman holding your leash might despise her, but half the heroes have a fond word to say."

"The Wandering Bard," Indrani quietly said.

"I heard the Peregrine has her back," the Concocter smiled. "I expect he'll speak for me as well, if you try to press this too far. Did you think you were the only one who could make friends in high places?"

Archer's fingers tightened around the hilt of the longknife.

"You have no idea who you bargained with," she tightly said. "Burning Hells, Cocky, what made you think you could bargain with a creature like that and end up ahead? We were both taught —"

The Concocter let out a burst of laughter, and Indrani had to pull back the blade or she would have pierced her eye.

"Oh, Ashen Gods," Cocky said. "Years out of Refuge, even after taking up with another band of villains, you still clutch to your blanket like a child. That blade you point so proudly at me, it's from the set she gave you isn't it? And that scarf, taken from the man who owned you while she looked on with *motherly fondness*."

"We all hid beneath her wing, before we could fly on our own," Indrani said. "There is no shame to be had there."

"There's always shame in being a fool," the Concocter said. "She wasn't your mother, Indrani. She wasn't any of our mothers, and she was barely even our teacher. She never gave a damn, even about you, and well all knew you were the favourite. The way you'll shatter like cheap glass if you admit that is honestly the most pathetic thing about you."

The urge was there to slice her again. Archer had sliced people for less, and she was being provoked her beyond what anyone could expect her to suffer without steel being bared. But Indrani had not come here to spill blood, she had come here for answers. And if she could not master herself long enough for get what she'd come from, if red heat and pride was all that she could bring forth, then she truly would be pathetic. Just a thug, fit for thug's work and nothing else. And the truth was that while there might have been a time where that would have been enough, when taking and bearing the consequences and doing it again and again and again until she died would have satisfied her, it no longer was. She had a hearth now, a warm place by it, and sometimes that meant bending the neck for a bit. A thirteen the thought of this would have disgusted her to the bone, but she was older now. She had learned what the world was like, when you were alone.

Indrani had come to understand why it was the world had fewer wolves than dogs.

"Gasses were used on the librarians in the Miscellaneous Stacks," Archer said. "They were rendered unconscious but not killed. Your work as well?"

Cocky was, for the first time, visibly taken aback.

"I, but – I didn't use those," the Concocter said. "They were a private commission from the Highest Assembly and the First Prince, a way to quell riots without deaths. But I only made a single batch, and it should be in the Repository awaiting shipment. I haven't *attacked* anyone, Archer."

She wasn't lying, Indrani decided. Not because of any particular fondness for the Concocter, but because she very much doubted that Cocky had dragged the potions and set them off in the Stacks. She wouldn't have the know-how for something that complex, much less the sneaking skills. Which meant there was at least one other traitor out there, acting knowingly on behalf of the Bard. And it'd been a traitor who'd known about a private commission being kept in the Repository, so most likely someone who worked in the Workshop and would have known about Cocky brewing something meant to ship out.

"I believe you," Archer admitted. "And will speak to that, along with the rest."

Something like surprise, and perhaps even gratitude, flickered across Cocky's face. Indrani, without wasting a moment, flipped her grip and struck her right in the fucking face with her longknife's handle. The Concocter's nose broke with a beautiful crunch, cartilage smashed and blood spraying. Archer's loosened her grip, after, and flicked her wrist as if she was shaking her knuckles.

"Consider that a reminder," Indrani said, "of lessons you should not have forgot."

And with that their business was done, she mused. If there was need for the location of the Repository crates raided for the gas receptacles, someone could be sent for ask. Besides, it was quite possible that the Concocter herself did not know. The other woman had reeled back from the blow, shouting in pain and holding her broken nose, but after her fingers came away red she turned to Indrani with cold eyes. Cocky smiled, that one nasty little number she only pulled out when she had something cutting to spit out in someone's ear.

"And there she is," the purple-eyed woman said. "Our old *friend* Indrani, bare of the pretences. It's a relief to see you acting without those airs you've been putting on. Still looking to just make someone bleed and then hiding behind another's cloak when consequences come."

That stung, more than it should have after the years that'd passed since she left Refuge.

"I'm not the one who's hiding behind the Terms," Indrani replied. "Or you'd be bleeding from a lot deeper in for some of the things you've said tonight, Cocky."

"Whatever happened to rules only mattering to other people, Archer?" the Concocter slyly said. "I thought you were going to be freed, unfettered. Nothing but you and the horizon, right?"

"Which of us is supposed to be clutching the Lady like a blanket again?" Indrani jeered. "Did it wound your precious little pride when she left, Cocky? Did it bite to realize that even with all your little potions and secrets in the end you just weren't that *special*?"

"Even now you're licking her boots," the Concocter said, tone disgusted.

"I always knew what she was," Indrani replied. "Who she was. She told us from the start. It's your own delusions that scraped you raw."

"Knew what she was?" Cocky shouted. "You sanctimonious bitch, you signed up with the first outfit that took you in. We stayed, Indrani, we stayed and she *left*. All these years with her, for her, and almost without a word she just left. Because we were pets to her, Archer, not people. And when you find something more interesting to do, pets get left behind."

"Whining," Indrani replied, contemptuous. "The pathetic whining of someone who was unwilling to stand on their feet and find their way outside the shelter of the Lady's shadow. You were given years as a pupil, teachings half the continent would lose a hand for, and now you complain because she was not willing to hold your hand until you breathed your last."

The Concocter snorted.

"Look at you, talking proudly like you didn't just trade one mistress for another," she mocked. "You think it makes you someone, that some girl with a crown found you fit to kill for her? You're still fetching errands for one of your betters, now you just have some fancy seal behind you instead of Ranger's reputation."

There was anger there, Indrani found, but any fool could have found that. The old hate was familiar too, in its own way, but it was the unfamiliar glint that caught Archer by surprise. Envy. And just like that, it fell into place.

"It burns you, doesn't it?" Archer said. "That I'm actually *happy* now."

The Concocter hadn't even flinched this hard when she'd broken the woman's nose.

"I wonder if they'd look at you the same, your Woe, if I told them what you're really like," Cocky said.

"They know," Indrani replied. "They've known from the start, and they love me anyway. That's the part that really burns you, isn't it?"

"You were *vile* to us," the Concocter snarled. "To everyone, any time you could get away with it. You taunted and bruised and bled us for sport, and now you're the Black Queen's enforcer?"

"We were all like that, Cocky," Indrani said. "And I don't miss it, but the lessons of those days kept me alive through worse ones."

"I still remember that night you forced Alexis into that sack full of beetles and tied it up," the purple-eyed villainess said. "Gods, the way she screamed. And the Lady just said-"

"That's one way to cure a fear," Indrani softly finished.

Casually, she'd said it. Almost amused. There'd been a time where Archer had admired that, thought that callousness was something to be cultivated instead of exactly what it claimed to be: callouses. Roughness born of use, the easiest thing in the world to accrue.

"No wonder she still wants to kill you," Cocky said. "One look at you with your Hierophant and your little queen and she will draw a fucking blade, Archer."

If she bent her neck now, Indrani thought, there might yet be something to repair here. Because they'd all hated each other at times, the Concocter was right about that, but it'd also been more complicated than that. Because it'd been them and then everyone else, and that wasn't a place you could live in for years without loving the people you shared it with. There had been warm lights shared along with the dark places. But Indrani would have to apologize. To express regret. To *lie*. Because the truth of it was that Archer didn't particularly regret who she'd been at thirteen. She'd make no excuses for that girl either, but Indrani could look that past in the eye without feeling all that ashamed.

Sometimes she figured that Catherine believed her to be, when they talked of Refuge. But Hells, Cat had always taken them as better people than they were. Sometimes Indrani felt a little bit of shame over that, not being the better person her friend thought she was, but those claws never dug deep. Mostly because Archer actually liked who she was, for the most part. She was

comfortable with it, she'd *grown* comfortable with it. And that meant if the things she cared about changed in ways she might never have imaged they would when she'd been a girl, it didn't trouble her. Indrani believed in doing what she wanted, most of all, and sometimes that could be a little more complicated than just enjoying what was happening at hand.

"Refuge is dead," Archer said, "bury it, Cocky, and move on. I have."

"You don't get it, do you?" the Concocter laughed, and it was a bleak sound. "You think it's about your having found a good backer or a bedmate, or even just a place in the world. That we hate the way you thrive."

"Isn't it?" Indrani asked.

"It's the way you laugh with them, Indrani," Cocky quietly said. "The way there's no prick to the barbs. Because you love them and they love you."

Hand whipping around she viciously threw down a rack of empty vials, glass shattering over the floor, and there was a hate on her face that was like pondwater gone still and festering.

"We would have loved you too, if you'd let us," the Concocter said. "If you'd given us what you give them. But you never did. What is it that makes them so much *better*, Archer, so much more *deserving*?"

"I never had to fight them," Indrani honestly said.

They'd never been competition, the way the others had been in Refuge. There'd been jostling, growing pains, but never anything with *bite* to it. It'd been a hearth opened to her, not other wolves to fight for the same scraps.

"That's the thing, Archer," the Concocter tiredly said. "You never *had* to fight us either."

That, more than any other thing she had heard that night, gave Indrani pause. It had the unpleasant ring of truth to it. The other woman drew in on herself, bloody and somehow looking exhausted.

"Go," she said. "I have to brew myself something to fix the nose and I've seen enough of you for two lifetimes."

Indrani replied with a jerky nod, wiping her blade clean on her coat before sheathing it and abruptly turning. It felt like fleeing when she left the room, no matter how much she told herself otherwise. The door closed shut behind her and Archer let out a shallow breath. She, too, felt oddly exhausted. Leaning

against the wall for a bit, she wondered if would truly leave it all at that. There were more pressing things to see to, and she needed to find Cat and pass along the answers, but somehow she thought that if she left now that conversation would be over for good. Could she live with that? Did she *want* to? Lips twisting, she raised a hesitant hand towards the handle.

The Arsenal shivered.

Indrani's hair rose up all over her body, the sensation of coming danger acute, and the hand went down. There was never enough time, was there? It was something you had to learn to live with, the give and take of how you were willing to spend yourself. The door was slammed open and Cocky peered out, some sort of dark poultice shining on her cheek. She caught sight of Archer a moment later.

"What was that?" she asked.

The Arsenal shivered again, like door being pounded on.

"Trouble come a 'knocking," Indrani drawled.

She cocked her head to the side, studying the other villainess.

"*What?*" the Concocter said, sounding irritated.

"You're going to end up on a lot of powerful people's shit list your role in this, Cat not the least of them," Archer said.

"And?" Cocky replied, unimpressed by the prediction.

"How would you like to get a head start," Indrani said, "on earning your way out of those?"

They locked gazes, hazelnut to purple, and a long moment passed. The Concocter dipped her head the slightest bit.

"I still have a field bag," Cocky said. "Give me a moment to grab it."

It wasn't much, Indrani thought. Barely anything at all. But it was something, and if she'd learned anything since she'd stumbled across the two most important people of her life in Marchford all those years ago, it was this: people who didn't plant seeds never got to grow trees.

—

Indrani wasn't surprised the Arsenal's wards eventually broke, even though Cocky expressed her disbelief what must have been a least three different times. It didn't matter how tall the walls were or how thick the gates when there were traitors behind both. The breach had taken place in a set of hallways between the

Belfry and the Workshop, so the two of them had been close, but by the time they got there the battle had moved on. An utterly smashed workshop that'd once belonged to the Blind Maker now boasted mostly broken wood and corpses, though fresh guards had come in since what must have been the first slaughter. Archer found an officer and got asking question, Cocky lingering behind her and not bothering to offer potions to the few wounded still around. Indrani approved.

The brews she carried that'd help were expensive, and best kept for more urgent situations.

"We were crushed, Lady Archer," the Levantine captain in charge told her. "We would have all been slain if the Mirror Knight and his allies did not intervene."

"Who did the crushing?" Indrani asked.

"Fae," the captain said. "They were not many, less than thirty, but their power... it was like nothing I've ever seen."

If the Courts ever remembered the Dominion of Levant's existence it was no doubt to even more promptly forget about it, so that didn't mean much. There was no point in asking the mustachioed man if it was a princess or a count they were dealing with, it wasn't like the fairies went around announcing their titles to human rank and file.

"Mirror Boy and his band drew them away?" Indrani pressed.

"Some but not all," the captain said. "A band left the rest, heading for Belfry. And there are some among my men who say it was not the Mirror Knight that had the fae moving."

"Meaning?" Archer frowned.

"They might have been looking for someone, and that is why they let themselves be drawn towards the Repository," the captain said. "But it was battle, Lady Archer, and that makes for poor recall and wild truths."

"Thank you, captain," Indrani muttered, and the man saluted.

Cocky leaned in closer.

"The Repository is where they've been stashing that sword," she quietly said.

"Adjutant's with Looking Glass and his buddies," Indrani replied. "He'll keep them pointed at the enemy, and the enemy out of the good stuff. We're headed for the Belfry."

The Concocter's brow rose.

"Worried about your," and there she hesitated, "... lover?"

"Partner," Archer said. "No, he can look after himself just fine. But he keeps some nifty stuff in his rooms, and I don't think it's a coincidence that fae headed that way."

"We'll be too late to do much, considering the fae left some time ago," Cocky pointed out.

"We're late as first line of defence, sure," Indrani shrugged. "But we're headed out as reinforcements, and for that we're just fine."

Because a running battle against fae in the middle of the Belfry had trouble written all over it, which mean Cat would be drawn there like a moth to the flame. Probably half drunk and halfway through a terrible plan that'd somehow end up working, Indrani fondly thought, or at least close enough to working that she could pretend it'd achieved what she'd meant it to. They set out quickly, because fashionably later got results but actual late was just being sloppy. The gates into the great tower of the Belfry were wide open, but wariness wasn't why Indrani's steps stuttered. The very stone of the floor had been charred, almost turned to glass in that distinctive way that blackflame did. But this was too much, she thought, and not wielded well. Even just the shape of the burn...

She strode forward, heedless of the possibility of ambush and even the sound of fighting far above. The Night had, by the marks on the floor and the slight inclined of melted stone, billowed outwards in an explosion. But at the centre of where that explosion had begun, Archer could see a charred corpse with a knife stuck in its neck. She knew that blade, had seen it used before. *No*, Indrani told herself. *It can't be her. She wouldn't have died from a knife.* Cat might not be able to pull the regeneration tricks the drow could, or even heal with Night, but she could have kept herself from bleeding out long enough to kill the Fallen Monk and gotten to a healer. Indrani chose to ignore the treacherous whisper in the back of her mind about Night being able to hurt Catherine, when she did not properly control it.

"Cocky," Archer said, voice steady. "I need you to have a look at that corpse."

The other woman grimaced.

"Archer, that's probably..."

"If it is, I want to know for sure," Archer said. "Cut the body if you have to."

The Concocter slowly nodded.

"And you?"

Indrani reached for the bow on her back, fingers itching for an arrow, and looked up at the spire where the sounds of a fight were echoing from.

"I'm going to make someone bleed," the Archer said, and her voice rang of steel.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Whining," Indrani replied, contemptuous. "The pathetic whining of someone who was unwilling to stand on their feet and vote for Practical Guide to Evil on Topwebfiction. You were given a great story, plots half the continent would lose a hand for, and now you complain because you'll keep getting more prompts until you read your last."

topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil

Insanenoodlyguy

... and then I add in a letter and fuck up the link!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Entrerist

What happened is Cat killed the monk with black flame, she healed with Night. Probably by praying to the crows, then put the knife in the monks neck so any Fae who looked will think she is dead and be surprised later.

Shveiran

I really liked this one

[Liliet](#)

(Yet again, cheapening a strong emotional moment)

(Can't you just pick the funny bits to use for this?)

ThatOneGuy

One body and nobody there to patch it together. That or we see the next trick or Cat coming back from the grave as she was short a death for this book... And you can not really come back easily if the king of the dead does the deed or murder.

Oh sure he can raise you, but the bindings are a bit tricky to get out of.

Miles

I'm sure we'll have one of them too. She's been through the revolving door so many times now it's part of her role and likely new Name too.

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, even if the corpse isn't Cat, this feels like it's going to get incredibly messy before the end. Either way, Cat would have had to pull heavily on some eldritch forces, and there are always consequences to that. She'd probably avoid apotheosis a second time, and that severely limits the favorable outcomes.

Ross

We've seen that she has the ability to carry bodies in the Night. So she probably released that explosion of Night flame, swapped in a body, and slinked away before the flames went down.

Shveiran

This.

Really people, Cat put together a band of betrayers she knew would likely stab her given the chance, and she did so for the express purpose to draw them out.

She is a Mastermind whose plan has not really been ruined in any meaningful way; she was aware of the Fallen Monk's skills at least in a general way, and the methos he supposedly "did her in" with is not more complicated than "unexpected knife".

Isn't it a given she had an answer ready?

I will believe this killed Catherine Foundling only if it is confirmed in this Book's Epilogue.

Shveiran

Unless of course dying was somehow part of the plan, though I doubt that. She isn't the Squire anymore.

[Liliet](#)

...I'm not sure that's an obstacle.

Shveiran

Not an obstacle. A risk.

Dying as part of the plan means if the plan backfires

you are still dead; it's all or nothing, putting all your eggs in one basket.
SquireCat did this daily, FUNCat plays it as safe as reasonably possible; and this is not an instance where dying has to be a part of the plan.

Shikkarasu

I find your lack of Faith disturbing.

[Liliet](#)

True!

Ninestrings

Calling it now, Cat returned the knife to our monk friend with interest.

If that's the case has Cat come into her name and developed fire powers? or did a third party torch him?

[Burlyraven](#)

A third party like a certain fire adept that's been stowed away in the Night for some time now, albeit presumably dead twice over?

Only half meming on this one.

Cicero

Too much evidence. I'll believe Cat is dead when a thousand years have passed and she hasn't reappeared.

dadycoool

Only a thousand? Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return, is still feared 700 years later.

raven

lol, reminds me of the ciaphas cain novels.

the main protag in those books got reported KIA so many times that his superiors just gave up keeping track and still have him listed on active duty 20 years after his official state funeral.

[Liliet](#)

Was he alive?

[Liliet](#)

After these 20 years, I mean?

Composaurus

(not OP) I don't believe so but the author started writing books again after an 8 year hiatus and it wouldn't be out of character for him to make a 'surprise' return. The books are written out of order though so future books might just be set before he died.

Insanenoodlyguy

oh he started writing Cain again? Or just started writing? Either way glad to hear it!

ThatOneGuy

The hero of the imperium was one of the few characters who made it past the date when 40k had originally stopped so... Possibly. We have yet to get another book, but nobody would be surprised if the ship he was on before being declared dead simply popped out of the warp a bit late.

[Liliet](#)

b e a u t i f u l

LarsBlitzer

Honestly, I wouldn't put it past GW to make that happen, then have the Custodes finally mount a text-to-speech module on a certain corpse on a throne...

But yes, IF Cat was killed before she could return the favor to the Monk, and IF she passed out before being able to call on Night, and IF there was interference in doing so, well, that's an awful lot of "if."

Zahariel

No, he was very much dead. Of old age. Which, by itself, was incredibly suspicious in its own right, considering the life he lived and the universe he lived in.

[Liliet](#)

BEAUTIFUL

ethan B

nah he's dead dead.

the Administratum refused to mark him as dead because it was cheaper to continue paying his salary after his funeral. but one of the points is even dead he inspired so many

people as the hero of the imperium that he could still be considered as in service from beyond the grave

[Liliet](#)

> the Administratum refused to mark him as dead because it was cheaper to continue paying his salary after his funeral.

Wait, wait, cheaper than what? I gotta hear this one!

[TeK](#)

Got a really good deal on life insurance, I imagine

Insanenoodlyguy

Bureaucracy. He became such a hero that every time he "died" it started to cost a small fortune to put the word out far and wide only to then need to retract everything with a correction. The administratum always struggled to keep up with the paperwork and finally decided on a "Screw it, we don't change his status. He's alive and on active duty, period."

[Liliet](#)

This is so beautiful...

Insanenoodlyguy

Mind you, it's not like it was always "Oh we can't find him after this fight, well, he must be dead!" it was "When last we heard from the ship, it was on fire, taking more fire, falling into the atmosphere, and the ship left a crater in the ground with no pods having been fired... I think... I think he's gone."

Then a few months later he not only shows up and he literally stumbled into the demoiic cultists who were using the orc invasion as a distraction to fulfill their own plots, ruined their day, and created a strategic opening in the orc horde while bringing back invaluable intel on their movements. Meanwhile, inside his brain it's like this.

[Javvies](#)

Hang on.

Do you have an actual source/citation for that?

Because if you don't, I'm gonna have to call BS on the "it cost too much money" theory.

This is 40k. The Administratum and the Imperium is so vast that it is common for planets to be lost. The cost associated with decorating him dead and then needing to correct then declare him alive again would have been lost in a single rounding error in Imperial budgets.

No, without a source for the monetary concern, I'm pretty sure it's because they didn't like needing to go back into their records and correct them again and again after he was declared dead. After all, if you keep him listed as alive, you never need to worry about him popping up alive and complaining about being called dead and needing to reactivate his codes and clearances.

Remember, the record keepers don't like needing to change their records to account for things not in their reports.

Insanenoodlyguy

I did also refer to the time and reasources spent. I agree any cost in crowns would be more of a "this is a ridiculous waste of money and it's making our department look bad" more than "we can't afford this." I agree that the real cost was time spent changing all the goddamn paperwork AGAIN.

Javvies

The books aren't in chronological order.

Well, each set of three (1-3, 4-6, e.t.c) is in chronological order relative to one another, as there are related aspects in a super-arc, so to speak, but each book is a standalone, and set widely apart in time. He did, after all, serve as a Commissar for over a century, plus retire to spend time as an instructor at a Schola Progenium, only to be recalled to active service multiple times.

That said, I suspect that he actually does end up dead for reals at some point, as he did get a formal state funeral, and his Inquisitor girlfriend thinks he's dead.

In fact, the books are set as his personal recollections recorded subsequent to publishing some of his memoirs, and recorded over the course of years of his retirement, not the memoir he'd published, as he wrote them, out of chronological order and no organisational process that could be determined, found on a data slate and curated and annotated by said Inquisitor girlfriend after his death for limited and classified distribution to some of her Inquisitor colleagues.

However, since early on in his career he had been declared dead only to be discovered to be alive repeatedly ... it was eventually ordered that all reports of his death were to be ignored, and the Munitorium isn't allowed to declare him dead or list him as dead on their records.

And, in one campaign, very early in his career, as described in ... book 4, chronologically the first of the full length novels, though some of the short stories are placed earlier, he got declared dead when the troop transport he was on got attacked and the section he was in was opened to vacuum, with witnesses to him not getting on the right side of the emergency bulkheads before they closed, only to turn up a few weeks later in an escape pod in orbit of the planet they were heading to, only to be attacked and seemingly shot and crashed down into enemy held territory by an Ork fighter, only to turn up a few months later at the head of an army collected and formed behind enemy lines ... and said army had been thought to be cornered and completely destroyed by the Orks based on satellite surveillance, though at the time I don't think they knew he was in charge of it.

As for what actually killed/will kill him in the end ... I don't think that's ever actually been mentioned, but we know that he had at least a century of active service, plus an indeterminate amount of retirement, though we also know that he had gotten rejuve treatments at least once. So it could be old age, though with known rejuve treatments that's questionable, even discounting that it's Warhammer 40k.

Insanenoodlyguy

The implication was he was actually dead, but he'd been certainly dead so many times the policy stuck, body in a casket or no.

Cain's whole deal is being a combo of Abigail and Bumbling Conjuror. He's got legitimate talent and ability, but his accidentally stumbling into things (he's repeatedly tried to go "Fuck no, I'm out" only to wander into the REAL plot in the process of trying to flee) makes him look like an unparalleled genius. He's got perfectly normal and sensible policies and leadership style, but in a world where religious fanaticism and martyrdom is encouraged he is seen as a father to his men, hard but fair and always doing what he can to bring his boys home. That, the aforementioned # of times he wandered home after being declared dead, and a state propaganda machine make him a God-touched living legend (note the man in comparison to his action figure) nobody would dare count out anymore.

Insanenoodlyguy

Whoop, had a relevant picture for the part in parenthesis

THE SUBSECTOR IS IN DANGER,
AND THERE'S ONLY ONE MAN WITH A
CHAINSAWORD BIG ENOUGH TO SAVE IT...

The Hero of the Imperium Ciaphas Cain

AND NOW YOU CAN TOO, WITH YOUR VERY OWN
OFFICIAL COMMISSAR CIPHAS CAIN

Action Figure

Only
29⁹⁹
Thrones

THE COMMISSAR, THE HERO, THE LEGEND.
Slay xenos filth, purge heretics, and
bolster morale with six points of
articulation and interchangeable bolt pistol
and viscerator chain sword! The pull ring
on his back unleashes his most devastating
taunts and heroic catch phrases, straight
from the mouth of the real Ciaphas Cain!
Collect the Ciaphas Cain Action Team to
relive all of his greatest victories!"

*Real bolovoid actor that portrayed Ciaphas Cain.
**Must verify age to remove clothing of Ciaphas Cain and
Lady Fearness Doll figures.
Summary operation pack sold separately.

www.EagleOrdinary.com

Javvies

That image is hilarious.

Actually, I think Ciaphas Cain is more like a cross between Abigail and the Fortunate Fool, rather than the Bumbling Conjurer. Only luckier.

Or, well, no, not really any of the luck based Hero types we've seen. He and Abigail are a lot closer than anything else.

Because the luck Heroes also tend to be comic relief characters, even to their fellows, and while we readers

sometimes laugh, in-universe, he's broadly revered by his fellow subjects of the God-Emperor.

Also, because he's actually quite competent when he's not trying to dodge any semblance of responsibility or danger. And, hell, he's not reliant on luck-based plot armor in combat the way Bumbling Conjuror was.

He is actually good in a fight without needing to slip and fall to dodge attacks. He'd take cover like a sensible fellow, and is actually insanely good with his chainsword – like, good enough that if that were his only thing, he'd have a Name based on it in the Guideverse.

Basically, the only thing he's not good at is dodging dangerous situations.

[Liliet](#)

Protagonist luck!

dadycoool

Well, shit. That's my reaction to each part of this chapter. Backstory for Archer! Yay! At least we know Cat isn't interested in surrounding herself with Good people, just people who know restraint. And for all that Archer was aloof when they first met, she did fit in rather seamlessly.

Welp, looks like Archer is about to cut loose for the first time in a while. If anyone hurts one of her people, a lot of people pay the price. And it looks to her and us like someone managed to kill Cat. I don't imagine even DK could find anything useful left over from the aftermath of what's about to happen.

IDKWhoitis

I'm willing to bet it's a fae corpse or something. And Cat is still probably very wounded. Because it wouldn't be a proper Foundling gambit if Cat isn't crippled and dying as the set up for the show down (which would probably include words with the Bard).

dadycoool

Oh, yeah. She doesn't consider things going according to her plan unless she's bleeding on the floor, unable to pick up a weapon, and gargling on her own blood. Fortunately, this doesn't extend to her underlings, because somehow she considers herself more expendable than even a single legionnaire.

[Liliet](#)

Hey, a single legionary she doesn't feel THAT bad about. It's when it's someone she personally cares for that she gets

upset, and when it's a whole fucking company that she gets guilty.

D00d

Archer recognized the knife so the corpse is the Monk with Cat's sleeve knife in his throat.

Wait, wasn't he part of her band ?

Well played EE.

[Liliet](#)

She realized Monk was there so it's Monk's knife, whoever's the body is.

Shveiran

This is, if anything, evidence that it is the Monk's body.

If Archer recognizes the dagger, it's likely a favored tool like her own swords. So if FM killed Cat, why would he leave the dagger in the body?

Whereas if Cat killed the Monk with his own knife because fuck him, she'd not care to retrieve it.

[Liliet](#)

Well if FM killed Cat then IMMEDIATELY got vaporized by Nightsplosion...

Shveiran

...which somehow vaporized his clothing and items, but not the dagger?

It's possible, granted, but...

[Liliet](#)

The dagger's stuck in Cat, who is the origin point of the explosion and something of an eye of the storm.

...actually I'd expect it to not affect her at all in that case... HMMMM 😊

[numberlen](#)

If Cat is to be a rival to the bard, then death won't even be an obstacle.

Assuming of course that is indeed her corpse.

Frivolous

Interesting that Indrani, who was protective of Masego during Kairos's Last Stand, doesn't consider him endangered enough to be needing her this time. Has he grown so powerful in the 2-year interval?

Also, Indrani was a sadistic bully in her younger years. Nasty. And she still feels little or no remorse, which is very interesting.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, she's still going to where he might be. It's just not the main reason.

> Also, Indrani was a sadistic bully in her younger years. Nasty. And she still feels little or no remorse, which is very interesting.

From what she told Cat, she very much agrees with the "nasty" epithet.

She just thought there wasn't any other way, both back then and uh, up until now. She blamed Hye for all of it, but now she's realizing it's within her power to fix it, and was within her power back then too, she just didn't realize it.

Because she came in from the wild, and Hye did not see anything wrong with her being a biting, scared mess =x

Oshi

Hye doesn't teach anything except survival. Indrani was raised a slave. Morality and self worth/love were not in her vocabulary.

[Liliet](#)

Fun fact I realized upon rereading the chapter!

Indrani's understanding was that if she didn't hurt others she would have gotten hurt in that way herself.

This is the condition upon which she:

- tells Cat about how fucked up it was;
- considers 'bending her neck' to Silver Huntress just for the sake of mending the relationship;
- muses about how she's not ashamed of being that person [who would rather hurt others-her-family than get hurt herself] [notably implying that has changed] but Cat probably expects her to be the kind of person who is.

Like, is it just me, or like, wow?

Zach

But I think she is starting to feel remorse, or at least regret. She recognized that there was some truth to what

Concocter said about her being unwilling to even try treating them like a family (which they basically are, regardless of Ranger's distorted upbringing).

[Liliet](#)

Indrani had been assuming that her only choices were being the one doing the hurting or the one being hurt.

Concocter's words... pusher her further along the path to the realization that no, it was just her and the demons in her head, nobody else was playing that game.

The reason she "didn't regret who she'd been at thirteen" was because she parsed "who she'd been at thirteen" as "a person who would rather push the hurt on others than take it herself". Not as "a person who swung at shadows and didn't see what was really going on around her".

superkeaton

Nice to see Archer realize she spent her youth being a wretched bully and that her mentor never really cared about any of them. This is good character growth. Concocter seems like a deeply unpleasant miser carrying a lot of loneliness.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani already knew Hye didn't care and that she spent her youth being a wretched bully. She told Cat as much, at Camps.

No, the realization is similar to Akua's – that there was another way. That she COULD have done better.

RoflCat

And that the current Archer can do, well, at least try, it now.

She probably won't ever be fond of Cocky the same way as those two.

Assuming Cocky doesn't end up dead because she's learned the danger of being used by Bard and thus no longer a usable pawn.

Because that's likely one way Bard kept her reputation so 'clean' all these time: Bury any villains she used and tell it off as heroic trickery.

Heroes? Maybe if they stop being a blind savant, but most don't so eh.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

I can't wait for the spectacle that will be Archer 'bending her neck' to the Silver Huntress. Because I think Cocky's words crossed the threshold on which Archer was already considering doing that, and no matter what it ends up being, it'll be a spectacle to *me*. Somehow I trust erratic with pulling off "a bully apologizing" in a satisfactory way.

Here's hope it'll happen onscreen,,,

Oshi

I'm not sure it will but then I still think Indrani might die before all this is over. If it does happen on screen though I think the possibility will become a surety.

[Liliet](#)

We'll just see who's right ~~you evil jinx~~

Jurai

We're gonna see Masego go full blown ballistic if that happens

Zach

I think there's a difference between Indrani saying she realizes Ranger doesn't care and her really accepting that. It's obvious that she views Ranger as a parental figure (like Concocter points out, she still uses the knives and scarf Ranger gave her), and the stuff about her knowing Ranger doesn't care is mostly her being in denial to avoid actually confronting those feelings and what they imply about Ranger as a person.

She's also probably less willing than the other Refuge people to think poorly of Ranger because of how Ranger "rescued" her from slavery. Even if Ranger is emotionally and physically abusive towards her, she feels like she can't condemn her for it, because she owes her. So she has to rationalize things in such a way that Ranger isn't doing anything wrong (which involves internalizing Ranger's whole "might is right" philosophy).

[TeK](#)

Yeah, really hard to argue against inherently harmful philosophy when it was the only one that saved you.

Kinda goes along with the theme of the series. Like Cat said to Pilgrim, she knows they are monsters, but when she was growing up, Praes was the only game in town, and she chose the best option available.

This is how cults operate, really. When you are desperate, you can make some bad choices that you know are bad, because the alternative is even worse.

Or another example from the series. "Summoning demons is objectively the worst thing a person can do, but it feels much better than death"

[Liliet](#)

I think Indrani WAS in denial back in Refuge, but when she talks to Cat about those things in Book 4... well, Cat talks right over that denial. "It's okay to still love her" etc. And Indrani specifically told Cat she stayed with her instead of going back because Refuge wasn't home.

Wait, what were we disagreeing on?

[Liliet](#)

Oh wow.

Indrani vs old memories... and then STILL A FUCKING CLIFFHANGER

'cause Indrani's logic is my logic, this doesn't make sense (also, y'know, Cat's the protagonist) but I don't think we'll get a fakeout of 'oh yeah it's the Monk's body'?
WHAT IS GOING ON

Oshi

Cat's dead. Just need to see if it sticks this time. I'm kind of sad EE is going back to this well but then what can yah do.

Shveiran

She isn't, come on. I give this author a lot more street cred than this.

Juff

Typo Thread:

lingering potion (should reword one of the lingerings in this sentence)

"Funny," the > "Funny." The delimiting the (extra space)

see," Cocky > see." Cocky

back," the > back." The

well all > we all

provoked her beyond > provoked here beyond

for get what > to forget what

A thirteen > At thirteen

sent for ask > sent to ask
warm lights (should this be nights?)
imaged > imagined
said, "bury > said. "Bury
you?" the > you?" The
if would truly > if she could truly
like door > like a door
list your > list for your
asking question > asking questions
your," and there she hesitated, > your"—and there she hesitated—"sure," Indrani > sure." Indrani

laguz24

I really want to see how MK handles Archer and her complete lack of respect, oh it will be glorious. Also, it's nice to see what those years with cat did for her.

[Liliet](#)

Mirror Knight is extremely elsewhere. Archer's going to back up Adanna and Roland.

RoflCat

.....Wait.

Rogue
Artificer
Archer
Concocter
And likely Hierophant

They'd have their own Band of Five up there.

Roland being a Lancer-turned-Leader the Voltron way.
Artificer the rebellious Lancer who just got her 'oh shit I was dumb' moment.
Hierophant likely taking the Big Guy spot in this fight given his Name being good against Fae.
Archer probably take both Smart Guy and Heart in role since she's likely the only one who can translate for Masego right now.
Concocter? The tag-along kid for now.

Agent J

I dunno. Concocter did pretty well as the Heart in this chapter. Gods know it wasn't Archer.

RoflCat

The Heart role is for the band as a whole, which on the assumption Masego will be the 5th member makes it rather impossible for anyone but Archer to do so.

If anything this chapter's 'redemption' moment of Archer let her qualify as the Heart for this team.
She's already a friend to Roland.
Communicating with Masego outside of research topic is a lost cause for most people.
She just reopen the path to being a friend to Concocter.
She's definitely not going to like Artificer for a while which is fine given that Artificer is basically Zuko during the turning period right now, and Archer's a little more tolerant after Akua and Concocter here.

[Liliet](#)

Tbf Masego's got some Heart talents of his own.

Sun Dog

Zeze has the heart of an angel. It's in a jar somewhere.

nick012000

Wait, was there a Band of Five among the Ranger's pupils? Archer, Beastmaster, Concocter, Hunter, and Silver Huntress?

[Liliet](#)

I think it was mentioned at some point there were five total. Kind of weird, felt to me like there should have been more, but there we have it.

laguz24

There was no story for them to be a band of five and the hero/villain/neutral divide plus ranger's teachings would have kept them all mostly semi hating each other.

[Liliet](#)

No story, yeah.

Hero/villain/neutral divide doesn't seem like much of an obstacle IF there was a story to put them together in the first place.

And it sounds like there was a chance for them to band together, Hye was egging them on when they fought but not MAKING them fight.

Do I want Indrani to recover these relationships? Yes. Very. Very very.

nick012000

Maybe Ranger intended to have them as a backup in case something managed to kill her – five students whose teacher tragically dies, forcing them to unite and work together to survive the attacks of the minions of the Evil Overlord who killed her, and ultimately avenging her death.

[Liliet](#)

A backup for what? Hye doesn't have any goals outside the personal. There's nothing for them to complete in her absence, cause she doesn't care what happens in her absence.

She just found it entertaining to train students, after Amadeus. For a while anyway.

[TeK](#)

I could've sworn it was mentioned that there was more than five. But it is beyond me to actually search.

[Liliet](#)

I presume there was also non-Named population.

[TeK](#)

"I could go to Refuge," Archer offered. "Most pupils will be gone, especially the heroes – last I heard Silver signed up with the White Knight – but there's bound to be one or two left I can beat into joining. Lady Ranger probably won't care enough to get involved."

Heroes implies more than one and Hunter is dead, so it's Silver plus one.

"Beastmaster might qualify with the right mount, but he's not a pushover I can bully and he doesn't really give a shit about anything going on outside the Waning Woods. Also tends to disappear for months at a time, so he might not be there at all. Concocter's the only one I can be sure will be there, but her thing is potions and she uses ingredients from the woods for most her brews."

But admittedly the ground are pretty thin and those that are Named in chapter are the only ones to have a consistent appearance.

[Liliet](#)

> Most pupils will be gone, especially the heroes – last I heard Silver signed up with the White Knight – but there's bound to be one or two left I can beat into joining.

Yup, this is from where I got the impression there were more than five! If 'one or two' is the minority compared to 'most' who left, and not even the whole minority but the part of it Indrani can beat into joining...

agumentic

So, whose Interlude we are going to see on Friday, do you think? Kingfisher Prince? Mirror Knight? Someone else?

[Dresden 67](#)

Probably one of those two, yeah.

Maybe Adjutant or the Repentant Magister.

ruduen

My money's on Hierophant.

M0och123

Mine is on Adjutant

Dan Lawrence

Adjutant or Hierophant probably.

Agent J

I desperately want a Christophe pov. Was hoping we'd get it today, actually. Definitely not complaining though. This was exactly the sort of gut punch I come here for. Either way, I'm hoping the next one is MK.

Magicturtle

EE, even though i love these interludes the cliffhangers is slowly killing me :p I need answers please

Darkening

Well, time for Archer to remind everyone *why* she was Ranger's favorite. They're gonna wish they could get stuffed into a sack of beetles when she's done here.

Decius

It's possible that they will end up stuffed into several sacks that also have beetles in them.

[Walter](#)

Man I've totally lost the thread of this. Archer, our protag, tortured this lady, then trusted the information that she got

from that, and now she's trusting her victim with what might well be Cat's body?

Mental Mouse

Both of them are traditional Villains – not Praesi-style, but more in the usual mold for Villains in general. Especially given their “upbringing” in general and their respective positions, that was practically a friendly chat... between one of the Black Queen's own band and an underling whose side business endangered the Big Plan.

Letouriste

Complicated relationships.

It holds on a rational level to let her with cat given concocter badly want a few good words for her case after the mess.

TeK

Not tortured, actually, more threatened. Although by some standards she basically sweettalked. Also you would be surprised how dependable are bonds born out of mutual abuse.

Liliet

You probably missed that they are adopted siblings.

And what TeK said.

Walter

Every time we talk we always end up in definition town. The author drops an atrocity on us and I'm like “nuts, I wish our protags weren't such garbage people” and you come past to explain that it doesn't count.

Like, our greatest hits include Cat's slavery not counting as slavery, it's just that they have to do what she says or they are killed and they can't quit and never get paid. We got Cat's person-cloak being totally dif from the antag's person-cloak. The pattern isn't super hard to suss out.

But, like, this one is literally in the same update as the comments. I can just scroll up and read the original, no clicking required. Even your denial fu can't possibly be up to this.

Archer is literally beating someone and cutting them with a knife while asking them questions! That's ‘sweet talk’? If anybody did to a protag what Indrani is currently doing to

this character the entire rest of the book would be about the Woe burning down the entire world in order to take endless revenge. How you gonna say that isn't torture?

Morgenstern

I think what was meant with "by some standards she basically sweettalked" was a HEAVY focus on the definition of "some standards"... Like, *for asshole X* (who "makes an art out of" torture... well, in THEIR definition) that is sweettalk, whereas for any normal sane person it is already torture...

[TeK](#)

Why is it for every time I decide to be sarcastic in the comments someone writes up a rant telling me I am wrong?

[Liliet](#)

..this time it wasn't even addressed to you!

(I'm not bitter)

[TeK](#)

Maybe he just feels intimidated by me for some reason



[Liliet](#)

Okay, by "what TeK said" I actually meant the second paragraph, sorry for not clarifying. If you want to argue against the sweet talk thing, take it up with TeK.

What I meant (and was sloppy in expressing) was
> Also you would be surprised how dependable are bonds born out of mutual abuse.

[TeK](#)

Torture is when you apply pain or other types of unpleasant experience to get information. Threat is when you promise to do so.

I feel like Indrani inflicting injuries was more of a response to some personal jabs, unrelated to an effort to get information. Seeing as she did it mostly after getting said information.

Although we can agree that it's intimidation if nothing else. Also, well, I was more sarcastic than anything. I mean, it was terrible, but by this point my standards for that inverse are kinda skewed.

Cocky is a drug dealer and she got her nose broken and her cheek cut. Quite honestly, wouldn't call it torture even IRL.

Shveiran

Not to mention, so far as Indrani knows, an accomplice in a plan whose purpose is to endanger the two people she loves the most and also cause the zombification of the continent.

There is "not being a murderhobo" and there is "being so convinced a pacifist you wouldn't shot Hitler". Indrani is resorting to violence (against a Named that will likely not even bear scars for it), but context matters, godsdamn it.

[TeK](#)

Not that being a murderhobo is bad, mind you. That is how my DnD party is named after all.

Zach

Have you guys been reading a different story than me?. Because last I checked, this is the story where Catherine has repeatedly commented on her friends being kind of morally dubious and Archer has a habit of literally murdering people to steal their liquor.

This chapter is basically part of a character arc of Archer coming to terms with the way Ranger's abusive upbringing affected her as a person (which includes stuff like her adopting Ranger's "killing people is fine, actually" morality).

[Javvies](#)

Complications.

I wonder – did the First Prince actually make an order for nonlethal sleepy gas from Concocter or did someone fake that request, in order to have it available for Bard's plots?

The corpse is not Cat. Or, if it is, the current condition is going to be very temporary.

On the other hand, Monk is a significantly different body type and size relative to Cat, so it's probably not him either.

Ooh, could maybe be the corpse of the Scorched Apostate that Cat knifed and dumped to fake her death, so as to be able to work around Bard's plots and assets, and spring out back to life to ruin them.

[Liliet](#)

Good question.

A nonlethal sleepy gas sounds like a good thing for a head of state to stockpile, especially in a nation -this- close to localized riots for various reasons.

Which only means it's believable, which only makes it easier to fake.

Faking a request is higher level access than stealing stuff, I'll note.

Javvies

Eh, depends on how the request was made.
Private letter directly to Concocter would be super easy.
Formal request relayed through the leadership of Arsenal?
Hard. Request relayed through a seemingly trustworthy intermediary that was actually compromised by Bard? Not too difficult.
Especially if there was also included an ask to keep things quiet.

Also, one thing that makes me suspicious?
There's only been a single batch of the stuff made, and it was supposed to be waiting to be moved out. Which means it's a recent "request" ... two plus years on. Sure, I could buy asking for sleepy gas right after the coup attempt. But the timing of just requesting such a thing now is suspicious as hell. And only in a limited amount? No. That's just a little too convenient a coincidence, I think.

Abodmuthkat

You know, it's not explicitly spelled out, but Cat probably still has the corpse of the Wicked Enchanter tucked away in the Night, after their little chat. Loose ends, and all. And the two of them were already close enough to the same shape for a glamour to work.

TeK

That is perfect and rather obvious in retrospect explanation to the corpse, shame I didn't think of that.

onedollargum

More like the Blackened Queen, am I right? ;D

TeK

As low ng as she isn't Blacked Queen.

Revenant

?

What do you mean?

TeK

Trust me, if you didn't get it, it's for the best.

JRogue

Hierophant is about to step out of his workshop, very upset that someone is fighting on his doorstep, and disrupting his work. Then he will own that fae duchess before being delighted to find a titled fae of the Autumn Court there for him to... experiment... on.

Draconic

I'm not too worried about Cat. Being dead never stopped her for long. If she is dead at all. She did choose members of her group because she suspected them of being traitors...

JJR

"Never make a deal with something that you don't know how to kill."

Ranger the Notoriously Unkillable

Lokesh Chandak

Well, they never made deals with her, did they. They were more at her mercy and under her... protection? That's definitely the wrong word for it.

TeK

So I've been thinking. What is Bard's justification for all of this? I mean let's be honest, we all expect Cat to get out of this bag, and she did attacked Arsenal, which is full of weapons.

Instructed Fae to go after the Dead King killing sword no less. That can have several outcomes, not one of which is that good for her. Going after Severity will have some severe consequences. She really will sever all ties with Heroes if she destroyed Severance.

So what do you think it is? I personally think she will use Hierophant as a scapegoat. Likely he is still has traces of Dead King's control. His interlude does start with him doing something with a sword. And then there are Chekhov's arrays under Mirage. And ever since the disturbances he disappeared into thin air, not really mentioned or remembered in "he is an asset that we have" sort of way". As in, he is in this fucking Arsenal and is instrumental to at least one major target of thr intruders.

Cat'n'co defend his quarters, but somehow don't remember that he exists? And then WB's agents seem to be under impression that he is the Betrayer. We have no claim as to otherwise aside from Cat's trust and she was established as an Unreliable Narrator.

The Arsenal being compromised from inside by DK seem to be like a perfect excuse to use external forces, and given that the possible perpetrator is a close and trusted ally of Queen of the Lost and Found box, it can even excuse as to why high command wasn't in the know.

As they say, perfect crime is the one you are legally bound to commit.

Liliet

I don't think Bard has a justification for all of this. I think she's deliberately and consciously ceding this one to Cat and positioning herself as everyone's enemy.

Why? Fuck knows! But it's consistent with her antagonizing Cat for no particular reason, so far.

TeK

Nah, it's more a contriving for the sake of contriving. Noone wants to be everyone's enemy, and if they did, there are far more effective ways. She had to leave herself some plausible deniability, otherwise it's just sloppy craftsmanship and that is just ain't her.

Also I would disagree with the "no reason" part. Cat had decided they were enemies for no real reason, not the other way around. What did she do, helped Heroes free the kingdom and killed her villainous auntie. Oh and she is crazy powerful. From personal enmity Cat decided to turn Bard into her nemesis, with WB just kinda rolling with it.

We don't have any evidence of her being sinister that do not come from villainous and inherently antagonistic to her sources. Neither does Cat. She just can't stomach the compromise with someone quite literally immune to the most effective methods in her arsenal.

Mental Mouse

To say that, you basically need to ignore everything Cat's said about the matter, and a good deal of what the Bard herself has said. Not to mention that the WB has worked directly against Cat several times, notably sabotaging the rescue of Masego. And then there's this latest fracas, where the fae themselves admit WB sicced them on the Arsenal, with

specific instructions to destroy with *two* of the biggest weapons being prepared against DK.

[TeK](#)

What did Bard said that would implicate her in nefarious deeds or actions?

She actually helped Masego fight off DK, where did she sabotaged his rescue?

I don't actually remember, to be honest. She helped Lonely, sure, but aside from that when did she acted directly against Cat? To Cat's knowledge at least.

She allowed Aqua to release the Demon, but she arguably couldn't stop her. And Cat wouldn't learn about it until way later. She did prevent elves from killing Diabolist off, kick-starting Doom of Liese, but in process irreparably damaged the trust between two foremost Villains of Praes, trust that arguably, allowed Praes to become powerful enough to be worthy of Crusade. She killed Captain, but that was justifiable and not directly against Cat. She tried to make Cordelia into a Named, which... is a bad thing, I guess? Oh and she tried to kill DK. Oh and she served as an envoy from Below, but that is neither here nor there.

Can you quickly remind me, when did the enmity started and why?

[doominator10](#)

Idk how much Cat knows about it, but Bard did tell Dead King that he has her permission to kill Cat.

[TeK](#)

She said he has her permission to eat the baby. Which I assume was metaphor for going all out with the blessing from Below.

[doominator10](#)

I was pretty sure that was more explicit about Cat, but I guess that's up for debate.

[TeK](#)

That is, because I totally didn't think that at all.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Most of those are blatantly working either against Cat (and Black).

At Leiss III, she signaled Pilgrim to delay his rescue of Masego, allowing DK to take his sorcery.

[TeK](#)

And that is bad? That is personal attack against too established villains, one of which was very much corrupted by Dead King...

And Cat doesn't know about it.

How is working against Black can he considered evil? Or antagonistic to Cat, given that she very explicitly stated that she doesn't care about someone taking a swing at Black?

Hanno did, so did Pilgrim, yet she was not opposed to cooperation to this degree.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm sorry, but you do not seem to have been reading the same story as I have, let alone following the discussions in the comments. I am not going to recapitulate several years worth of plot and character developments to argue with someone who can't follow the game even *with* a scorecard.

[TeK](#)

Shit, that was impressive putdown. I just had some sudden second doubts about what I had read and impressions I had conjured out of that. No shame in second guessing yourself, though it is in making others do it for you.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's not about putting you down, it's about recognizing a basic disconnect, and disengaging.

[TeK](#)

Eh, it's not that I don't understand your position, or even disagree much. But I did have doubts upon rethinking which I put to writing. But apparently either my memory is faulty (because I did wrote everything based on my memory of what I've read), or you don't want to recognise that someone may have made different conclusions from text presented. Or both.

Either way, there doesn't seem to be much of a compromise, so I will disengage too.

Liliet

Bard specifically taunted her, repeatedly.

When someone who could technically be your ally repeatedly deliberately antagonizes you, assuming they are in fact your enemy is kind of logical.

TeK

Well shit, now I have to review my entire modus operandi in relationships, if that is true.

Although Cat's entire surrounding specifically taunts and antagonizes her, figured she will be more tolerant.

Zach

We absolutely do have evidence of her, at the very least, having motives that do not have good results. Probably the best example is her convincing William to go through with the Contrition summoning. There's an interlude where William is starting to shift towards thinking that maybe Catherine has a point and the rebellion isn't actually good for the people of Callow, and suddenly the Wandering Bard shows up and convinces him against this. It's probably the most blatant example of the Bard directly shifting events in a malicious way.

The most generous interpretation of the Bard is that she's an agent for Good who doesn't care about the actual circumstances of the people of Calernia (like being willing to wreck Procer through use of the Angel super-weapon as long as it kills the Dead King).

There's also the basic fact that it's a really dumb idea to trust some immortal entity that refuses to actually be honest in its intentions.

TeK

You are saying like summoning an angel is a bad thing. Which is arguable. I mean yeah, an eldritch entity messing with your mind and free will may be misconstrued as some kind of forcible intervention by more squimish individuals, but it's specifically stated that they just show you who you are without all those petty lies we tell ourselves on the constant basis. With an implications being that everything else you do of your free will based on newly discovered information.

Basically they just tell you the truth and you free to do as you wish, it's just most will reliably pick up a sword

and go a'crusading. I can't honestly say that it's that atrocious. Maybe for Cat, but she made a career out of not facing what she's done.

Yes she did try to murder DK wrecking Procer in the process, but all she's really done was taking Cat's entire MO and upscaling it both in size and in time. Ugly choices, yada yada, only most people are regrettably shortsighted towards consequences beyond the lifetime of their grandchildren. Not understandable by most, but most are idiots.

Quite honestly there is a huge possibility that explaining just stops at that wall between perspectives.

And noone asks to trust WB, but Cat is downright antagonistic in her treatment of Bard, and it seems oddly personal. I can't really figure out why.

[Liliet](#)

> Basically they just tell you the truth and you free to do as you wish, it's just most will reliably pick up a sword and go a'crusading.

I got the impression that the Fifteenth would also get turned against the Empire if they were in range for a successful summoning, which speaks to a rather more brainwashing approach (with William just being the one whose brain it would be taking as a template for the washing)

[TeK](#)

We don't have a confirmation about what Ange will do to non-human species though, and given Williams bigotry, you may be onto something. On the other hand, we only have his words to judge whether or not it's brainwashing, which doesn't tell us much if he was...

[Liliet](#)

We have Akua and Masego's analysis though.

[TeK](#)

But they are both mildly heretic Villains.

[Liliet](#)

...exactly?

[TeK](#)

I'm just saying, anything they say about Angels is going to be mildly heretical. Just as much belief in Heavens colours your perspective, so does the opposite.

[Liliet](#)

Fair.

Shveiran

By that logic, anything a priest or a Hero ever said about a devil or demon would be unreliable.

[Tek](#)

Not entirely, but yes. I would doubt anything someone with an obvious bias says about a thing he has a bias about. Don't you?

[Liliet](#)

No, *the* most generous interpretation of Bard is that she's a long-view utilitarian who is really numb to short term specifics. It's not hard to imagine a logic in which the total sum of possible outcomes for First Llesse weighted by probability is better if William tries to summon Contrition than if he doesn't (key word being try: again, it's not hard to imagine a logic where that was a very low probability outcome in the first place, with Bard figuring he won't succeed either way but it'll just take the whole story in another direction).

This whole story being "a bunch of utilitarians with mostly shared goals acting against each other because each of them individually believes that's what'll make for the best outcome overall" sounds very on-brand for Guide, imho.

Ahad Mahmood

No one wants everyone to hate them – I refer to the martyr complex, and Lelouch from Code Geass as a great example to watch if you are unfamiliar.

Additionally setting yourself up to be hated is not uncommon. Especially if you're an immortal being finding a way to die which I believe Liliet has implied before. Bard has specifically stopped people from attacking Cat by referring to her as 'mine'. At the time it seemed more like my prey but on re reading doesn't seem that simple. I also feel Bard is trying to get Cat to play by Above because all it would require is one prayer. That is all. Like she never

will but unlike other villains there are few things she would have to give up. Night arguably but she will eventually anyway in my opinion.

[TeK](#)

When you say she stopped people are you referencing the elves? Cause they went after Aqua.

What I mean is it's impractical or everyone to hate you. Even Lelouch had a loyal and dedicated group of people.

And I highly doubt she wants to die. That'd be boring and it's explicitly stated that she denied three things, one of which is death and another is her dream. So she wants something different, something Tyrant referred to as "glorious" and Neshie referred to as "they will all come after you if they knew"

But he is known to exaggerate.

Ahad Mahmood

Ok that is valid. I am really excited because this series has some of the best set ups and pay offs, especially in the recent two books.

[Liliet](#)

I get the impression that Bard wouldn't see herself dying as a bad thing, presuming she gets to have things set up the way she likes beforehand, but isn't actively *after* it.

(So kind of like Catherine, only with even less attachment to "no I would actually prefer to live actually" cause Catherine actually gets to have a good life if she survives and Bard is kind of stuck in hell)

If her position (and tools, and freedom to act) is a price for her not *needing* this position and tools and freedom in the future because the stuff she needed them for is going to take care of itself instead, it's a perfectly valid tradeoff.

[Javvies](#)

Eh, depends on how the request was made. Private letter directly to Concocter would be super easy. Formal request relayed through the leadership of Arsenal? Hard. Request relayed through a seemingly trustworthy intermediary that was actually compromised by Bard? Not too difficult. Especially if there was also included an ask to keep things quiet.

Also, one thing that makes me suspicious?
There's only been a single batch of the stuff made, and it was supposed to be waiting to be moved out. Which means it's a recent "request" ... two plus years on. Sure, I could buy asking for sleepy gas right after the coup attempt. But the timing of just requesting such a thing now is suspicious as hell. And only in a limited amount? No. That's just a little too convenient a coincidence, I think.

[Javvies](#)

... the fuck, wordpress?

[Liliet](#)

oh mood

[Liliet](#)

Huh, yeah.

Xinci

I do find it that Indrani noting Rangers actions and attitude as callouses seems to frame her most accurately. Most of her reactions are based on callouses gotten survival against various facets of the world. Thus she is an excellent teacher in survival, and how to not get ground down by the various other agents in Creation. However, none of her methods are meant to form a bonded group. Which Indrani only really realized later.

nick012000

Worth noting that Ranger was the only member of the Calamities who left immediately after they won.

[TeK](#)

It's one of those pesky side effects of nigh-invincibility. Hard to form deep and emotional bonds with people you know you'll outlast.

[Javvies](#)

Plus there's her biological immortality, or close enough as to make no difference. From the Name and from being a half elf.

Even if they don't get killed, Ranger will still see basically everyone she meets and knows die of old age while she keeps on existing. And she knows that she'll outlive them all and their children.

Ranger can't afford to let herself get close to people for her own protection/self-interest. Or so she's come to

believe. She doesn't want the pain of losing people she cares about. The less close she is to people, the less it can hurt her when they inevitably die and leave her.

Tek

Or better yet, it is better for her to initiate break up and leave first, taking some measure of control in the way relationship ends.

Liliet

I'll note that rather than the impression of someone who tried getting attached to people, got burned and now doesn't (but / because of she knows what it's like), Ranger gives me the impression of someone who went with that logic from the start. Why bother? It's not like she NEEDS the human network of interdependence and cooperation and mutual caring for anything. She's individually too powerful for that.

And she just... never followed why anyone *would*. When she found out that taking care of people can be fun, she made herself a dollhouse and played with it for a while, then left the minute a better game presented itself. With loyalty simply not being a concept she ever considered as applied to herself, in either direction. She never needed it for anything, after all.

Javvies

Well, any prior attempt to care about people would have been centuries ago. So I'm not sure how one could tell the difference from this remove.

Also, it's entirely possible that not caring about others is something she started doing after one or both of her parents died. Maybe she saw how much missing her father hurt her mom. Or maybe it didn't start until she lost her mom.

Liliet

Her mom's alive, or at least was as of the Keter excursion in Regard.

And I'd say the difference is that if she had cared once she'd act more aware that *other people care*. To me, from the text, she comes across as genuinely oblivious of the emotions of people she interacts with – Amadeus, Indrani, etc. Alexis, too – “that's one way to cure a fear” actually it's not? She acts like someone who expects different reactions to what she says/does than

what she actually gets, but cannot be assed to note the difference and correct.

Liliet

Also, if she did know what getting attached to people is like, I think she wouldn't have treated Refuge like she did. Note what we have: a smattering of children, some of them orphans who have nobody but her and some of them have parents at home, that she treats exactly the same; lessons that she doesn't actually care if they absorb – Cocky comes across as someone who never even tried, who saw Refuge as just that – a shelter – and not a school at all, and absolutely no actions towards EITHER binding them to her OR making sure they don't get overattached. It's like a fucking social experiment, 'what happens if i just don't do anything at all and don't even try to guide what relationship they have to me', only she also doesn't care about the results, because she fucked off halfway through.

I said "dollhouse" for a reason.

A person who cared and got burned is going to have strong feelings on the topic of caring in general, at least, while Ranger just... didn't. She didn't discourage Indrani from isolating herself from other kids, but she didn't discourage the rest from banding together either.

Just... nothing. No input. She was a mom of a dysfunctional family without even *noticing that she was*.

Like she didn't enlist another caretaker to take pressure off of herself, either. No, if they want to follow her around and imitate her closely and get themselves killed by doing that, they're free to!

Dolls. That stop being alive in her imagination the minute she puts them down and stops paying attention to the game.

TeK

Shit, that is valid interpretation. I am guilty of humanisation of unhuman character and seeing the best in people, so that possibility kinda never occurred to me.

Liliet

I am a great fan of all varieties of 'character hurt by caring' and something of a conneisseur you might say.

Akua's one of those. Kairos is one one of those.
Alaya is one of those.

(None of these are a straight example of what Ranger would be in this hypothetical but they're all examples of characters who incorporate 'and i will not go there because that way lies caring and getting hurt and that's stupid' into their decision making process)

Hye is not one of those)=

(Because she's not avoiding caring, she just picks it up and drops it as it pleases her, which is... something else)

[TeK](#)

But her unmatherly attitude may come from her own mother. Maybe it's not that she doesn't care, but rather belief that leaving them on their own is not just perfectly normal, but beneficial and good. Her mother does teach badass elves to be even more badass, and also teach how to be even even more badass. And she gets to casually defy the whole racist supremacist society like it's nothing, so I assume some sort of harsh childhood was involved.

[Liliet](#)

maybe, but the result is what it is

Tom

Calling it now, the rest of book 6 is interludes XD

Interlude: Deadhand

"One hundred and twenty-five: under no circumstances should you trust anyone who has the title of chancellor, vizier or duke. While they will always be powerful and competent, keep in mind they will also inevitably turn out to be in some way treacherous."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

One was limping, two were nursing an arms and Adjutant had only withstood that blow from the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide's

morningstar at the price of his plate being dented and the flesh beneath it torn right through.

The Repentant Magister had done what she could, and she was a skilled healer, but magical healing was less immediately potent than the priestly kind when it came to deeper wounds. All of them were Named, and so the pain and increased fragility was only a minor matter, but Hakram had considered it an interesting piece of irony that he usually received a better quality of healing with the Woe, a band of villains, than he had from a pack of Above's designated footsoldiers. The air was rife with tension as the band of five he accompanied let the Vagrant Spear guide them through the bare stone corridors, though conversation had not died down even the wake of the defeat inflicted unto them by what could only be remnants of the Court of Autumn. The calm voice in the back of Hakram's mind noted that where the Woe would be digging into their second plan of attack by now, everyone pitching even if it was Catherine who'd put it all together, these five were instead wasting their breath on largely inconsequential matters.

Adjutant decided to take his own evaluation with a grain of salt, acknowledging he would always favour his own companions whether or not he was aware of it.

They'd all been headed towards somewhere called the Spins for some time now, ominously enough without any fae harassment as they moved. Aside from Hakram's professional vexation at the way half of the Arsenal seemed to have some sort of nickname known only to the locals, on top of the already labyrinthine amount of sections within the facility, there should have been no reason for displeasure on anyone's part. Unfortunately, the lack of immediate peril meant the Mirror Knight's band of five had promptly lapsed back into open malfunction. It felt like dealing with children, Hakram thought. While that was not entirely a rare thing with heroes, who were often more preoccupied with pretty ideals than practicalities, this band of five was... remarkably unstable. It would not be impossible to make them functional, in his opinion, but it would take sustained effort to keep them that way and some truly miraculous labour to mend the root causes.

"Would you hurry, Magister?" the Blade of Mercy complained.
"We'll lose them if you keep slowing us down."

As displayed, though in his opinion the younger of the Proceran heroes was, for all that he was vastly irritating, more a symptom of the troubles than a cause. The Repentant Magister, whose true name was Nephele Eliade, visibly bit down on the sharp retort she equally visibly wanted to let out at the boy who'd been needling her for hours now. The Stygian was slow because she'd taken bad fall in the last scrap with the Prince of Fallen Leaves and magical healing could only help so much with bones, not because she was somehow lazy as was being implied. Now, that should have

been the moment when the band's unspoken leader stepped in before tempers further rose. The Mirror Knight had brought these people together after all, and that implied a level of deference to his leadership. Instead, Christophe of Pavanie leaned closer to the Vagrant Spear and addressed her in a low voice. The look the Magister shot at his back was distinctly less than adoring. It must have been rather irritating, Hakram mused, deferring to something that essentially did not exist.

"How is your arm, Blade of Mercy?" Adjutant gravelled.

The redheaded boy started, constant in his surprise that Hakram could do anything but stand behind a human villain threateningly or eat village babies. Adjutant had known men and women who truly, genuinely hated his kind and so he'd not been all that ruffled by the Blade's casual bigotry. It was the way of thinking of a boy who'd been told orcs were not people and had never had occasion to question that before, not something running deeper. Hakram thought less of men who chided the likes of the Blade for speaking their opinion of his kind but privately shared in the belief, for at least the boy could be *taught*.

"It stings," the blue-eyed boy admitted. "But it is only pain."

"I am sure Lady Eliade could heal it further, if the sting is a distraction," Adjutant suggested.

The Blade of Mercy cast a look at the Stygian sorceress and bit his tongue, looking somewhat abashed at the implicit reminder that the only reason his arm wasn't bleeding meat was the Magister's healing touch.

"I would not ask her to waste her valuable magic on my discomfort," the Blade of Mercy stiffly said, inclining his head at the sorceress.

It was exactly the kind of answer someone with a disdain of magic trying to politely excuse themselves from healing would have used, but Adjutant suspected that when it came to the redheaded boy the words were genuine. Or close enough. Hakram had met two very different Blades of Mercy, after all. The first was a boy with Light gleaming in his eyes, spouting lines sounding suspiciously similar to those of the heroes of Proceran bodice-ripper novels and very much trying to act like one of those heroes. The other was an awkward redheaded boy, out of his depth and painfully aware of it. He found it easier to pity the latter than the former, for all that they were one and the same.

The Maddened Keeper, further behind, let out a harsh bark of laughter at the about-face but did not speak. That she did not contribute much of anything was, to Hakram's eyes, a contributing part of this mess: there was an element missing to their band, the Callowan Named's aloofness withholding an influence that

would have stabilized matters even if it was negative – a designated enemy, after all, would have given the Blade someone to focus his grandstanding against. The Magister offered Adjutant a discreet incline of the head in thanks when no one else was looking, which the orc did not hesitate in returning. It was a rare thing for him to have high opinion of a heroine before meeting her, but the Repentant Magister had been an exception. How could he not hold a woman who'd spurned the slavery she was raised to in high esteem? If Catherine intended to take this one as a consort he could only approve.

"Adjutant," the Mirror Knight called out from the front, "if we might have a word?"

Hakram put some spring to his step, catching up to the two in front as the Vagrant Spear moved to the side so he might stand between them. Those two were significantly easier to read than the rest, but in a way twice as hard to understand. Adjutant, in theory, knew much of the Vagrant Spear from Indrani's reports – which, while usually written in sloppy drunk handwriting with some of the filthiest limericks he'd ever seen slipped in here and there, always seemed to cover enough the important parts thoroughly enough he couldn't actually complain about it to Catherine – and her equally informative tendency to shamelessly gossip after she had a few drinks in her.

He knew that Sidonia was from the city of Alava, from one of the lesser lines of the Blood related to spears and considered as related to the Champion's Blood even though in practice their skills had much more in common with the Slayer's Blood. A political issue, he'd been made to understand. Hakram knew that Sidonia was strictly interested in men, could kill skillfully with both hands and seemed to have some Name-driven taboo against wearing shoes of any sort. None of this, though, helped him understand the mercurial brew of affection and dislike she related to the Mirror Knight with, or why it seemed to spin the man's head around so much. Half the time the man seemed to crave her good opinion, the other half he seemed to court actively spiting it. It was probably about sex, which humans keeping to the House of Light tended to make a lot more complicated than it needed to be.

"I have heard that the Woe fought mighty battles against the Seasons of the Splendid," the Vagrant Spear said. "Do you have insights to share about the nature of our foe?"

Adjutant considered that, for a moment.

"The Prince of Fallen Leaves is weak, for one of his title," Hakram replied. "And the court he belongs to should be Autumn."

The orc cast a curious look at the Mirror Knight, who he'd expected would have known much of this. The 'Elfin Dames' living

in a lake the man was supposedly sworn to defend sounded very much like fae, or something close enough it hardly mattered.

"The Fair Folk are a weakness of mine," Christophe of Pavanie boldly volunteered. "My shield will not reflect their works, and their illusory wiles are effective against even my protections."

"Your oath protects your mind from glamours and manipulations," the Vagrant Spear dismissed.

"It does not," the Mirror Knight curtly said.

Sidonia of Alava looked surprised, by Adjutant's reckoning, but not by the curtness.

"You once told me-"

"I know what I said," the Mirror Knight grunted, looking away, "yet I repeat: my oath will not protect me."

The Levantine looked confused, for a moment, then a wicked grin split her lips.

"Are you telling me you finally lost your-"

"I would recommend that the Repentant Magister provide protective enchantments against glamour, if she can," Hakram interrupted. "The stronger fae do not usually bother with deception, but once cornered they'll break habit if they lack the strength to win otherwise."

Something like gratitude gleamed in the Mirror Knight's eyes at the distraction that'd been provided.

"Have you fought Autumn before then, Adjutant?" he asked.

"No," the orc gravelled. "But it is the spawn of Summer broken, and I have fought Summer enough."

The dream that the King of Winter had seeded in Catherine after titling her in his court had been a difficult thing to sparse even though her recollection of it was vivid, because it was not truly a single dream: it was the recollection of a cycle's shape, one so old and primordial that mortals mind found it difficulty to truly grasp. There had been lessons to learn from it, though, and Hakram Deadhand had committed them to memory.

"The Lady tells marvelous tales of the battles against Summer," the Vagrant Spear agreed.

It took Hakram a moment to grasp that she was talking about Indrani, simply using the same term Indrani herself slipped into whenever talking about the Ranger. Interesting, he mused. Archer

might not be interested in making a legacy for herself, but that did not mean she wouldn't end up making one regardless.

"I'll ask Nephele if she can weave such enchantments," the Mirror Knight said. "Thank you for your advice, Adjutant."

"It was my pleasure," the orc replied.

The Mirror Knight retreated further back with eagerness, leaving Adjutant alone with a still-grinning Vagrant Spear. That grin was directed at him, now, like she expected him to pat her on the back for having put the Proceran hero to flight.

"Now is not the time to make sport of him," Adjutant bluntly said. "We're headed into a hard fight."

"You said the prince was weak," Sidonia replied. "Have you not defeated stronger royalty of the Splendid?"

"As part of a band containing the Black Queen and the Hierophant," Hakram flatly replied. "And even then, it was a close thing."

And that was the thing that had his hand itching, wasn't it? Metaphorically speaking. After so many years among the Woe, where Catherine steered and inspired and mediated, having his Name attached to this walking mess was making him restless. His very nature was urging him to *fix* this band so that at least they'd cease bleeding each other with their sharp edges. It wouldn't even be difficult, he knew, to untie the most pressing of the knots. If the Mirror Knight ceased focusing on the Vagrant Spear he'd start taking the Blade of Mercy closer in hand, which would free the Repentant Magister to be a moderating influence on the band. All it would take was establish some sort of accord between Christophe and Sidonia, terms of interaction they could keep to instead of constantly pushing each other.

"You underestimate us," the Vagrant Spear said.

"You overestimate yourself," Adjutant frankly replied. "The only reason there hasn't been a casualty on our side so far is that the fae aren't here to fight us."

That struck her in the pride, as it'd been meant to. Indrani had coddled her four too much, they'd started to get ahead of themselves. The Vagrant Spear, the blooming pattern of blue on grey on her face tightening as she scowled, turned to him with a straightened back and tight grip on her spear. Trying to make it so he was not looming so tall above her.

"The Lady bats you around when you spar, I hear," she challenged, baring pale teeth.

Hakram Deadhand did not bare his own teeth, posture or swagger. He simply looked at Sidonia of Alava, calmly, and considered how long it'd take him to kill her if he was serious about it.

"You are not the Archer, child," the Adjutant simply said. "And if you challenge me again, I will rip your fucking throat out."

The younger woman stared at him for a long moment, then shivered.

"Apologies, Lord," the Vagrant Spear said, briskly dipping down her head. "I should not swat at him while we head into battle, it does us all disservice."

"I don't know what stands between you two," Hakram said, and raised a hand to stop her when it looked like she might tell him, "and I do not particularly *want* to. There will be time to pursue it after the fae are scattered, Sidonia. Until then, the Mirror Knight holds command."

The Vagrant Spear threw him a sardonic look.

"As you say, Lord Adjutant," Sidonia said, tone a tad dry.

The orc decided not to address that. There was only so much blood you could squeeze from a stone.

"Are we close?" he asked instead.

"Soon," the Vagrant Spear said. "We should get there ahead of the Splendid, if they took the main halls."

"Good," Adjutant said, baring his fangs in approval.

He slowed his stride, leaving Sidonia alone in the front and sliding into the conversation that had been forming behind him. As expected, with the Mirror Knight there to impress the Blade of Mercy was significantly more personable. Without the needling to interrupt, Lady Eliade skillfully steered the conversation away from what she'd been asked, an enchantment that would perfectly resist glamour, to make it seem like the Mirror Knight had instead requested something she could achieve, an enchantment that would allow someone to tell if they were under the throes of glamour. When properly angled, the four Named could associate without wounding each other. But there were still only four, Hakram noted, as the last member of the band of five had stayed aloof and behind all this time.

The Maddened Keeper's long and unkempt hair did much to hide her face, but Adjutant would have been able to peg her stare as cool and distant even if he'd not spent the last few years learning the nuances of human expressions. That one watched and missed nothing, but she kept her peace. She was Callowan, but from the

times before the Empire had ruled it and so little like the Callowans that Hakram knew. There was a sense of... threat to her, one that had the orc's instincts apprehensive. To his senses, to his Name, she felt like a predator waiting to strike. She was no fighter, the earlier scraps with the fae had proved that, but the Maddened Keeper had also swallowed whole a cloud of decay that'd powdered rock and would likely have killed the Blade of Mercy if it'd been allowed to spread. In a senses she reminded him of Vivienne, in the sense that she was clearly familiar with violence but just as clearly not trained in it – but there ended the similarities, as no prince of the fae had ever *very carefully* avoided being touched by Thief even at the height of her Name.

Adjutant slowed his steps even further, slipping at the back of band and matching his stride to the Maddened Keeper. She peered at him through oily bangs, unsmiling.

"We were never properly introduced," Hakram gravelled.

"So that's what you're used for," the Maddened Keeper said, voice apathetic. "The plate and the axe, the height – it all paints the wrong picture. They don't see it coming, that your brain's the most dangerous part of you."

She was not such a tall woman, the Keeper. Skinny thing, no real muscle to her, and though she had vigor it was the feverish kind: burning but not healthy. Whether it was with his hand of bone or the spectral one, it would have been child's play to snap that sparrow-like neck. So why was Adjutant's Name screaming at him that if he laid a finger on the Keeper he'd be snuffed out in the blink of an eye?

"If we are to be at odds, so be it," Adjutant said. "There are old wounds, between your people and mine. But there are more pressing needs, Maddened Keeper."

"Necessity's son," the woman said, tone gone velvet soft. "Whispering her sweet nothings. Stack, stack, stack – move around the stones and maybe one day the game will make sense. But the tower always crumbles, doesn't it? You'll not find me so easy to steal or pile, death's hand."

She cast him an unfriendly look through the ratty curtain of hair.

"Walk away, orc," the Maddened Keeper told him. "Lest I develop an interest in pulling at your seams."

Adjutant was not above recognizing that creeping sensation going up his spine as fear or heeding its warning. There were some that were beyond his ability to corral, and so to continue an attempt was to invite sanction. Villains that did not know their limits died young, and Hakram had too many labours unfinished to be able

to afford delusions about his own ability. He walked away, not with undue haste but without lingering either, moving towards the centre of the band again. Hakram caught only snippets of what was being discussed, which turned out to be heroic gossip about the lingering rumours of the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods being romantically involved. He filed it away regardless, but before the subject could change the Vagrant Spear called them to a halt with a peremptory gesture. They had reached the end of a long hallway, which Adjutant found was leading down to a broad downwards slope, spiralling inwards oddly.

"We are here," the Vagrant Spear said. "The top of the Spins."

Quietly walking to the edge of the hallway, Hakram leaned down and studied the battlefield the band had picked with a frown. The Repository was largely used as a great warehouse for all the incoming supplies for the Arsenal and outgoing artefacts feeding the war machine of the Grand Alliance, which in most situations would mean a large room spreading outwards. The Arsenal, however, had been carved from the inside of a mountain: there was no difficulty in layering several of these warehouses atop each other, so long as they could all be accessed by wagon. The Spins were likely the part meant for that very purpose, a soft-sloped spiral leading into eight different broad hallways of different heights. Most of those would lead to warehouses, though the 'central' hall was likely to be the one heading deeper into the Repository. Towards the restricted sections, where war assets were being kept and the Maddened Keeper informed them all the fae were headed – though she couldn't tell them exactly *what* the fae were after. Speaking of the devil, she'd come to the fore at long last.

"The fae haven't come through here," the Maddened Keeper said. "But we don't have long."

"I'll take the front," the Mirror Knight immediately said. "Lady Eliade, your sorcery will serve well from the heights and Antoine can serve as your escort. Sidonia-"

He was making mistakes, Hakram thought, planning like his magical back-up was the Witch of the Woods instead of the Repentant Magister – whose sorceries lacked bite, and the artefacts she used to make up for it tended to require shorter distance.

"I can go on the frontline with you," the Blade of Mercy interrupted, "the Vagrant Spear can see to the Magister's protection."

"I strike, I do not defend," Sidonia of Alava flatly said. "That is the nature of my Bestowal. This plan is foolish."

"Perhaps the Adjutant could see to my defence as I weave sorceries from closer," the Repentant Magister suggested. "You

are well-versed in such duties, Lord Hakram, if I recall correctly?"

Catherine had begun needing a flanker once more since her return from the Everdark, so Nephele Eliade was not wrong. That said, Hakram was by far the most durable of the Named here after the Mirror Knight so frankly speaking he should be at the man's side when the fae began taking the gloves off instead of out back with the Repentant Magister.

"I am," Adjutant said. "But we have the advantage of surprise. It would be wasteful not to at least attempt an ambush."

The Mirror Knight blinked in surprise, while the Blade of Mercy stared at him in undisguised distaste.

"That would be dishonourable," the redheaded boy told him, as if addressing one slow of wit.

"The Adjutant has it right," the Vagrant Spear grunted. "You don't meet a raiding party on open ground, you turn the raid on them."

"They have the advantage in numbers," Lady Eliade noted. "It would be wise to try to remedy that as quickly as possible."

"The Levantine and the mage, arguing in favour of ambush," the Blade of Mercy sneered. "How surprising."

Christophe of Pavanie straightened.

"No chivalry was offered in the attack, none be offered in the defence," the Mirror Knight said. "It would be best of the prince could be slain swiftly, the rest might buckle."

"*Christophe*," the Blade of Mercy protested.

"Honour offered to the dishonourable is gold tossed into the river," the Mirror Knight replied. "Both the Adjutant and I can afford a long drop without any trouble, we might as well leap. Sidonia and Antoine flanking the hall, Lady Eliade on the slope overlooking?"

"Agreed," the Vagrant Spear nodded.

Hakram rumbled in approval himself. Keeping himself and the other heavy back might seem counterintuitive, but that way they'd be able to more easily pick out a fae high noble to tie up. There were mutters of approval from the rest.

"I will go with the Repentant Magister," the Maddened Keeper said, and none gainsaid her.

With the bare bones of the plan agreed on, all that was left was preparations.

"Gather close," Nephele Eliade ordered. "And don't move, it will make laying the enchantments much harder."

Adjutant had heard much of providence, the golden luck of heroes, but rarely had he wished for its arrival. He did today, though, because if they were to make through this without corpses on the ground a dollop of providence would very much be required.

—

The first fae to arrive reminded Hakram of a dragonfly.

All shiny carapace in shades of blue and long wings, with a long halberd in her hands, she cast a look around but after a long moment it appeared she could not see through the illusions that the Repentant Magister had woven around the flankers. *The Lady of Cooling Nights*, Adjutant recognized. Coming after the outrider, the vanguard should be next. The first fae whistled softly, the melody of it haunting, and two more fae slunk in. Though the orc was familiar with the sight of them, their titles remained unknown. Their unnaturally tall bodies and long limbs, though, could not be mistaken — neither could their skin, pale as bone, or the sharp spears of ivory they held. Pale wings bloomed and they scattered upwards, Hakram's fists tightening against the handle of his axe as he hoped none of the heroes would be spooked into striking too soon. A beat passed and none of them moved, to his relief.

The Prince of Fallen Leaves' court strolled in afterwards, riding at a leisurely on great white horses. Three lancers of what Adjutant suspected was Autumn's equivalent to the Immortals of Summer and the Sword of Waning Day for Winter, their scale armour fashioned to look like a thousand fallen leaves but their lances wickedly sharp and their horsemanship unnaturally skillful. Then the Countess of Still Amber, half a statue and dressed in her namesake from head to toe, and the Duchess of Red Sunset — blinding to look at, which had made the Mirror Knight the only one who could withstand her up closer. The company slowed, only to be joined a few moments later by two more fae. The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide, looking like his armour had been carved out of granite by an artist and his massive morningstar hefted over his shoulder, was simply too heavy for a horse to be able to bear him. He towered tall enough he could keep up with the last fae's mount, however.

The Prince of Fallen Leaves himself was of a dark grey-brown tone, wearing loose court clothes in tones of burnt orange that subtly evoked the membrane of a leaf by the cut and cloth, and on his brow rested a heavy crown of burnished copper. Bearing a slender longsword of what looked like rotting wood, he offered a

permanent faint smile under pale orange eyes. Yet for all that the fae looked more like a dandy out on ride than a prince of the fae, Adjutant knew him to be wickedly fast on his feet and seemingly impossible to wound: any cut made on him would begin spilling fallen leaves, as if he were a sack filled with them, until it closed and left no scar behind. The Lady of Cooling Nights landed at the prince's feet, kneeling.

"My prince, all the halls seem to lead here," she reported. "Shall we assemble the court and sally forth?"

They'd split their forces, the orc realized. Given the sometimes maze-like lay of the Arsenal, it made sense that pathfinders would have been needed. Especially if they were after more than the sword made out of the Saint's corpse, as Hakram suspected they were. The Bard would have needed something to put them in her debt before they came here, or more likely *someone*. Now was the time to strike, Adjutant thought. Before some fae happened to see through their illusions, and before more of them gathered here. The Mirror Knight might cotton on to that, he considered, but there was one of their company a great deal more used to raids and that was...

The Vagrant Spear blinked into existence, grinning with all her teeth and spear screaming with the Light as it tore right through the Lady of Cooling Nights' throat.

"Honour to the Blood," Sidonia of Alava gleefully shouted.

Chaos broke out in the moment that followed, the fae all aflutter at the sudden attack. Adjutant kept a calm eye on the situation, looking for his opening. The Blade of Mercy revealed himself with a hoarse shout, greatsword glinting with Light as it carved through both a lancer and its mount in a single stroke, and a heartbeat later the Repentant Magister fired her sorcery into the mess. The power gathered to strike at their ambushers by the fae, a panoply of titles and abilities, was sucked into a small spinning orb of gold that then blew up in a pulse of pure sorcery at the height of the chest of all those mounted. Only one of the lancers was caught and blown off its mount, the others all dismounting in time, but with that trick Lady Eliade had bought the rest of the band another heartbeat of advantage.

"I will engage the prince," the Mirror Knight's voice murmured, though coming from empty air.

Adjutant simply grunted in reply, wary of being overheard himself, but picked his own target before leaping. The whistle of the wind against his face was pleasant, as to his side a thrown spear of ivory struck at what should have been emptiness – but bounced a mirror shield, revealing a steady-eyed Mirror Knight falling with his silver sword already in hand. Below them the tall, pale fae who'd not thrown its spear instead leap up on pale

wings and flew towards the Magister. The two remaining lancers were stuck against the side of the hall, moved there impatiently by the greater fae around them as they made room to fight, but already the Duchess of Red Sunset was beginning to emit searing light. Adjutant looked away, guiding his fall with his shield and landing a heartbeat later on the head of the Countess of Still Amber, knocking off her horse in surprise and rolling away before her petrifying curse could begin eating at his boots.

Shield rising as he rose, Adjutant brought up his axe just in time to strike the side of a massive morningstar as it was swung down at him, pushing the blow to the side enough that it shattered the ground instead of his skull and shoulder.

"You again," the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide said, voice sounding like a thousand stones grinding against each other. "It seems you did learn to fear your betters last time, orc."

Hakram Deadhand rolled his shoulder, limbering the muscle he'd almost just pulled, and bared his fangs at his foe.

"Yes," the Adjutant growled, "let us talk, fae, of *betters*."

[tkjarrah](#)

best thing about fighting fae is how they give you setup for all the *coolest* lines

dadycoool

They also deliver them, like the Fae Cat got in a duel with. That was a badass boast.

[TeK](#)

I mean it's really easy when you fight someone who is literally hardwired to have a flair for theatrics.

[Javvies](#)

Hakram is awesome, as ever.

Dysfunctional Heroes. That's no real surprise, especially since it's Mirror Knight and non-Procerans.

Still so many questions about the Maddened Keeper. But it's not surprising that she and Hakram aren't going to get along. It's an open question as to how she and Cat would get along.

WuseMajor

Hmmm... Maddened Keeper is the third traitor?

nimelennar

Too obvious. I'd be more inclined to suspect someone is manipulating the Blade of Mercy's naive idealism.

[TeK](#)

Because Gods forbid readers actually predict something about the story.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say more because "the standoffish one is the traitor" is a trope that is at the height of being normally subverted, and in this Very Classic Band of Heroes I'd expect EE to go with that.

[TeK](#)

On the other hand, hadn't we got to a point where subversion of tropes had become it's own trope that is ought to be subverted?

[Liliet](#)

Note my point about this band being The Classic Band of Traditional Classicness.

There's time and place and narrative pacing for everything.

[TeK](#)

True. I am just never sure of anything.

Decius

The time to subvert your expectations is when you ARE sure.

Which is why the rest of the story will be told in interludes.

[TeK](#)

But I saw too many people predict the rest of the book will be in interludes, which should mean there would never be an interlude again.

Black Spiral Dancer

Maybe

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Too obvious, probably not.

RoflCat

As the others have said, it'd be too obvious.

If anything she's CALLOWAN, she's more likely to be a reverse Artificer given the nature of the different bands at each location (and the Cath/Hakram as their 'leader')
i.e. She took up the task/role of a traitor Bard set up only to betray Bard at the last second by helping Arsenal because fuck Bard for trying to put Callow in the pit again.

On that line of thought that there's someone on each band that's kind of a mirror of the other...

Archer – Vagrant Spear. One a free-spirited whimsical person who's learning to mend the old rift, the other bound by the way of Blood and learning to avoid opening new ones (i.e. that moment with Hakram)

Maddened Keeper – Poet. One on the merry joy side but likely lacking any deep motives, the other cold and apathetic and you can be sure as hell there's some hidden final goal she's aiming for.

Hakram – Cath. The orderly orc (a rather un-orc like) who lacks the charm to make his band work and the half-drunk Warlord (a very orc title) that strangely charm both enemies and allies.

Artificer – Magister. Two people who rejected their origins.

Rogue – Blade. One a man of smoke, mirror and daggers who's never truly belong in that field but manage by, the other a boy who 'should' be at his home in the field but always in over his head.

Mirror – Monk. One a guy so lacking in self-reflection (yes I'm going to keep using that joke) that he get manipulated by more sinister masterminds, the other a willing backstabber.

Probably pushing it, but it's two Band of Fives so there's probably always going to be some alignment somewhere.

Oshi

Please stop saying Cath *shudder*....it hurts me.

[TeK](#)

But it's cathartic!

Mith

I assumed they were referencing Cat taking the piss out of the opposition.

[onedollargum](#)

She's certainly doing the team dynamic no favours.

Sylfa

"It's an open question as to how she and Cat would get along." Like a house on fire? All green glow and goblin-like cackling...

Jworks

I expect a Hierophant and Kingfisher Prince interlude before we get back to Cat, hopefully sooner.

Cicero

I love how the Adjutant cannot help himself, he has to try and fix things, just a little. And I also like how the Spear and the Repentant Magister both have started to realize that he is the effective leader of their party.

[Liliet](#)

Y e p.

He's deferring to Christophe but the gap in ability is just too large.

(Victoria and Breakthrough)

Oshi

Like a bear herding cubs. I'm just surprised they are so... inexperienced. It's been a few year's. Although tbh the three in the group who've spent actual time with people of real skill are more self aware then the two who are not.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat doing a good impression of Dead King is probably giving an accurate read. He's a great weapon, but Mirror Knight is the type who gets pointed in a direction and told to kick ass. He's very good at that, and not very experienced at much else. Has likely fallen into the trap of assuming that as the best ass-kicker he's the best leader.

LarsBlitzer

It's one of the drawbacks of being on the side of Light: Providence is a crutch, so the limp is very noticeable to others who haven't had the benefit of Above keeping their

thumb on the scales. The Heroes may not even see it as such, just that it's "The natural order of things" or some such bullshit. At least, until there's something that can block it and I've got a suspicion that either Dead King or the Fae would have some sort of counter or be able to nullify it. A blindfold for the gods, in way. We'll see that particular rug pulled out from under them soon enough. The schadenfreude will be palpable.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"He's the sinister villain henchman of the treacherous Black Queen! We must be wary of him backstabbing us and turning us against each other!"

Hakram: "They call this a Band of Five? I'd better give them a little help..."

<an hour later> "WTF, he's *resolving* our conflicts? And our leader's asking him for advice?"

[Mental Mouse](#)

Though as Captain Amazing points out way below, resolving their conflicts might actually *be* sabotaging them on the story level.

[TeK](#)

Doubt he is doing it conscientiously though. It was stated that they don't really look at the world through stories like Cat does.

[Liliet](#)

You mean *consciously*. I'm sure we can all agree Hakam does everything conscientiously, right?

[TeK](#)

Yeah. My autocorrect does not agree with me.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That's why I've been teaching mine that its proper name is autocowreck. 😊

Frankly, I don't do comment sections on my iPad if I can help it – that, and the number of taps it takes to do italics or the like.

[TeK](#)

I don't have a PC, so I am kind of stuck.

hakureireimu

Who does the epigraph applies to?

Razorfloss razor

Sounds like something saint would say.

Anonymous

Adjutant. And how the Maddened Keeper is treating him.

Morgenstern

I like how there are multiple fae that can be applied, too – will we yet see some betrayal in their ranks as well?

Morgenstern

... to whom that can... (ugh, wordpress)

IDKWhoitis

So im just going to bet on Masego getting the last interlude before Cat jumps back in. Alternatively, we can take a peak at what Black is up to... (yes wishful thinking on my part).

Also, I'm suspicious of the Keeper, but I don't think she is a traitor. At least not with the Bard. She might be a Cat's paw for DK or some other agenda.

The distinct lack of reaction from Hakrams Name suggests either this is an asynchronous time line, or Cat isn't close to dead. He would have felt something was wrong otherwise...

Sparsebeard

The real question is, what does she keep and is it what maddened her?

Gibborim

My assumption was knowledge/secrets.

[TeK](#)

Funnily enough, Maddened Keeper is also a keeper that had something he kept stolen, and so now he is mad. As in, angry.

Big I

It was mentioned in her first appearance that she's the living seal on a Hell Egg.

Konstantin von Karstein

Where?

talene1

From Book 6 Chapter 14

" The Maddened Keeper looked instead like a perennially exhausted woman in her early twenties, skin drawn and pale and her dark hair ratty. Her threadbare robes ever rumpled and she was thin, but there was a sense of... menace about her. Not like a snake coiling but rather like a diseased thing, the sight of which had you withdraw your hand out of fear and disgust. She was host, it was rumoured, to a great many old secrets that should have stayed unknown – and had even turned herself into a living seal on a Hell Egg from Triumphant's days. "

Konstantin von Karstein

Thanks 😊

Sun Dog

That may go a long way towards explaining the touch hazard and her inhaling that cloud of decay with no problem.

[Liliet](#)

I'd boldly guess "close" doesn't even register for him anymore.

He'd probably know if she was ACTUALLY dead though, which rules out a couple of possibilities (in a synchronous timeline anyway).

Oshi

Agreed. He's too much a part of her not to know if she was gone. But like I've said before...Cat has a tendency to be dead and back again pretty quickly.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Agreed that Hakram would know if Cat was dead. For the Keeper, I wouldn't worry about "traitor" so much as "loose cannon".

what informs her insights?

Is Hakram's pebble game common knowlege in the army? MK also knew about Losara title.

Agent J

Pretty sure it's a Named thing. However she happens upon that information it's probably by more mystical means than legion gossip.

[Liliet](#)

I think she's just a seer type. She WAS "the eyes" in the library encounter.

Big I

"Towers" became popular amongst Wasteland elite after Hakram became the Adjutant. From there it spread to all the people spying on the Wasteland, like the Tyrant. MKs probably using some oracle BS though.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Um, we have two very different MKs in this party. Maybe refer to them as Keeper and Knight?

[Liliet](#)

omfg too true

Do0d

Maybe her demon whispers partial truths in her ear.

Juff

Typo Thread:

an arms > an arm
even the wake > even in the wake
would digging > would be digging
enough the > enough of the
court actively spiting (strange wording. maybe "actively court her spite" or "be actively spiting it")
sparse > parse
mortals mind > mortal minds
much, they'd > much; they'd
In a senses > In a sense (though maybe you should remove it, since "in the sense" appears later in the sentence)
back of band > back of the band
carved form > carved from
best of the > best if the
make through > make it through
at a leisurely (missing word)
Adjutant brought up (extra space)

[Adrian_V](#)

So of course we jump to the other storyline, I know is necessary and all but i think Erra still derives some twisted sadistic pleasure in making us sweat to know what happened to Cat.

Someone said the Maddened Keeper is too obvious a traitor, i think that even if she is not a traitor she is a ticking time bomb planted to explode.

[TeK](#)

He had mastered Dao of Cliffhangers.

[Liliet](#)

Actually to me Keeper seems like one of the more stable/reliable members of this band. She's mostly unwilling to take part in what's going on, but the 2.5 things she DOES do, she does well.

And it's not 'twisted sadistic pleasure'... well, it is, but that kind is just called "good writing".

If we found out it was a fakeout immediately, the whole thing would be MUCH less immersive and would give us much less understanding of what the context and impact of Cat's plan (whatever it is) is.

[Adrian_V](#)

To me she is either the representation of "things was not meant to know" ready to explode, or the tragic heroine that will suffer because of her powers, also there are many demon things implied with her, nothing good can come out of it.

superkeaton

Hakram a best. And I love that he can't stand how disorganized the group is, how inefficient. It reminds me of Black. The Keeper's a weird one. She seems to have some kind of clarity, like the Tyrant's Wish, but I'm not sure what she actually does. Also, lol, Mirror lost some of his powers cause he fucked. Indrani would make total sport out of him.

laguz24

I don't know maybe he exaggerated his powers and if he did screw up, how and by whom.

[Liliet](#)

He slept with the Cleves Prince's daughter, it was a whole thing with the fucking-drow-over beat.

Tom

Sometimes I wonder if you work as an assistant to EE or something, because the number of little details you recall is kind of ridiculous XD

[Liliet](#)

no im just a nerd

i have the wog document downloaded as pdf on my desktop, for scale reference

caoimhinh

I think that's a reference to the Arthurian Legend. Christophe had an oath of celibate like the one Lancelot had. Which made him stronger so long as he was a virgin. In Lancelot's case it was physical prowess and skill while Christophe's case seemed to be immunity to Glamour.

Lancelot, like Christophe, was associated with the Faerie/Elfin Dame of the Lake (such that Lancelot was called Lancelot du Lac, meaning Lancelot of the Lake) and he is said to have weakened after he broke his vow of chastity either in sleeping with Elaine (mother of his son Galahad) or Guinevere (King Arthur's wife).

I wonder if Christophe will also cause the downfall of a principate due to that affair, lol.

[TeK](#)

Well, she is a living seal on Hell Egg, which seems that her Role must be Containment. She is a metaphorical lid on the Can of Evil, and her presence here means that something soon will need to be *contained*

anon

Would lol if her aspects turned out to be Secure, Contain and Protect.

[Liliet](#)

YES

Oshi

Also pertinent is that she seems to be able to use the power of what she contains Naruto style. I'm wondering if she is meant to die and blow up the arsenal as another contingency.

[TeK](#)

Now I am thinking that Maddened Keeper will turn out to be a person who reforms a demon through a power of friendship.

Mental Mouse

The question is, what kind of demon is she containing?

TeK

Does anyone noticed that apparently Cristoph had superpowers from being a virgin and he apparently lost them? Sex better be fucking worth it.

Agent J

The girl in question is trying to get him to betray the entire Drow race, their goddesses, and the Black Queen. She's bad for his powers and super bad for his health.

TeK

I kinda sympathize with him though now.

laguz24

You know that brings me to a question if I were a group of immortal powerful beings and I had the power to grant heroism to mortals why on earth would I make those powers contingent based on not doing one of the most common acts associated with mortals, serious design flaw.

TeK

Proof of willpower and ability for self-sacrifice, I imagine. Go against your basic instincts and such. Plus I sense it is much more predicated on cultural belief, rather than common sense. Procer has an influential House of Light, which seem to be very much a Catholic Church, if with less pedophilia, it kinda feels that Heroes of Procer should be aspiring to an ideal preached by the House. You don't see Levantine Heroes have powers contingent on not having sex, although I imagine their obsession with honor and such can't be broken without consequences easily.

thearpox23

Because some of the strongest powers draw their strength from sacrifice or struggle? And even outside of narrativium logic such sacrifices are a proof of commitment to a cause. And besides besides that said immortal beings don't even necessarily have the mortals best interests in mind, so things going tits up isn't necessarily even a flaw.

caoimhinh

Just to troll them, of course.

Mental Mouse

That's a reference to real-world magical/religious tradition:

1) Personal taboos in general are an old and widespread tradition for generating power or maintaining a consecrated state. My go-to example is the Jewish laws – not just the dietary rules, but the various other prohibitions like mixed fabrics and (male) homosexuality. Pop-sociology aside, those laws are explicitly stated to set Jews apart as the Chosen People of their god.

2) Sex in particular is very magical, so sexual taboos (both private and public) have inordinate power. The priestly chastity of Catholicism is the classic example there, but there are innumerable other examples in anthropology and sociology. This is also why so many people get crazy when the subject of homosexuality comes up, or for that matter any unfamiliar sexual practices.

speakup

MK broke his vows, and so lost (some?) of his powers.

>Kaleidoscope VI

>Sidonia, as the other Chosen insisted they all call her in private, seemed unruffled by the darkness besieging them. Christophe admired this greatly, as she had been returned from the side of the Gods Above for nary an hour. The Pilgrim's power had breathed life back into her still body so recently, yet she returned to their holy struggle without hesitation. The strength of her resolve was worthy of praise. No all the Grey Pilgrim had returned had been so unflinching in their devotion. There was no trace of daze and confusion in her eyes, only certainty, and the Mirror Knight wrestled with the strange thing that was attraction towards a Levantine. **Had his vows not forbidden it...** He cleared his throat, cheeks flashing with embarrassment."

TeK

Shit, that is quite important and also explains a lot. All this time guy was going through puberty. Now here's a clue as to why he annoys people so. Even I see a bit of myself in him.

This is why taking an oath of chastity before thoroughly enjoying sex is an idea almost sure to backfire.

Mental Mouse

I don't think we've seen any sign that he actually lost too much of his powers, and he's certainly still pretty badass. We

saw that he took some random noble's daughter as a lover, with no hint that the encounter in question was a "Betrayed My Name" thing.

At a guess, he had an oath of chastity which granted him immunity to glamour, but lost it offscreen, allowing him to sleep around without further consequence – or the protection may have been broken otherwise. Also, the Vagrant Spear is an asshole. 😊

TeK

He didn't lost much, he probably lost exactly what he gained by an oath of chastity plus maybe interest.

Also Vagrant Spear probably was after his chastity too, at least at some point, but apparently lost.

Xinci

I mean him breaking that oath and his whole general weak spots being a mix of arrogance and ignorance paints a pretty good picture of how he could die. To have broken an oath at all is rather important

Mental Mouse

Also, there's the question of just how he came to break that oath, given the stakes... and the point that the oaths came with an immunity to magical manipulation. I'll eat a virtual hat if neither the Dead King nor the Bard was involved with that.

TeK

I doubt he broke his oath to get some though. I am pretty sure there are feelings involved.

It's just... I've been thinking about, and I can't really hate Mirror now. His everything paints picture of a confused teenager trying his best. However unlike Cat (which is kinda arrogant of her not to notice) he never had a patient dedicated mentor to clean up and pick things up after him.

He is literally and figuratively thrown at the deep end of the well and just kinda expected to behave, but never explained how or why he is wrong. I wrote this somewhere down in the comments, but the reaction of heroes to him is one of annoyed tolerance. He is not loved nor liked, but he is strong so he is used. Literally the only hero that actually looks up to him is another confused teenager from Procer.

To have broken an oath is important, but, as with Lancelot, I think it's more of a tragic love story.

Liliet

Well, Cat HAS already had the realization that nobody ever bothered to explain things to him.

She's seriously failing to really take into account the headstart Black gave her, it's true. Check your privilege and all that XD

Mental Mouse

Also, she's a villain, so she's not so eager to educate her opponents. *Especially* after trying it once with Pilgrim.

caoimhinh

It was the same as Lancelot du Lac.
Having sex weakened him after breaking his vow of chastity, and his affair with King Arthur's wife condemned the Kingdom of Camelot to ruin, with everyone involved either dead or in a life of sadness after the event.
Definitely not worth it.

But hey, as colloquial wisdom in Latin-America puts it: "an erect dick believes in no God".

TeK

Yeah well, now that I thought about it, Lancelot didn't fuck Guinevere because his balls itched, it was a tragic forbidden love and a choice between a love and an oath.

Given the obvious parallels between Mirror and Lancie, there's love involved too, only from his side. And to choose maybe love over his oaths requires inexperience and general lack of love in his life. First is a given, but second is quite a curious revelation.

I know most people here have a zero tolerance policy towards Heroes, but they are humans too.

alele

No one is going to comment on MK's possible virginity powers? Which makes all the plotting future betrayals in bed out of wedlock some sort of fall from grace? Anyone else?

TeK

Now I wait for EE to include school of magic that grants you Gift for magic if you are still virgin after 30.

grzecho2222

And it we know how Masego regains his Gift.

grzecho2222

*now

[Walter](#)

We saw dude in bed with a lady during the Crow's visions, right? Possibly that's when he broke his oath and lost his protection from glamour.

[Mental Mouse](#)

My problem with that is, why would some random noble girl be able to seduce him if he was still both sworn to chastity *and* immune to manipulation? I think he had to have lost it beforehand.

[TeK](#)

Maybe she was really pretty.

[Javvies](#)

She's also the daughter (possibly only child? Don't remember) of a Proceran Prince.

And Mirror Knight isn't the smartest or most self aware idiot Hero in Above's lineup.

[TeK](#)

I doubt Mirror is conceited like that to care about titles an whatnot. It's just plan inexperience in any kind of (sexual) relationship. Some things you just can't learn without repeatedly screwing up.

Or maybe I am just an idiot and everyone else never did something stupid when it comes to sex and love.

[Javvies](#)

I'm pretty sure he is. At least, if they are Proceran titles.

Remember, this is also the guy who has repeatedly tried to justify atrocities committed by Procer against other countries because they were committed by Procer, which

automatically makes them the right thing to have done. To people from (or closely aligned with) those places victimized by Procer.

There's a reason basically all of the non-Proceran Heroes don't like him as a person.

Javvies

Though he is a naive and clueless idiot, I'll agree with that.

I'm not saying that her being the daughter of a Prince was the single most important deciding factor in his decision to break his oath and have sex with her, but it most assuredly helped.

TeK

Quite honestly I attribute it to the fact that he was in a war last few years, constantly on the frontlines, constantly risking his life in the thick of it.

Princess only got to him because she was near and shrewd enough to exploit his need to intimacy.

Or maybe she loves him too, heck.

Mental Mouse

It's not a matter of "never did something stupid", but we're watching the story-patterns here.

Someone compared him to Lancelot – but Lancelot was in love with Arthur's queen, and IIRC that had been set up from their first meeting. I remember a notable bit of slapstick (from de Troyes?) where when he first comes to Camelot, he has to fight another knight in the courtyard... but he's considerably hampered by craning his neck to look at Gwenevere, who's watching the fight from a palace window. That's some serious Story!

We haven't seen anything like that for the Mirror Knight (and that would have been sufficient reason in itself to give him a POV Interlude!). It's not at all clear to me that a some random princess who hadn't previously shown up in the main story, would have enough weight to break Mirror Knight's oaths. I mean, she's not even a King's daughter, just that of one of the many Proceran Princes. How does she get to hamstring one of the top Heroes of the region?

Javvies

Eh, I would not call Mirror Knight one of the top Heroes.

That said, as for how/why she pulled off seducing him offscreen ... we don't know much about the plot to betray the deal made with the Drow other than that it exists and she was trying to recruit Mirror Knight to it. It is entirely in character with Procer, so it could be entirely homegrown.

On the other hand, Malicia could be trying to discretely help it along to cause problems for the Alliance.

Or, Bard could be involved because the deal would presumably involve peace between the Drow and Procer ... it would be a massive change in the status quo in all the wrong ways for Bard. She could well be trying to push along the betrayal with the intent to take out the Dead King and replace him with the Drow as far as the rest of Calernia is concerned.

Plus, he's stupid, and has an extra helping of Proceran arrogance. She's a Proceran noble, the daughter of a Prince. He grew up a sickly weakling. Also, he's young, dumb, and full of cum. So to speak. In addition to all of the other factors.

[TeK](#)

Maybe the reason it wasn't shown was because it's important reveal later on. It is gradually hinted at, but as with any proper foreshadowing, you can dismiss the hints at first as unimportant.

How does she get to indeed. Personally I hold to "wrong place, wrong time" theory. As in, she isn't special, just lucky. War can be pretty taxing mentally. And Sidonia was with Archer at the time. I am shipping them now, after rereading Kaleidoscope. After initial vows are broken, he has less reason not to pursue Vagrant Spear, while she slowly finds herself jealous of whatever lucky wrench that got to him first. There is some good love story buried there somewhere.

[Mental Mouse](#)

>There is some good love story buried there somewhere.

Or a Greek tragedy....

[TeK](#)

Admittedly, I can't recall Greek tragedy without a love story.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which invariably turns to shit as the gears of Destiny grind everybody into paste. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'll note also that "wrong place, wrong time" is real-world logic. In this world, accidents and coincidences involving Named are subject to manipulation.

[TeK](#)

Well, stories have to be realistic. Even if nothing Named is accidental, it still has to look like it. There are limits to providence and it can't rewrite reality, as Black had been demonstrating over sixty years by now.

WealthyAardvark

The Prince of Cleves had at least two sons during the prologue of Book 6. But it's been two years of war since then, who knows if they still live?

[Auston Varner](#)

I think it only made him immune to magical manipulation. Plain old psychological manipulation of an inexperienced virgin by an attractive person trained in politicking? It was probably child's play for the princess

[Liliet](#)

Immune to magical glamour, not mundane manipulation.

dadycoool

Lol, Cat and Hakram paired with the most dysfunctional groups. At least he seems to have a similar, if lesser, effect as her.

thearpox23

And it is interesting to see the difference in their dysfunctionality.

In Cat's case they just forgoed the synergy and decided to bank on their two heavy-weights to carry, trusting themselves to not only handle the fae but ALSO any knife in their back.

Liliet

IMHO there are three principle differences at the core of it:

1) Cat's more meta aware, while Hakram works more with the object level. He thinks "gee this will take a lot of providence" while Cat would probably be like "yep the more dysfunctional they are the more providence they get, this looks like a very potent mixture";

2) Hakram works through low key subtlety, guiding the currents, while Catherine just makes her own... and doesn't really have the capacity for subtlety. Hakram can join different conversations without immediately derailing them completely, Catherine naturally makes everything about herself just by being in the vicinity. She wouldn't either need to or have the capacity to work with nuances of who defers to who and who seems to want to fuck who. With her around... well, what Hakram commented on Maddened Keeper not providing would be in place;

3) This band is actually meant to work straightforwardly, while Cat's band had an undefined (three, apparently) number of traitors in it. The only real "band" part was her and Roland, with the two of them keeping a wary eye out for everyone else. She even split the party with an eye to who is likely to reveal themselves where rather than anything to do with combat effectiveness.

TeK

Wait who is the third traitor in Cat's band, is it Cat herself?

SpacyRicochet

Liliet means that Cat picked Roland as the definite not-traitor that could help her suss out the actual traitors.

The other three were maybe-traitors, of which we now appear to have two actual-traitors and one manipulated-but-not-a-traitor.

TeK

Oh, ok. I didn't get it.

Liliet

...I didnt even realize there was a reading of what i wrote where it parsed lmao

it parses, but actually i just wrote 'three' instead of 'two' because ????

[Liliet](#)

...two. Two traitors.

Me and basic arithmetic, we're not always best friends.

dadycoool

1: "The crazier the plan, the more likely it is to work."

2: "What does the hierarchy matter? *I'm* here."

Wonder

This much interludes can only mean one thing, something very significant happened to The Queen of Lost and Found.

[Liliet](#)

Well, she's faking her death... It would be pretty cheap to reveal that immediately, wouldn't it?

(The longer we go without clarification the more confident I am in that assessment)

[TeK](#)

It also just may be that EE wanted an excuse to do interludes (which are much more numerous lately and tangle wider array of characters, compared to first books) and since he kinda established that interludes are used when Cat is somehow incapacitated (i.e. hanging on a cliff), he has to pretend to kill her off.

On the other hand, so much harder it would strike if Cat would be much more permanently incapacitated. Her disappearance for a long period of time would be interesting influence on character dynamic. For one, once she would be gone, everyone will understand how useful she was and wish her back.

Wonder

Next interlude is Heirophant

[Mental Mouse](#)

> ... so much harder it would strike if Cat would be much more permanently incapacitated.

<blink> ESL, or auto-co-wreck? Either way that sentence needs some help. 😊

[TeK](#)

Autocorrect, although quite honestly it's mostly blatant apathy, because I usually can't be bothered to proofread my comments. The longer they are, the less I am inclined



Burlyraven

Okay, so thoughts:

Archer is getting *respect*, respect. Makes a story involving her defying Ranger all the more likely.

Hakram is best boy, as always.

I'm concerned for the Magister. Hakram seems to approve of her becoming a consort to Cat, and by extension a moral anchor, but I don't know if she survives this situation. It'd be a shame, considering she and Adjutant would make a fine angel and devil (also funny since both are slightly shifted towards center on morality, if from opposite sides).

The Keeper is... concerning. The overarching story has plenty of individuals with knowledge of things they should not know that manage to hold on to their minds, so what is it exactly that makes the Keeper the Keeper? A bound demon? A direct oath to a Choir? Both? She seems the obvious traitor, but that's a cord that's been pulled more than a few times in recent chapters, so it'd be kind of disappointing here.

The Blade of Mercy might be a traitor. He's simple, and honorable, but he's of the old breed of heroes; the kind that most trust the Bard.

TeK

On the other hand, didn't Cat already collect all the traitors? Why would you need more? Heroes seem perfectly disfunctional to screw things up without an overarching grand masterplan. In fact, this is why they are here. Betrayal can be predicted and prepared for, as we've seen with Cat, but plain human stupidity, just like Gods, works in mysterious ways, and can blindside you even more.

Keeper is the Named analogy of radioactive waste disposal site. She does not know things she shouldn't know because they would be useful, she knows them because no one else can know them, and it would be hard to dispose of said secrets. In short, they may not even be overly useful secrets, or secrets that can be controlled with any degree of moderation. They are just too dangerous, and that is only thing that matters. I assume she is here at the very best, as contingency for the worst case scenario, if Arsenal goes caboomy. Worst case scenario is that something is very much planned to go caboomy and she is there

to contain the aftermath. She seems kinda as a goat's fifth leg, because her purpose is yet to come.

Blade of Mercy is inherently incapable of any kind of deceit, he is so much not a traitor. He may have been worked on and influenced by Bard, but he is not a traitor in the sense of the word.

Burlyraven

See, that's how traitors get the protag in stories like this, especially when there's been confirmation of more than one. There's always that one extra lurking in the background, waiting for their moment or their master's signal.

TeK

Dunno, feels like overplaying a trope. I wrote already about that kind of one-upping in previous chapters, but "always one more traitor" gets a tad repetitive after a while. From both narrative and inverse standpoint much more effective to create an illusion of "always one more" to keep both the target and readers on edge, guessing and paranoid, without investing more resources into actual traitors. With a heavy sack of human stupidity ready to smack you while you search the shadows.

Burlyraven

I honestly kind of hope you're right. It might just be that I find Blade kind of annoying and Keeper is a fantastic example of an inherently unnerving character. This just also feels like the kind of story where tropes get overplayed intentionally for meta reasons.

TeK

The situation also doesn't call for that kind of overplaying.

Now if it was Tyrant they were against, I would expect backstabbing chairs and eavesdropping pillows, who are secretly gargoyles. And there is just always one more. Just as you killed everyone around you, you realise that you were traitor to yourself all along.

Oshi

Always one more traitor overplayed! How dare you! The Dread Emperor will have words with you!

TeK

But it is. The only reason Tyrant died was to avoid being boring.

Liliet

> With a heavy sack of human stupidity ready to smack you while you search the shadows.

t h i s lmao

Mental Mouse

Interesting take on the Keeper, though I'd think being a living seal for a demon would be enough to make anybody insane. I still want to know what kind of demon that was.

Regarding the traitors, someone commented on a previous chapter that if there's at least two, then there's probably five. Perhaps a pseudo-band of five people actually working for the Bard, plus an unknown number of dupes.

TeK

It's just, being only a living seal doesn't fit. It's a very impressive feat which kinda ends the story. Now the question is, which story was ended, a story of a Maddened Keeper, or a person she was before? Either she wouldn't had a Role after that, retiring in obscurity like a used McGuffin, or she would gain a calling from that, using her experience to actively pursue similar things and keep them away from the world.

Mental Mouse

It seems clear that she did gain or advance the calling she now has. Sealing the demon might well have represented the completion of her Name (perhaps her third aspect), and/or her graduation from a transitional Name.

thearpox23

So do we think it is the demon of Absense that she sealed? Because that would make her possibly the only person with memories of that time the Woe and 14 heroes teamed up to contain the egg.

Javvies

It was said that she predated the Conquest. So, it can't be the Absence Demon from Harrow.

We have very little to go on when it comes to the Maddened Keeper.

thearpox23

- 1: A name with a thirst for information comes along for the Crusade
- 2: A hell egg appears and she comes along
- 3: Things get out of hand
- 4: She glomps the egg, becoming the Maddened Keeper
- 5: Now everyone remembers her as the Maddened Keeper all along

Usually when I make a point I have some sort of evidence to back up my claim, but this is just pure speculation in this case. You're right that we have very little to go on. The whole thing reminds me of the companions you can recruit in Sunless Sea.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, if they remember the Woe joining in the fight, that's a problem. 😊 Cat tipped off the heroes to the Egg's existence and location, as a show of good faith. But she and the Woe stayed the Hell away from it, while Pilgrim assured them "don't worry, we have ways to deal with that".

I was thinking Absence from the way the Keeper could soak up magical doom; Liliet seems to think it was Madness, which is plausible given she's the *Maddened* Keeper. I've come to think that it's simply "not yet revealed".

Narratively, Rogue Sorcerer had a "mysterious" tag – he was one of the few major players where we hadn't seen their origin and aspects. EE seems to be stripping away that tag, so he may have wanted to transfer it to a new character.

thearpox23

I deduced that they joined in the fight from the way Catherine's memories were wonky during the Battle of the Camps. It's not a great leap of logic to assume that whatever they planned, things somehow escalated and the Woe got involved.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, they'd at least remember going there, and both sides were pretty clear that the villains didn't want to get near the thing, while the heroes were perfectly happy to go smite a demon. And hey, they only lost a couple out of more than a dozen.

(Did anyone figure out which Names got disappeared?)

Cat's headache and some of the memory issues could adequately be explained by two of the heroes getting disappeared. Other memory issues would be covered by, you know, Winter Fae overdrive, getting hammered into a coma (I forget the exact details) and then possessed by Akua.

An aside: They say that as you get older, memory is the second thing to go... I forget what the first thing was. 😊

WealthyAardvark

There's probably at least one more traitor around. Consider Chapter 14: Audience

"I will not unmask our friend in these walls so that you might silence them and hide the next sin from our eyes," the Mirror Knight harshly replied. "Queen you might be, Catherine Foundling, but you are no queen of mine."

The Mirror Knight is speaking in anger, and does not strike me as a skilled liar. The 'friend' was the one who told his group that the Red Axe was going to be murdered by Cat. Cat notes that such a message would almost certainly have had to have been sent before the Wicked Enchanter died.

Unless this plot is horribly convoluted, the 'friend' wouldn't be the Poet. He literally just arrived as part of the group. Conceivably the Bard could have told him to lie and say he received a message from the Arsenal, but like I said: convoluted.

The Fallen Monk was technically in the Arsenal before the killing, but for like at most half of an hour. Not enough time for it to be significantly before the murder as to allow the Mirror Knight's group to arrive when it did. Also, as far as we know he wields no magic or miracles to pass a message with.

No, more likely there's a traitor among the 10 Named who are permanently based in the Arsenal. Cat noted in Chapter 15 that most of these Named would have likely have a way to communicate with the outside world outside of official channels.

[TeK](#)

That makes sense. Thematically as well. One traitor came from Archer's group, one from Knight's, one from the Arsenal.

[Liliet](#)

I agree with TeK here (that seems to happen a lot lately, huh). This band's narrative thread is not about any of them being traitors, it's about them being fucking idiots yet somehow bumbling their way through fights anyway – ie your typical DnD party. Keeper is... I like the 'radioactive waste disposal site' analogy, though I'd argue her propensity for knowing secrets is less to do with every secret she finds being too dangerous for everyone else, and more with a built-in radar for *finding* bad shit so she can take it in if necessary. She's containment/death touch/seer... huh. Three Aspects, huh.

[Burlyraven](#)

That's very likely, honestly. But going with the DnD party metaphor, Blade of Mercy feels a little like the character played by the dudebro that's on his phone the whole time, so more than a little bit of my suspicion might be coming from annoyance.

Cicero

It is possible that Blade of Mercy is the "traitor" due to being an idiot rather than due to a reasoned decision to betray the alliance.

It could be as simple as him thinking Bard = Hero = Good and trustworthy, and Catherine = Villain = Bad and untrustworthy and not taking the time to consider that Catherine is their ally against the Dead King and that thus any plot attacking Cat is helping the Dead King.

Basically he's just Lawful Stupid, not crafty betrayer.

"help" bleh.

"You again," Parahumans 2 said, voice sounding like a boring convoluted unreadable mess. "It seems you did learn to fear your betters last time, orc."

Hakram Deadhand rolled his shoulder, limbering the muscle he'd almost just pulled, and bared his fangs at his foe.

"Yes," the Adjutant growled, "let us talk, of voting on topwebfiction.com."

topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil

[Auston Varner](#)

You know, putting down other stories doesn't make this one look better, it makes it look like pgte can't stand on its own merit without you defending it. Which isn't the case, this is easily my favorite web novel, and one of my favorite stories ever. But seriously, the people who are going to be mad about PH2 beating Guide in rankings (if it is) will be mad without your reminder, and anybody who likes both stories will just be annoyed. Either way, probably not actually going to inspire enough people to vote to make a difference. Also, that's just a particularly uninspired example of a quote reminder. I tend to be in favor of them, as being at least theoretically more interesting than a simple link but if you're going to go to the effort of picking out and altering a quote, try to actually make it good.

Thanks for the link though. Ironically, I'm going to vote when I usually wouldn't bother, mostly because I don't usually feel like putting in the effort. But, since I'm already putting in the effort of critiquing your comment, I may as well.

... I'm probably going to regret making this comment when I wake up tomorrow, but for now I'm too tired and grumpy to care.

SpeckofStardust

Honestly The heroes may have been brought in by Bard but I don't think their as traitors but as accelerants. they make the boom bigger/contained.

[Liliet](#)

This.

[TeK](#)

"One hundred and twenty-five: under no circumstances should you trust anyone who has the title of chancellor, vizier or duke. While they will always be powerful and competent, keep in mind they will also inevitably turn out to be in some way treacherous."

Now it just may be my CK2 infested brain, but I just can't reconcile duke and chancellor/vizier as a the same category of titles. Mainly because chancellor is a function and duke is rank, for the lack of better explanation. Evil Chancellor is very much a trope, evil duke is not so much, and mostly because they double as a chancellor, given that it is usually a duke who is powerful enough vassal in a Kingdom to be granted such title and oh my god where am I going with it.

Earl ofPurple

Dukes are as high as you can get before you hit royalty. If someone is plotting in a Good aligned kingdom like Callow, the

dukes have the best chance of replacing the rightful king. Particularly since many dukes have more than a smidgen of royal blood.

[TeK](#)

Oh yeah, that makes sense.

Decius

You let anyone under the rank of viceroy serve on your council?

[TeK](#)

I usually play marriage game as a duke, without going for more land or higher titles for myself. It's more fun this way. By the time you are able to give away viceroyalties, game loses any challenge.

Decius

I'm currently trying to expand the Mali Empire and West African Reformed faith as much as possible without declaring war myself or changing religion or culture.

I've had some success acquiring heirs in raids, converting them during childhood, and then releasing them to inherit. I've had more success with my vassal kings declaring holy wars that my raiding retinue wins, but that's started to make them think they could take the throne.

Eldership succession lets me arrange for said kings to inherit the empire title, then spin off their (former) kingdom as a viceroyalty.

Sir Nil

Odd that Hakram had his interlude first, though that pretty much confirms that Cats not dead. If she is, then the Adjutant would've felt something and we would've gotten his perspective of it. Unless we have another Hakram interlude later on.

Decius

He did feel something. He just attributed it to his current band.

Oshi

Nah, Hakram is very self aware. It's his whole being. You can't be that devoid of emotions and stay sane without knowing where things are coming from. Cat wasn't the source of his unease the band was. He'd feel it if she was dead for good.

Decius

What makes you think Hakram is sane? What makes you think it's possible for Hakram to be sane?

Aotrs Commander

"Honour to the dishonourable is like gold thrown into a river."

slow clap

Christophope, that is geuniely the first smart thing you have ever said, in tandem with not dismissing ambushes for the sake of pride, basically. There's almost help for you yet.

Oshi

He's gonna get glamoured and die to the DK. Don't get too attached.

Aotrs Commander

Thgere is ZERO chance of me getting attached; this is literally the first thing I've ever seen him do that doesn't instantly make me want to see him die anyway. But apparently, even a stopped clock can be right occasionally.

[TeK](#)

Now that is a little too mean. Sure he isn't a nicest man alive, but many of his failing are a consequence of upbringing and ignorance. Not a failure of character.

Besides, as he continues to be used by everyone around him, without real respect (even heroes apparently view him only as a particularly tough brick to be thrown at opposition), I kinda feel sorry for him.

No wonder when someone pretended to see him as a person he was willing to break his oath of chastity. Yet he was being used once again.

ArkhoneX

I know this is unrelated t9 this specific chapter, but 0 bring it up because it is relevant overall. Do you think it is possible that Catherine isn't supposed to be resurrected, and is going to have to pull a Triumphant (May she never return) and fight her way through hell to get back?

[TeK](#)

Not really. EE mentioned before that afterlife wasn't any kind of physical certainty in Guideverse, so this would go against established rules of reality.

[Liliet](#)

What TeK said. The Triumphant thing is just a meme / urban legend, that anyone who knows their shit only ever repeats for cultural/social reasons.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Can someone give me a word count for this story? Broken down by books if possible?

Darkening

The entire woe shipping cat with nephele is just adorable. I look forward to seeing masego commenting on it in some vague fashion next interlude lol. The header about treacherous dukes is interesting considering we're introduced to a Duke and a duchess at the end of the chapter. Wonder how they'll prove treacherous.

[TeK](#)

I believe that does not apply to Fae, at least not to ones not of Winter.

[Auston Varner](#)

I don't know, it's well-known enough in universe

[Auston Varner](#)

*to be a consistent part of the fae courts.
Wordpress really does need an edit function

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, fae are gonna be treacherous regardless of their particular titles.

Captain Amazing

Didn't Hanno say something about his people being invulnerable so long as they were bickering? Telling the Spear they'll have time afterwards is like loudly declaring your imminent retirement. Warlock said something similar to Masego before he died. Hakram moved unresolved sexual tension into a tragic love interest plot. He hanged a subtle red flag on the Vagrant Spear. The Blade of Mercy's jackassery actually helps alleviate this at the end but the Spear is still the most vulnerable. Might be I'm reading too much into this.

laguz24

That was when the tyrant was going all Saturday morning cartoon villain here not this fae invasion which is about as serious as you can get. In an absurd adventure comedic bickering keeps you alive in this bickering is what gets you killed. Also for the remainder, possibly but I don't know enough but I would say you have caught a bad case of shipping goggles.

Auston Varner

Hakram literally said the squabbling between MK and VS was probably something to do with sex. I don't know that trusting the current narrator's judgment is the same as wearing shipping goggles. You could argue that Hakram is wrong, but even then, that would imply that HE'S the one wearing the goggles, not commenters who believe him (what would they be wearing? Unreliable narrator blinders? That's a pretty clunky term, there has to be a better one...)

Liliet

Mirror Knight musing about 'attraction to a Levantine' back at Camps has been quoted on this page lmao

Mental Mouse

There's also the point that Hakram isn't actually one of them, rather he's Cat's agent, so he might in fact be sabotaging them on the story level. I've seen at least one person going "oh, Hakram doesn't attend to that sort of stuff", but that smells to me of "big dumb orc", and as Keeper pointed out (while staying well clear of the others!), the Adjutant may be big, but he ain't dumb. Not to mention that he *is* the Name-bonded second to the greatest mortal storyworker of the age...

Earl of Purple

Hanno's band in the Free Cities was invulnerable so long as they were bickering because that was Champion and Hedge Witch good-naturedly bantering about how ghosts work and basically a scholar getting frustrated by the barbarian misunderstanding everything. That put them in 'comic relief' territory and ensured they matched the tone set by the Tyrant of Helike.

This isn't that kind of bickering. This is nearly meanspirited and a sign of tension underneath the surface that might come to the surface with unfortunate consequences.

WealthyAardvark

It occurs to me that it's a very good thing that Cat set up the Adjutant to accompany this band of five, and that Hakram is doing his best to help it function.

After the Mirror Knight got out of the lockdown he and his fellows were subjected to, someone influenced him to assemble this band and then go to the Miscellaneous Stacks. The Exalted Poet no longer accompanies them, so it's not like they ran there immediately after being cleared by the scrying of the White Knight and picked up whoever they ran into along the way to fill out the band.

The planned story that Cat deduced the Bard had set up was that the Mirror Knight would confront the Black Queen, evidence of an evil plot surrounding her, and the conflict would escalate into a full civil war between all of the Heroes and Villains in the Arsenal. After the conflict started all 12 heroes would be involved, way too many to qualify as a band of five even with the Sixth Ranger taken into account.

That is to say: this band was assembled by the Bard and her traitors to perform a single mission! They're not **meant** to be functional in even the medium term, let alone the long term. Cat has repurposed the band for her narrative, but she never got the chance to assess its strength and see how brittle it is.

So please, Hakram, do what you can to grease the workings of this band, lest the wheels fall off of Cat's plan.

Interlude: Concert

"A problem that cannot be solved by brute strength can still be destroyed by it."

– Dread Empress Massacre

The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide struck like a mountain made hammer, his stride shaking the earth and his war cry echoing as if sung through a gorge.

Hakram Deadhand stood before him in his burnt plate, armed only with a shield and a long axe, and breathed in deep of the cool air of this place. Fear, fear did not come. It should have, for his foe was a godling in the flesh while he was nothing but old steel and arrogance, but all that Adjutant felt was a quickening of the blood. A stirring. His enemy roared out a challenge, but the orc did not answer: the time for taunt and boast was past.

Instead the Adjutant breathed in deep, and even as the Duke of Faerie brought down his morningstar he moved. A step to the side, as the mace shattered stone, and with keen eyes he darted forth. Axe high he struck, but the great fae batted his blow aside with his bare hand and laughed.

The morningstar swept across and Adjutant was not swift enough to leap over the blow, his shield taking it head on as he stood his ground. The whisper of the word was with him, and it had been but a casual stroke, and still he was sent flying a dozen feet back as his shield bent. Hakram barrelled into a horse, toppling it, and rolled away as the morningstar came down and splashed the mount's entrails over rock. Twice now he'd escaped death narrowly, and yet where was the fear? No, instead a strange and wistful joy had come over him. Like he had come home, after a long journey, or found an old place once beloved. His voice escaped his throat, neither challenge nor scream, instead softly and almost sadly singing in the Kharsum of his youth.

"I sing of spring, come winter deep
I sing of a dream beyond sleep."

Adjutant stepped to the side, the lilting and bittersweet pace of *The Old Raider* guiding his feet. Down the morningstar went, the Duke roaring in implacable anger, but Hakram was not there.

"The world was fair, when I was young," he sang.

The wind screamed, the morningstar sweeping, but Adjutant had begin moving before it. Under he went, knees creaking, and rose to his feet as the Duke turned to him in surprise.

"My grip was strong, my fang was long," the orc sang.

The proud creature did not shy away when he approached, pitting its own strength against the curve of Adjutant's axe, but this time when the Duke slapped away the blow Hakram flicked his blade with Name-strength and the fae screamed. Its hand was bloody, and a finger fell onto broken sone.

"And never," Hakram of the Howling Wolves sang, "did my axe falter."

—

The Archer sped up the stairs, steps soft as the breeze as her aspect warmed her bones like noonday sun: she could **Stride** to the end of the world, never faltering nor lost, so long as it shone within her.

She'd already strung her longbow, felt the enchanted wood tighten against her finger as she pricked her ear for the sounds of fighting above. There were five beats to the song, three and two

at odds, and the fae were on the side with the numbers. A woman let out a hoarse scream of pain – the Blessed Artificer, Archer guessed – and so made it clear that the fae were on the *winning* side as well. She must hurry, she thought, reaching for the quiver at her side. Her fingers brushed through the touch of magic that would keep dust and water away from the wood, thumb sifting through the fletching until it found strix feathers and extracting that particular arrow. Black alder wood for the shaft, two centuries old so that the taste for shade and quiet would seep into the ambient magic, and an arrowhead of steel forged by a blacksmith born mute. It was a lurker's arrow, a slayer's arrow.

The strix feathers were simply a fancy of Archer's: the great flesh-eating owls of Waning Woods, after all, preferred to hunt by moonless night.

Her boots touched the second story moments later, arrow loosely nocked as she slipped in the shadow of tall pillars. The foes were righting on the footbridge that tied the hanging spire of crystal to the sides of the Belfry, though the fae wove in and out as was their way. Roland and the Artificer stood on one side, the black-skinned woman bleeding from a long cut across her chest and the Rogue looking like he was so deep in an aspect migraine he could barely see. Against them: a child of straw, an antlered huntress and what could only be a traitor. The Exalted Poet, Archer recalled. Caster, but in a tricky way and not entirely vulnerable up close. Very much human, however. The Archer carefully chose her vantage even as sorcery and Light, past trying to win, desperately tried to keep the two from dying against the three. She would only strike in complete surprise once, and so the shot must be made to count.

Angling herself so that the pillar would hide her from the side but she had a good view of the enemy's side, Archer breathed out. In the beat that followed, she fluidly drew the arrow past her ear and loosed in a single gesture. The lurker's arrow flew without making a sound or drawing the eye in any way, a wisp passing behind a flying tuft of straw from one fae being cleaved in two but inevitably, unerringly finding its target. Steel tore right through the Exalted Poet's throat, avoiding the spine but shredding the vocal cords. The man began choking on his own blood but Archer was already moving, slipping from shadow to shadow as her enemies fell into disarray.

One, the Archer counted

—

His insides were aching, the roughness of continued **Use** having taken him past raw and into bleeding. Worse, Roland was beginning to lack precision: he could not longer properly seize artefacts or sorcery, sometimes fumbling and losing a precious few moments

before finally succeeding. It was the sort of time a man in his position – in over his head – simply could not afford to lose if he was to keep avoiding an unfortunate end.

“No wall, no gate, no mighty keep.”

The Exalted Poet’s rasping voice called out another spurt of what a generous man might call poetry – a far cry from the fine verses of Candide Farstride or those of the princess-poetess Luna Trastanes, what was being inflicted on Roland’s ears – and the Rogue Sorcerer answered with the quickest thing he had at hand, a sizzling Liessen Chisel that spurted out from his sleeve. The Callowan spell was a ward-breaker by design, but it kicked like a horse and it would have shut up the Poet if it’d hit. If. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest leapt into the path, and thought the chisel split him in two it was straw and not blood that went flying: just another false body.

“Will turn away slumber’s cr-”

An arrowhead bloomed in the Exalted Poet’s throat, stealing his breath in a red gasp, and Roland de Beaumaraais felt a startled, nervous giggle leave his throat.

“Rogue, what was that?” the Blessed Artificer asked.

Both fae scattered before she was done speaking, faces startled at the sudden bloodletting.

“The tune turns about, my friend,” the Rogue Sorcerer said, grin tugging at his lips.

The tightening of the Helikean bronze burr into the flesh of his flank warned him that power was being directed at his back and Roland threw himself down, scrabbling for a sharp enough blade that he’d be able to make some damage. That unexpectedly lethal jet of acid from the Dominion hedge mage, or perhaps hellflame confiscated from one of the Eyes? Golden power shivered above him, biting into the railing and sending shards of white-hot metal and stone flying every which way. His coat took most of it, three layers of impact-negation enchantment blown through in the blink of an eye, but it couldn’t cover everything. He swallowed a scream when a piece of shrapnel shredded through his cheek and the corner of his lip, his aspect stumbling into the use of another power.

“Bite,” the Rogue Sorcerer shouted.

Ice erupted with a shrill cry, singing of death.

—

“The days were long in summer sun,” Hakram sang.

There was Adjutant, and there was all that went on around him. In the coolness of his mind, he found himself able to follow both without trouble.

The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide stamped his foot against the stone, the air shivering of the power as a rippled went through the ground as if a pond had been struck. Hakram swiftly circled to the side, waiting until he had come near one of the remaining lancers and the fae struck out at him by sword to measuredly leap up. The lancer's blade rasped against his plate, burnt by fires mightier than any of those burning here today, and Hakram dropped his axe to catch the fae by the wrist and toss him to the side, right onto the downwards arc of the morningstar come to pulp him. He landed in a crouch, blood flecked all over him, and snatched up his axe.

Light flashed, the Blade of Mercy screaming as his greatsword shattered the spear of the Countess of Still Amber, drawing from the fae a scream of rage as he swept her down from her horse with pure strength. The Vagrant Spear whooped madly as she leapt sideways, smashing a bare foot into one of the distorted pale fae's face and an elbow into the others' neck. The three of them stumbled to the ground in a pile, even as one of the lancers made to run through the now-prone heroine only for a tight circle of red sorcery to form around his neck and choke him with his own momentum, buying just enough time for the Mirror Knight to lightly dance away from the Prince of Fallen Leavens and casually split the head from the body in a single stroke.

"Even sorrow sweet, in battles won," Hakram sang.

The Duchess of Red Sunset burned with power, grown incandescent, and the Adjutant could not touch her. None of them could. Tough she was weaker in power than the prince himself, in some ways the nature of that power was harder to deal with. Now it was only a matter of time until she unleashed the fires, and those might turn the tide. Her attention needed to be drawn, focused. The orc retreated towards her, stoking the Duke's anger even further as he found himself denied his foe.

"Coward," the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide screamed

The insult passed over him like water on a duck's back. The Duchess saw him coming, not blinded by her own works, and even as behind him the Duke roared and smashed into the melee like an angry bull she struck at him. A whip of flame lashed out from behind the blinding incandescence, unnaturally twisting over his raised shield and sweeping down to seize his hand. But the whip found only bone there, crafted by a Warlock of which there had been few equals, and there was no pain to loosen his grip. Hakram Deadhand lunged forward and struck at the fae within burning light, only to be driven back. It did not matter, for he'd heard

her snarl in anger at his insolence. These were predictable creatures, once their nature was grasped.

The whip withdrew.

"And never did my hand linger," Hakram sang.

The fires of a setting sun swallowed him whole, but Adjutant had followed the rhythm: quick as the Duchess was, she was not so quick that his soul did not first echo with the will to **Stand**.

—

The huntress had come to hunt her, Archer saw with blade-sharp amusement.

She was a tall one, that fae, painted red and white with antlers tearing out of the sides of her head and a long spear of bone in her hand. Light-footed, almost reluctant to use her wings, and now striding across the stone floors of the Belfry in search of the archer who'd fired at her ally from behind. Ear to ear and eye to eye, Archer knew, the fae's senses were likely better than hers. In a game of shadows, at first glance it might seem like the huntress had the advantage. Of course, that perception relied on one assumption: that, when she heard the string of the bow being pulled, the fae could move faster than Archer could loose. The Named's fingers went drifting through her quiver once more, finding the arrow she sought by the soft touch of the bellhawk feather fletching. Prodigiously loud birds, bellhawks, known to use their cry to startle animals into leaving their hiding places.

The purpose of the matched arrow was a little different, but not dissimilar in essence.

Crouched atop the stacks, overlooking the huntress from the distance, the Archer drew and loosed before a single breath's span could pass. The antlered fae's head swivelled, but before she could finish finding the arrow from the whistling sound the enchantment carved into the birch shaft was awakened by the touch of wind and a deafening cry erupted. The huntress winced in pain, her unnaturally sharpened senses coming back to haunt her, and that delay cost her. While the fae narrowly managed to recover in time to catch the small glint of light on steel and swat aside the arrow, the second one – tipped in cold iron, a precaution she'd originally taken in case the Wild Hunt grew rebellious – that Archer had drawn and fired under the cover of the first found her thigh and struck true. The trick had been in the angle, aimed just so that the fae's peripheral vision would miss the second shot until it was too late. Even if the fae were magic made flesh, as Masego insisted, so long as they used human shape they shared the limitations of human eyes.

Two, the Archer counted.

The huntress screamed as the touch of cold iron spread through her veins like poison, ripping out the arrow only too late. It would not kill her, but she was slowed now. Weakened. And when the antlered fae looked atop the stacks, ready to unleash her wrath, she found only shadows there. Archer was gone, had been since the heartbeat that followed the second loosing. She did not need to stay to know whether her arrows had struck true.

It was with something like wariness that the huntress now eyed the open space before her.

—

The Rogue Sorcerer could feel it in the air, like a scent in the wind: the tide, it was turning.

The Lord of Plentiful Harvest snarled in anger, having been just a beat of the song too slow to escape the sudden blooming of the ice. His foot was frozen up to the knee, and with his childlike body even given his physical strength he was having a hard time finding the right angle to rip himself free. Roland was still panting even as he rose, he wouldn't make it in time, but he was not fighting alone. Adanna of Smyrna, bloodied but unbowed, turned a dark glare unto the fae they had each killed a dozen times only to see straw fly instead of blood. She was nearing exhaustion as well, sweat beading her brow and staining her clothes, but it was with a steady hand that she raised up a simple bundle of four twigs and crushed it in her grip. Four bolts of Light screamed to life, grasped tight and reflecting on her spectacles.

"Four," the Blessed Artificer said, "will be plenty enough for you."

Not bad, Roland, mused even as Adanna's hand came down and the Light thundered. It was well-known among Chosen that speaking the right phrase or challenge could nudge the odds of a blow landing in your favour, and this seemed like it might just pass muster. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest had already lost an arm to Adanna earlier, and today she was to be his bane for the four streaks Light melded together into a single great spear that tore through his chest, burning its way through flesh and bone and whatever deceit lay at the heart of fae. The Rogue Sorcerer, sensing that the end of this was to come soon one way or another, touched a finger to one of the runes in his pocket. The bottom of the Slow Regret, that despicable piece of Stygian work, slapped against his palm and he withdrew the small clay statue depicting a crane.

"You *insects*," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest snarled, body visibly boiling in the wake of his wound. "I will see you annihilated for this."

He'd begun shedding strands of straw from the sides of the gaping hole the Artificer had burned, and with a shudder he contracted onto himself: becoming significantly smaller, yet whole again. *Have we been destroying true pieces of him this entire time?* Regardless Roland touched his bloody cheek and rubbed some of the redness against the side of the statue, watching it sink into the clay without a trace, then grimaced. The part that came after was not one he enjoyed.

The Rogue Sorcerer produced a knife, the same he'd used to bleed dry the Count of Green Apples, and with a ragged war cry ran towards the fae.

—

The flames of a dying sun seared him, scorched him, devoured him whole.

Hakram Deadhand should have been made ash, dust scattered on the wind, but he stood unbowed in the face of the wrath of the Duchess of Red Sunset. Like a statue made of conceit, he refused the fae's verdict and his aspect came smooth and deep at the call. It too, disapproved of the utter arrogance of that creature in believing her will was enough to end him. He bowed his neck to one woman only, and she had sent him out today to win. The fires waned, as all fires had and ever would, and when the last ember died the Adjutant stood still. Unmoved.

"I bore a crown once, of iron hewn," Hakram sang, and struck.

Through the blinding light still at the heart of the fae, Adjutant saw the recoil of dismay. His axe's edge cut through a whip of flame, a pretty trick but poor in defence, and found flesh beneath. The Duchess cried out in pain and he hammered her down on the ground, teeth bared. The orc felt a strong grip squeeze around his ankle, the Repentant Magister's enchantment warning him he was now under glamour. Without missing a beat, Hakram stepped back and closed his eyes. **Find**, he thought. *Find me my foe*. The aspect pulsed within him and blindly he swung, letting Creation guide his hand. The blow glanced off the side of a spear of ivory, a pale-skinned fae coming into existence with a sound like a shattered mirror.

"**Flicker**," the Blade of Mercy yelled.

In the heartbeat that followed he smashed into the pale fae's side, made entirely out of Light — it was a simulacrum, Hakram understood only when after cutting through the spear and tackling the glowing Blade winked out. The orc took the opening, shield smashing the Duchess' face when she tried to rise before he knelt atop her, axe rising. The incandescence flared, tossing him away in a torrent of flame but it had been enough. Already coming down, one eye wide open and burning from the refusal to close,

the Vagrant Spear rammed her spear through the fae's open mouth, screaming in triumph. Hakram landed on his feet, steel boots shooting sparks as he slid to a halt.

"Earned riding," Hakram sang, "under autumn moon."

As if spellbound, the head of every single fae swivelled towards him. Unexpected, the Adjutant thought, but he could work with this. He rolled his shoulder, loosening it before all the howling Hells came for him.

"And never did my heart waver," Hakram Deadhand hummed.

—

Archer savoured the hesitation in the huntress' steps like fine wine, knowing it was the closest fae could come to true fear: the implicit recognition that there was something out there that could kill them, if it wanted to.

It was time to bring this to an end. First she allowed her boots to drag against the floor, the fae near instantly turning towards the noise and tossing a spear of blood-red power at the pillar Archer had been hiding behind. Stone shards and dust blew everywhere, but she'd already been moving. One, two, three steps even as the bellhawk arrow she'd reached for was knocked and loosed. The huntress went wild, charging forward, and though she parried the arrow in question with her bare hand the Archer had already released that second pulsing tension within her. The **Flow** that went beyond what earthly hands could master, hers to borrow for the shortest of whiles. Sometimes she wondered if that was what it felt like, to be the Lady. When everything fit perfectly, and you could place yourself within the parts of the world exactly the way you wanted.

There were twenty feet between the Archer and the huntress. Before one had been crossed, the second arrow was loosed: a slender thing of birch, that would have torn through the fae's left ankle were it not slapped aside by spear. Archer loosed the third arrow before the huntress was even done moving, and the cold iron tip tore through the fae's right shoulder. The enemy screamed in excruciating pain but strode forward. Seventeen feet left. The huntress had learned the trick, now, but it did not matter: Archer had killed things like here before. Much as the fae wanted to ignore the fourth arrow she could not, for it was of cold iron and headed right for her throat. She twisted around, ducking low as she moved — fifteen feet — but the fifth arrow ripped right through her left knee before the spear could adjust to the lowered height. The huntress stumbled but stubbornly carried on.

The sixth arrow was loosed low, at her midriff, and the fae's back erupted with red wings. One bat of them was enough for the

fae to drag herself up, the shot passing under her as she forced her body straight – ten feet – but the seventh tore through the left wing and her flight swivelled downwards. The huntress hit the ground but struck at the stone with the butt of her spear first, so that she would remain half-standing and half-stumbling forward when her feet touched down. Eight feet. A simple trajectory, and the spear was already occupied: the eighth arrow, the last cold iron tip Archer carried, punched through the fae's ribcage and into her heart. She stumbled forward a few steps, gasping, and raised her spear in a last effort. The Archer felt the flow leave her, the world become clumsy and blind once more, but even at her least she could see the span of that death.

Nonchalantly, she stepped to the side of the huntress blow and waited for the antlered fae to drop down with a plaintive scream of pain. Unmoved, Archer took another two steps forward and knocked a mundane arrow before turning. The blood-red power the huntress had gathered above her head did not defend her from the shot the Archer loosed a heartbeat after turning, punching through the back of the fae's skull.

—

One of the Rogue Sorcerer's ribs shattered as the little fae slapped his side, throwing him away like a ragdoll, and he screamed in pain. It wouldn't be enough, damn him, damn this damned statue and the damned sorcerer whose damned soul had thought it was a clever damned thing to make. At least some sort of spell could have been woven in to numb the pain but no, Stygian sorcerers were all bloody sadists. Exception made for Nephele, of course, was a delight unless she had a few drinks in her and reason to be displeased. Roland landed on the stone footbridge, which was not great for his already bruised back, and tried to hack away at the fae that'd flown over to him and was now dropping down. Sadly his knifeplay had gone somewhat rusty of late, and the Lord of Plentiful Harvest snapped the wrist holding the knife before landing on his ribs and shattering another few. Gods, the pain.

"Duck," the Blessed Artificer screamed.

Sadly, between the excruciating amount of pain he was in and the fact that the fae was standing atop his abdomen it had been fated that Roland de Beaumaraais was going nowhere. Which proved something of an issue when a bolt of Light struck him and not the Lord of Plentiful Harvest, who *had* been in a position to heed Adanna's advice. With a breathless scream of pain, the Rogue Sorcerer felt the power scythe through the last two layers of protection on his shirt and sear his skin. Not deeply, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that at least properties would be maintained.

"Cower," the childlike fae ordered, tossing a disk of golden power at the Blessed Artificer.

He then turned cruel eyes at the Rogue Sorcerer, freshly back on his feet, who met him gallantly with a raised knife.

"Adanna," he called out. "Still alive?"

"Yes," the Blessed Artificer panted back.

"Then prepare your sharpest blade," Roland de Beaumaraais said. "This ends."

"In this," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest beatifically smiled, "you are correct. This ends, and it ends with you *screaming*."

The Rogue Sorcerer smiled, deeply relieved.

"Say what you will about Theodosian," Roland said, "but the little bastard would have seen it coming."

On that scathing assessment his fingers closed around the clay statue artefact still in his pocket, the Slow Regret. With a grunt he shattered the clay with his grip and pointed a single finger at the childlike fae. Before his foe could even blink a small thread of translucent sorcery connected them, and Roland screamed once more as his ribs *unsnapped*. The Lord of Plentiful Harvest turned surprised, pained eye on the Rogue Sorcerer, who grinned back mockingly. Roland's seared skin healed, while the fae screamed as the burning touch of Light ate at its chest.

"Artificer," he yelled. "Now is-"

"Soon," Adanna yelled back, tone distracted.

The Rogue Sorcerer's ribs unshattered once more, as the last of the wounds he'd taken since binding himself to the Slow Regret flowed through, and the fae broke out of the enchantment with a yell of triumph.

"Now," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest said, "you-"

He paused, looking up, and Roland followed his gaze. Above them, the crackling web of Light that had been preventing the fae from going up was gone. Instead a hundred glinting swords of Light hung in the air, while the Blessed Artificer grinned a devil's grin at them both.

"Boom," Roland helpfully said, flicking a finger at the fae.

The swords came down and the world went white.

"Spring passed into summer song," Hakram sang.

His ankle was still being squeezed, a reminder that he was under glamour and could not trust all that his eyes told him. Yet he saw much, in the moment where the Court of Autumn tried to destroy him. The Maddened Keeper, laying the lightest of touches on one of the pale fae – it melted from the inside in the beat that followed, in too much pain to even scream. The Repentant Magister, throwing a bauble of silver at the Countess of Still Amber that froze her in place just long enough for the Blade of Mercy to cleave her in two. And Hakram saw, too, the wrath headed his way: a cloud of rot and decay, from the Prince of Fallen Leaves' hand, and single smooth pebble from the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide. Adjutant knew the latter would carry with it the strength of an entire avalanche and was likely to kill him on impact even if the former did not.

The Mirror Knight, unflinching, stood between the orc and the onslaught. Straight-backed, shield raised, the hero widened his stance.

"**Withstand**," Christophe de Pavanie said.

And though death struck at the Mirror Knight, he looked upon it in disdain and let it wash over him. It was an opening, Hakram thought as the rot split around the Proceran. They would not see him coming, not through that. The Adjutant did not embrace fury, for the Red Rage had never been in his blood. He reached instead for the cold, for the frozen bite, and let it flow through his veins. Strength filled his limbs, and he knew the **Rampage** had begun.

"Then summer into fall, headlong," Hakram sang.

The rot ate at his flesh as he leapt through it, but in the throes of his aspect that meant nothing. It was back, and he emerged from the cloud with his axe raised high. The Duke of Unrelenting Landslide blinked in surprise, but swung down the morningstar without hesitation. A step to the side, as the stone broke. The morningstar swung, but Adjutant had the measure of his foe now. And the swiftness to act on that measure. He leapt over the swing, and with all his might smashed his shield in the Duke's face. The fae rocked back, in pain, and took a hand off the morningstar to blindly swipe. Adjutant began to duck the moment he landed, smooth and measured, and his axe sliced through the fae's heel. The Duke screamed out in pain, falling onto his knee, and there the orc was waiting.

"And I know what waits after," Hakram Deadhand sang, axe smashing through the Duke of Unrelenting Landslide's forehead.

Again and again he ripped free and swung, making a red mess of the fae's head, until the giant toppled at his feet and he

breathed out. He chanced a look around him, finding that now only the Prince of Fallen Leaves still stood and that the band of five was surrounding him. Yet Hakram's ankle was still squeezed tight: a heartbeat later Sidonia struck at the fae, only for the illusion to shatter, and the orc grasped that there was worst yet ahead.

The prince was in the wind, and there was no one protecting the sword meant to slay the Dead King. The last two lines of the old song came to him, like a mournful warning.

*I sing of spring, come winter deep
I sing of a dream beyond sleep*

[*ErraticErrata*](#)

Later than I would have liked and still a little raw, but there it is. Enjoy!

caoimhinh

It was an *awesome* chapter, don't you worry about that.

Hope you get better soon, health is of paramount importance at all times.

Jessica Day

Bravo! Encore, encore!

Arctruth

Absolutely brilliant chapter. Wound up fitting Hakram's words to Avi Kaplan's Change on the Rise while I read. Honestly this is one of the best fight scenes I've ever read.

DrD

Wow... that was... wow. 0_0

NerfContessa

Indeed.

Terribilis

I adore your poetic chapters EE.

I hope you feel better soon!

Cap'n Smurfy

Really nice to see Archer in action from her own perspective. She has a surprising amount of variety in her arsenal of arrows.

dadycoool

And it shows just how much time and effort went into each piece of her equipment.

[Liliet](#)

Surprising? 😊

Cap'n Smurfy

Yeah I was expecting her to have just regular, well-made arrows plus a few specialised ones like her mage killers. Not a custom made highly magical arrow for each and every scenario.

[Liliet](#)

I figure she has just, like, five to ten kinds in total. She just has a lot of each because when she needs them she needs many at once.

Shikkarasu

I assume the opposite. She mentioned running out of Mage-Takers after 5-10 shots the first time she used them. Between that and the fact that she still has Cold Iron *years* after her last tangle with the Fae suggests she has dozens of different kinds and occasionally adds 10ish of a new type of arrow to her collection as and when she has the opportunity/need.

It's also an example of her deceptively calculating mind. She acts like her plans are haphazard, but she's always ready for anything.

WuseMajor

"The trick, young Archer, is not to plan for everything."

"Huh?"

"The trick is to be ready for anything."

"Ohhhh..."

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but she won't have all of them in her quiver at the same time. It's got limited size.

That said, YEP.

(and she wrote out a list of names she could call Akua, I will never be over that)

Cap'n Smurfy

That is still more magic arrows than I assumed. This surprised me. I am surprised. Behold my surprised face: 😲

laguz24

Now, what would the bard need severance for? Aside from the obvious. Also, this is what I need in a life going to places I do not know.

Sir Nil

Probably just to destroy it, which forces the Alliance to use the Judgement corpse instead against the Dead King. Which, we still don't know the cost of yet. All we know was that is was enough to make the Augur go against the Bard.

Oshi

It's never so easy. Better still to poison it or bend it into uselessness.

Sir Nil

I see this as an attempt by the Bard to drag Calernia back into the Age of Wonder. Which is her playing field instead of the Age of Order Cat has made. The story the Bard was originally trying to pull was one of the desperate Warden of the West unleashing a super weapon to slay the Dead King. Very classic Age of Wonder, instead Kairos slew the Age of Wonder by crippling the weapon. Kairos wasn't kidding when he said he'd slain it, by throwing the Hierarch into Judgement, he may have crippled the Judgement weapon or changed its nature. Especially if we consider the fact that the Hierarch, a Named who believed all to be equal was the one that silenced Judgement. If the Judgement weapon is activated, I can almost guarantee that the Hierarch will have some hand in its after effects.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, Severance is pretty much a super-weapon in its own right, albeit a heroic version. The thing is, there are also ways it could go wrong... and Bard might have her own opinions about how safe it is. In particular... what happens if it succeeds... but then it's still around? Would possessing it be a balance-of-power issue in its own right? Then too,

there's that old saw about never placing your trust in an artifact...

Sir Nil

The thing is, is that it isn't the only weapon the Arsenal was developing. Sure it's one of the main ones, but the fact that there are multiple weapons being developed against the Dead King is another blade barred at the old Age of Wonder. The Age of Wonder was the Age of Heroes and Villains, and it seems to love simplifying conflicts into just that. A Hero vs a Villain, but Severance is a weapon that had hands from both Good and Evil in creating and controlling it. It is more Order than Wonder because of that.

I also personally suspect that whatever drawback the Judgement Corpse might've originally had, was something the Bard was counting on happening. I theorise the original drawback of the Judgement Corpse was causing the Eye of Judgement to be cast on everyone Calernia, like what would've happened with the Contrition Corpse but on a much larger scale. If that happened, it would've effectively turned the entirety of Calernia Good because Judgement killed that everyone that wasn't.

Sir Nil

As for the power balance, as we're not sure what Bard's exact motivations are, we won't know what her opinions are, but I suspect she only cares about power balance if it benefits her in some way.

Sir Nil

A single heroic band of 5 can beat the Dead King, but that is an old method, that has a steep cost of life and doing so would enforce the previous Age of Wonder mindset as opposed to the the Age of Order Cat is trying to build. In trying to shatter the Truce and Terms, the Bard is trying to force an old method of victory as opposed to the new one Cat is trying to make. If Cat successfully kills the Dead King with both Evil and Good named, then she sets an unbreakable precedent for her future Liesse Accords. That of a powerful named using great powers getting drowned by multitudes of named.

ByVectron!

To get free of the story, maybe? To cut that thread connecting her to the mortal realms.

MrRigger

Well now, isn't that a problem? Or rather, an opening for Cat to make her reappearance stymieing the Prince. And I can't help but think how some of the Heroes around him took the sight of the Adjutant fighting and singing, cause that was awesome.

Big I

Just a shame they can't understand Kharsum.

caoimhinh

Indeed.

I'm kind of hoping for a glimpse into the POV of one of the Heroes around Hakram, and them going like "The Adjutant growled strangely in that eerie tongue of the Orcs, all soft grunts and throaty rasp, but Gods Above, it sounded like he was *singing*. With a strangely fitting cadence that matched his steps."

Kinda like when the Drow went to battle and Itima's son was freaked out by the foreign chant of "Rumenarumenarumena".

Sir Nil

Oh dear, Adjutant singing a similar song to Cat? Archer being in the role of the hunter? If this wasn't meant to mirror Cat then I'd eat my foot.

Burnsy

"No one protecting the sword meant to slay the Dead King."

I know where Cat went.

[Liliet](#)

Same

Shikkarasu

The poor Prince is about to get a face-full of the late and Lately Queen of Callow.

[Liliet](#)

y e s

ATLRoyal

Anyone wanna take some time to compose the full song Hakram sung w/o the rest of the text between it all?

[Auston Varner](#)

Here you go!

I sing of spring, come winter deep
I sing of a dream beyond sleep

The world was fair, when I was young
My grip was strong, my fang was long
And never did my axe falter

The days were long in summer sun
Even sorrow sweet, in battles won
And never did my hand linger

I bore a crown once, of iron hewn
Earned riding under autumn moon
And never did my heart waver

Spring passed into summer song
Then summer into fall, headlong
And I know what waits after

I sing of spring, come winter deep
I sing of a dream beyond sleep

Sulomund

Good stuff.

RandomIntenetStranger

God i was shaking through the whole thing and while some of it may have been because of the cold it was mostly due to excitement.

Frivolous

I kept worrying Hakram was dead because he was singing, because orcs sing death-songs. Thank goodness he lived through this episode.

[Javvies](#)

Hakram's been doing the battlesong/chanting thing for years. So him doing it again isn't exactly a sign of anything. Fortunately. Or unfortunately, depending.

dadycool

"Dead the man and dead the hand" from the war against Summer comes to mind.

Letouriste

This is not him singing. He sung several times in the story, the first one being in the extra chapters.

Nuke_The_Earth

I'd love a list of all the parts where he sings, or all the songs he sings. Orcish chants just have a strong feel to them.

beleester

I think the only times we've actually *seen* it are here, and in Conspiracy II (Extra chapter). It's mentioned that he took down a Revenant while reciting poetry during the timeskip, but it doesn't happen "on camera."

Honorable mentions:

"Dead the Hand" (about Hakram, but not Orcish) is in Chapter 25: Intent

"Ruin, Sown" (not Hakram, but Orcish) is the epigraph to Interlude: Congregation III

The Riddle of Power (Orcish, but not poetry) is in Chapter 23: Recoup

beleester

Missed one more bit of Kharsum poetry: A group of Orcs about to get killed recite "The Chant of the Dead" in Heroic Interlude: Balestra.

hakureireimu

They also sing not-death songs.

[Auston Varner](#)

I believe they call those "death for other people" songs 😊

Eleron M Pfoutz

It was a death-song. Just not HIS death-song.

WuseMajor

"Today is a good day for SOMEONE ELSE to die!"

Eleron M Pfoutz

Exactly!

[Javvies](#)

Archer in action. I don't think we've ever gotten such a good look at her working like this before.

That's a nifty last trick the Rogue Sorcerer used. But it's easy to understand why he doesn't like that one.

Hakram the battlesinger/chanter. Excellent as always.
Wonder how the Heroes will react to his performance.

hakureireimu

Late Regret?

dadycoool

Huh. Roland pulling out all the stops today. Too bad the Fae are making him use it early.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, it's not like it was wasted – even with it, it took the Artificer's "sharpest knife" to deal the final blow, and that's after everybody had been chipping away at his straw bodies and hammering his main body as well. That dude was one badass boss – but unfortunately, not the final one.

I suspect Roland mostly was regretting that he had to use it at all, and no wonder!

dadycoool

I was referring to the fact that he used it against non-undead. When you're in a war with the Dead King, you need every blade pointed North, which actually illustrates the tragedy that is this infighting-filled arc.

hakureireimu

I actually think EE is reusing names, unintentionally or not.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Every blade pointed north" is a rallying cry for Cat's potential allies. It in no way prevents nor binds other enemies from getting in the way. Really, fae aren't really part of Calernian politics, so much as a natural hazard and potential resource. Now, if Cat were able to turn an entire court of Arcadia against DK, that would be useful!

ciara

Damn these derivative villains, always re-using old badass names for their new curses. No one appreciates the theatricality anymore!

dadycoool

This chapter is really cementing the thought that Cat's Name will be a music-based one, considering she and Hakram were singing

songs while wrecking their opponents and Archer thought of the encounter in terms of beats.

Speaking of the songs, Hakram with the flex!

[TeK](#)

Heartbeats though. Bur yeah, Catbard confirmed.

dadycool

Have people been talking about the possibility of Cat actually transitioning into inheriting the name of Bard, the way she was slated to become one of the Knights as Squire?

[TeK](#)

Not really more like taking upon her Role instead. With a possible name of Guide or something.

dadycool

Now that Name would be Meta AF.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or Cat may become Bard's Eternal Opponent, the trickster spoiling her plans and rewriting the stories.

WuseMajor

Honestly, I've been suspecting that Bard's real plan this entire time has been to Retire/Die for Good, but, because the stupid pointless conflict between Heaven and Hell needs a Referee/Emissary, she can't. So, she's been grooming a replacement. Someone who wants to

1) Put a stop to the forever war.

AND

2) Wants to murder the Bard for good.

AND

3) Has an amazing instinct for Stories.

All are required. Three so she can do the job, two so she's motivated to end the Bard's endless existence, and one so the karmic punishment for two can snap shut around her and bind her to the Bard's endless task and put her in the same unending hell the Bard is in, destroying everything she tried to create and keeping all the crabs in the bucket until she can pawn it off on another girl.

dadycool

Considering it's Cat, I think she has the skills, support, and Protagonist Armor to do that and avoid the punishment. I almost wonder if Bard became the Intercessor by accident/punishment and her replacement wouldn't necessarily have the exact same circumstances/result.

laguz24

You know I'm really worried about how spring will be required to respond to mirror autumn. Who will make the deal with them and how?

[Javvies](#)

So far, based on what we know, this isn't a situation where Spring would need to mirror Autumn.

Autumn is not at war with an outside party. Autumn is launching a raid for the redemption of debts owed to (Hunted Magician) and by the Court (to Bard). Plus, the Arsenal may or may not qualify as sufficiently of Creation anyways.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sure looks pretty warlike to me... But the autumn/spring dynamic might not be the same as Winter/Summer was, especially since the merger.

[Javvies](#)

They're not doing anything that would permanently change the balance of power between the Courts.

They're here as debt collectors (Hunted Magician) and in the process will pay off a debt incurred (Bard) to locate him. Then they'll leave.

They're not trying to annex part of Creation. For that matter, the Arsenal might not qualify as sufficiently part of Creation to count.

As far as we know, anyways.

Daniel E

I can't recall a time when we ever saw a Named use all 3 Aspects more or less back to back.

Black opened the second siege of :Liesse with both Lead and Conquer, and ended his argument with Malicia with Destroy. That ended with him knocked out for days, so, given that the other three times we saw that were Lone Swordsman in a duel with Catherine during first Liesse, the Hedge Wizard getting baited

and killed by the Warlock and the Stalwart Paladin just before Catherine stole him from his angels, I suspect using up all the power they grant might strongly suggest the end of one's story as well.

nick012000

There was also the time that Akua fought the fae right after she became the Diabolist.

Mental Mouse

In addition to "Underscore"'s list, We *have* seen a lot of fights where one side was trying to bait out their opponent's Aspects, as many as they could. Not only do the most powerful aspects have limited uses, but even if they don't, revealing them may give the opponent a chance to come up with a specific counter.

For a Named to use all three Aspects in the same fight normally qualifies as "shooting their wad" – it seems to imply that the Named is pushed to their limit and may well be overmatched. (Ranger, as usual, is an exception.)

byzantine279

Since Ranger's Aspects are passive rather than active they don't count for this. I suspect this counting trick only works at all with Named that have 3 active aspects.

Thanatoss

Ranger Aspects are: Learn, Perfect, and Transcend.

Why more Named do not attempt to get this broken overpowered combination of Aspects when they are undefinied? Cat did get Learn when she was actively taught by Black. So it shouldn't be impossible to get at least Learn and Perfect, that would make any normal martial Named or mage Named OP on the spot.

Javvies

Ranger's version of Learn lets her learn stuff in combat. Squire Cat's version of Learn did not allow her to learn stuff in combat. Only when doing focused study or actively being taught.

Same term, different emphasis. I expect that the tradeoff for Ranger's Learn is that it is less useful, if at all, for noncombat, utility, or academic applications, whereas Cat's Learn let her pick up all kinds of things from studying or being taught.

And, also? Getting a Learn type Aspect similar to Squire Cat's ow probably relatively common for transitional Names, or academically focused.
Getting Perfect? That's going to be difficult.

Plus, Aspects are usually something you need to shore up a weakness or need in the moment, or something that epitomizes you or what you do, doubling down and enhancing something you already have or have done.

Juff

Typo Thread:

breathed in deep (appears twice in quick succession)
begin moving > begun moving
slipped in > slipped into
righting > fighting
from the side (maybe remove this)
Archer counted > Archer counted.
out form > out from
make some damage (maybe do some damage)
rippled > ripple
by sword > with sword
others' > other's
Tough she was > Though she was
Landslide screamed > Landslide screamed.
Archer was gone, had (extra space)
rose, he > rose; he
straw form > straw from
They part > The part
glowing Blade winked out (something's wrong here)
like here before > like her before
huntress blow > huntress' blow
was a delight > who was a delight
properties > proprieties
this," the Lord of Plentiful Harvest beatifically smiled, "you >
this"—the Lord of Plentiful Harvest beatifically smiled—"you
finer > finger
last if the > last of the
and single > and a single

Nuke_The_Earth

"The world was fair, when I was young,
My grip was strong, my fang was long,
And never did my axe falter."

This part specifically struck a chord in me pretty strongly. I've always had a sort of affinity for warrior cultures, and this, to me, sings of what it is to be an Orc.

[Loki](#)

Username checks out.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Warrior-Poet Hakram Deadhand. Awesome scene.

Not to say I didn't enjoy the little details of Rogue Sorcerer's or Archer's styles of fighting, but Warrior-Poet.

dadycoool

People who can kick your ass and simultaneously sing a ballad about it are a special type.

'Ladi Williams

Get well soon EE...this was awesome.

Once again I say this would make an awesome series if we can get a good studio to produce it...

I would pay extra to watch the deadhand scenes over and over again.

Wonder

The moment Deadhand started singing, I knew the Duke was dead.

[TeK](#)

He really duked it out, eh?

Mammon

Damn Archer, one can tell you're not too experienced in this dramatic poetry stuff. All owls eat flesh and most to all hunt at night. That's just nonsensical.

[Burlyraven](#)

I love it when the war chants and songs come out, and it's been far too long since we've seen either Hakram or Archer be badass.

I know Cat is the obvious choice for defender of the sword, but I have to wonder if we might not see Kingfisher make an appearance, possibly as a last second save, or even as the main champion. His aspects are still largely unknown to the story.

[Javvies](#)

Kingfisher Prince is mostly out of play, as he's babysitting Red Axe somewhere hidden.

[Burlyraven](#)

Not a guarantee with all this going on. Besides, there are hints that Red Axe might still have even more value to the

current story possessing Arsenal, so Hakram and Mirror 5 might find themselves stumbling upon the pair.

[TeK](#)

Violets are red
Roses are blue
You have an arrow
Stuck in you

[TeK](#)

The orcs are green
The drow are grey
I have penetrated
The Fey

'Ladi Williams

Why does everyone think Cat's gone to defend the sword.
Have you all forgotten the Hierophant?
First of his name...Seer of wonders...Witness extraordinaire...Rebucker of gods...
He's more than enough to swat down one errant fae.
Puh-lease

Raved Thrad

I can just see Masego chortling in glee. "A prince of the fae? For *me*? Oh Catherine, you're too good to me. Just think of all the experiments I can run, because we don't have to give this one back."

Big Brother

A Heiropgant does not chortle. At most, he'd let out a pleased "hmph" before imprisoning the Prince.

Raved Thrad

I doubt that Masego's outgrown his ability to rollick with raucous laughter. His sheer enjoyment of the irony (or is that stupidity?) that was the Exiled Prince showed that.

Morgenstern

Also, of one of the breeds he very much wanted to have for his Quartered Seasons theory. =D

Mike E.

Hopefully Heiropgant is in his quarters ready to defend the not-so-public stuff he is working on, and NOT at the badass sword.

Mental Mouse

Quibble: IIRC, Hierophant isn't the first of his name, it's just a rare one. And against a Prince of the Fae, without his sorcery, even he's going to have trouble. I figure he'll win, for a whole bunch of reasons, but it'll be a fight. Remember too that his Quartered Seasons workshop is believed to be a target in its own right, so he doesn't just have to win, he needs to protect his work. That said, his work includes a lot of stuff that specifically deals with fae power – the Prince might well end up as a captive. Dunno if the Prince is dumb enough to try and wield the sword...

Daniel E

I give up. I don't know why my comments need moderation and subsequently get lost half the time 😞

dadycool

Language? The only time mine have needed moderation was because of swearing.

Daniel E

It's consistent though. The above post needed moderation, it just started one day for no discernible reason.

Daniel E

And this post in turn also needed moderation. I believe that deserves a 'wtf'? 😞

thearpox23

I guess that depends on what system erra uses for moderation. If it's some offsite/wordpress mods, then it's probably just some small man trying to feel big. If it's only erra himself doing the moderation, the system probably either has 'moderation' listed as a problematic word OR you're just much more likely to get hit by software once you've been caught by it once.

Daniel E

The latter seems likely, though I can't fathom what started it in the first place. Welp, I can still read the comments at least, even if timely posting is now beyond me.

dadycool

Or maybe someone or something basically said "Fuck Daniel in particular."

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Maybe the Bard is working against you?

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

On a more serious note: are you logged into your WordPress account on the device that you used to post these comments?

Daniel E

Yes, just my home PC. Registered here and sign in with Google like usual.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Have you tried contacting WordPress tech support? I don't *know* that it'll help, but it's worth a try.

[TeK](#)

Christophe de Pavanie said

Pavanie: Asian freak with deep dimples and big eyes

WuseMajor

I used to be a Fae Noble, until I took an arrow to the knee. And the other knee. And the stomach. And the heart. And the brain.

WuseMajor

Also, is anyone else suddenly worried that the Fae are just a distraction? Something powerful enough to ensure that all the Named blow their wads here and are left powerless and in the hospital when the Dead King's minions arrive tomorrow? Or Spring? Or something?

I mean, we might not have uncovered all the betrayers yet.

RoflCat

So since something like Roland's Late Regret exist, what's the chance Catherine had some trick like that prepared since she KNEW she will get betrayed?

We have Akua who previously did the whole 'soul outside the body but can still exhibit Name power' back in Liese.

So far after the knife moment there was 'billion of Night' from Roland's POV (since Count of Green Apple made his appearance there it means this happen after Catherine made the wager) And Archer finds only a single corpse with a knife she recognize stuck in it.

Count of Green Apple got knifed by Roland.
The 3 Archer found were the straw guy, huntress and the traitor poet.
Count of Ravenous Flame got the chop so he's 'out'.
Monk is most likely that corpse.

Which leave the Duchess of Rash Tempest still mysteriously missing despite her oath to the Bard.

[308924810a](#)

Cross posting, but while I was rereading chunks in preparation to write fan fiction for this I had an idea:
I was rereading book 4 chapter 34: abyss, and I had a sudden insight that makes a bunch of the Bard's nonsensical actions/the nonsensical actions that are attributed to her influence, tie together.

In the chapter Akua mentions that winter Cat could have been granting titles and assembling a court, and that none of the heroes on the continent would be able to escalate in strength fast enough to stand against her, but that would have caused intervention from the Gods Above to level the playing field, then the Gods Below would have intervened to counter, and things would have gone into an escalation spiral.

The Bard's supposed influence to make the Crusade go east rather than north, her effort to make a Named rule Procer, and her effort to break up the Truce and Terms can all be tied together with the assumption that she wants an escalation spiral, where the side that is clearly Good is losing, so the Gods Above step in, then the Gods below step in, and things escalate from there. It also explains the Dead King's exclamation that people would turn against the Bard If they knew what she wanted, because planning to wipe out most of Procer with divine mutually assured destruction is one of the few things I think could turn heroes against her at this point.

It might even explain what the heck was going on with the Fey courts unexpectedly invading Callow, because the bard set up a story that would put their power in the hands of a local in the hopes of provoking an escalation spiral.

The Dead King's invitation to Cat to go to Keter had little to do with a bidding war, and potentially even little to do with pitting her against Malicia, but it had everything to do with convincing her that her critical interests were secure enough that she didn't need to start granting titles and start that escalation spiral.

However I think something changed around the time of Kairos and the Heirarch's intervention to convince him that he no longer needs to worry about a godly intervention escalation spiral.

Whether he's actually convinced that the hierarch ruined whichever plan the Bard had that had required an escalation spiral, or whether it's actually Cat allying with Procer and muddying the clear Good VS Evil narrative that made him get confident, he feels he has both the opportunity and the strategic need to either take or at least cripple enough of Calernia that the next crusade can't just finish him.

Now why the Bard wants an escalation spiral I have no clear guess.

[sengachi](#)

Holy hells and hallowed bells, there was a poetry to this chapter.

Interlude: Threads

"The finest exercise of war is to interrupt the enemy's plan. Therefore, the general without a plan is also without peer."
– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

"Archer," Roland smiled. "It's damned good to see you."

Indrani flicked a glance at the ripped-up footbridge, large chunks of it either torched, cut or otherwise savaged beyond recognition.

"Same to you, Rogue," she replied. "You've had an interesting day, by the looks of it."

The rueful smile she got in answer to that was classic Roland, a touch of nonchalance facing the constant messes he seemed to get himself into. A tall, dark-skinned woman with those famous Wasteland golden eyes made her approach, skittish as a cat.

"Greetings, Archer," the Blessed Artificer stiffly said. "I am—"

"I know who you are," Indrani informed her.

She was not hostile in tone, even though the heroine seemed physically unable to help herself from picking fights with Masego whenever they were in the same room. Archer had no need to fight Hierophant's battles for him. Besides, she'd made some inquiries and judged that Adanna of Smyrna would stay within acceptable bounds even if she got the upper hand — nothing permanent, nothing crippling. If nothing else, the Artificer would serve to

make sure that Masego didn't got too soft during his years away from the front.

"Pick up the Poet and bring him down," Archer ordered them. "I want to ask him a few questions."

"You have a healer?" Roland asked, sounding relieved.

Someone had done a nasty turn on his cheek – heated metal, by the charred and bloody looks of that wound – so she could see why he'd be. The Artificer was bleeding as well, but it looked mostly like shallow cuts. Both heroes were exhausted, though, maybe a quarter hour away from the sense of danger fading and the shakes settling in instead. The Rogue Sorcerer had a few potions to delay that further, she knew, but odds were Cocky would have better stuff below.

"I brought the Concocter," Indrani said. "She's down there, examining the body."

"Only the one?" Roland probed, sounding surprised.

"It is the Black Queen's," the Blessed Artificer bluntly told her. "The fae said that she died and they cannot lie."

"Knowingly," Archer corrected. "They cannot lie *knowingly*. There's a body down there, sure, but I've my doubts."

If Indrani was right, though, it begged the question of where the Hells Catherine actually was. She wouldn't have left Roland and the Artificer to face enemies outnumbered without a good reason, or even just disappeared at all for that matter. Indrani had been sent out to get answers and she'd yet to bring them back.

"There will be another prisoner," Roland volunteered. "I crippled the Count of Green Apples and tossed him into the stacks on the western side of the first story."

Archer let out a low whistle, genuinely impressed. Fae didn't usually leg it when they'd come for a reason, as these clearly had, so if the Count hadn't come back then *crippled* must be something of an understatement.

"I'll pick him up, then," Indrani said. "Can the two of you handle the Exalted Poet?"

The Blessed Artificer was already kneeling at the man's side, she noted with approval, already getting down to work. Except the dark-skinned woman was grimacing in dismay, finger on the side of the traitor's neck.

"He's dead," Adanna of Smyrna said. "He has no pulse."

Archer blinked in surprise. She'd shot him in the throat, true, but she'd avoided the spine. She'd buy unconscious, she'd been banking on it really, but *dead*?

"Isn't he a Levantine hero?" Indrani said.

"He was a Levantine *poet*, Archer," Roland reminded her. "An occupation not habitually known for its physical fortitude."

"It isn't as if being born in the Dominion lends someone greater vitality," the Blessed Artificer waspishly said. "Though to my passing knowledge of medicine, he appears to have died from choking on his blood."

"Hells," Archer cursed. "I wanted to interrogate him. How dead is he, would you say?"

"... averagely dead?" Adanna of Smyrna hazarded.

"Not fresh gone," Roland noted. "If you're thinking of fanning a last spark with tonics, I'd say that stallion has left the pen."

Damn it, just when she finally *had* someone at hand who had those sorts of brews.

"Just toss him down, then," Indrani sighed. "Can't leave the body unattended, not with the number of potential necromancers in this place."

"He's a hero," the Blessed Artificer bit out angrily. "We can't just-"

"He was a traitor," Archer flatly interrupted, "and now he's a corpse. Carry him down in a tender embrace, if you feel like it, but I've no intention of lending an ear to your praise of a failed turncoat."

She shot a look at Roland.

"Don't linger," she said. "That's a nasty wound, best to get it seen to as soon as possible."

Archer did not bother with goodbyes, instead leaving them to make their decision on their own as she headed for the stairs. Much as it rubbed her the wrong way not to remove her arrows from the corpses, given how precious they were, it would have to wait. After going one story down she made her way around the side of the Belfry and found the fae the Rogue Sorcerer had handled, brow rising when she saw one of the Fair Folk outright unconscious. She'd seen their like wounded and dead by the hundreds, but *unconscious*? That was much rarer. What had Roland done to screw with it that badly? Screw with him, it turned out as Archer got close, but when she turned over the body – a longknife in hand, just in case – she started at the face.

"I know you," Archer muttered, brow creasing.

Whatshisname from the Battle of Dormer, wasn't he? The fucker who'd kept throwing fire at her and nearly burned Vivienne to death when he caught her flatfooted. The Duke of Something Something. Green Trees, Green Yews – no, that was some other bastard Cat and Hakram had murdered while she'd been out in southern Callow with Zeze – oh, Green *Orchards*! So the last time she'd seen that face it'd been on a Duke of Summer, one who should be thoroughly dead by now. Cat had been in a black mood that night and people didn't tend to walk those off. Much less turn up a few years later with a different name, yet here we were. That had *implications*, according to some of what she'd picked up lately.

Indrani had honestly paid only passing attention to this Quartered Season racket that Masego and Catherine had going on, doing her due diligence of going through everybody's things more out of habit than genuine interest, but she'd picked up a thing or two. The principle, as she understood it, had come from a theory Zeze put forward after the Twilight Ways were born and he got rid of the petty god in the back of his head: that the Court of Arcadia Resplendent, the one born from the wedding of Summer and Winter, was an entirely new entity and not something flowing directly from either Winter or Summer.

There were a bunch of complicated explanation for why that was, best left for others to dig into, but the heart of it was a division being made between 'power' and 'crowns', the former being the good stuff and the latter the formal mantle. Masego believed that Arcadia was one crown and Twilight another. Which meant that regardless of where 'power' had been accrued – mostly Arcadia with Twilight and the Crows splitting the difference, the theory went – there were still two 'crowns' up for grabs. It didn't matter if there wasn't much 'power' left behind either, the way Masego put it, because it was still a functioning godhead. Dried up, sure, but functional.

What he and Cat meant to make of it had been straight out of that brand of outrageous that tended to spring up whenever they collaborated on something: vicious to the bone and too clever by half. Instead of making a giant sharper or even a fine arrow for their good pal Indrani, they'd decided to make a gift. So what did it mean, this old face with a new name? Someone else would have to figure it out, she supposed, because it was beyond her.

"Might as well bring you down," Indrani mused, gazing down at the fae.

She was wary of waking up one of the fae and interrogating them without a warding specialist at hand, but Roland with a few potions in him might do in a pinch. There was a need for answers. She hoisted the fae over her shoulder, forcing her bow to the

side, and finished the trek back at the bottom of the Belfry. Cocky was kneeling on the floor, silver knife in hand as she studied the insides of the dead body she'd been left with, and only vaguely gestured in greeting when Indrani dropped the unconscious count.

"So?" Archer probed.

The Concocter withdrew her hands, stripping them of some sort of gauzy transparent film they'd been coated in and throwing it aside. It melted a beat later, leaving behind only the filth and blood it'd soaked up.

"I was going to have to ask you if the Black Queen was misassigned, but it won't be necessary," Cocky bluntly said. "Whoever this boy was, he was not finished going through puberty."

Indrani felt her shoulders loosen. She'd believed, she had. Believed that Cat wouldn't go out like this, to a nobody and a few fae, that this plan had been of her own making and that meant she still had hands to play. But Archer also remembered the stillness of ice around her, the utter silence of creeping death, and shed known that sometimes there just wasn't anything you could do. Sometimes the world got the last laugh, and all you could do was take it. *But not today*, she thought, breathing out. She wouldn't be losing anyone today.

"Keep that between us," Archer said. "You couldn't identify the body."

"I know the Rogue Sorcerer professionally," Cocky pointed out. "He is aware I am not, in fact, a complete imbecile."

Indrani swallowed the theatrical *my Gods, how long have you been lying to him?* that'd come to her tongue unbidden, an old habit not quite shed, and forced herself to focus.

"He'll also know to keep his mouth shut," Archer replied. "We understand each other."

While the dark-haired Named had no idea why Cat wanted to pass herself off as dead, she didn't feel all that inclined to spread knowledge of the trick around now that she'd figured it out. Presumably there were reasons for this, another round of deep games that Indrani had long given up trying to figure out. Archer could catch the scent a story when it was around, and she'd been taught how to avoid those that'd get her killed, but she just didn't have the knack for that sort of thinking that Catherine did. It took a peculiar sort of madness, to master those arts, and not of a sort she envied.

"Did you get another prisoner upstairs?" the Concocter asked. "I have serums readied, if it is the case."

"He, uh, died," Indrani said.

A beat passed.

"You killed him, didn't you?" Cocky said, and it wasn't really a question.

"Let's not get hung up on who did what," Archer evaded. "Do you have something that would compel fae to speak?"

Her brow rose, and she now seemed interested.

"Magically compel, no," the Concocter said. "But there are other ways. I have a substance than should be able to lull him into a pleasant trance and make him receptive to inquiries."

"That'd do it," Indrani approved. "They're hard to break with pain, but they're not immune to gentler methods. Thanks, Cocky."

The purpled-eyed woman eyed her with something like wary surprise, as if expecting a barb to follow, and only nodded after a few moments had passed.

"I can wake him up now, if you'd like," the Concocter said, gesturing at the prisoner.

"Best to wait for the Rogue Sorcerer for containment," Archer replied.

As it happened it was not long before Roland and the Artificer were there, the two of them carrying the Exalted Poet's corpse by the arms and legs. The arrow had been removed, but the wound was visible.

"Really, Indrani? An arrow to the throat?" Cocky murmured. "Quite the capture method."

"He's Dominion," Archer defended, "they're supposed to be hardy."

"I'm sure that fact was a great comfort while he choked to death on his own blood," the Concocter replied, sounding deeply amused.

Everyone was getting snippy, these days. The heroes set down the corpse without much ceremony – it was heavy and they were tired – before Roland straightened his coat and the Artificer wiped her hands clean on her apron.

"Rogue Sorcerer," Cocky greeted the Proceran as she rose to her feet

She let a full moment pass.

"Artificer."

Indrani, no stranger to the art of petty slights, had to smother a smile at the refinement of that particular bit of pettiness.

"Concocter," the Blessed Artificer replied, tone flat.

"Let's get that cheek healed up," Archer cheerfully said. "Maybe something for the fatigue as well, unless Rogue's been drinking?"

"I refrained," Roland said. "I would be in your debt, Concocter, if you would oblige."

That stroked Cocky's fur the right way, as courtesies tended to, and she got to work without quibbling. It was quick work sewing up the cheek with needle and thread then applying the salve and having him drink the potion that back in Refuge they'd called the Pardon. It was red and thick, almost more molasses than liquid, and it smelled of death – which is was partly made of, Indrani suspected, or at least flesh – but within moments of drinking it Roland was looking better. The bleeding on his cheek ceased and the charred skin began to flake, though this wasn't a miracle brew: skin did not grow back, and it'd take more than a drink to fix his carved cheek muscles.

The Artificer got seen to as well, if less comprehensively, with a small vial ending the bleeding in her cuts and an elongated pill for the pain. The heroine grimaced as she swallowed the latter, not without reason: Cocky didn't coat hers in honey or extracts, unlike a lot of medicine-peddlers.

"Feeling up to a bit of a talk, Sorcerer?" Indrani asked.

"What about?" Roland asked.

"Not you and me," she laughed, then pointed a boot at the unconscious fae. "I've questions for our friend here."

"I can run containment, if you want," the Rogue Sorcerer said, "but it should not be necessary. He should barely be more physically capable than a human, at the moment."

Archer's brow rose. While she was damned curious about how he'd pulled that off – everyone and their sister knew Roland had sticky fingers when it came to tricks and artefacts, but there was quite a leap between that and hollowing out a Count of Autumn – that seemed like it might infringe on the nature of his aspects, and that... just wasn't something you *asked*. It was fair game if heard, or fought, but asking someone to just hand out one of three words at the heart of them a different story.

"Keep an eye out anyway," Indrani said. "Cocky, the fae's all yours."

"Joy," the Concocter muttered, rolling her eyes.

Backtalk or not, it was with poorly veiled eagerness she knelt at the Count of Green Apples' side and forced his mouth open. Odds were she didn't often get to ply her trade on the likes of him, Archer mused. Her own eyes wandered a bit, coming to rest on the dead body that was not Catherine's. Roland hadn't asked, though she suspected that when they got a moment to talk without people to overhear he would, and evidently the Blessed Artificer still believed herself to be correct. Whose body was it? It couldn't be the Fallen Monk's, she thought, even though it was his knife that Cocky had taken out from the neck and laid down next to the body.

Wait, why was the knife there?

Indrani could recognize it on sight, she'd seen it make quite a few cuts. The Monk had always been sharp in a bad way, but she hadn't thought that he would... Well, you couldn't always see it coming. There were nights ahead of her where Archer would examine whether she ought to have seen that betrayal coming, but not now. Last blood had not been spilled. *The knife was placed here so I could see it*, Indrani decided. The rest of her band was here, but dispersed and unlikely to come here in the Belfry without reason. Cat must have left it there as a message. Not recrimination, that wasn't her style. It'd been stuck in the corpse, though, so what was it that was important about the corpse?

Oh, Indrani thought, and put it together. *You're listening through it, aren't you? You're waiting for my report and for whatever we dig up here.* Breathing out, Archer knelt by Cocky's side even as the fae's eyes fluttered open – glazed, unseeing – and Roland took position behind the Count of Green Apples.

"It's working?" she asked the Concocter.

"It should," Cocky said, finger forcing open an eye and looking at the dilation. "Try asking him a question."

"Who are you?" Archer asked.

"I am the Count of Green Apples, of course," the fae said, sounding surprised.

"Dreamlike state," Cocky said, sounding satisfied. "It took hold properly."

Indrani nodded her thanks, then took to interrogation.

"Who sent you here?"

"The Prince of Falling Leaves," the fae said.

The Blessed Artificer flinched at the words, all eyes save the Count's turning to her in surprise.

"Care to share?" Archer lightly said.

"The Hunted Magician," Adanna of Smyrna replied. "He's had dealings with that creature before."

Fuck, Indrani thought. This better not end up being blamed on Cat because a villain had been the way in and not one of Above's shiny helmets. Interesting that the Artificer would know that, though. She'd have to remember to look into it later.

"Why did you come to the Belfry in particular?" Archer asked.

"To destroy the works of the Hierophant," the Count said. "And so settle half our debt."

Indrani's fingers clenched in triumph. That sounded like a proper scapegoat being set out for her, didn't it?

"Who is the debt owed to?"

"The Wandering Bard."

Cocky stiffened at her side, beginning to grasp the depths of how badly she'd miscalculated by making a bargain with the Intercessor. The Artificer looked mostly confused, Roland grim.

"Where did the prince go?" Indrani asked.

"To get his due," the Count of Green Apples proudly said. "To break the sword."

And there it was, Autumn's plan laid out. The dark-haired killer rose to her feet, stretching as she did.

"Archer?" the Rogue Sorcerer tried.

"Knock him out and bind him," Indrani ordered. "We're got work to do."

Now, Archer thought, how was she going to keep giving her report to a dead body subtle? Any notion of her guess there being wrong was put to rest, after all, by the way the corpse's neck had slightly turned so it would be able to *watch* the interrogation.

—

Christophe de Pavanie took the blow without flinching, angling his shield so that it would slide to the side and giving answer with a slice of his sword. The fae drew back with a scream, having tasted of the Light running along the blade's edge and found it to be a thing of pain, and in a flash of orange-red wings it withdrew. The creature fled down the hallway to the right, the faint squeeze against the hero's ankle informing him glamour had been woven against him, but the Mirror Knight did not

pursue. He halted his steps, for though Christophe himself was not tired in the slightest the same could not be said of all his companions.

Lady Eliade was suffering the worst of it, by his reckoning. Between the wounded leg, the fresh break of her shoulder by one of the Lords of Dwindling Warmth and the exhaustion of continued spellcasting, she was reaching the end of what her body could take. She might be able to use a few more trinkets, but no more great spells. The Repentant Magister was not like the Witch of the Woods, a war mage meant for the killing fields. Her gifts were gentler in nature, for all her sordid past, and she grew exhausted significantly more quickly than her savage counterpart. Sidonia was helping her keep pace, the Vagrant Spear the only one among them confident she could react swiftly to ambush even one-handed. Frustratingly, Sidonia had also refused healing after looking directly at the Duchess of Red Sunset with an eye that was now a blackened ruin.

Christophe was not certain whether she was refusing because he'd been the one to suggest healing or because some fool Dominion code of honour forbade it, but neither answer would do anything to abate his anger over the matter.

Antoine was keeping pace for now, slightly behind and to the Mirror Knight's left as was their habit, but he could recognize that his compatriot was quickly headed towards collapse as well. The Blade of Mercy's nature was to prove dangerous beyond his years, as was only proper of a young man the Saint of Swords herself had once deemed 'built for killing Damned', but though his strength was explosive it was also short-lived. He'd used **Kindle** earlier, so by now he should be drawing on true Light and not the one contained within his aspect: the way Antoine heavily relied on Light and Choosing to move and react meant he was now headed faster towards collapse with every fight. He'd used up **Flicker** as an offensive strike, too, so he wouldn't be able to use it as a life-saving trick. That fact would be weighing on him, a lingering distracting fear.

The man Antoine had used the boon to protect was near spent as well, Christophe suspected, though the Adjutant hid it better than most. The orc had to have called on at least two aspects when tangling with the Fair Folk in that last melee, and he was slower on his feet now if you knew what to look for: the Adjutant was simply tall enough that even slowed his stride was quicker than most humans'. That was ill news, as the Mirror Knight was aware that Hakram Deadhand had not been a stranger to their successes thus far. The orc could not be called silvertongued, he did not have the... cunning mien for that, but he had a calming and orderly way about him. Christophe, who half the time seemed to infuriate when he meant compliment and praise when he meant to insult, could only envy that.

He even envied the man's Name, he would admit to himself. Though like him the Adjutant had been blessed with endurance, unlike him the orc was just as deadly on the attack. It was an impious thought, to envy one of the Damned, and half-heartedly Christophe chided himself for it. A lot of what he'd believed to be truth in the beautiful shade of the lakeside of orchards of Pavanie had not taken well to the harsher glare of the world beyond them.

Of the Maddened Keeper he thought little, knowing from Cleves that she hardly ever tired – it was as if her body resisted any change at all, be it good or bad. Christophe also knew that she was no comrade in the shield wall, no sister-in-arms. She would come and go as she wished, and though she did the work of Above in swallowing whole the evils that she did the manner in which she bound those within her made her not unlike the carrier of a sickness: there was nothing that the Keeper kept within her that was not a mere finger's touch away from Creation. Had she not been in the city when he gathered Chosen to head out to the Arsenal and end the plot revealed to him, he likely would not have sought her out. Yet she'd been invaluable in navigating the Twilight Ways and finding a path into the Arsenal that would not take them months and months to travel. In some ways he sympathized with the Keeper: her Choosing, like his, had made her into someone to use instead of someone to honour.

"Keep your guard up," the Mirror Knight said. "We should be nearing the Severance."

"It might have been broken by the time we arrive," Antoine said, tone bleak.

"They would not still be ambushing us if that were the case," Adjutant said, his voice rough as stone.

A far cry from that eerie, beautiful tune he'd sung in some Praesi tongue as the fae stormed around them.

"They must be buying time for the prince to break through the wards," the Repentant Magister said. "Those were put up by the finest mages in the Arsenal, they won't fall easily."

Obvious. That had been *obvious*, so why hadn't he seen it? All these blessings, but what were they really worth in his hands? The Dames had chosen him, back home, but he'd wandered a long way from that home. Would they choose him again, he wondered?

Somehow he doubted it.

"We push on with all haste," the Mirror Knight grimly said. "We cannot allow a weapon that might be able to take the Dead King's head to be broken."

No life here was worth that price. That blade might save hundreds of thousands of lives, *millions*. Some of the Named would balk at what he'd said, or perhaps how bluntly he'd said, but it was the truth nonetheless. What was one Chosen, in the face of that many innocents? Or even all five of them, and the Damned one too. It might rub them raw, to hear it starkly said, but it was Christophe's people who were dying in droves holding the fronts. It was his countrymen who'd been forced to flee their homes and now sickened and despaired in great refugee camps, who gave up harvest and coin to keep Calernia from Keter's reaching grasp. So often he'd had to watch his people beggar themselves with gratitude as the foreign armies that'd come to lend their aid, and the sight of it sickened him.

Whose lands was it that were burning, bleeding, trod upon by the dead? The Principate had been made into the shield of the rest of the continent, just like he'd been made the shield for the rest of the Chosen: they were both expected to keep taking the hits and keep their mouth shut, as if it were an *honour*. No, the Mirror Knight would spend every life here without hesitating a beat if it meant saving the innocent. There was more to being Chosen than Light and tricks: it was a burden as well as a privilege. Too often only the privilege was remembered.

"We don't all have your... stamina," the Vagrant Spear said, tone faintly mocking.

Or was it lurid? He itched to answer but took hold of himself. Now was not the time for this.

"Then some of us will pull ahead, and the others will have to catch up," Christophe said. "I do not like splitting our numbers, but it must be done. We will draw the attention of the fae as we advance, which will flush out ambushes."

"Unless they slip behind with the intent to strike at the laggards," the Repentant Magister pointed out.

"You are free to retreat, if that is your wish," the Mirror Knight replied. "I expect they will not follow."

"Perhaps," Antoine hesitantly said, "Lady Eliade could seek reinforcements?"

"That would be wise," Christophe agreed, cursing himself for not having thought of such a delicate way to send her away.

Must he always give insult? It had not been meant as one even if it sounded like an accusation.

"Vagrant Spear, Adjutant, Keeper, with me," the Mirror Knight said.

"Christophe?" Antoine said, blinking in utter surprise.

"You're nearing the end of your rope," he replied. "I can't take you into the thick of it. Besides, someone needs to see to Lady Eliade's protection."

"I am still fit to fight," Antoine insisted. "I promise you-"

Anger flared.

"Don't promise me anything," Christophe forced out, "just do as I say."

The stricken look on the younger man's face had him regretting his tone immediately, but did the Blade not realize what he was doing by arguing with him in front of the others? How could they heed his orders when his own second contradicted him? The Vagrant Spear, uninterested, instead cast an uneasy look at the woman she'd been supporting for some time now.

"Nephele-" she said.

"Go," the Repentant Magister said. "I am sure the Blade of Mercy will see grandly to my safety. We will make haste and return with help."

"The Forlorn Paladin won't be far," Sidonia said. "He's an odd duck, but steady. He'll listen."

"I'm sure," the sorcerers smiled. "Shall we, Antoine?"

The Blade of Mercy cast him a look and Christophe nodded jerkily, hoping his eyes could carry the apology he could not allow himself to speak before this company.

"It would be my pleasure, Lady Eliade," the Blade of Mercy stiffly replied.

The Adjutant was watching them all, face unreadable, but the orc said nothing. Christophe did not know whether he should be disappointed or grateful for that.

"Form up," the Mirror Knight said. "We must move quickly."

They would kill the Prince of Falling Leaves, he swore it. And if none of their blades could do it...

Christophe of Pavanie would do what he must.

—

She was not surprised to find herself awaited.

Deftly, the other woman began to shuffle a deck of cards and cocked a sardonic eyebrow.

"You took your time," she said.

Slowly, careful not to aggravate her injury, she lowered herself into the seat across the table before replying.

"I had some catching up to do," Catherine Foundling replied, making herself comfortable. "But I'm about ready to begin. You?"

"Just about," the Intercessor smiled, and began to deal out the cards.

Sir Nil

Well I'm glad to see my theory on Quartered Seasons was correct. The Maddened Keeper doesn't tire huh, I'm guessing she is a bit like Catherine when she was waist deep in winter, except with demons somehow. Bard is a fan of the classics I guess, though I wonder if she has realised the Dead King has already won against the house.

Sir Nil

The corpse seems like a trick somehow, Archer interpreted it as Cat wanting to hear the interrogation but Cat already knows all the useful information. So who planted the corpse? Dead King? Or is it Bard trying to create more misinformation? Are the traitors and fey really the only attacks going on at the moment?

laguz24

No, the corpse was the scorched apostate's. Also, Christophe's starting to learn about some humility he just needs some sociability to go along with it. The sheer irony that Procer is getting the Callow/ Rhenia treatment with large attacks every generation.

[Liliet](#)

The corpse is Tancred's, and Cat at the very least needed a way to know how that altercation would end up going. Also, y'know, the results of Concocter's interrogation – sure it didn't yield much new or useful, but Cat wouldn't have known that for sure ahead of the time.

Shveiran

Also, in the end Indrani muses about how to give her report to a corpse without being obvious and says "Any notion of her guess there being wrong was put to rest, after all, by the way the corpse's neck had slightly turned so it would be able to watch the interrogation."

Her report is not the interrogation: she is going to brief Cat about what has happened before the battle while they were divided: what she got from Cocky is likely going to be of use to the Black Queen, and is going to be reported off-screen.

Mental Mouse

Yes, the Corpse is the Scorched Apostate's... but the thing is... Archer may not know that the Dead King briefly held that corpse as a Revenant. The Monk used a line from the Dead King's book, and it was his knife left behind. But then, it was clearly Cat who left corpse and knife alike... Circles within circles, schemes within schemes.

And now, Cat and the Bard face each other at a card table. I wonder, what stakes will they wager, and what will each win or lose?

boballab

A Name. Remember Cat was on the cusp of a Name the last we saw her. What if she is on the cusp of taking the Bard's Name? She already got something from the Bard according to an earlier chapter, what if she can now take the rest?

Miles

Taking the Bard's Name would effectively kill Cat, since the Name overwrites their memories and goals.

Thanatoss

No, it was not stated that Bard/Intercessor Name does overwrite memories.
However she would be able to interact only with Named, and possibly be unable to hurt anyone, that would be problematic.

tkjarrah

uh cat? now might be a good time to recall certain idioms about playing games with fate and/or death

Zggt

The shape things are taking:

The Wandering Bard called in favors to make sure she has the power to destroy Cat's plans when they meet. Lets assume that she's using her thousands of years of experience and has the amount of force necessary to accomplish that. She also knows that Cat has to assume this.

Cat knows she cannot out-talk the Wandering Bard. She also knows that for every trap like this there is a way out which will require a sacrifice on her part; these are the only victories to be had against the forces of Above. The Wandering Bard will naturally use the one card we know to be at the core of Cat's being: her wish for peace. Cat has already seen the seeds of the war after the Dead King set with people already thinking of a campaign against the Drow, and Malicia is a knife at the back of the rest of the continent, waiting for them to deplete themselves and crush the shattered remains.

So the Bard will inevitably offer that after the Dead King's demise she can ensure a peace under control of Above. They Grand Alliance gets to keep the weapons, the Drow will fight the chain of hunger and will be left alone, and the rest, after they crush Praes, will be under the benevolent guidance of Heroes to lead them to an era of stability in which everyone will thrive. It will be Redemption through Noble Sacrifice in the fight against Evil, a message which will resonate throughout the next age the way the Miezian occupation did through this one.

I expected Malicia to be the first to do this kind of move, with something in the flavor of Below (we'll join the fight, on your side, use all the horrors you know Praes has to wield... or we'll offer sanctuary to villains considering how inherently expendable everyone sees them, and so Praes will be strong enough to win once the current war is over). In essence, it's giving Cat all she ever wanted except one thing: humanity being in charge of humanity, rather than Named being in charge of humanity.

One can point out that human nature means there will always be representation for both Above and Below (with varying success). Therefore anything that does not end in a resolution where their feud won't inherently have armies involved is doomed to eventually collapse. In a world where it is a matter of time until another Triumphant comes along, Elves decide "this offends me" somewhere important, another nation decides to conquer the backwater continent and use the locals as labor to strip it of resources, or when someone gets the continent nuked from flying machines because someone invented the printing press, "an era" can be a generation or two.

That's still more than Cat has managed to achieve so far in her life. That's a huge temptation, and while she may strive for a

more complete solution, she isn't Black, and will have to weigh her chances to do better if she refuses assuming the Bard and Malicia will be against her every step of the way. The problem is that at least one of them is going to be against her no matter what, and the other may as well add "Chancellor" as a prefix to their Name.

The ideal solution would be to play Malicia and the Bard against each other. It's a nice theoretical balance like in the Prisoner's Dilemma, complicated by the fact that there's a third person here. Game theory implies that making the first move (making the offer) is probably the strongest approach available to each, but if both make the move at the same time they both lose. Malicia is taking a gamble here that Cat will refuse and completely alienate the Bard.

Now, how far down this train of thought did Cat already go? She's already had experience with powerful people with powerful plans manipulating everything to achieve their goals, and arguably is one of the smartest at dealing with those who try to force her into a box and do specific things. The next chapter is going to be very interesting, one way or another.

Those games are where Cat truly excels at. The way she sees the world as a living thing is arguably her greatest strength here. Now we might finally get some insight as to how the Bard sees things (or at least to how Cat thinks she does).

[Liliet](#)

Bard also knows there cannot be a temporary solution though... Why not just go with Cat's plan?

erebus42

Probably because while she may be compelled to do her job she has another goal, (as Kairos had said) one which the gods went to great pains to try to make sure she never reaches.

[Liliet](#)

Kairos was speculating. SOME of it is going to be off base.

Just a a note.

erebus42

A fair point but considering this was Kairos during peak monologue over a game of Shatranj, I would still bet on him being more on base than off.

Shveiran

As they say, the Bard is in the details.

Liliet

Yeah but he said a lot of things there. MOST of it being true still leaves room for the key detail springing from his interpretation of players' motivations being wrong (as the players' motivations are the most speculative parts and the most drama-important parts)

RoflCat

Actually, as someone whose 'job' is to ensure the Stories are keeping tracks, wouldn't she have an incentive to KEEP IT GOING? To ensure her continued existence and also gain power the deeper the Stories weight there are.

After all, if the game of the Gods end, why would they bother to keep her around?

I feel like the best case scenario for Bard is a 'reset' of the game at this point.

Dead King has gotten too big on the Below side, and now she will use an equally big move (final desperate move when all else fell) from Above side to 'equalize' that and leave herself a fresh new board with a bunch of 'clueless' and 'weak' people she can manipulate and keep her scheme going.

Sure the amount of survivors might be down to single digits, but there's the Ragnarok case (after a big all around showdown of all the major factions, of the humans 2 will survive to repopulate the world...you can also just look up Odin's Sphere true end)

Javvies

Except that this only applies to Calernia. There's still the rest of the world, including ... what's it called? The place with a joint Hero and Villain rulership arrangement. Think they're vaguely Chinese inspired?

The Cat would redirect Calernia into a course more akin to that.

Cat and the Accords don't end the game. They merely limit the collateral damage caused by Named.

Oshi

Which has no bearing on what Bard wants. She has her goals and limiting damage to creation is not part of them. She is just as much married to her own will as the

dead king is to his. No matter what happens any endgame with either of them in place is not one where Cat/calernia will prosper for long.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"The place with a joint Hero and Villain rulership arrangement."

The [Yan Tei](#) is what they're called.

[Liliet](#)

Nobody's ending the game of Gods. They're just adding rules to it.

Also,

> To ensure her continued existence ironically, in Guide, this is not a particularly widespread motivation, and given how much we know about how much Bard's life sucks,

(But yes, literally nothing is threatening her continued existence. Stories will keep happening, heroes and villains will keep existing, it's just the consequences that will be shifted, and the Gods never cared about that part in the first place)

Zggt

The Bard in her interlude said that she saw progress; slow, but progress throughout the ages. Throughout thousands of years with a Name that forces her to be at important decision points and then see the ripples throughout her endless life, in which one of those ripples is the rise of the Dead King, her perspective is by definition not human; part of being human means you die at the end. The Bard believes she can control the effects of a story she writes on this scale, and she is doubtlessly good enough at her job now that another Dead King probably can't happen, and therefore this will change the balance between Above and Below in the long term within her realm of responsibility.

None of the Bard's reasons have anything to do with specific people, but with the shape of humanity on the continent. She knows that if a lot will die, they will rebuild things better in a few centuries, and in a thousand years it will be nothing more than a footnote in a history book. She let Akua loose just to get at Cat, and she all but said in her interlude that any amount of deaths to get her would be worth it.

A lot of this is because of the horror of Bard's power, never giving her enough time to get to really know regular

people as she's whisked away from mission to mission. By any human standard her perspective is completely warped. Cat on the other hand makes people a part of her life, not a part of her story, which in this specific case is the polar opposite view: there are real people with real problems that need to be addressed at a higher priority than whatever story is going on right now. Think of it as a matter of approach, Bard is about doing it *right*, while Cat is about doing the *most*. The Grand Alliance, a regulatory body over Named, non-named governments, these are solutions that do not fit into the Bard's view which was forged by her abilities; over long enough time, slow and regulated change with Above's approval is the way to go. She had trouble with Black and Malicia, and knows that Cat might actually make something stick for the long term.

That's my take on why the Bard is willing to send hundreds of thousands of people to their deaths to get her way.

Liliet

I agree with most of what you lay out here, with the exception of this:

>these are solutions that do not fit into the Bard's view which was forged by her abilities; over long enough time, slow and regulated change with Above's approval is the way to go

The "Above's approval" thing is... without evidence backing it that I can see. All the heroes currently helping Cat have Above's approval by definition due to being heroes; Above does not either give or withhold approval based on specific plans. Bard's a mastermind all of her own.

Furthermore, allow me to present a quote from Epilogue III:

> "But I made your Name, sweetcakes. Back in the days before I knew better."

> "Prokopia Lakene was rightfully elected," the Hierarch frowned.

> "Right's a pretty broad word, when it comes down to it," the Bard said. "She was silvertongued like you wouldn't believe, true, but that's where I went wrong. The moment the tongue was gone, so was the Name."

> "The League survived her," he said.

> "The League's skin deep," the Bard said. "None of the forces behind moved any differently after it was formed."

Bard has tried what was essentially the same solution Cat is going for now, and it was not sufficiently effectual in the long term – not sufficiently effectual in the exact way Cat's going for now, by changing the flow of forces by arranging an alliance.

That's my take on why Bard is willing to burn her reputation and her resources on shoring up Catherine's project until it really can stand on its own, long term.

FatUnicorn

I think that an important fact which you missed is what none of us know, the true intention of Bard. As I gathered, you think its the victory of Above. In my opinion the Bard is the representation of goddess of strife, meddling in affairs of mortals and creating never ending conflict. If gods created creation as an experiment, Bard is the variable pertaining the status quo, and so never ending the experiment. Why is she doing this is the real question, what is she truly trying to escape?

DrD

Is the Intercessor really a Hero? Is she even Named in the way other Named are?

She does have a Role. She is a thing of the gods, the intercessor between gods and creation, both those above AND below, as we saw from her interceding for the gods below when the crows made their deal to save the drow.

Do people assume she's a Hero because she likes them to think that? Because she can put a story behind her actions the same as the Chosen, or because she has taken up that role opposite the Dead King for so long? Her Name isn't the Wandering Bard, yet even the Pilgrim who can see through lies calls her that and didn't fully understand her nature til Cat informed him of all the details.

Thanatoss

I basically agree with you at all points. Untill we discover Bard's goal we can't deduce what is her desired outcome. Also Bard lives for so long that her Name simply changed meaning due to cultural changes in language etc. I belive. That is why both Names are correct and Pilgrim doesn't detect lie in any of them.

NerfContessa

Circles. Within circles indeed.

Another grand chapter.

Mental Mouse

But now, Cat has graduated to the point where she really is a player – newest to the game, but still gaining power and skill.

Shikkarasu

Book1: Sits across from Juniper and talks her way into victory

Book2: Sits across from Akua and talks her way into victory

Book3: Sits across from Thief and talks her way into victory. Tried the same with Malicia, but was interrupted.

Book4: Sits across from Sve Noc and talks her way into victory

Book5: Sits across from Kairos and talks her way into victory

Book6: Sits across from the Wandering Bard.

This is going to be *good*

Eleron M Pfoutz

Hold on... This is a LONG, LONG TERM Pattern... Book 1: Bard Foils Cat by leading Akua and her henchies to the Demon Egg's significance (She wouldn't have shown up if that Egg wasn't something NASTY powerful, even by Outsider standards in this setting.

Book 5: Cat Foils Bard by signing up with Grand Alliance.

Book 6: We find out if the rule holds or is broken like the system it enforces.

Liliet

HOT DAMN

I did not expect this ♥

Oshi

I told you there would be a revel!

Liliet

[Vote] before Cocky gets upset at lack of recognition!

Anomandris

Oof that ending!!

Also, I am kinda been getting a bettering opinion of MK in these fights. He doesn't seem to be Saint of Swords' level fanatical in the whole Good vs Evil thing, nor just plainly naive like the

Blade of Mercy. Seems more like a guy over his head rather than anything...

Oshi

Dude, hes gonna kill himself or everyone there unless Cat can stop him. It's just the way it's stacked. Bard has been shaping him off screen. This will be...interesting.

Jworks

Yea, but at the same time it seems like a personality trait that makes him so intolerable, not a result of his bestowal. I'd be more sympathetic if it was a part of his bestowal.

[TeK](#)

Funny, it's the other way around for me. Maybe because it means that he can learn, he can change and he can be better. I am much more sympathetic to the reason s like "he is a jerk cause he is human" then "he is a jerk cause plot convenience", which is what being a result of a Bestowal kinda ends up being. Plus I am big on personal responsibility, so not having an excuse for being a jerk is much more sympathetic to me.

dadycool

Humans (and other races, to be inclusive) can learn. Card-carrying Heroes and Villains can't. Masego learning how to be sociable changes him as a person, as did Cat's lessons on how to be a Queen/High Priestess, and GP's experience in his backstory.

On the other hand, we saw waaay back when Cat first set something on Goblinfire that if something goes against a person's Name, they're essentially prevented from doing it.

[TeK](#)

Well yeah? And I personally can sympathize more with a human who can change, rather than card-carrying NPC.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I do appreciate how Rogue Sorcerer is being all modest and then after the fight he's like "oh, btw I crippled a fae too, he's downstairs", and Archer's like whoa, you did what?...

RS is pretty badass. Understated, quiet badass.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oy vey WordPress. I made a point of posting that in the main reply box, and WP's like oh no, you were going to reply to someone else yesterday, your comment is going into the middle of the thread. And just for good measure, we'll stick it in the way of someone else's reply.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, same. He is Trying, he is learning before our own eyes.

He just... never had the opportunity before.

Shveiran

Of course he had, he just never took it.

There is no point in vilifying him for it, as it is common both in story and in the real world (heck, I need not look further than myself) but "not growing beyond your flaws" is not the world's fault. Let's call an apple an apple, shall we?

[Liliet](#)

I don't see it as a fault is the problem.
Yes, most people don't. That's the neutral default.

[Liliet](#)

He didn't have a push that he'd have resisted (or gone with), is where I draw the line.

Shveiran

Is being violent a fault, then? Or abusive, or racist, or rude? These can all be a problem, and they can all be a result of what you are and how you grew up, and they all need you to take steps yourself to fix them.

I don't mean to be argumentative, here, but if we adopt that criteria we are saying that a lot of people are not at fault for a lot of things that hurt a lot of victims.

Theitzal

Funny you should mention vilification, at the beginning of this book Cat mused on the difference between heroes and villains after the Scorched Apostates death, in her terms a hero is one who trusts to Above and is rewarded for it, a villain is one who,"does what needs to be

done.” The mirror knight is echoing that line unknowingly in his mind in this chapter.

Mental Mouse

yeah, foreshadowing. The problem is, if he goes over to Below, I’m pretty sure he forfeits his accumulated power. Probably... at least he’s not a Choir hero.

Theitzal

Just thought of something, Amadaeus is working towards dred emporer and Cat is working to another name but you know what name is open? What if MK becomes the next Black Knight?

Jworks

I’m saying I’d be more sympathetic if it was part of his Bestowal because it would be an inherent trait of his personality brought on by the Name. He clearly wants to change to some degree, so imagine him truly wanting to change but being denied time after time because of a set personality trait given to him by the gods. Him being denied the ability to change is what would make me sympathetic, right now he wants to change and he just isn’t going through with it. I find that a little shallower than being denied by fate personally.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, just because you want to change, that doesn’t mean its easy to do. Learning takes time and experience. Like they say, “good judgement comes from experience, and all too often, the experience comes from bad judgement”.

TeK

I am deeply sympathetic to trying and failing because most of my life can be ascribed as such.

Liliet

Yup.

“How do I say things the way I think them and not the way everyone else would be thinking them???”

Frivolous

Really nice update.

The corpse is probably Scorched Apostate.

EE whetted our appetites with teeny tiny details of what Quartered Seasons is and what it does. A gift of what? A gift for whom? It's interesting that Indrani describes QS as vicious to the bone and too clever by half.

I'm confused by how Mirror Knight thought it unfortunate that Blade of Mercy's Flicker had been used already in an offensive manner. The implication was that BoM could not use Flicker again today, or at least not in a defensive manner.

Don't Named get to use an Aspect 3x a day, or am I misremembering?

Lastly, why is the Intercessor playing cards? She's never done that before. Is it solitaire, or is she playing against Catherine?

Oshi

My guess. Cat wants to trap DK/Bard in some kind of preplanned outer planar eternal war outside of creation. Binding them to never return. What you cannot defeat you seal away.

WuseMajor

I mean, if you could force the Dead King to become the King of Autumn, then he'd at least potentially end up in the same trap the King of Winter was in, bound by all the Fae rules and laws and forced to ...well, do whatever it is Autumn does. War against Spring maybe, I dunno.

Same goes for the Bard.

Alternately, it's possible they're taking the Crown and mixing it with some kind of iron explosive, so that a few moments after you become Fae and the apotheosis turns you into one, you die from a massive iron overdose.

I suspect this is similar to the sword that was a prayer.

Decius

Except you can't ever seal someone away 'forever'. You can only seal them away until some unlikely or distant event.

There are a lot of things that were sealed away until some distant or unlikely event... like "Until death itself dies and Above and Below join together".

Sir Nil

3x a day was just with the Lone Swordsman's Rise, however, there are other limits to aspects. Blacks Destroy and Tyrants Rend both took a lot out of stamina out of them. It seems that

the general rule is that most aspects can only be used once per fight or day, with some exceptions.

Shveiran

Some Aspects can be used thrice, some only one, some can be activated several times but take a lot out of you and some other still have a constant effect.

caoimhinh

That has been explored before, in fact.
There are broadly two types of Aspects:

-Explosively powerful ones that can only be used once per day normally (though circumstances might allow for re-use, like stepping into the appropriate story).

Examples of this include: **Forgive, Fall, Destroy, Confiscate, Rend, Struggle, Triumph.**

-Convenient and useful ones that are relatively weaker but can be used a few times. and these can even be half-used or "leaned into" to slightly get the benefits of them without real expenditure. Although it's important to notice that some of these Aspects might have consequences to the Named (like a burn in stamina, life-force, or just pain).

Examples of these include: **Learn, Find, Behold, Wish, See, Use, Rise**

Then of course there's Ranger, who apparently has her 3 Aspects (**Learn, Perfect, Transcend**) constantly active and lives in them. Which is one of the reasons she is so OP.

P.S: some Aspects have conditions attached to them due to the nature of the Bestowal and the Named that has them. Like Hanno's coin needing the Choir of Judgement.

[*Liliet*](#)

I think Confiscate's more the second type.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Surely so, given how Rogue was using it in Liesse III.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah, that's what i was thinking too.

Sir Nil

Bard's card thing is probably a callback to how she told the Dead King how the house always wins during the battle to make Twilight Paths.

laguz24

Or the tarot cards she showed William before the siege of Liesse.

Cicero

Depends on the Aspect. The Grey Pilgrim's resurrection aspect "Forgive" could only be used once a day.

Frivolous

I'd forgotten Forgive. Thank you.

Big I

Quartered Seasons is meant to take out the Bard, according to Cat. Maybe also the Dead King as well, since there's two crowns floating around.

Liliet

No, it's *meant* for the Dead King. It *also can be dangerous* to Bard, but that's a background note.

Mammon

The way that they said Flicker couldn't be used to save his life rather than at all suggests that MK refers to the Narrative use of Aspects. Not an actual limit of the Aspect to be used, rather than the narrative Story-weight of an Aspect being used for the first time that day and fight.

For example, though indeed partly a matter of stamina, if a hero or villain uses their Aspect for the first time then it would turn the tide, but the second time against similar odds it would maybe force a stalemate, and the third time and onwards it would be a desperate and insufficient defence to stall for time. This has been shown and suggested several times throughout the story, that an Aspect is kept in reserve to be used the first time because the first time packs that greater punch, or that it wasn't the showstopper and tide-turner it should be because it has been used before that day/fight.

Some Aspects such as Rogue's Use and Adjutant's Find are meant for continuous spamming, but others are meant to be used sparingly if not just the one time. They decrease in power, such as how Cat's and William's Rise wouldn't quite heal as much as fast the second and third time, but more importantly they wouldn't hold the same Story weight.

So because Flicker had been used already for an offensive move, if Blade would find himself in a pinch and use it defensively or as a tide-turner even with his stamina fully recovered, it's

quite likely that the enemy would find but strings instead of steel cables of Providence pulling at them. They could bat Flick aside and kill him, or otherwise find themselves able to stay in the fight, recover or not be completely overwhelmed in that critical moment. That's the issue that MK was likely referring to.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, also likely!

Cicero

Hmm... so Cat is confronting the Intercessor.

Interesting that the Mirror Knight is not completely unreflective, just... very dull.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, he is trying. (Some might retort "yes, he's very trying".



and growth to progress from reflecting everyone else, to reflecting on yourself.

jamesc9

> , just... very dull

That was punny.

"help" bleh.

"I had some catching up to do," Catherine Foundling replied, making herself comfortable. "But I'm about ready to begin voting on topwebfiction. You?"

<http://topwebfiction.com/?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

(Vote guys were down to number 3!!

RubberBandMan

Hrm. The last chapter was concert, while this chapter was Threads. While Cat has been personafied by music and beats to a song, Bard has been Called LongStrings and a distant manipulator making plots from afar. Sort of a weaver, if you will.

Could last chapter, Concert, be Cat's plays being shown, while this one, Threads, is more of Bards gambits/replies?

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has had association with fabric and threads too.
Remember weaver/woven?

[Mental Mouse](#)

But now they're trading symbolism. Hmm!

[Liliet](#)

We've had THREE mastermind metaphor mediums in two interludes: music, fabric and card game.

hakureireimu

I don't understand this part:

"I know the Rogue Sorcerer professionally," Cocky pointed out.
"He is aware I am not, in fact, a complete imbecile."

Why does Indrani thinks that Concocter was lying to Roland?

laguz24

She knows her and she is not as smart as she thinks she is.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say it's more an urge to be reflexively mean, considering the bar set is 'not a complete imbecile'.

[TeK](#)

Which is a high bar to set, admittedly.

Oshi

It's a joke.

Cocky says Hey he knows I'm good.

Archer answers Liar in a theatrical manner

[Liliet](#)

"How long have you been pretending to not be a complete imbecile? What acting skills!"

[TeK](#)

"Do you wantt me to teach you?"

[Liliet](#)

"...Nah, I got it down"

Burnsy

It's not that she actually thinks the Concocter has been lying in a serious way, she's just fighting the urge to reflexively be a dick for no reason. Catherine's influence

Shveiran

Actually, no: Indrani has always acted this way in Refuge, has we learned in Interludes past. Cat's influence, this time, if anything has mollified her.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, although part of reason she is taken to Cat so much, is because her usual propensity to barbs was never deemed confrontational.

[Liliet](#)

Mm!

byzantine279

The fighting the urge is Cat's influence, I think.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Cat's influence, this time, if anything has mollified her.

I think that's what Burnsy was saying.

Juff

Typo Thread:

"Archer," > "Archer."
got too soft > get too soft
complicated explanation > complicated explanations
back at the bottom > back to the bottom
shed known > she'd known
scent a story > scent of a story
purpled-eyed > purple-eyed
as she rose to her feet (missing fullstop)
which is was > which it was
them a different > there was a different
"We're got > "We've got
gratitude as the (maybe to? for?)
sorcerers > sorceress
about," the > about." The

[Barthumphries](#)

One bat of them was enough for the fae to drag herself up
Change bat to beat.
There are also other typos.

Burnsy

Bard: "Hmmm.... got any methods of deification you're remaking into weapons?"
Cat: "Go Fish."

Decius

Technically correct. In that all of the methods of deification that Cat has are not being made into weapons; they either have been made into weapons or are being studied to determine IF they can be made into weapons.

Setrak

In addition, Severence is literally in a lake.

Ninestrings

It's a good thing the Mirror Knight is pretty cause boy howdy there is not much else going on up there.

Also hell yeah time for some cards with the devil!

[Liliet](#)

He's Doing His Best

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ahem. We're getting to watch him *learn* here. If he survives this war, I suspect he might gain real wisdom in his adulthood.

[Auston Varner](#)

To echo and expand on Liliet and Mental Mouse, he's a young man, previously very sheltered, who was fed a particular (inaccurate) narrative about how the world works for a long time. He's breaking out of it, but it takes time, and it seems like associating with Adjutant is doing him a world of good, causing him to seriously re-examine how he thinks about Named associated with Below, and perhaps eventually non-Procerans in general (after all, even with his explicit racism against everyone outside of Procer, he's concluded that Hakram, who is from a species mostly known for savagery and being the Dread Empire's foot soldiers, is a good man and even someone to envy. From there, it's not much of a leap to "Hey, maybe the other humans I know aren't so bad either")

Wonder

Well, if there is anybody about there who wishes to take on the Keeper, all they have to know is that they should be ready for some Mutually Assured Destruction. Because that Chosen is one hell of a prison you don't want broken.

Big I

So Maddened Keeper is probably working for the Bard, since the Keeper's the only reason Mirror Knight's band of idiots got there in time to do anything. My guess is that the Keeper is the Bard's nuclear option in case her plan goes to shite.

Mirror Knight seems like he's on the way to becoming a full blown angsty anime protagonist. Hope Adjutant and the Vagrant Spear can save him from himself with the power of friendship.

I can't help but wonder if the Blade of Mercy's being set up romantically with the Repentant Magister. That'd make for a juicy love triangle with the Black Queen.

Dome Zasrekh

Keeper does not have to actively **work** for Bard just a dangerous person who can shake things up in multiple ways. ...And you really think BoM is a mach for Cat's charms???

[TeK](#)

Well, the boy does have a big *sword*...

caoimhinh

But you know what they say about those who carry big toys and flaunt them around: overcompensating. :v

Seriously though, I see nothing that remotely resembles a romantic set-up for Blade and Repentant. Plus, we already have it from multiple PoV that she is into Cat and vice-versa.

Big I

Just thinking of romantic clichés. Opposites attract, and all that. He starts off antagonistic to her, then they're sent from the battlefield, her wounded, under his protection. They're one tense life and death situation away from realising how their "pride and prejudice" are affecting their judgement.

Shveiran

With that said, right now Repentant doesn't really have anything going to ever be more than a fling.

TeK

Yeah, I don't too. But nothing stops a threesome. Or hell, a foursome if Archer deigns to join.

The boy does know how to use his big sword.

Shveiran

Of course. One thing about teenage boys is that they always know how to use their "sword", this is well known.

Mental Mouse

Not to mention Hanno's quasi-paternal role.

Liliet

I think he's too much of a kid for Nephele to be interested...

Burlyraven

Well, it's not a resurrection, but at least the boy is getting some use. Depending on how exactly Cat's managed to necromance Tancred, there could be some side effects, but I think she lost the learning zombie power with Winter.

I'm still very concerned for the MK/Adjutant squad, especially the members that left to seek help. There's been too many injuries and exhausted aspects and wounded egos. If the Kingfisher isn't revealed to have a death defying trump card of a power and inexplicable last second hero timing, I dunno if there's a happy ending to be found.

Of course, Cat settling in for her match with Bard will likely result in a series of mysterious boons and curses for all parties, so who knows.

Burlyraven

Doesn't have to be the Kingfisher, admittedly. There are more than a few barely expounded upon players in the Arsenal.

Anonymous

>If the Kingfisher isn't revealed to have a death defying trump card of a power
He probably does have one, considering he became named by sheer refusal to die..

Oshi

When did he do that? He's a ruler name. He'll have things that are more command oriented.

Shveiran

But he got his Name holding a bastion against hope. Prince Otto Redcrown said that they lost two fortresses to the Dead King on the first days after the Truce and would have lost the third as well if the Kingfisher Prince hadn't got a Name by simply refusing to die.

That was the Epilogue of the last Book, if I'm not mistaken.

[TeK](#)

So. It's nice to see that my sympathy for MK wasn't misplaced, he really is just clueless but well-meaning. And more importantly, gradually self-aware. As a fellow social awkwarder, I sympathize very much. At least there would no longer be so much hate for him after this chapter. He just needs to be taught. And what do we know, he seem to slowly warm up to a certain green charmer.

My guess for MK (the other kind) being "nuclear waste disposal site" was essentially indirectly confirmed too, which is double nice. Seems like CSP are not too far behind.

Cat is not dead, obviously, and she used Tankred as a stand in, as was one of my theories as well. So that's three guesses being right, I am feeling good today.

Of course, now everything comes to the conclusion as this arc seems to draw to an end, which mens something about to go terribly wrong. MK&MK&co seemingly spent go to fight for the Sword, with MK (the first kind) seemingly willing to actually grab the sword and swing it if needs be. Given the theorised cost of an arm and a leg, it is time for the boy to bleed into man. Garcher seems to try and re-establish her severed bonds, which has nice potential for a tragic death, as they draw near Severance. And still no hint of neither the man of a day, Hunted Magician, not another man of the day, Hierophant. Which kinda begs the question of dafuq.

And as Cat is getting ready to play a game of cards, I am reminded that she didn't do so previously, so that might just be as hilariously glorious as her match against Tyrant in shatranj.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I personally think that Christophe starting to fall into Villainy.

He broke his vows and now has those dark thoughts constantly. Not only about sacrifice and killing, but also about others not being grateful for what he (and Procer) do. That's not a heroic combination.

He is also constantly doubting himself and thinking himself unworthy of his Name, instead of self-evaluating himself in search of improvement, he is kicking himself and being depressed about it. The last person we saw with that kind of self-pity and existential doubts, Vivienne, lost her Name as a result.

I doubt Chris will be left Nameless, but after the breaking of vows and dark thoughts, it might very well come a fall from grace. Just like Lancelot du Lac who had his time as a villain against Camelot (he killed some of his fellow Knights of the Round Table and waged war on Arthur, weakening the kingdom, which was taken advantage of by Mordred to destroy it and kill Arthur, etc)

[TeK](#)

Yeah, he probably doesn't have a good fate for him in store. Thing is, Saint all the way back in Book 4 mentioned that the guy seemed to be a weapon sharpened by a Creation in advance for some incredibly strong opponent, and admitted that he would overtake her in time. Which kinda implied he was to be a sword against Dead King. And look who doesn't want any other weapon against Dead King left to be used.

Which means that someone who will be antagonistic to that hypothetical person trying to turn his story into something without a good end, will instead attempt to turn it the good way. And that someone might well just succeed, given that it is a protagonist.

So I will hold my bet for Chris yet.

caoimhinh

It was Hanno who said Christophe was a weapon destined to fight something great. Saint commented he would overtake her in 10 years due to the effect of his Aspect of **Dawn** that makes him a bit stronger every morning.

My bet is still that he is a weapon Above prepared to fight Sve Noc.

[TeK](#)

Ok, my memory is a bit patchy I guess.

Isn't Keter called Crown of Dawn though?

caoimhinh

Keter is the Crown of the Dead

[Javvies](#)

Nah, Sve Noc was out of play for centuries when Mirror Knight got his Name. And they'd still be out of play indefinitely for centuries more, were it not for the repeated series of improbable events known as Catherine Foundling's career. I mean, honestly, there were so many times Cat just barely avoided losing for good, and she was targeted by Bard. No, Above would have had no reason to empower Mirror Knight to go after Sve Noc. Besides, none of his Aspects would particularly help him against the drow, far less the Sisters themselves – look at how Winter!Cat fared, and she's stronger, more unkillable, smarter, and has more and more flexible powers.

I think it's more likely that Mirror Knight was going to be aimed at Ranger – remember, he'd have gotten his Name not so very long after the Conquest, in which Ranger had played a part. And Saint said that given time he'd have been stronger than her, and she had lost badly to Ranger, so Above would need someone stronger than her to get Ranger.

Shveiran

I like this theory.

caoimhinh

The Conquest was over 20 years ago, definitely happened before Christophe was born. Or at the very least he was a little child when it happened. He had just gotten his Name when the 10th Crusade started.

Plus, Heroes don't need to be stronger to kill an OP foe, they just need the right set of tools and a Story on their backs.

Mirror Knight's ability to fully restore his strength and grow more powerful at dawn is exactly the kind of thing that a Hero fighting the Goddesses of Night would need to end them at the end of a confrontation.

Visualize the battle:

*The Hero faces the Drow, they grow in strength at night so the battle is hard, but he has the endurance to **withstand** until the end of the night through the desperate fight. Just as all seems lost, **dawn** comes and the Drow are weakened, just as the Hero emerges stronger than ever, thus managing to turn the tide and kill the Evil Goddesses of Night.*

That's a story of heroic victory right there, kinda like Gandalf arriving at dawn to reinforce the war and several other examples seen both in manga and books.

And Sve Noc is arrogant enough to put themselves at risk facing an enemy their legions could handle (they now

have Cat to advise them against such endeavors, luckily for them).

Additionally, is not like Heroes only work against one Villain. Sure, they have some customization, but they are meant to fight many enemies over the course of their life. So Mirror Knight's skillset being suitable both to fight Sve Noc and catch up to Ranger seems plausible to me.

Mental Mouse

> And they'd still be out of play indefinitely for centuries more, were it not for the repeated series of improbable events known as Catherine Foundling's career.

Actually Sve Noc (or at least the Drow) would shortly be dead if not for Cat's interference in the Dwarf/Drow War.

Shveiran

Shortly being the key term, here, considering the dwarfs' frame of reference. I thought avoiding a long campaign was the key objective for the Herald of the Depths, and how long is "long" for the dwarves is unknown.

Still, this is arguing semantics: for all intents and purposes, the drow were very likely goners, as Mental mouse says.

Javvies

True enough.

The point, however, is that whether the drow were doomed outright by the dwarves or the dwarves were likely to stall out after making gains, but before getting to the core of the drow remnants and Sve Noc, the drow were entirely out of play and going to stay that way for as far as the surface, and Mirror Knight, would be able to tell.

That is, the drow weren't going to be doing anything that would bring Mirror Knight into contact or conflict with them. No matter what the result of the dwarven campaign actually was or how long it took. And that means that the drow and Sve Noc weren't the target Mirror Knight was crafted to oppose.

Shveiran

Great chapter, as always.

We finally had the Mirror Knight PoV I wanted, though I must say I'm not really impressed with what we saw; self-righteous much? He sounds like he is mad at the injustice of it all but is hard-pressed to explain what the injustice actually is: he complains that Procer has been forced to pay the cost of the war in ravaged lands and ruined lives, and he sounds so bitter about it... which, I mean, is totally fair, but he seems bitter **at those helping Procer**, like it was somehow their choice that the war was not fought elsewhere, or maybe like this was a sacrifice Procer willingly made to protect everyone somehow.

Now, personally? I think if my country did its utmost to piss in the international porridge for generations, having pretty much everyone stepping in to help us fight is something I'd receive with gratitude.

But you know, if he thinks "they are just doing it to help themselves, after all, if the Dead King wins everyone loses"... I disagree, but it's not like it is a totally unreasonable stance. There is some truth there, right.

But to go even further and be bitter at them? What are you complaining about, dude? That they are not somehow teleporting all the undeads away from your homeland? they are already there bleeding for the cause, it's kind of hard to one-up that.

The fact that he is warming up to Hakram somewhat kind of irritates me, honestly. Sure, Hakram could charm Malicia's favorite stone tile given a couple hours, but still... it has been two years, this boy was on the frontline fighting side by side with Villains, not being betrayed and he still spewed all that wild, conspiracy-theory bullshit two hours ago like he believed it. He was willing to draw on it! He was willing to draw on the Black Motherburning Queen of all people, with all attached consequences!

Personally, I am not going to jump on the "oh, see, he can change!" wagon anytime soon. There is a lot of soul searching there, and I hope this doesn't end like Cordelia. There is very little payoff in this series that left me short of completely satisfied, **very little** but Pilgrm and Cordelia "allied status" was the big one. I really hope Cristophe's isn't another.

[TeK](#)

Funny. And now I am finding myself defending the guy. I seem to be doing it a lot across the series, picking some Hero that is not particularly well liked by the cast, which seems to bleed out into the comments something fierce. I did with Pilgrim, I did it with Saint, I am fairly sure I'd've done it with William, but I joined the Guide at Book 3.

I don't know where you saw self-righteousness, the guy seemed just bitter if anything. He does not glorify himself, he seems, if anything, pointedly aware of what a giant mess he is.

He seemed bitter at how he should be grateful for everyone helping them against Procer, when they bleed and die to keep the dead from others. If anything, it should be the other way around, others should be grateful for their sacrifice, and suffering, and he sees their armies as an attempt for self-preservation that it is. It's not like they help Procer because they like it much, they help it because if it's overrun, it's Goodbye Calernia. And yet he should be grateful for his country bleeding for others sake? Now that is exactly Catherine's entire reason for being angry at Heroes back at Book 4 and mind you, she was being invaded so had an inherent moral high ground, but the sentiment is not so different to not be *understandable*.

He is also bitter for being used as a particularly tough brick to throw on opposition, which I already said in earlier chapters, and he probably wonders if others even see him as a person. He was never explained that he was wrong, because, well, why would you sit down and talk with a *tool*?

I am not saying he is one hundred percent right, and he is very willfully blind to similarities between his own country's situation and other examples. But his position is very much understandable and born not out of inherent malice, but rather a certain perspective.

Because history is... highly subjective. If you look at history books of different nations, you will be amused by how often both sides by their own admission were completely in the right and the other side were evil virus of Satan. Simultaneously.

And all the comments on Procer history we got from sources rather antagonistic to Procer. Like we never heard their point of view. For all I know, it may very well be that Scouring of Vaccei really was necessary. Probably not, but we should recognise our inherent bias towards his attitude, being that EXACTLY THE SAME BIAS forms his wildly despised attitude.

He is not bitter at the help, he is bitter at the lack of gratitude for sacrifices by the people of Procer. He probably thinks that sending armies is something others should have done, out of gratitude for their struggle, and is incomprehending how come they are the ones that should be grateful ones instead, without being owed gratitude in return for *dying in tens of thousands*.

I can totally get where he is coming from, which is why I just can't find it in myself to dislike him.

About Hakram and the like. Again, the guy had been fighting in the thickest, non-stop for two years, and not back-to-back with Villains at all as you seem to imply. He was always with one Hero or another, and even then he wasn't fighting back to back, he was used as a shield and tolerated for his usefulness. On a different front from Black Queen. His only interaction with her was when she was a gal who made people eat their fingers and casually attempted to summon Dead King and enslave an entire race. Which was, again, entirely understandable from her perspective at the time, just as Chris' behaviour is to him no doubt. The point is, this could not have left a good impression on anyone, much less a guy that had a lake dropped onto him. His distrust is understandable and well warranted. Even though it is wrong.

Also I doubt there weren't previous instances of betrayal by Villains, it's just that they were all killed offscreen by Cat. However the guy is probably in the dark about that detail, because why would anyone bother to explain anything to this nationalist narrow-minded idiot? Honestly, no reason to talk to him at all, just throw him at Dead King's hordes, it's all he's good for anyway.

Also also, can you explain what you didn't like about Cordelia and Pilgrim?

Shveiran

→ I don't know where you saw self-righteousness, the guy seemed just bitter if anything. He does not glorify himself, he seems, if anything, pointedly aware of what a giant mess he is.

He doesn't glorify himself, but you don't need to have a huge ego to be self-righteous: you just need to be convinced you and yours are in the right, and cast judgment on others without understanding or wishing to understand their positions. I refer you to my previous post with regards to why I think he does *that* if need be, and doing that is why I call him self-righteous in turn.

→ And yet he should be grateful for his country bleeding for others sake? Now that is exactly Catherine's entire reason for being angry at Heroes back at Book 4 and mind you, she was being invaded so had an inherent moral high ground, but the sentiment is not so different to not be understandable.

Woah, big leap here. Catherine and Christophe's sentiments are not alike. She was mad at the invaders, whereas Cristophe is mad at his allies.

That's not the same, in any way.

If he was brooding about the DK, you would have a point. But

he is bitter at those trying to pull his country out of the ditch.

With that said, he shouldn't be GRATEFUL that a tragedy is happening, but that tragedy is not caused by his allies. It is hindered by them, so being bitter at them makes no sense. He wants to think they help out of fear for the DK and thus deserve no gratitude? As I said, fair, but that justifies a neutral stance, not resentment.

-> "He is also bitter for being used as a particularly tough brick to throw on the opposition, which I already said in earlier chapters, and he probably wonders if others even see him as a person. He was never explained that he was wrong, because, well, why would you sit down and talk with a tool?"

He is one of the very few Proceran heroes, with too many victories to count under his belt, who is universally recognized as a big weight and that also beds a Princess. If he wanted to look for information or to be taught anything from Named or from normal people, he has so many avenues to pursue that I can't even count them.

Are you telling me you honestly believe that Cat, Hanno, and Pilgrim one and all are being mean to him for no reason when they have always acted otherwise with nearly anyone and have every possible motivation to try and bring him into the fold? Not to mention no personal enmity that could curb their tongue?

Hell, if there ever was a mentor-shaped hole in his story, the Pilgrim is Name-bound to appear in it! It's what he does, it's what he has spent these two years doing. I don't see him making an exception for, again, one of the most powerful Named involved in the war.

If he doesn't like being just a warrior, he is the one taking no step to address it, I'm sorry. He is literally swimming in means, so if this persists the cause is internal.

-> "I am not saying he is one hundred percent right, and he is very willfully blind to similarities between his own country's situation and other examples. But his position is very much understandable and born not out of inherent malice, but rather a certain perspective.

Because history is... highly subjective. If you look at history books of different nations, you will be amused by how often both sides by their own admission were completely in the right and the other side were evil virus of Satan. Simultaneously.

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should recognise our inherent bias towards his attitude, being that EXACTLY THE SAME BIAS forms his wildly despised attitude.

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I can totally get where he is coming from, which is why I just can't find it in myself to dislike him."

Again, I have no idea what you are building this argument on. Procer is not MAKING A SACRIFICE, this was not a CHOICE. The Dead King invaded, and they are the invadee. It sucks, it's sad, I can get he is mad about it, but there is no SACRIFICE involved.

There is also no FAULT involved save that which can be laid at the feet of Neshamah. Is this the Dominion's doing? Is it Callow's? There is no perspective here, it's a FACT: they are not the ones invading Procer, they are the ones defending it. There is nothing understandable about being mad at them. It doesn't matter how many Proceran orphanages are on fire, because everyone he's being mad at did not light the fires and is in fact trying to put them out, at great personal risk.

Again, you want to say "no gratitude required, they just don't want the fire to spread"? I disagree, but even that stance doesn't justify moving all the way from gratitude and into plain resentment.

If someone stabbed me, of course I'd be mad, but I'd not be mad **at** the random guy who tried to save me.

→"About Hakram and the like. Again, the guy had been fighting in the thickest, non-stop for two years, and not back-to-back with Villains at all as you seem to imply. He was always with one Hero or another, and even then he wasn't fighting back to back, he was used as a shield and tolerated for his usefulness. On a different front from Black Queen. His only interaction with her was when she was a gal who made people eat their fingers and casually attempted to summon Dead King and enslave an entire race. Which was, again, entirely understandable from her perspective at the time, just as Chris' behaviour is to him no doubt. The point is, this could not have left a good impression on anyone, much less a guy that had a lake dropped onto him. His distrust is understandable and well warranted. Even though it is wrong."

Why would you think he is not fighting with Villains? Villains and Heroes mingle at the Arsenal, and in the Archer's roving band. I'll grant you that we have no clear evidence that my version is true, but why would you think Cristophe's front is only made of Heroes? That seems to run against the spirit of the T&T and also be bad tactics, since Heroes and Villains have different strong suits and you'd likely want a broader toolbox everywhere that Neshamah has a harder time outmaneuvering.

--> "Also also, can you explain what you didn't like about Cordelia and Pilgrim?"

Oh, boy, we don't want to open that can of worm again, we'd be here all week.

Suffice to say, because I feel it's uncouth not to answer, that I felt we got the worst of both worlds: they had to be "broken" out of the conflict, dealt with from a position of strength, almost conquered, yet they were never humbled: they never apologized for causing the conflict in the first place and keeping it going, never asked forgiveness for anything, never admitted they may, in fact, have been wrong, and never lost anything as a result of losing to Cat. So that didn't scratch my "Cat has beaten this enemy" itch.

At the same time, there was no real reconciliation (again, no admission, no forgiveness asked, no reparation) and they still act like recalcitrant allies at best: see Pilgrim and the WB, see Cordelia not even disclosing the nature of the weapon and even now keeping her cards close to her chest regarding the conspiracy even if, you know, there is no guarantee she'll survive the next month so it's not like this doesn't concern Cat and the drow.

So that doesn't scratch my "A peaceful solution to the problem has been found and now someone new and interesting has joined the family" itch, either.

Darkening

Yeaah, I'm still a bit bitter about those conversations between Cat and Cordelia before Cat went to meet with the Dead King. Cordelia's just such a hypocrite about Cat coming to power by killing her own countrymen after she literally did the same thing in the proceran civil war with the only difference being that she was born into royalty. Jeez. And then just going on into, "You and your people don't matter because you're not strong enough to stop me." territory. Ugh. Even that scene where she went down on one knee to beg Cat to help her country against the Dead King wasn't an actual *apology*, just her asking for help.

ethericsentinel

Cordelia learned that she couldn't push a peace treaty through without throwing away her position, and then she took the hard line against Cat because it was that or be replaced by someone worse for Procer. There's no might-makes-right there. Just my-country-centrism, which is, to be honest, pretty common for a medieval ruler.

Javvies

About what?

The Exalted Poet? He's a dead traitor.

In medieval times in the real world, he'd be lucky to get buried in unconsecrated ground. More likely, his body would be displayed and left for the crows or given/left to animals.

For that matter, probably don't have to go back to medieval times for that kind of practice to be common.

Under the circumstances, his corpse is going to get tossed into a pyre. In the part for "enemy dead".

The condition of his corpse isn't really going to matter to anyone.

Javvies

Dammit wordpress.

Mental Mouse

> He seemed bitter at how he should be grateful

A line I learned decades ago from another classic story, the early Pern books: "Gratitude is an ill-fitting tunic, it chafes if worn too long". That applies all around. Mirror Knight needs to learn that this all goes turnabout by turns... he spent his early years as a tool – but now he *is* leading a band, and being aided by others. Soon enough it will turn again, and he will need to stand with the others against the greater foe.

Morgenstern

He was still getting thrown at the monsters like a particularly large brick by the older heroes in this book, to be fair. It's just here in the Arsenal, being YET AGAIN used (this time by the Bard, who seems to threaten to destroy him by using Severity/Severance **here**, as no one else seems capable of using that thing without shredded before even being able to use it once), that he is "leading" a band – and he isn't, not really, at least not since Hakram showed up. And before that, there was the Kingfisher Prince he also had to defer to, right after he got there with his little group and tried to make his cause (promptly being shut up (not that that wasn't the right move, of course,

from our more informed standpoint ^^)). He IS a tool and he is not wrong in realizing everyone IS using him as such, and oftentimes not really in the way you would normally "make use of" a PERSON... he got literally hurled into stuff (and all-around treated) like a (non-feeling) cannonball (and no matter how tough he is, that's probably gonna 'chafe' in more ways than one).

Even the one person that seemed nice to him ... was again just trying to use him to plot.

He might not be very likable, but if one tries to take **his** standpoint, there are at least SOME points one can see and potentially agree how he COULD be bitter, especially with not being the brightest mind.

Oshi

It's literally what he signed up for. It's what Saint did for decades. That he chafes at is because hes young and stupid. Perspective fixes everything. It just depends on how many mistakes it will take for him to learn.

Shveiran

I really, really think that people are taking this "being thrown at enemies" thing to deduce a lot of consequences and... I can't say I follow the reasoning.

IN COMBAT, he is playing the tank. So what? Is that using him because he is supernaturally more resilient than anyone else, and can only fight in the melee row to begin with because his whole thing is sword and board? Really, casters hiding behind him to fight is using him? Come on, everyone who played a tank in a MMORPG or a tabletop RPG has found himself bearing the brunt of the enemy assault while everyone else came out smelling like a rose... but guess what, that's the job description. The sniper snips, the healer heals, the mage manipulates the fundamental laws of the universe and the tank stops people from stabbing them by drawing fire. It's the job! Granted, throwing him at monster is a step beyond that; but again, in the example above, sometimes you eat a fireball because you will survive that but the party may not survive the mob of mooks taking another turn. And you know what, if it bothers you, you can always talk about it afterward? I'm not a huge fan of the WotW, but I seriously doubt that if confronted about it, she'd have kept doing it and antagonize her allies. You know, because she is neither malicious nor a moron.

OUT OF COMBAT... again, what does that prove? Being the tank in combat correlates absolutely zero with how much respect you get. If anything, stepping out of the carved-up

stomach of the undead abomination earns you point! It is a staple of heroic tradition!

Heck, Catherine has been leading from the front since the very beginning; did anyone ever looked like they thought her carving up devils was a reason why she shouldn't also being the one making the battle plans? Or deciding the over-arching priorities? Stabbing and getting stabbed was never a disqualification!

You think strategists enjoy super-powerful individuals that change the course of battle to be out of the loop? If they drop the ball the battle is at risk, he is more important than most commanders simply because he can stop the gargantuan abomination in its step.

If he is out of the loop, it is because he doesn't take steps to address it.

caoimhinh

I agree with you, and I personally think Christophe is starting to walk his path towards a fall from grace and becoming a Villain. He already broke vows he made when becoming a Hero, and now this constant chain of dark thoughts paints a bad image.

Also, what you pointed out is one of the disappointments I have with this unnecessary time skip of 2 years: They haven't grown and developed in those 2 years. Everyone is either the same or *dumber*.

We have seen that Heroes are still stubbornly refusing to acknowledge that Villains can be nice people too, and that people like Aquiline and Razin somehow got stupid enough to be trying to offend Catherine and risk themselves disobeying orders, when they by all accounts should be long past that point, after two years on the frontline of a hellish war against the undead.

It really doesn't seem like 2 years have passed, nor does it feel like they have been through a horrible war (and still fighting in it) during those years. They simply don't act like it, besides Cat been a bit stressed and mentally fatigued. Compare it to how all the Procerans characters changed after spending a few weeks fighting the undead invasion. Add to that the fact that Cat was having an easy time strolling the countryside instead of coordinating the frontlines, and a little whisper of the Bard was enough to have here 21 freaking Named away from the war. Which contradicts how dire the current state of the war is supposed to be. They shouldn't have been able to pull back this much manpower at all.

[TeK](#)

The war is one the hold for now, or at least, in the same kind of defensive stalemate that was WW1. Both sides are currently preparing for major assault, so war's gone quiet for a bit.

The time skip was necessary to establish the Truce'n'Terms into a working condition and set up a stage for the next ark, without boring readers with mostly inconsequential details.

And I don't see as much of a problem as you do. Sure, some Heroes refuse to acknowledge Villains to b nice guys. Not all of them, heck, not even a *majority*. Who else besides MK even? Artificer sleeps with one for Gods sake. Kingfisher flirts with Cat, Roland and Hanno and Tariq are given, Spear likes Archer, Magister likes Cat and Hakram, somewhat at least, and everyone else is at least cooperative. Which is a huge turnaround, not a minor one, who can it even be a minor one, the guys went merrily Crusading against the guys not to long ago, it's like Richard the Lionheart and Salah al-Din uniting to fight the Mongols, there are a lot of grudges and having them cooperate after only two years is already downright improbable if anything.

Aquiline and Razin getting stupid is exactly what I expected to happen in two years. Before the scars of Prince's Graveyard were to fresh, but now they faded and Cat was established as some roughly on the same side. Which is the only prerequisite for those minor bouts of insubordination. You just don't do that with infant-eating monster, you do it with someone you consider to be a reasonable human being and for Cat to be considered that by someone that hated her with passion just measly two years ago is nothing to scoff at.

You yourself said how Christophe is all dark and depressed, you saw how Heroes snap at each other constantly, and not in a good way either, yet you don't see how there are any scars left by the war?

Also, characters that changed were unNamed, which might've contributed to the swiftness, or rather the Namedness contributed to the lack of one.

Shveiran

On the whole, I like the time-skip a lot, and have been on record saying that.
And I stand by it.

Yet there are a few problems, yes. Aquiline and Razin are one (though minor in my book) disappointment, Heroes like Mirror Knight and Blade of Mercy are another. Though that particular problem is much smaller for me ever since it seemed like

Nephele and Artificer were not “against Villains” but more “against Masego”. That makes it very different to me.

Shveiran

Also, a lot of these Named are not here because of WB. Some work here (masego, artificer, Roland, hunted magician, concocter), some are passing by on their own (archer's band) and some are here for the reunion (Cat and Hakram) while some still are coming here to prevent WB's disaster (Kingfisher's prince)

[Liliet](#)

Kingfisher Prince is there for the conference too.

[Javvies](#)

Yes and no.

That's his official reason for being at the Arsenal.

On the other hand, the timing and location of his arrival suggests that he was at least partially guided by Augur.

Especially since he could probably have made do by going to the Salia conference center, and that likely would have been a shorter and faster trip, plus more or less on the way.

Plus his conversation with Cat would tend to support his being sent by Augur to disrupt Bard's plots against Cat, the Alliance, the Truce and Terms, and the future Accords.

[Liliet](#)

It was mentioned in Terms that Frederic would be coming to the Arsenal.

[Javvies](#)

Augur could easily have let him know he should go to the Arsenal for the conference ahead of time. Or nudged things in ways to make him decide to go.

For that matter, even if he would have gone to the Arsenal anyways, it's likely that Augur gave him some kind of warning/direction, based the fortuitous timing and nature of his arrival, and his chat with Cat.

He's certainly been warned about Bard/Intercessor, and he believes those warnings enough to take Cat's lead and indirect references to Bard.

Point is, I'm fairly certain that whatever official reasoning he gave for attending the conference via the Arsenal, there are ulterior and alternate motives for him doing so – at least some of which are most likely because Augur wanted to put him into a position to stop Bard from ruining things. Also, I'm pretty sure that he really wanted to meet Cat and thank her for her efforts.

Liliet

The problem is, while all of that is possible – and there is no evidence it didn't happen – it's not *necessary*. Providence for arriving in the exact right moment is just that, Providence. Roles generate it automatically. Augur is not NEEDED.

And it's been two years since the Salian coup attempt. It sounds like Augur shared the information and everyone with the need to know was brought in on it. Frederic is one of those people, being a ruling Named.

Re: meeting Cat, yeah I'd estimate like 75% prior that he'd have wanted to do that XD

caoimhinh

Hm, Nephele (Repentant Magister) is not against Masego, although it seems the whispers of the Bard got to her too, making her start to be suspicious of Masego, but not taking hostile actions against him so much as double-checking to make sure he is not against them. Blessed Artificer, on the other hand, is the one with a problem with him. Though this is a *shared* thing, as we got from Masego's PoV when his very Name was urging him to thoroughly crush her works. Though I dislike Artificer because she has that conceited and arrogant attitude of Praesi Highborn mixed with the self-righteousness of inexperienced Heroes.

Mammon

As usual, Cat and Zeze were planning to turn it into a sharper, crafting a plan and weapon with brute finesse and just a little too clever. Instead of, you know, turning it into an arrow for me.

godsDamned, Archer, who's the simpleminded one here?

—

Cat: *Needs a body*

Cat: *Remembers she has the body of Tancred in her shadow-

pocket.*

Cat: *Realises that Providence has given her a body for probably this very situation days ago, and decided that this body had to be of a adolescent boy to be of the right size.*

Cat: Well fuck you too, Creation.

TeK

Huh, I didn't think about an insult implied but got damn that was a burn.

Darkening

Wow, that theory actually hurts quite a bit.

Javvies

Mirror Knight ... you're a dumbass. People don't like you because you (try to) justify the atrocities Procer has habitually committed against the rest of Calernia. Those atrocities, and their associated expansionist tendencies, do a large part to contribute to why the rest of Calernia doesn't particularly like Procer either.

And, called it that the knifed body was that of Scorched Apostate. Which means Fallen Monk's corpse is somewhere ... maybe the Night, unless it got vaporized.

Hmm. Wonder what happened to the knife wound in Cat's throat? Archer thinks Cat doesn't have the self-healing/regeneration tricks of Night.

Man, Archer really needs to recalibrate how tough people are if she thinks an arrow to the throat is a reliable capture method.

Artificer ... why'd you slow yourself down carrying the traitor down the stairs instead of tossing him over the edge? It's not like he's going to get an honorable burial, where you want the body to look good for the services.

Mental Mouse

> Artificer ... why'd you slow yourself down carrying the traitor down the stairs instead of tossing him over the edge?

Because they might yet be able to do something with the corpse, and whatever it is will be that much harder if the corpse has been smashed by a long fall!

Javvies

Except doing anything with the corpse would involve necromancy.

And necromancy is a Villainous practice. And therefore not something Blessed Artificer is okay with.

[Liliet](#)

> Artificer ... why'd you slow yourself down carrying the traitor down the stairs instead of tossing him over the edge?

Because that'd just be rude?

[Javvies](#)

It's a traitor's corpse. Courtesy is not required.
As long as it doesn't land on anybody, or anything important ... who is going to care?

Unless you're referring to whomever the poor fellows are who will have to clean things up after the battle is over.

[Liliet](#)

Adanna cares?

[Javvies](#)

About what?

The Exalted Poet? He's a dead traitor.

In medieval times in the real world, he'd be lucky to get buried in unconsecrated ground. More likely, his body would be displayed and left for the crows or given/left to animals.

For that matter, probably don't have to go back to medieval times for that kind of practice to be common.

Under the circumstances, his corpse is going to get tossed into a pyre. In the part for "enemy dead".

The condition of his corpse isn't really going to matter to anyone.

[Liliet](#)

You're repeating Archer's argument. Which she said in response to Adanna's protests.

Shveiran

And?

Adanna clearly thinks he deserves respect, but that doesn't make that position reasonable. Her support of this position is not, in itself, an argument for its validity.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, 'a person deserves respect in death' seems like a valid position to me regardless of who the person is. Kind of a universal default that can be overridden by circumstances, necessity and personal emotions, but when it's not, that's by definition better.

Shveiran

well, I agree in principle. I just have an hard time coming up with more relevant circumstances for changing dead bodies protocols than "we are being invaded, this is a treacherous, super-powered individual that knows a lot and also necromancy is both real and kind of key in this huge war we are fighting, and handling it disrespectfully is faster while time is of the essence". It's not that Adanna's stance is weird in principle. But it's kind of out of place in these circumstances.

[Liliet](#)

Eh. I don't think time was THAT of essence. They were just two floors up

Morgenstern

To be 'fair', I don't think Archer was thinking of a capture method at the time... but rather not really thinking at all XD Going instead with an "in the moment" *gut feeling* (unconscious decision stemming from previous experience (about heroes, and Levantines even more so)) about how to shut him up without outright killing him while making her only one hidden shot count (seeing how it took multiple iron arrows to get down a fae, it's at least a bit understandable how going for the Hero (who usually don't die all that easily, either) seemed safer/more worth it). Forgetting (in the heat of the fight going on for a bit of time longer, bc there were more than just one opponent) about after which time that *would* end up being a problem, if no one healed him of course (which other heroes in a usual hero group probably would have, but... well, yeah, no, the fae weren't gonna).

dadycoool

Well, this chapter was nice.

Oh, look! There they both are!

Aotrs Commander

Oh, Indrani.

Only you could consider and AN ARROW TO THE THROAT a nonlethal attack.

Never change...

(Somewhere, across multiple continuities, Hawkeye (both of them), Green Arrow, Speedy, Red Arrow, Arsenal and Artemis all just simultaneously face-palmed.)

erebus42

In her defense, most of the people she usually fights would probably just walk off an arrow in the throat.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Notably everyone else she was fighting at the moment.

[Liliet](#)

Y u p

[TeK](#)

Tis' just a flesh wound!

Shveiran

Incidentally, Interlude:Concert does not appear in the table of contents

NerfGlaistigUaine

Ah fuck, now you've made me feel for the Mirror Knight. Sure he's an incompetent dick but he's like Elhokar from Stormlight – he knows it. And he's trying to do the right thing and be a good leader even though he's not suited for it. Poor bastard.

Is it strange that the thought of a corpse turning its head in curiosity made me giggle?

[Mental Mouse](#)

What made me giggle was that setup for another "That's my Cat!" moment. "Hmm, why would she leave the corpse? Probably looking through it to see who comes to check it out... yep, it's looking at us all right!"

Letouriste

@EE: it seems you forgot to put last Interlude in the table of contents 😊

Hellarion Angelus

Actually, there is a good chance that the artificier is lying and the poet is still alive, just faking his death with her help, and that's why Archer is surprised she killed him. It would fit on why she stopped them from throwing his body, she was the one who checked the pulse, Roland had carried him by his legs...

laguz24

No, that kind of double treachery is way too subtle for the inexperienced artificer. Since all the traitors were revealed providence would not work like this.

[Mental Mouse](#)

To what end? Archer intended to interrogate him, and odds are good she (or at least Cat) would have let him bargain for his life.

[Aranaya](#)

"Hells," Archer cursed. "I wanted to interrogate him. How dead is he, would you say?"

Only one thing you can do; go through his clothes and look for loose change

[Aranaya](#)

if it is formless, then the deepest spy cannot discern it, nor the wise make plans against it (Sun Tzu)

Ah, Tancred.

Interlude: Set Them Up

*"The Vales we held with valour
And swept clear the Wasaliti
But spring returns the enemy
As we grow old in armour."*

– Duncan Threefingers, Callowan poet

Catherine Foundling leaned back into her seat, neck yet bloody but her sharp smile unwavering. On her brow sat a crown, blackly won, and she wore a mantle made of many woes. Facing her, sprawled on her seat like a languid cat, the Wandering Bard

shuffled a worn deck of cards. Trickster's fingers danced, below light blue eyes and a smile that had seen many a kingdom turn to dust. At her side waited a badly-strung lute and before her a flask of silver lay open. Both women were smiling in that way people did, when sharpening knives behind their back.

"So, what are we drinking?" Catherine asked, flicking a glance at the flask.

The Wandering Bard, whose name was now Marguerite, chuckled and set down the cards. She took a delicate glass from the side and snatched her flask, pouring a finger for the other woman.

"Ashuran *haralm*," the Bard replied, tone whimsical. "Some call it the very elixir of life."

"Nice touch," Catherine admitted. "But, as you might be aware, I have recently been stabbed."

"I may have heard of this unfortunate happenstance," the Bard said. "Do you mean to say you won't be drinking after all?"

The Black Queen snorted.

"Crows no," she said. "It means make it a double, my neck still hurts like you wouldn't believe."

"That's the spirit," the Wandering Bard grinned, and poured again.

The tanned queen picked up her glass, swirling the hard liquor within as if she were appreciating the bouquet of a fine wine instead of playing with shipborne rotgut.

"So cards, huh," Catherine said. "I wouldn't have pegged you for the type."

"I enjoy the underlying truths of the game," the Bard demurred.

"Illuminate me, by all means," the Black Queen invited, sipping at her drink.

Unlike the last time they'd shared it, she did not choke. Marguerite of Baillons deftly began shuffling the cards again, a smooth and soothing cut from hand to hand.

"Cards are unfair," the Intercessor said. "Cards about luck and lies, and sometimes there's simply no way to win."

"That usually means you're not playing the right game," the Carrion's Lord apprentice replied.

"Are you?" the Wandering Bard smiled.

Catherine drank, the liquor warming her guts.

"Hard to tell until the end," she said. "What did you have in mind?"

"How kind of you," the Bard mused, the undertone skeptical, "to let me choose this uncontested."

"Can't win if there's no game," the Black Queen grinned, all teeth and malice.

"Can't cheat without rules, is it?" the Wandering Bard smiled back, reaching for her flask. "Fair enough. Have you ever played Affray, Catherine?"

"That drunk's game?" the dark-eyed queen said, brow rising.

The Intercessor cast a look at the now quarter empty glass in her hand, then raised her flask for a silent toast.

"It's medicinal," Catherine Foundling protested, meaning *point taken*.

"Back in the day it was used as peacemaking ritual, in the lands that became Lange and Salia," the Bard confided as she shuffled. "It was your Queen of Blades that brought it east, after she went about the business of carving an empire across the Whitecaps."

It was a simple enough game, one that could be played with any tarot deck's Major Arcana. The first player would set down a card from their hand, opening an 'affray': players could set down cards one after another, with the cumulative value of the cards of any of the twenty one Major Arcana put down used to count who the winner of that affray was. To win an affray granted a player one point. The trick was that there could be up to five affrays – or more or less, depending on variants – on the table at any time, and a player could declare their loss and clear out the affray by conceding the point. For that concession they would gain the right to take back one of the cards they'd put down in said affray.

"Nowadays it's a tavern game for people too drunk for more complicated ones," Catherine snorted.

"The Langeni used clay tablets instead of cards," the Bard told her. "Each of them standing for a life sworn to the resolution of the strife."

"That's just a battle without the steel," the Black Queen said. "Nothing more or less."

The Intercessor drank of her flask and did not disagree.

"While we're having this pleasant little chat, one pal to another," Catherine said. "I've got a question to ask you."

"I delight in giving answers," the Bard replied.

"You see, I've had this song stuck in my head all day," the orphan queen said. "I don't suppose you'd know anything about that?"

"Sounds troubling," the Intercessor said, glint of triumph in her eye. "But you are in luck, as I happen to be something of an authority when it comes to songs. Which one is it that haunts you?"

The Black Queen hummed the first few bars of 'The Girl Who Climbed The Tower' and saw the way the glint died, smiling at the sight.

"Ah," Catherine Foundling said. "So there it is. Never you mind, Marguerite, I withdraw my question."

They matched eyes in silence, a moment passing.

"Seven cards each," the Wandering Bard said. "Draw on drop, five affrays."

"I await your pleasure," Catherine Foundling replied. "Hells, you can even open the game."

"Your kindness is without bounds," the Bard praised.

With light fingers she began to deal. One each, back and forth.

"Kindness?" the Black Queen said. "No. I'm just recognizing that you drew first blood, that's all there is to it."

The last card was hardly down that they both took up their hands. Each looked at their own, seeing how once more Creation had seen to the details, and with a flourish the Wandering Bard set down her first card and in the same gesture drew. What she revealed was a fair-haired woman subduing a lion, Strength. The older name for that card, and the truer one today, was Fortitude.

"The Mirror Knight," the Intercessor said. "Lost and angry and feeling it all slip away from his grasp. He'll take up the sword because it fixes all he despises about himself."

A card was set down over it, without missing a beat: a crowned and dark-skinned man on a barren throne, the Emperor.

"The Adjutant," the Black Queen said. "Faith with a cold eye, patience without hesitation. He will steer them all away from the rocks, because it is in his nature to mend what is broken."

—

The Prince of Falling Leaves had lost patience, Christophe de Pavanie saw.

Hammering at the wards hadn't borne fruit – the enchanted steel gates were still shut – so instead he had unleashed the fullness of his wrath on the stone around them. Some clever soul had seen to it this would be no solution, and even now that the cube of rock surrounded by water holding the Severance had been peeled open of protection by rot some invisible barrier still prevented the fae from entering the room. Yet the prince of the Fair Folk had grown darkly ruthless in his pursuit of entry, snatching up Arsenal armsmen and making puppets of them before throwing them across the unseen divide. The poor soldiers were slowly forcing open the enchanted doors from the inside, using their blades to pry them apart as they groaned in protest.

"Forward," the Mirror Knight bellowed, sword high.

The Vagrant Spear whooped, quickening her pace as she claimed the vanguard. The royal fae's gaggle of attendants were sent out by him and swept forth against the three Named, lords and ladies carved out of frenzied dreams and wielding powers outlandish, but the Mirror Knight and the Adjutant stood like tall stones as the tide washed around them. There could be no strategy to this, no cunning: it was only a parade of sneering faces and blades that Christophe must strike at, cutting when he could and forcing through their blows as if they were but summer rain. Yet his blade bit fae flesh too little, the Adjutant was tiring and Sidonia was still half-blind. The Vagrant Spear took the first wound, a deep slash across the face that added red to the savage paints on her face, but the orc was not far behind in having a barbed spear pierce into the side of his leg. On the sides, all the hallways leading to this godforsaken place, fae were pouring in. The wayfinders were returning, heeding the call of their lord and prince. Before long, Christophe of Pavanie knew, he would be standing alone surrounded by corpses.

Again. Too slow, too weak, too stupid, *again*.

"Cross the wards," Hakram Deadhand roared.

None knew if they would be allowed through, for the Repentant Magister was not there to speak of it – and who was it that had sent her away? Christophe of Pavanie, once more the gravedigger of finer souls – but what choice did they have? The Adjutant was the first to reach where once stone had stood, before it frittered away into pebbles and dust, and after resisting for a heartbeat the wards let him through. Without hesitation the orc limped towards the enchanted soldiers, axe raised. Sidonia was halfway to safety, when some wild-looking fae ran her through the side with a slender rapier of bone. Christophe swelled with

anger, screaming, and tore his way through the Fair Folk to get to her side. The fae parted like mist wherever he struck, and though their strikes glanced off his sides and shield with barely any effort the Mirror Knight had never felt more *impotent* than in that moment.

Sidonia had rammed a knife through the hollow of the fae's chin, by the time he got there, even as the warrior twisted his grip and ran through her lung. The Mirror Knight smashed down the *animal* with his shield, fury boiling out, and dropped his blade to pick up the Vagrant Spear even as the fae swarmed him like flies. Step by step, keeping Sidonia safe under the shield, he retreated to the safety of the wards as the Fair Folk harassed him. It was onto wet stone he stood, a wounded friend clutched tight in his arms, and Gods forgive him but *he had sent away their only healer*. He would have wept of it, but what would weeping do? Sidonia could still make it through this, if the fae were scattered and help sought. But could he abandon the Severance for the sake of one soul, to its likely destruction?

No, he thought as he laid her down, he could not.

To the side, the Adjutant slew the third struggling soldier with a clean stroke through the neck but it had been a moment too late. The doors had been open, just a finger's worth, and the crack the steel gave as it did had the ring of the inexorable to it.

—

"I didn't think you'd send the Deadhand out with that valiant lot right from the start," the Bard acknowledged. "You usually keep him in reserve for longer."

"He was the only one who could do it," Catherine shrugged. "Can you imagine if I'd sent Archer with them instead?"

The Intercessor chuckled.

"That would have been my affray before long, true enough," she said. "He's a steady sort, your man, I won't argue that. But he can't spin gold from straw, Catherine. The Mirror Knight has been left to fester for too long, the sickness sunk into the bones."

"I'll not speak to Christophe of Pavanie," the Black Queen said. "He's not one of mine, and I know him little. But I have put my faith in Hakram Deadhand many a time, when the day grew dark, and I was never once disappointed."

"Your father's daughter indeed," the Wandering Bard said, and it was a compliment to neither. "I told him then and I'll tell you now: love always fucks you over."

"If you want the right to lecture me," Catherine Foundling replied, unmoved, "*win.*"

As if prompted by the words, the Bard set down her second card. A black spire of stone piercing even the clouds, as pale lightning struck at it: the Tower.

"Ruin onto your Truce and Terms," the Intercessor said. "The Red Axe slain in blind revenge, heroes and villains at each other's throats beyond what can be mended."

The other woman gave answer without batting an eye, her card dropped atop the other with insolent nonchalance. It showed a fair prince, riding a chariot pulled by horses both black and white: the Chariot.

"The Kingfisher Prince," the Black Queen said. "Alamans iron forged in a Lycaonese forge, daring with duty holding the reins. Authority and trust, crowns earthly and not."

Under her breath, barely noticing it, she hummed the tune to a familiar song that spoke of foxes and kings.

—

"It appears we've run into a spot of trouble, my friend," Prince Frederic of Brus jovially said.

Soldiers crowded both ends of the hallway, perhaps sixty in whole? Not a small amount, considering the garrison of the Arsenal should not surpass three hundred in whole. By the looks of them it was a mix of bearded Levantines and the latest issue of the mold buried at the heart of Callow that kept churning out gruff, middle-aged soldiers with hard eyes. No Named or creatures, by the looks of it, but Frederic's eyes were not so fine he would trust them without condition.

"Let me go," the Red Axe grunted. "I'll make it out on my own."

Doubtful, considering she was currently bereft of the weapon that'd earned her the Choosing, but admittedly it sometimes paid to keep your coin on Chosen when the odds were long. Regardless it was simply out of question that he might let an unarmed, shoeless and manacled woman be captured by a band of soldiers. The sheer dishonour of such a thing would force him to abdicate, shorn his hair in contrition and never again enjoy a vintage more than a year old.

The Prince of Brus might even have to drink wine from Callow in penance, which was simply too horrid a fate to contemplate.

"No need for that," Frederic assured her. "I do happen to have a smattering of royal blood in my veins, which comes in useful on occasion. I should be able to talk our way out of this."

From the corner of his eye, he caught the sight of an approaching half-company of crossbowmen. It seemed to have been what the surrounding soldiers were waiting for, as a moment later a captain in Dominion armour and paint hailed them.

"You are surrounded and were caught red-handed helping a prisoner escape," the Dominion warrior said. "Surrender now or be served the sword."

Whoever it was who'd arranged this, Frederic thought, had been careful. There was not a single Proceran soldier here, someone who might have trusted or deferred to a prince of the blood – on the contrary, trying such a thing with this lot was a lot more likely to have them using those crossbows. The Callowans in particular still remembered being at war with the Principate and were a famously touchy lot when it came to foreigners. Not without reason, but in the current circumstances that was rather unfortunate.

At least it smoothed away any notion he might have developed of this being a betrayal by the Black Queen. Cordelia had told him once that Queen Catherine had a fondness for soldiers and the common folk, sometimes at the expense of those of higher births, which given the First Prince's diplomatic tendencies likely meant that the Black Queen would bake an entire pie out of dukes to feed an urchin child from the street without batting an eye. She was not the kind of woman who would sacrifice her own countrymen, her own soldiers, to carry out so petty a scheme.

Like as not, Frederic mused, this was part of the trap. A Proceran prince, the sole Chosen among them, slaughtering Callowan soldiers to help a killer escape justice – even if Queen Catherine came out in his support, which would be... delicate, the mere appearances of this would have the Army of Callow brought to a boil. Someone, Frederic Goethal thought, was trying to sow dissension within the Grand Alliance at a time where unity was one of the few things standing between them and annihilation.

Someone was going to have to *die*, evidently.

"I understand that you have a duty," the Kingfisher Prince called out. "Yet so do I, and I have reason to believe that this woman's life is in danger. That is why I sprung her from her cell."

"I don't care if you've got duty or if you've got the clap, princeling," the Dominion captain said. "Drop your sword and kneel, *now*."

"I will do this, on my honour," the Prince of Brus replied, "if you can assure me that I will be placed in the same cell as the Red Axe, and that my sword will be returned to me when I am in that cell."

It was possible that Frederic would be able to fight his way through this, though far from certain – Dominion foot was hardy and sharpened by years of raiding, while the Callowans were veterans from half a dozen ludicrously brutal wars – but it would be a slaughter. Against such numbers, it would be vanity to attempt anything but his utmost. That meant killing blows, and the full might of his Choosing behind him.

"I must not have been clear," the Dominion captain shouted, "this isn't a negotiation, princeling. But it's your last warning, though, so drop that *fucking* sword."

If it came to a fight, Frederic Goethal thought, in a very real sense he had already lost. What did he have he could bargain with, here? Should he simply surrender, and from a visible and reassuring position of weakness try to make his case then?

"You shouldn't have come," the Red Axe whispered. "It'll make it all worse. Just step back and act strange, I'll say I used my Bestowal to make you do it."

"I do not believe I could ever come to enjoy Dormer reds," Frederic confessed, "so I shall have to decline."

"Hold," another voice called out. "What's this all about, then?"

It was a Callowan lieutenant who'd spoken out, a stout orc with a scarred face and a wary look about him.

"Stay out of this, Inger," the Dominion captain said. "You are outranked."

Ah, how embarrassing – about her, the prince silently corrected.

"Outrank my ass, Hassar," the orc growled. "I'm not shooting a fucking war hero without at least asking *why* first."

That, the Kingfisher Prince decided, sounded like a way to turn this around.

—

"Agnes continues to hold a grudge, I see," the Wandering Bard said. "She really ought to know better than to meddle by now. It never helps."

"It's a tired old game, this one," Catherine Foundling said. "This pretence that you *know better*, that you are the natural mistress of all our fates and we do offence by pulling our own

strings. I'd oppose you for that alone, even if you were all you try to pass for."

"You oppose me because there is no part of you that can tolerate being used instead of user," the Intercessor replied. "Everything else you add atop of that is a justification attempting to be just."

"Have you ever been beaten twice in the same century before?" the Black Queen mused. "Gods, twice in the same *decade*? The Tyrant of the Augur, and maybe now a third headed your way. It has to sting, that your grip is growing loose after all these years."

The Intercessor laughed.

"How very badly you want me to be your enemy," she said, as if awed. "To be *malicious*, out to get you. As if I was not simply snuffing out fires before they swallowed too much, no small number lit by your hand."

"You feed on agency, Intercessor," the Black Queen said, tone cold. "You are a parasite sucking the blood out of all you touch. Whatever you might once have been, that is what you are now: mad as any Tyrant, callously make use of all the world to fight your war on Keter."

"Yours is a rout, Catherine," the Intercessor said. "I watched, for two years. I waited. And what do you have to show for it? You teased out a few of his tricks and buried a kingdom's worth of dead as the price. You are out of your league. You are *failing*."

"You lie as easily as you breathe," the Black Queen replied. "These plans have been years in the making, you did not wait a whit. You simply cannot tolerate that this war can be fought in any way but with your hand at the helm."

"Where are the devils, Catherine?" the Intercessor said. "Where are the hosts that darken the skies, and the demons he has kept leashed for centuries? Where are the rituals that poison the land and the sorceries never before seen? I'll tell you the truth of it."

She leaned forward, eyes hooded.

"Your alliance is not great enough a threat to warrant the use of any of those," the Intercessor said. "*You do not worry him.*"

"You must know, deep down, that the truth of you is unpalatable to any who grasp it," the Black Queen said, hard-eyed. "Why else would you remain half-hidden, pulling strings instead of serving as an advisor to the greats of this age? You talk about the Dead King, again and again, as if the horror of him in any way excuses what *you* are."

"As is your habit, you talk of-"

"*Gods, have I had enough of that,*" the orphan girl snarled. "This insistence that we don't understand while you don't explain, that we are ignorant when you do not teach, that we are blind when you keep us in the dark. You are not somehow beyond us, you leech. You're not too important, too big to be judged – not when you spend our lives like coppers. Being old and hard to kill does no exempt you from consequence, and even if it's the last thing I do I will carve the truth of that into your fucking skull."

"How many times I've been in this seat, the subject of that same indignation spoken through a different tongue," the Intercessor said. "And do you know how it comes to happen, that I am lectured again?"

She smiled mirthlessly.

"Because I do what is necessary anyway," the Wandering Bard said.

"You might be fighting a monster," the Black Queen said, "but what of it? The rest of us are, after all, fighting *two*."

The other woman softly laughed.

"A leech and a scavenger," the Wandering Bard mused. "My, but what a pair we make. So, my friend, from one bottom-feeder to another – shall we settle the order of precedence among the base and hungry?"

A card was put down on the table, smoothly but without gentleness. Grey-clad and tanned, bearing a lantern and a staff: the Hermit.

"Fear and treason, conspiracy," the Intercessor said. "Your fishing rod of crowns untouched but the fisherman drowned by the tide anyway. The Hierophant, *slain*."

It was carefully, almost delicately, that a card was placed over the last. Two figures crowned with roses and holding hands, a radiant sun above them: the Lovers.

"Archer," Catherine Foundling said, her voice clear as a frozen pond, fury gone cold. "Love like greed and feet unrelenting – Gods have mercy on whoever you sent after him, because she *will make them into meat*."

—

It had taken Indrani longer to figure that she needed to go after Masego than to figure out where he actually would be.

Cat had been no help at all, disappearing from the corpse the moment she heard what there'd been to say, but eventually Archer

had pieced it all together. She'd gone to the Belfry because she figured Catherine would be there, and she'd been right, but that'd been true for a reason: Cat had come here to keep Autumn's grubby little hands off of the stuff in Masego's quarters. This debt business the fae talked about, it was about breaking the most promising stuff in the Arsenal – the Bard, for some no doubt godawful reason, must have wanted it gone. Except the fae that'd gone for Quartered Seasons had gotten slaughtered wholesale, and presumably two traitors had died in the failure as well: the Poet and the Monk, both gone. It seemed like a right mess for the Bard's side, but who the fuck ever knew with that one? She was all twists and turns and nipping at her own tail.

The bottom line of it, though, was that it'd been a pretty shit plan to send a bunch of fae after what was probably one of the single most warded rooms in the entire Arsenal. Indrani figured that even if the Artificer hadn't bottled up the fairies near the bottom of the Belfry they would have been stuck hammering at that door for at least an hour, if not more. Fae were infamously shit at dealing with thresholds, and while Olowe's Theorem suggested that a bastard realm like the Arsenal would only have weaker versions of creational laws like those weak didn't mean *absent*. For a supposed weaver of wiles like the Wandering Bard, it was a lackluster effort. It'd tied up a lot of Named, though. And when Indrani had considered Quartered Seasons with a cold eye, thinking about how she would have scuppered that ship, the answer had been pretty obvious: Hierophant.

The material stuff could be built up again, but if Masego was dead that project was dead in the water. It was his theories, his rituals, his methods from beginning to start. Even if his notes got passed to someone else, it was doubtful they'd be able to keep going. There just weren't that many mages with that kind of talent in Calernia. So, that must have been the play then: striking loud at the front gate, then slipping through the back to slide the knife. Zeze wasn't helpless, but he wasn't exactly invincible either. More worryingly he had some pretty dangerous weaknesses, for someone who knew where to look.

After that it'd just been a matter of figuring out where he was, since he obviously wasn't in his rooms. Archer had almost smacked herself in the back of the head when she'd realized she was making this a lot more complicated than it needed to be: the outer wards of the Arsenal had been broken through by Autumn, and Hierophant had been one of the mages to set those foundations down. He wouldn't be holed up or spoiling for a fight right now, he'd be fixing those wards and making sure that the entire Arsenal didn't start splitting in pieces between multiple layers of the Pattern. Which, uh, would be... unpleasant to anyone happening to be in one of those pieces when they split. Archer didn't need four Named to watch Masego's back, though, and there'd be other fires to put out. So she sent Roland and Cocky

where she figured they'd be most useful, and went on with only the Blessed Artificer at her side.

Adanna of Smyrna was exhausted, grumpy and running out of Light baubles to use but she have did one very important thing to contribute: she was one of the few keyed into the wards that surrounded the Chancel, the part of the Arsenal where the central warding array was.

They cut in through the Alcazar's tunnels, since they were deserted and a shortcut, and got through the first checkpoint smoothly enough. It'd been stripped of guards, which boded ill but might well have a mundane explanation given that the Arsenal was currently under attack. The two of them passed by the restricted stacks, Indrani feeling the hum of those heavy wards against her skin, and then the large room called the Mirage. Yet before they arrived at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second of three checkpoints protecting the central array, Archer caught a familiar scent in the air. Blood. Somewhere close to here someone had spilled blood, and recently. She raised a hand, signaling for the Blessed Artificer to halt. The other woman did, after a beat.

"We're not alone," Archer murmured. "Assume an enemy, blood was spilled."

"Do you think the Hierophant is wounded?" the Blessed Artificer whispered back.

"There'd be a lot more holes in the everything, if someone stuck him," Indrani decided. "But it might be where the guards are gone."

She gestured for the Blessed Artificer to follow her, quiet as she could, and they withdrew some. The smell had been coming from the near the Arsenal treasury offices, Indrani figured, so it was worth a look.

Archer caught the reflection of magelights on steel just before the blade slid between her ribs.

—

Catherine Foundling drained her glass dry and leaned forward. Hands hidden beneath a cloak laden with many victories, eyes cold, she cracked her neck the saw way she had back when she'd still fought for silvers in the Pit.

"I'd say it's about time to get started in earnest, isn't it?" the Black Queen said, smiling the smile of a woman who'd ransacked a shatranj board before coming there.

Hands carelessly plucking at the strings of the badly-strung lute on her lap the Wandering Bard hummed, fingers too deft for the clumsy sounds they brought and eyes looking at places that were not in this room.

"I couldn't agree more," the Intercessor said, smiling the smile of someone whose sleeves were filled with half a dozen decks of cards.

Insanenoodlyguy

"You shouldn't have come," the Red Axe whispered. "It'll make it all worse. Just step back and vote for PGTE on Topwebfiction, I'll say I used my reminder to make you do it."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil-yettofindaname>

Hi, I just finished reading PGTE for the first time, and I saw talk of a discord server a few chapters ago, does anyone have the link?
(It was frequently in the vote thread, so I'm leaving my reply here)

Dsylexic Wofl

<https://discord.gg/jkangV>

There you go fam.

[tkjarrah](#)

always fun when we get a little reminder of how much booksmarts indrani really has

[Liliet](#)

casually int 16 ♥

thearpox23

It's her dump stat.

Shveiran

...godsdamn it, it actually is, isn't it?

WuseMajor

I mean, if she intentionally wanted her Wisdom to be 6, does it really count as a dump stat?

Shveiran

With her Perception and Insight? That stat is not low, my friend: her recklessness does not come from her not knowing any better, it comes from a deliberate choice to do it ANYWAY.

naturalnuke

Ah yes, high wisdom Chaotic Neutral.

thearpox23

If you want to analyze, Indrani is actually absurdly highly stated.

Her Dexterity is sky high and her highest stat. Her second highest stat is probably Charisma, as she is extremely good looking, and even though she isn't very diplomatic, everyone seems to like her. (Or at least lets her get away with all sorts of shit.) Even her old buddies from refuge only hate her because she didn't want to be friends with them. Then it's between Strength and Wisdom. On one hand she can overpower Hakram, but she is also extremely perceptive, as was shown on many occasions. Really, the only other stat you could argue isn't extremely high is her Constitution, and even that is by comparison to those that can tank falling mountains and near Antarctic colds, meaning it is still probably higher than 16.

shikkarasu

She overpowers Hakram by way of AC and To-Hit bonus. Also, she's good with Con saves, but she doesn't tend to get hit very often. I figure her Str/Con is around 12-14 and she maxed Dex. She probably has 16 Wis/Int, but I don't think she has that much Charisma. She gets Bluff bonuses by playing up her devil-may-care attitude and downplaying her intellect.

I played a character like that in 3.5. She was almost as awesome as Archer.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani's Str is absurd. By the calculations made on the discord server, to send an arrow the size

of hers the distance that was indicated in one of the chapters (without counting wind resistance and assuming perfect transference of energy from arm to bow to arrow, which both result in lowballing) Indrani needed to draw ~300kg.

No, DnD characters cannot do that.

thearpox23

My memory is fuzzy, but doesn't she enjoy overpowering Hakram via wrestling? I half-recall her arm-wrestling him as well.

Also, her Wis is waayyy higher than her Int, she is scary good at reading people, and it consistently mentioned to have superior intuition to outright computation power.

When it comes to Charisma, I want you to consider her attitude and the shit she gets away with again, then try to imagine someone else pulling it. High Cha doesn't mean good attitude or that she isn't a murder-hobo. Bluff skill is irrelevant to anything.

Shveiran

DnD characters can do anything the DM feels fit the campaign, as the rules as written are designed to exist only until demanded by the game arbiter.

Considering how much the Gods seem to like big explosion, I feel safe to say that if this was a DnD campaign no rule would stand in the way of her giant-ass bow.

Big Brother

Cat and Bard are the best match for hero (Villain) and villain (Old Monster), a vicious dichotomy I've always loved seeing since I first read Spawn.

Big Brother

Also, quick question, was this chapter the first Affray of five, or three? I honestly have an interest in this game now, and want to play it.

[Liliet](#)

Three affrays started out of five.

Big Brother

Then I'm curious which affray will be conceded first, and what the final 2 shall be.

As to what's in the hands/deck, I'm certain the fool can be disregarded as it was stated Affray is played with the 21 High Arcana of a Tarot deck, while the Fool is marked as 0.

1, the Magician, is in the Bard's hand, for the Hunted Magician is still one of her on-going plans.

2, the High Priestess, is either in Cat's hand or the deck, and will most likely be the final card of the final affray, deciding the game.

3, the Empress, is in the Bard's hand, for Malicia still sits the Tower, the last remnants of the Age of Wonders

5, the Hierophant, is in Cat's hand, whose fate will be decided in the 4th Affray

8, Justice, Bard's hand, to bring ruin to the T&T by the death of the Red Axe

10, the Wheel, is in Bard's hand, a perpetuation of the cycle, and the continuation of the way things have always been

12, the Hanged Man, Bard's hand, for Black is still unaccounted for

13, Death, is in Cat's hand, as her plan is a new beginning for Calernia

14, Temperance, lies also in Cat's hand, with Severance/the Severing showing the way to killing immortals

15, the Devil, is in Bard's hand, for deals that have been struck, and those yet to be made

17, the Stars, Cat's hand, Quartered Seasons, to contain the Fae/Dead King

18, the Moon, Cat's hand, her knowledge of the Story revealing Bard for the monster that she is.

19, the Sun, Bard's hand, the false hopes she has filled the Heroes with, and the "good" they perform at her request

20, Judgement, Cat's hand, with the Sword of Mercy being shown by the Choir that Cat is not the Villain of this tale

21, the World, final card of the deck, to be drawn by Bard but countered by Cat, with the Bard's lies revealed for all to see.

Big Brother

Though fair warning, my meaning of the cards is taken from my dark Tarot deck, not a typical Tarot deck, as I felt the lovecraftian tone of my deck would fit this story better.

Decius

22: Goblinfire

Because whoever wins the game being played with the cards is going to get set on fire.

shikkarasu

Nah, Goblin Fire is 0, the Fool. It excuses you from playing by the rules in French Tarot. (Highest Scoring card, doesn't need to follow suite, you keep the points even if you lose the trick.)

There's a reason Bard chose a game that didn't include it. It is Catherine made cardboard. 😊

Vagabond

Wouldn't you have to keep in mind the numbers for the tally of the game too? So confusing!

beleester

It's a little confusing, because the rules imply that you can put multiple cards into an affray, but they seem to each be playing one and then moving on.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah I think that's just them.

Sckarred

From what I'm understanding, the affray doesn't need to be considered done before someone starts another

[*Liliet*](#)

Mhm.

nimelennar

Five affrays, and we've seen three. Battles for the Severance, for Masego, and for the Red Axe.

One affray must surely be a diplomatic one, for the Thief has yet to be played. But what is the fifth, and who shall she play to win it? Herself?

Ninestrings

It would be interesting to see which Major Arcana represents Cat.

The High Priestess?

I assume The Wandering Bard is The Fool .

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Kinda has to be – the Empress is taken, and the court cards aren't in play here.

Oshi

Nope. Thief isn't part of this. This is purely an arsenal game. I'm waiting to see what the other plays are. Trump cards are Bard's things and Cat always cheats. I'm going to be sad if this is when EE decides to kill someone.

shikkarasu

Don't forget they each have 7 cards. That they can forfeit an Affray to get one back suggests that they can play more than one per affray. The whole game is full of potential for activated Trap Cards.

danh3107

Easily one of the best chapters this whole book, if not the best. Absolutely solid and clever writing.

Tenthyr

Cats rage is so pure. But I hope it doesn't tip over into that villainous tunnel vision the Bard clearly would like— Cat is walking the terribly fine line between icy, ruthless domination and the villain reaching the apex of their power... And making a fateful misstep.

[Liliet](#)

I think "love always fucks you over" is quite sufficient setup to make sure she doesn't XD

shikkarasu

She's not Named, yet, so this may count as the first step of her Plan. Doubly so if she gets her Name from winning 3+ Affrays.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

I'm loving this use of an external viewpoint for a chapter about a story duel between two people who are essentially competing for the right to be Calernia's narrator.

erebus42

Or perhaps whether or not Calernia should even have narrator?

Oshi

+1 that right there erebus

caoimhinh

Yeah, and even the name of the game they are playing is fitting.

Affray: "In many legal jurisdictions related to English common law, affray is a public order offense consisting of the fighting of one or more persons in a public place to the terror of ordinary people."

That really describes the fights of the top people in Calernia, like the Bard and Dead King playing continental shatranj with each other.

[Liliet](#)

00000 yes n i c e

Ninestrings

Two layers of traitors? it seems wild that the Blessed Artificer would help take out the other traitors only to turn now.

Unless she is a knife aimed at Masego? that would explain why she was practicing blocking his magic earlier...

[Liliet](#)

...oh, I didn't realize that might be Adanna. RIP.

I just... dont think so for out of text reasons.

Ninestrings

Not explicitly stated but it was just the two of them, unless whoever it was took her out with literally zero sound.

Archer is sharp, the odds of something sneaking up on her is low, betrayal seems far more likely to land the knife with her.

[Liliet](#)

> unless whoever it was took her out with literally zero sound.

we dont happen to have someone like that around do we? 😊

Shveiran

We do, yet that someone is also someone Archer observed closely. To be honest, I kind of assumed Indrani stole a page out of Cat's book here (which is really Black's) and has a plan to kill (and defend against) most people she met.

Didn't Tariq comment along these lines in Book 5, while they were climbing together?

[Liliet](#)

oooo let me check
ty for the reason to reread that sequence ♥

im guessing you're referring to the part where he comments on how she's ready to kill him personally? he doesnt actually comment on whether it extends to everyone and i dont think the implication is there lol considering his position at that time

Shveiran

Oh, I didn't mean that Indrani has Black's level of "thou has entereth the room and therefore I have seven plus plans and / or contingencies to ensure your demise should it prove necessary ready" paranoia (though is it paranoia if they re out to get you? Discuss) just that she is the type that watches out for ambushes and that knows the allies of today may very well be the enemies of tomorrow.

She had no reason to believe that the folks on her band were always going to be allies, and she knows Cat expects betrayals here, so... I don't know, I feel like Indrani wouldn't get caught with her pants down, especially after seeing the Monk's dagger in NotCat's throat. She's not invincible and I'd not be disappointed too much if her contingency failed, but I'd expect her to have one.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani got caught pants down by the Monk's betrayal AND by the fact Concocter actually was in fact collaborating with Bard.

That said, I do agree that after two in a row she'd be more cautious lmao

Dsylexic Wofl

Im assuming we are going by D&D metrics? In which case Her worst stat would be Charisma, as Charisma doesnt dictate how pretty or beautiful you are. Strength and Constitution dictate that. Charisma is essentially your presence, your diplomatic skills as well as your bluffing. Indrani Charisma is her lowest, but not by a lot, she just has high Bluff and Intimidate, instead of Diplomacy.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing you were trying to reply to another message?

Anyway my estimation of DnD stats for Indrani
Str: 40 (yes dnd doesnt let it go that high but)
(Indrani can bench press a rhino. we did math on discord that says that) (from how far her bow can send an arrow) (this is p much lowballing)

Con: UHHH WE'RE ABOUT TO FIND OUT LOL (generally speaking probably 20+ tho cause again martial Named are automatically past normal person abilities)

Dex: 30 (I'm going with a lower estimate than Str only because 30 is already absurd)

Int: 17 (we've all noticed, right?)

Wis: DEPENDS ON HOW WE COUNT but tbh with Drani's general self-awareness and ability to swallow unpleasant truths I'd put this around 17 too

Cha: 14 or so? Note: Charisma also dictates willpower, like the result of a staring contest and shit.

...Yeah, Cha is the dump stat.

Decius

Archer has a plan to kill everyone she meets, but she copied that out of Ranger's book. The fact that Cat copied Black's copy of that same page is part of how they haven't killed each other.

thearpox23

I haven't bothered to make a compilation of which Named are currently in the Arsenal with the notes marking where they currently are, but maybe somebody else can point out which Named is out that has a chance of sneaking up on Archer?

Because Adanna has the opportunity but it would be weird for her to stage the betrayal now, I refuse to believe that a regular person would be able to sneak up on Archer, which leaves either a fae or one of the Named at the Arsenal.

No point in speculating of the fae, but regarding the Named... Haunted Magician? Maddened Keeper? I'm sure I am missing someone.

[Liliet](#)

we dont actually know whre the Fallen Monk went

thearpox23

I think that's the one agent we can discount. No way Cat would let him pull that shit twice.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not so sure

AceOfSword

We never saw a bidy, it's nit safe to assume that a Named is dead unless you can confirm it.

Catherine faked her death for the fae, she might have had to let the Fallen Monk get away in order to do that: he stabs her, she explodes with night-fire, he avoids the worst of it only getting some burns, there's a charred corpse with a knife in it's neck. The fae think she's dead and go up, the Fallen Monk goes to kill Masego.

Shveiran

I see you point. But if you tried to slay the Black Queen, would you really expect her Swan Song to have no casualties?

As a trick, it works better annihilating the Monk on the spot, is what I'm saying.

[Liliet](#)

If you were trying to slay the Black Queen, wouldn't you have prepared a trick to slip out of blast radius instantly?

Shveiran

Well, duh, but I frankly doubt my patron would expect it to work.

My return would make them more dubious about my success, is what I'm saying.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure Fallen Monk is an ideology guy, not a patron having guy.

thearpox23

Liliet, you're missing the most important thing. Even IF the Monk survived his attempt, and even IF he managed to escape in working condition, do you really think Catherine would have left him unattended? I'm not even talking about tailing him

through the Arsenal, let's just assume he escaped and covered all his tracks. She already left a body at the crime scene as a message, she'd find a way to let at least Archer know what to be wary off.

Leaving an backstabbing enemy alive so that he can backstab one more time, and that would in turn shift other threads in the story, which would give her an advantage in the end is just not her story. And never against someone like the Bard. I'd expect shit like that from Malicia or Akua(Books 1-3), or maybe even Black. But even they wouldn't dare it against the Bard.

thearpox23

PS: Now that I think about it, I know which character would dare that trick against the Bard.

Dread Emperor Traitorous would absolutely do it, but then... he would also be the traitor, and also I am poisoned.

thearpox23

PPS: "is just not her story" Read 'story' as 'style'.

I know I have many typos, and I try to ignore them, but sometimes I typo something important.
Insert obligatory comment about the need to be able to edit our comments

[Liliet](#)

(replying here cause of the depth limit)

Catherine DID leave Archer a warning to be wary of him. That's what the knife in the neck and the fact his body isn't lying around imply when put together.

thearpox23

Missed that. Good catch. Could mean something else, but I'll tentatively give you the 'if X and X and X are true then' it could happen.

Would also mean that Archer missed the message, so good on ya Cat. Screwed that one up.

[Liliet](#)

i dont think she did, she was the one saying the knife is a message to her
if it was about 'neener neener one of yours was a traitor' Cat could damn well tell her that later

thearpox23

She said it was a message, and concluded that Cat was listening to the interrogation.

If she was thinking Monk was on the loose and still a danger she would have absolutely mentioned it to RogueS team.

So either he isn't a threat, OR Cat didn't leave a message, OR Archer missed the memo.

[Liliet](#)

Missed the memo, sounds like.

Probably took it too personally that one of her own was a traitor to realize WHY Cat would be telling her that lmao

Cicero

I took that to be an ambush not a backstab

[Liliet](#)

Same

Morgenstern

Second that. She **was** snooping around where she thought the danger might be...

Sulomund

And now, we wait.

:c

medailyfun

Just noticed the similarity :)))

I'm one of a few survivors
I'm a drawer labelled "lost and found"
Moon travelers and deep sea divers
Whose oxygen supply ran out
Now maybe if their gods be willing
They'll give us something, fill our empty cups

Sit down in the boat, don't spill it
Or we'll just have to line back up

And wait
So we wait
We wait
Yes we wait
And we wait
And we wait
We will wait
'Til we

Cardigans "Godspell"

M0och123

This was such a great chapter, OMG.

I bet Cat's trump card is the White Knight.
Some other cards in her hand should be the Hunted Magician and Sve Noc.
Robber? Maybe. (I would love to see Robber appear to blow some things up, goblin style!
Any others?

Also, any ideas as to what cards the Bard has in hand?

Big I

I assume Akua is one of Cat's trumps. The Bard could literally have anything.

SpacyRicochet

"By the way, Robber is a big fan. He wanted you to have this."

As the rest of The Black Queen's hand went flying in The Intercessor's face, a special sharper joined the flicks of paper in the air.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The problem is, there aren't enough Trumps in the deck to cover all the characters, we don't even have the court cards here. I think at least we can assume that only those characters present are represented, though DK might yet get a presence in. The Hunted Magician would likely be the Magician, and Sve Noc would probably be the Moon (representing Night).

alele

Given the "take a card back if you declare a loss" as a Chekhov Gun, any guesses on who gets to withdraw and fight again?

domboy

imma guess its betrayal at least from the Bard, and Archer from Cat

[Liliet](#)

On Cat's side – Adjutant, possibly. The stakes aren't quite clear on the Christophe thing, it might be that's one Cat can concede without fear.

On Bard's side – oh boy... 😊

Decius

Bard will try to force Cat to make some kind of hard choice about who to save, and then Cat will cheat. Goblinfire will be involved, and it won't technically be Cat's fault.

Hellspirit

This was precisely what I wanted!!!!
Cat and Bard playing out the cards in narrative against each other.

grzecho2222

Bard: "Ha, and what will you do now?"

Cat: Lays five cards.

Bard: "Exodia, uh it's not possible! No one's ever been able to call him!"

Sparsebeard

I still wonder if the DK and Cat aren't somehow still working together, unbeknownst to Cat.

After all, there was a part of the meeting between The Three Amigos missing and I don't think the cost of the war against the DK is above what Cat is ready to pay for her ambitions.

It would also explain why the DK isn't going all out as the Intercessor so aptly remarks.

[Liliet](#)

> the cost of the war against the DK

that would seem to be half the continent, multiple times worse than the Doom of Liesse, so uh

I don't think so

Sparsebeard

Isn't what's been taken up till now basically what she was gonna offer the DK in order to repel the crusade though.

And Cat pretty much admitted that this war against the DK is necessary to unite the nations of Calernia.

It's a practical guide to evil after all, and if it can help her goals, I'm pretty sure Cat would consider costs (so far) acceptable.

Liliet

Cat was offering this to the DK as a target of invasion that she would then help repel after backstabbing him.

Sparsebeard

Which is pretty much what is happening now.

I'm not saying that Cat would let the DK keep the lost principalities, she needs land for the drow and a victory would help cement the terms.

Doesn't mean that DK and Cat didn't have a chat about screwing the bard over despite fighting each other. DK seems to care a lot more about Bard than the whole alliance while Cat needs the war to make heroes and villains collaborate.

Still, I think narratively, it's pretty clear that the Bard is the main antagonist. I mean, DK was introduced much later and had much less impact on the story.

Liliet

I mean, I think narratively it's pretty clear the plot isn't about either Bard or the Dead King. They're pieces of the puzzle, and the challenge is to assemble it. Bard is notably not out to genocide the continent; that makes her a lesser problem regardless of how early or late in the plot she appeared.

Sparsebeard

The war against the DK is pretty straightforward and all in all, his existence isn't even detrimental to Cat's goals. Quite the contrary in fact since without him the terms would have been much harder to agree to.

The Intercessor on the other hand seems like she absolutely has to go in order for Cat's long term goals to be achieved. And we know the DK also wants her gone.

As for continental genocide... was that even ever truly an option with heroes popping up whenever the continent is truly in danger and using whatever desperate means to triumph?

I mean, ultimately, wasn't even the DK himself the WB's doing?

Defeating the DK seems like a much easier task than getting rid of the Bard. I mean, he's been defeated countless times before and he doesn't NEED to be utterly destroyed, simply pushing him back would suffice.

But frankly, even if we are talking about total destruction, destroying the DK seems harduous and much less important to the plot than destroying the Bard.

Liliet

His existence is detrimental to Cat's goals of

- showing what the new cool unprecedented alliance can do in the form of getting rid of him
- settling the drow
- making the world better by getting rid of him

also no his existence is not WB's doing lol it was the opposite – something she failed to prevent

Sparsebeard

Just pushing back the DK would be sufficient to accomplish all those goals. Cat isn't a hero on a quest to eliminate the DK's evil!

On the other hand, the Bard has opposed Cat's designs and been the antagonist of the story countless times:

- Opposed Black
- Manipulated William
- Facilitated Akua's Folly (that thing with the elves fading away)
- Got SoB to put pressure on the crusade and the Prince of Procer
- Got Sabah killed by Champion
- Engineered obstruction and treason with the Band of Five against the DK
- Screwed over the drows
- Tried to influence the free cities but was denied by Hierarch
- Tried to force the Prince of Procer into a Role by initiating a coup

- Organised an attack on the Arsenal
- Etc, etc.

And that's only part of the things WE KNOW ABOUT.

DK on the other hand is this arc's antagonist, but no more than William, Akua, the Sisters, Cordelia, the Fea, etc, were. I mean, we even skipped the first two years of the war to come back just before the Bard enter the fray again.

[Liliet](#)

> Cat isn't a hero on a quest to eliminate the DK's evil!

Is she not? :3

[Liliet](#)

(meanwhile destroying the Bard is utterly unnecessary)

Shveiran

Sez you, based on nothing substantial.

I'm not saying it's impossible that you are right; it isn't.

But the Bard is a mystery wrapped in an enigma and cloaked in questions. We suspect much, and we know next to nothing; a good proof of this is how wildly opinions on what we do in fact know about the Bard vary wildly.

You want to argue that Bard is not necessarily an enemy? Fine and dandy, it's a perfectly possible theory.

You want to say this is somehow proven or factually based? I'm sorry, but there just isn't any substantial evidence to sustain that.

[Liliet](#)

Fair, very fair.



thearpox23

"It's a tired old game, this one," Catherine Foundling said.

"This pretence that you know better, that you are the natural mistress of all our fates and we do offence by pulling our own strings. I'd oppose you for that alone, even if you were all you try to pass for."

"Gods, have I had enough of that," the orphan girl snarled. "This insistence that we don't understand while you don't explain, that we are ignorant when you do not teach, that we are blind when you keep us in the dark. You are not somehow beyond us, you leech. You're not too important, too big to be judged ? not when you spend our lives like coppers. Being old and hard to kill does no exempt you from consequence, and even if it's the last thing I do I will carve the truth of that into your fucking skull."

Represents my sentiments perfectly. Frankly shocking how few stories even touch this attitude, despite having characters acting like the Bard, and those that channel it so well are much fewer still.

It is personally one of my biggest peeves many stories I read, as I absolutely despise the attitude of creatures like the Bard, and when the author does not address it, that majorly alienates me from the story.

Shveiran

The best part, in my opinion, is that this sentiment is channeled through a character like Catherine and not, say, one like Anaxeres.

This frames the attack to direct it at manipulation, puppeteering, profiting from the misery of many and the like while never doubting the need for order, authority, and laws to prevent the world from spiraling into chaos.

For me, attacking the first without sparing the second is cathartic in the moment yet icky in the long run. I keep having all these "yes, but" in my brain that alienates me from the narrative.

The balance is kind of a tricky landing, and this is one of the few stories that I've ever seen sticking it.

thearpox23

Hear, hear. I fear many authors try to place different perspectives into the story, yet fail to fully think them through themselves. So they succeed in putting forth the implications, yet the actual clash is lackluster or absent entirely. And that is enough for most readers, with some works even elevated to great status, because most people don't care to analyze too much.

That said, which other stories have you read that have stuck the balance? Because off the top of my head I cannot think of a single one that does it better. I can think of stories that address it circumstantially, by virtue of good writing, but not directly, not as well.

Shveiran

Sanderson would be my go-to artist for these kinds of themes. Both the Mistborn and the Stormlight saga address the topic of absolutism, delegation, and rebellion with a lot of depth (which is somewhat helped by how long the novels are, but if you're here you likely also see it as a feature and not a bug XD).

Besides him... Well, sir Pratchett did address it in the Watchmen saga, and very eloquently, though I personally didn't like his conclusion much. It splendidly fit the theme of the sagas, but in a vacuum, I feel it's a bit cheating.

thearpox23

Been many years since I read Pratchett! I remember reading him as a kid, never took his philosophizing seriously. Was easy to write it off, because it's such a clown setting. (I guess I also didn't like his conclusions and just focused on the comedy rather than sabotage my own reading experience.) I guess if I read his works again I'd pick up a bunch of stuff I didn't before.

Sanderson was one of the authors I considered, but was never entirely sold on, and then forgot about. All I know is that he's a good writer, addressed many themes, and has long books.

Since we're chatting, can you tell me what the setting, the atmosphere is like and the overall story is about? For example I don't like the Wild West as a setting, or Fallout-esque dystopias, or even stuff that is too bleak and fatalistic. And then you have G.R.R.Martin who makes great characters but is incompetent at world lore, and can't form a coherent story with his own characters to save his life. So I'd like to know what I'd be getting myself into, and I don't mind spoilers if that's relevant at all.

Shveiran

Oh, my, now I have to win you over. Brandon Sanderson is my favorite author, bar none. But I'll try to be at least somewhat impartial here.

Mistborn is a three book saga composed by the Last Empire, the Well of Ascension and the Hero of Ages. (there is also the independent novels set in the world's future, so be careful not to start with those)
The set-up is basically that a man has been ruined by the God King of the evil empire that spans all known lands, but since he is a rogue and not a general, he

will stick it to him by robbing him blind rather than leading a rebellion. Sort of.

What follows is an amazing ride that involves a great heist, plans within plans within plans, political intrigue between the noble houses, magic ninjas dueling in the mist above the unsuspecting cities, and one of the best mentor-apprentice relationships I've read. And all that it's just book one. Nay, it's actually the first two-thirds of it, really.

One of the most distinguishing features is the magic system, which, as is the norm for Sanderson, is developed as a small series of clearly defined powers that are measurable, so much so that you know precisely what each one does and what it doesn't, its limits and its functioning. And then you spend three books reading about people using those simple, defined powers and combining them into crazy, mind-blowing combinations that you never saw coming and that you are nevertheless forced to admit make perfect sense.

Long story short: amazing worldbuilding, good plot twists that you don't see coming but feel inevitable after the fact, and characters I'm fond of to this day. I can't recommend it enough: pick up the Last Empire, and you won't regret it. I'm sure of it.

As for Stormlight... oh, boy, it's amazing, but you kinda need to go in trusting the author, because the beginning is... kind of peculiar.

My suggestion is to try Mistborn first, and if you like it, then you can rest assured Stormlight will hook you in as well.

But as a teaser, it has knights wielding superpowered armors and ten-foot long swords, and in a context that forces me, a HEMA enthusiast, to admit that it makes perfect sense in context.

[Liliet](#)

Also note: it's possible to really dislike Mistborn but very much like Stormlight Archives.

thearpox23

We both know that is a useless comment to leave, bordering on tautology.

thearpox23

Well, that actually sounds really exciting. I'll probably make it my next big read then. Congrats on being seemingly the only person on the internet capable

of selling something they are a fan on, and not just screech "Shut up and read/watch that!".

What about his other books? The guy has like a dozen novels + a bunch of short stories and novellas + a bunch of other novels that aren't counted in the first list for some reason(?).

So far from your post I've gathered that he's got two main fantasy worlds he's working on. Where does of his stuff fall? And how is the quality?

[Auston Varner](#)

Regarding the two lists of novels, many of Sanderson's works are set in a shared universe called the Cosmere, where different series take place on different worlds and have different magic systems, but all the magic stems from (kind of) the same source, and some characters can travel between worlds (that's an important but relatively minor detail in Stormlight, pretty much just background info for the rest). His books tend to be divided into Cosmere and non-Cosmere works for that reason

Shveiran

As Auston Varner said.

Also, it should be noted that some of his stuff is meant for a younger audience. Steelheart, Firefight and Calamity are pleasant, but you can tell they are not meant for you. They lack the same punch; I'd say pick them up if you fall in love with the guy like I did, but don't make them a priority read. The same goes for the Rithmatist saga.

As a stand-alone, Warbreaker is pretty neat. I'd recommend it as an author card, though he really shines more when he has more time to develop stuff and character; he is very consistent and always has an endgame plan, so the longer the story goes the more invested you become.

Elantris is also very good... as a first novel. I still enjoyed it, but it is a poor way to judge his skills. It's still got an original setting, interesting characters and a nice plot though, so I'd still recommend it.

Legion is... strange but cool. Much shorter and set in our world, but a very interesting concept. Good fun.

Band of Mourning, Shadows of Self and the Alloy of Law I enjoyed a lot despite my dislike for gunslinging, so that should probably count for something; but admittedly I was hooked the moment I got to find out how Mistborn's world evolved after Well of Ascension. They are novellas set after the Mistborn saga, after the death of the original cast; but yeah, one shouldn't read them before Mistborn, obviously.

Edgedancer is a neat expansion on a minor character of the Stormlight Archive; fun, but... again, it's an extra.

As for quality... well, my own opinion is that it's top notch. Now, I have no way to tell if he somehow pushes all my buttons or he is, objectively, amazing (if objective amazingness even exists) but I never closed one book of his without getting the shivers, and I'd kind of always pick up something of his if given the choice.

Bottom line, no author is for everyone; but for the value it has... if one asks me to recommend a fantasy read, I'll always fall on his bibliography.

thearpox23

Alright, thanks for the listing. I'll be sure to use it as a guide. Who knows, maybe his books will supplant this novel and The Witcher Saga as my favorite novels.

Cicero

One thing I'd say about Brandon Sanderson is that he is consistent and produces good quality books at an amazing rate. Louis L'Amour is only other author I can think of who produced at the rate Sanderson does.

LarsBlitzer

"I fear many authors try to place different perspectives into the story, yet fail to fully think them through themselves."

I think the reason for that happening is mostly because the writer has a specific outcome they want, and following a given initially unconsidered perspective may turn out to be either irrelevant to the narrative, or likely to hijack the story entirely. I suspect that's part of the reason the Game of Thrones TV series is done, while the books are unfinished. The Mountain That Doesn't Write still has some

of that "Mereenese Knot" to unravel. He's been lost in the weeds for a while, juggling everything he can. At least he knows one of the possible endings wouldn't be satisfactory. I suppose something along the lines of making the last two or three seasons "A mere Green Dream of what might have been, but now we're down the other leg of the Trousers of Time so we don't have to worry about that, Bran." or similar handwaving. But I digress.

I don't think many writers are better, certainly none that I can think of right now.

thearpox23

G.R.R.Martin's problem is so rare he is almost a unicorn in the field, and shouldn't be used as an example for anything. It takes real skill to create such fleshed out characters, yet be so incompetent at guiding said characters towards an outcome, that he is effectively guiding cats. And then to guide the first cats he makes more cats, and that works for like a chapter or two, but these cats eventually go off on their own as well, creating a never-ending cycle. And then sometimes alpha cats emerge, and start actually guiding the other cats forward, but they usually then get shot for short-term catharsis at the cost of all the cats breaking off on their own again. (I do just really enjoy ragging on Martin, but I'll stop there, before this grows into an essay.)

Can't speak for the second half of the paragraph you wrote, but I will note that I had to reread it around ten times to even get an approximation of your point. I assume you were referencing the GoT TV Show which I haven't watched. Maybe it'd make sense to a fan, but between random name drops, sudden quotes, lack of transitions, or paragraph breaks, it is confusing.

On a serious note though, you seem to confuse fleshing out the competing philosophies and perspectives of the characters with following them around for extended period of the plot. No, you just have to keep solid the parts where they are present in the story, and if their perspective is relevant, give them the opportunity to express and test their convictions. Keep in mind that such things are often central conflicts to the plot; like the clash between order and chaos, or the classic 'what makes a human?' to give two common examples.

The former are often extremely simplistic, and the most frequent failure of the latter is to just (effectively) put humans in robot bodies, have them act as humans, and

then pretend that they're AIs and there is any sort of moral quandary to be had.

Or to give another side of this, consider every time a character spouts a plan or a vision that is impractical and can be debunked by two minutes, or when an long-running civilization that was build on such a vision and has existed for over a millennia gets ruined by something that was bound to happen within a decade of its existence. The author is effectively trying to sell you the idea that "Hey, this ridiculous thing Can and Has worked! If only you poor hero haven't acted like a regular human being it wouldn't have completely collapsed on its own!"

It is true that authors usually have different priorities, like character drama, but it doesn't change my point that they don't think fully through the stuff put into the story. It's not about how much of it goes into the story mate, it's about them understanding the subjects they're touching in general.

Javvies

The Game of Thrones TV series was at its best when it was closest to the books. So the early seasons. The further away from the books the show got, the worse the quality of the story got. Might have been a few exceptions, mostly around expanding/amplifying things that happened in the background in the books where there was no PoV, but generally? No.

And once they moved past where the books had covered, they replaced story with visual spectacle.

Don't get me wrong – there were amazing visual spectacles and cinematography ... but tossing story out the window just to make a specific visual spectacle happen? No.

And dragging out and extending the lifespan of certain characters because they're popular with the fanbase. Or whatever the fuck happened with the Dornish.

GRRM screwed up when he ditched the five year gap/ timeskip that was going to be needed for the Essos storylines because most of the Westeros storylines didn't provide for one. Or, rather, some of the critical Westeros storylines wouldn't reasonably allow for one. Specially the Iron Throne-centric storylines, ie Cersei's. Maybe if Kevan Lannister hadn't died, he'd have been able to maintain an uneasy equilibrium in most of Westeros for long enough to get the Essos storylines handled faster.

Still can't comment on a show I haven't watched or care about.

"GRRM screwed up when..."

GRRM screwed up when it became a viable reading strategy to read all the chapters in the book from a single perspective first, then second perspective, et cetera, and miss almost nothing. Or even just skip a couple perspectives entirely. Not kidding when I say I'd actually recommend that and that it'd probably make for a more enjoyable and wholesome reading experience. If you like Dany for example, you can just binge her perspective books 2-5 (dropped series after book 5) and forget the whole Westeros nonsense and be left with a well paced story that doesn't feel lacking.

But his bigger screw-up was bungling the whole main narrative enough that in order to resolve it he keeps introducing important characters/factions/mcguffins not just past book two, but actually with increasing frequency. It is the basics of good storytelling to first introduce your factions, then let them duke it out. Every late-comer should be well set-up, make sense, and not overshadow our main factions that we care about the most. Instead we get an exhausting "let's care about the Dormer now" interruption because pacing isn't a thing. Past a certain point the whole thing starts to feel like a vampire novel where the author goes "You know what, Werewolves ALSO exist. And also Demons exist. And also Angels are a thing. And also Ghosts. And you also have Oriental Mystics. And Mages. And a secret Mason society. And also and also and also..."

The whole five year time skip is frankly a gigantic red herring. It is one of the narrative tools he could have used to direct his story, perhaps not the greatest, but certainly not alone. I maintain that the Red Wedding was the single biggest mistake that Martin made in the series, and put the story cohesion into a death spiral. The chapter itself might've been cathartic, but it'd be like if Erra killed off Cordelia after the Battle of the Camps, and we'd have to have two to three books following individual princes as they run around like headless chickens. Of course it'd only be two to three books if you were to devote full chapter perspectives to each prince for as long as they remained in the game, but you have to structure the plot around your writing style.

[Javvies](#)

Not having watched the show means you didn't miss anything. IMO.

I admit, I never bothered to watch the final season. They'd gone too far off the rails and totally abandoned story and internal consistency by the time I couldn't force myself to continue watching. IMO.

True, the ever expanding list of characters and factions and agendas is a major issue. Some of it is acceptable, ie, can't really introduce anything in Slaver's Bay until somebody gets there or is gathering information about the place in anticipation of going there.

Also, I'm pretty sure that he's massively underestimating how much story there is to go. Especially since the battles of Mereen and the Lake were supposedly supposed to fit into the end of Dance, and will now have to be shoehorned into the beginning of Winds. Plus he's dumped Dany back into the hands of the Dothraki, so her story isn't going anywhere fast (on the other hand, maybe by the time she gets back to Slaver's Bay, there won't be anything left to keep her there).

You think the Red Wedding was his biggest mistake? That's ... probably controversial. What about it do you think makes it's his biggest mistake?

thearpox23

Biggest single mistake if we're talking about specific events, and yes, I know it's controversial, and that's because standalone the chapter is really good. I already mostly explained why. When you have kingdom-size narrative-driven story, you are relying on a few strong and interesting personalities to drive your narrative. Every time you remove one of them the focus either shifts to the other main characters, or you need some secondary character(s) to fill the shoes. Either way it is a narrative shift.

The first one was Ned's death, which kicked off the civil war, and set-up the picture of the conflict. Another was the death of the Khan, which let Dany take over the mongol horde.

The difference with the Red Wedding and later Lannister nonsense is that instead of setting up the conflict they fragmented it, making the situation hard to follow, indescribable in just

several sentences, and most importantly leaving it without any charismatic figureheads for us to care about. The second most prominent army was left without a single character attached to it, and several still alive characters attached to it now split apart from it, giving us yet another thread to keep track of.

Before the event the story was mostly cohesive: with the Starks on the one side of the civil war, Lannisters on the other, the Wall and the Dorthraki to the sides, and several other houses staying on the sidelines for the time being. But after the event the so-called opposing factions were essentially split entirely. I have already mentioned that it's possible to read only chapters for a single location and miss very little, but it was the Red Wedding that fully drove that spike. You could no longer say 'If Dany were to go north right now she'd join up with the main event,' because the main event no longer exists.

Every parallel narrative is interesting to read for two reasons. The first is because we care about the parallel narrative for its own merits, and the second for how it is/will connect to the main story once they join back up. Once you destroy the main theater of action you greatly sabotage the second reason.

In many real world wars, and in fact with every conflict in the Guide, each faction rep. could harbor the optimism that 'If we defeat Cat/Black/Procer here and here we'll be able to get the advantage, cement our position here, and then push on to win the war.' Past the Red Wedding that line of thought is absent in the books, and so the main conflict loses its luster as well. We now have to care for the individual local struggles more because there is nothing to care about with the main event.

I hope you're satisfied with my explanation. I don't exactly hang around on GoT forums so I don't know how common of a sentiment that is. But one final thing "I'm pretty sure that he's massively underestimating how much story there is to go." I have already told you that he is herding cats. To understand what is going on, you have to get that into your brain. Whenever Martin imagines how much there is for him to write, it ends up being little

more than a suggestion for his independent and willful clowder.

Javvies

Yeah, I can see where you're coming from with that.

I'm not sure I entirely agree. Or that I entirely disagree.

It is, unquestionably a pivotal moment.

On the one hand, it sure looks like it could be one hell of a mistake looking back in from the quagmire he seems to have written himself into. Offing Robb in the Red Wedding shortstops anywhere he was going, and left the Lannisters without ongoing overt opposition in Westeros, other than the largely ineffective Ironborn, and Stannis who hasn't managed to get much done since Renly died.

On the other hand ... I think that the intention of the Red Wedding, and its consequences, was to set things up for later, and delay others.

I'm not yet ready to commit on the Red Wedding having been the single biggest mistake he's made – there's too much story left, too many balls set into motion by the Red Wedding and it's consequences.

And part of the problem might be the way that things are dragging so long. The long delay between books definitely hasn't helped.

thearpox23

I can understand that the pivotal moment was not entirely without purpose, setting up certain things and delaying others as you said. All the same there is a giant question mark of whether the story even needed a pivotal moment anywhere near there. The event may have happened early compared to what has already been written, but the brick of text before it wasn't short. At what point do you have to start delivering on the things you set up already instead of setting up things even more. Even if some of the balls set into motion by the event eventually pay off, there is still the opportunity cost to account for.

As it is, it was the most prominent point for my gradual loss of interest in the saga, ending with me dropping the series after book five.

You are entirely correct that the things dragging on and the delay is a part of the problem, and for my side I feel entirely justified to judge an event twenty-odd years and several brick-sized tomes after its publishing. Writer's block or not, I am not an Ent or an Elf to consider two decades a passing breeze.

And while I respect your decision to hold your opinion, I do encourage you to consider the opportunity cost for any payoff in your final judgement.

dadycool

It's a somewhat classic Revolution Aftermath type of story. Sure, the wicked monarch has been overthrown by the Hero, but what'll happen to the kingdom and its people now that the central order has been removed? The power-vacuum alone would decimate everyone.

Thankfully, Cat understands this and has been preparing for her own absence and the other "What comes next" stuff, like the T&T.

thearpox23

This series dealt with the Revolution Aftermath type of story as well, more so in the first few volumes, but that's really not the type of conflict at play in this instance. The wicked monarch, tyrant, emperor or whatever have legal worldly authority they have obtained via generally conventional means.

The Bard holds no crown, has no claim on anything, and at most can sometimes hold up a badge as an emissary of the gods above or below. But it isn't even a rebellion against the gods, just against a tool of theirs. The only things enabling the Bard are her abilities and experience, and her entire skill-set centers on the removal of agency, whereas the above-mentioned tyrant is focused on achieving their own goals, and the issue with them is just their abuse of their authority.

Winning against the Bard is no revolution or even any change on its own, it would merely ease the changes that would come. That Cat has already envisioned the Liesse Accords is great and will open a new age, but that is the reason why Bard is so hostile towards her, not the other way around. The Liesse Accords are not a way for Cat to maintain civilization past Bard's passing, but rather it is the Bard herself putting herself forward as the enemy because the Liesse Accords are show the agency she cannot bear.

If you want an example of a type of a story where such a character is not done well, and which probably inspired this whole examination: Pick any story where a character taunts the protagonist, mock him, and gives out fragments of information while behaving as if the protagonist has no agency. Then the protagonist acts exactly as the character predicted and the thing acts all smug about it. No, it then revealing it was all part of its master plan and getting beaten in a boss battle does not address the issue. Or if the story is different it becomes a companion/friend and the whole thing is forgotten without any self-reflection or an insulting "Sorry about that, but it was all for your own good and it's in the past so let's move on now."

[Liliet](#)

Ooof yeah.

Who else didn't like Howl's Moving Castle: the book?

thearpox23

I only watched the anime, which like all Miyazaki's works, was a triumph of style over function, along with having so many trope similarities with all his other movies I didn't believe at first it wasn't his original work. Also the second half was a mess.

So what's the deal with the book?

[Liliet](#)

Basically the entire plot is a conspiracy behind the protagonist's back with implication that her worries, concerns and fears were stupid/silly because see, all these people were secretly on her side and perfectly okay all along! You know, secretly.

thearpox23

TO BE FAIR, some women(men as well(?who?)) find that hot FOR THEIR OWN REASONS WHICH I RESPECT. Damn, I would rage if it didn't have an appropriate tag and I read it by accident. Stuff like this is why fan-fictions are a thing.

Juniper

Ah... the book came first, by Diana Wynne Jones. They made a movie out of the book.

[Liliet](#)

Revolution Aftermath is Black's entire story since he won his civil war 😊

[Liliet](#)

AGREED 100%

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except the abyss below that is named Hubris.

Juff

Typo Thread:

spirit," the > spirit." The
Cards about > Cards are about
Carrion's Lord > Carrion Lord's
you?" the > you?" The
game," the > game." The
is it?" the > is it?" The
down that they > down before they
gaggled > gaggle
trough > through
her struck > he struck
been open > been opened
do it," > do it."
forged in a Lycaonese forge (maybe reword one of the forges)
sixty in whole (maybe remove "in whole" as it's repeated in the
next sentence)
shorn > shear
what thee > what the
them an annihilation > them and annihilation
Tyrant of the Augur > Tyrant and the Augur
does no exempt > does not exempt
the near the > near the
saw way > same way

Anomandris

I know people have had this thought before, but Gods, this story is so Malazanesque. And that's the highest praise I can give to any Fantasy.

A reading from the Deck of Dragons, anyone?

caoimhinh

Oh, and the older version of Affray used clay tablets so... they were *Tiles*, no?

That's quite a reference right there.

AceOfSword

And the chapter is called "set them up" which is usually followed by "knock them down". Makes me wonder if the original game of Affray had anything involving the clay tablets knocking each other down. That could give an entirely new dimension to the fact that you can remove one when you concede a loss. Taking away a tile could stop the chain reaction.

Frivolous

The Emperor of all Major Arcana representing Hakram? Not what I expected. The Emperor is the card of the master, whereas Hakram is the Adjutant.

I found the last section very intriguing. Cat 'ransacked a shatranj board' while the Intercessor 'filled with half a dozen decks of cards'.

The implication is that the Intercessor is playing cards while Cat is playing shatranj. I hope that means that Cat is not playing the game the Intercessor thinks she's playing.

I dearly hope that means Cat is fooling and out-maneuvering the Intercessor.

Oshi

Authority, establishment, structure, a father figure

That's the classical meaning. Hakram is a symbol of all that and her lessons from her father in trusting love.

[Liliet](#)

Cat even says "he fixes things" which is also Amadeus's theme.

Dome Zasrekh

When did Cat ever play the game others were expecting?

Decius

Fighting in the pit.

In the war school games she cheated at the same game everyone else was playing.

AceOfSword

Cat has said several times that Hakram is a prince among men though.

Also knowing Cat, who wouldn't be surprised if she actually has shatranj pieces on her that she's planning to use in the game?
Raises hand

beleester

Cat isn't that good at shatranj, actually – her game against the Tyrant consisted of her cheating like the dickens and still losing, and then blowing up the board in response.

[*Liliet*](#)

She doesn't need to be good at shatranj if the game is affray. Really now.

Decius

Both of them know that the game that they are playing is only a interlude to the fight that they will have.

[*Liliet*](#)

Raises hand

JJR

Raises hand

I'm thinking, one of Bard's limitations is that she can only work through Named (with some wiggle room). The cards up her sleeve are probably all the Named that she has secretly working for her in the Arsenal (possibly some of them represent the fae too).

Cat has no such limitation, and if you ransack a Shatranj board one thing that you'll get is a LOT of pawns. The ordinary, not doom driven, mortals who live and work in the Arsenal. I think Cat's plan is ultimately to move the game to a field the Bard can't reach directly, the hearts and minds of the unnamed.

[*Liliet*](#)

Note that Kingfisher Prince is currently up against mortals... I don't think Bard really has that limitation 😡

JJR

He is, but I don't think that the card Bard played refers to them. "The Red Axe slain in blind revenge." Sounds more like some villain is going to show up and try to kill Red Axe to avenge the villain that she killed.

There's a couple other instances of her meddling with non-named too. Both Black and Cat got a visit despite not having Names anymore. But they were former Named and both still had a great deal of narrative weight behind them.

This game will probably out the truth one way or the other. I think it will be, "I know your weakness." Though it might be, "I am not left handed."

Do0d

When Bard spoke to Amadeus when he was a captive, wasn't she acting as the Intercessor ? And wasn't he a claimant already ?

[Liliet](#)

There is not a clear division of her 'acting as Intercessor' and not.

Do0d

I thought she was able to meet the sisters (who were not Named) because she was acting in her role as intercessor for the purpose of offering them the deal.

[Liliet](#)

I think she always acts as the Intercessor is the thing, be it by bringing people offers or joining bands. Ultimately the mechanic "is the story weight enough to anchor her here" is the same.

Do0d

From the scene and what Bard says, I believe that the Named Bard acted on is the Red Axe herself. Furthermore I would posit that she was to be slain by a mundane soldier blindly avenging a friend she killed while escaping.

[Adrian_V](#)

So who just stabbed Archer? I doubt is Artificer by this point. Maybe it was the Hunted Magician, we don't know enough to discard the use of knives by him and being saved from Autumn may be enough to goad him.

Oshi

She put down a card for betrayal remember. Someone got stabbed by I'm guessing the Hunted Magician or something like that.

Liliet

Fallen Monk might have had enough smarts to leg it immediately after stabbing Cat.

Zggt

Welp, this is going more or less as expected so far... except the twist of The Girl that Climbed the Tower. I guess it's time to dive into that song a bit deeper, and how it is going to work out. On the surface, it's a song about becoming the Dread Empress. That being said, the second layer of this story is that it's not talking about the actual Tower, but about what it represents to the Girl; she does not actually have to grasp the physical tower to become a what a Dread Empress represents: the strongest of her realm. As such, it can be seen as a song about the combination of self-actualization and maturation going hand in hand.

The metaphor of the first phase is pretty straightforward. You must first give up your delusions and lies you tell yourself. If one of your motivations is helping people and the other is to survive, and your survival is a higher priority, you will be forced to make choices that prove that. If you climb for revenge, you will have to set aside everything else. If you are on the path to self actualization, this test is inevitable. Both the literal and metaphorical fires aplenty, literal and metaphorical killings of and removals of parts of herself, and culminating in willingly giving up her power to the Crows.

In the second verse things get a lot more complicated. The restless dead can mean a lot here. The first thing is the most literal; corpses (restless meaning they'd be uncomfortable with this) and walking under them when they are buried, and that the longest part is in essence going underground. In this case, Cat checked this box of literal interpretation plenty of times, but the clearest case is with the Drow.

The next meaning for restless dead is those that have died without actualization; in this case it could mean that here she is still below those who have tried and failed in their life, and as such the girl in the poem must understand what each one actually did accomplish, why they failed, and the such. What it means is that you must learn not only from your successes and mistakes, but from those of others. It boils down to a message of learning wisdom once you have let go of your lies. In many ways, Catherine is still in the process here, but you could argue that on the learning from successes and mistakes of others she's already swimming in that like a fish through water.

Another important meaning for the restless dead here is those that are yet to die in her service or under her rule before she achieves her actualization. This is surprisingly a more common

metaphor when analyzing Eastern poetry, but it fits so nicely here. The metaphor is that the stepping stones for climbing the ladder are the those that died for her rise. That she must carry the weight of their lives, of their futures, on her back, to understand the weight of the trust people put in her. As such, her duty must become above herself.

The combination of meanings of the second verse combines in a lot of different ways. If the first part of the path to actualization requires removing your delusions, then the second part requires changing yourself for what you want and reach a balance which you can live with. The second part in this case is a metaphor for the teen years early adulthood, or when pushed to the extreme of rising to the peak of what you can, is a process that will take the rest of your life.

Now we reach the third step. We return to less amorphous and more direct meanings here. The meeting under a full moon here implies a want of privacy from others and the want of them to see each other. The romantic interpretation (using the words love and kiss) and a knife in the back as a reward for trust is pretty clear. The next one is a private meeting with a ally, rewarded by betrayal and death. Finally there is also the inverted meaning of each, that the Girl is the traitor, that the Girl did the stabbing. It means understanding both sides of this confrontation.

The death here is personal, meaning that the breach of trust forced a complete reevaluation of the self. On a personal level, most people go through some form of this and it is one of the sad parts about growing up and learning that you need to protect yourself. It's also about admitting to yourself that you were on both sides of important issues.

The final step is actually claiming the actualization. But in essence, who you were before this process is already gone. You had to change enough until what you were before becoming the Dread Empress is now well and truly gone. You can make the case that Black's usage of her checks this box, and she quite literally stabbed him for that. But on the other hand you could say that either Adjutant against her wishes will die for her success (which would actually hurt her in a way that might be worse for her than Captain's death to Black, if we look at the Bard's methodology), or Archer will betray her trust completely (which the Bard, by playing on her love of Masego, might be able to achieve), or something of that scale may already be happening. Also, Akua's shocking but inevitable betrayal.

The thing with these metaphors is that you can pin each one on major events that fit through certain interpretations. While the first two steps are well and truly under her belt through and through, the third still doesn't have something that you can cap

it off and say "nailed it" quite as clearly as the other two, though her dealing with the Winter Court and Akua are pretty close. Which might be taken to mean that what we are witnessing is a strike which will burn out whatever is left of Cat from before meeting Black.

That being said, it does not imply that the Bard wins. Nor does it imply that Cat will regret it. On the contrary, it means that Bard's plans which are already in motion may be the thing that turns Cat from the Black Queen into something utterly horrifying like Triumphant (though to be fair, Cat probably won't; she isn't a win-at-all-costs person, though this may change soon). The Bard *really* didn't like it when Cat named this specific song, meaning that she recognized that Cat has a way out of here that continues her rise at the very least.

thearpox23

Mate, Cat lied about the song.

Zggt

Yeah, I know. I can say "it's basically the recipe Below gave for success just as much as the Book of All Things is that for Above", and that Cat used this to in essence say "bitch, I don't need your cooperation to win, you want to forge someone greater than Malicia and the Dead King combined then I'm willing to pay the price". Which is probably the sword option in Cat's version of diplomacy, now all that's left is the horrible drink option for the Bard to swallow down.

But really, I've been itching to do a deep dive into something poetic of the story and this just felt like a time I could and remain kinda in context, and really, all we have interesting about foxes in the context of Cat is Winter's metaphor of the fox willing to chew off its own leg to free itself from a trap, and I could probably scrounge up only 2-3 paragraphs on that one without really reaching.

[Liliet](#)

I really like your analysis! You wouldn't happen to feel like posting it on the subreddit, would you?

That said, I think Cat's choice of the song is only that it's the other one of the clearly-mystically-significant two.

thearpox23

"Cat used this to in essence say "bitch, I don't need your cooperation to win...."

No one is so much as considering cooperation or even

referring to it. The two are already irreconcilable, both know it, Cat simply reaffirmed it once again. As far as their dialogue, the Bard is trying to destabilize Cat through many layers of sophistry, and Cat is trying to mislead the Bard about herself while also venting. There is no proverbial wine Cat brought to this table, or at least I have yet to see any. Not that she won't make an offer that'd require the Bard to concede a core part of her identity, but the thought that the Bard will bend has not yet been a consideration in this story.

By lying about the song Cat either tried to deceive the Bard about the tactics she would use to oppose her. Either by banking on the cultural divide between Callow and Praes, or by banking on the divide between 'Outwit' (Or make the campaign too costly) and 'Replace'. Humming different themes would naturally cause Cat's tactics to be different, although in what way that difference would show I am yet uncertain. I'd probably have to reread the entire arc to figure that one out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, strangely enough it's the Bard bringing the literal jug and figurative sword to this table.

Jesse Coombs

The bard asked her what song haunts her. Cat was answering that question not telling the bard which song she had stuck in her head. Cat could get away with this even while she was functionally fae.

Konstantin von Karstein

Cat lied, the song in her head was that about the fox.

Jesse Coombs

She didn't lie. The bard asked what song haunted her. Cat answered. She could get away with that even when she was fae and literally unable to knowingly lie. It is a song that has haunted her.

"A shiver went through me as he rose to his feet. He knew the song. Gods Below, he knew the song. Two years that question of where I knew it from had plagued me." – Book II, Chapter 49

Dome Zasrekh

I don't think Akua will betray Cat, the best part of her character is that she has been the villain and now knows

better. I think it will be shocking to most people that she won't fall back to her past self.

Zggt

I'm really hoping she'll have her redemption arc complete, showing that even those of the most traitorous and wicked of origins can be redeemed... but too many people know about this story option, Cat's giving her a lot of trust and power over time, and Akua's life was built in the shape of a knife in the back. I'd like to think that her transition to Above would be the ultimate show that they are of the same cloth, but just because of that there are so many forces that won't allow it to happen... so I think it's knife in the back still, though one more aware than before (which is a massive step from "mustache twirling villain of evilness" towards "redeemed", but not nearly there yet). Or we could actually see her redemption arc about her realizing her loyalty to Cat is real and the story of the Girl Who Climbed the Tower becomes about her finally having what it takes to be Empress with that realization, and that be her redemption arc. Or she could be the one to stab Cat in the back, the trust rewarded with a deal between her and the Bard/Malicia.

Whatever is going on with her has got to be one of the biggest question marks in the story now.

[Liliet](#)

I think Akua's arc has been laid out clear as water in books 3-4, with book 5 giving us cursory glances confirming that that's still happening and book 6 giving a glimpse of confirmed continuation (the choice of black swan as a form).

mamm0nn

Personally I think she chose the swan over the choices like the dead-crow whatever that Cat assumed, because swans are pretty and crows are not. She's still Akua, the symbolism might've just been a convenient addition to a choice that came down to 'It's pretty, black and can fly.'

[Liliet](#)

I mean, there were uh. A lot of options there. That were not a swan.

Big I

So I'm guessing that the Rogue Sorcerer and the Concoctor were sent to back up the Mirror Knight, which would bring them back up to five if we ignore the Maddened Keeper. Suspiciously no mention of her this chapter.

Presumably the next chapter will be titled "Knock Them Down".

ninegardens

>"Cards are unfair," the Intercessor said. "Cards about luck and lies, and sometimes there's simply no way to win."

>"That usually means you're not playing the right game," the Carrion's Lord apprentice replied.

>"I'd say it's about time to get started in earnest, isn't it?" the Black Queen said, smiling the smile of a woman who'd ransacked a shatranj board before coming there.

>"I couldn't agree more," the Intercessor said, smiling the smile of someone whose sleeves were filled with half a dozen decks of cards.

Can't help but feel like these are interlinked. Hint being that Bard prepared for the "correct" game before coming, and Black queen the wrong one... but who that advantages/disadvantages is unclear.

Also:

I do like WB argument that Cat's war isn't WORKING, that it isn't ENOUGH... and the argument sounds ever so reasonable.... until you remember that Bard is setting fire to a bunch of their plans rather than HELPING them.

Also also; Hunted magician. Clearly a card that Bard was planning to play/use... but Cat knows about him, and has fairy powers, so what side is he going to come down on?

Is he the one who stabbed Archer? Seems likely that he would be one of the ones with access to the wards that could go for Masego, and that Bard might have offered him escape in exchange for his service.....

Or potentially he is still in Cat's service, in one way or another... Hmmmmmm...

[Liliet](#)

> Hint being that Bard prepared for the "correct" game before coming, and Black queen the wrong one...

Nah mate, it's the Bard who prepared for the wrong one 😊

I love Catherine "fucking meme" Foundling who cheats at cards by using chess pieces.

dadycool

I stand at the precipice of anticipation. So much back-and-forth. Fortunately, there's nothing resembling equal rivalry here, which means Cat's exactly where she wants to be: on one knee, blood-covered face tilted upward at a superior opponent, spitting venom

with a growing grin as she rocks herself onto her feet with a second wind in her breath.

[Liliet](#)

YUP

LarsBlitzer

Well, "Struggle" was one of her aspects when she was the Squire, so the parts of herself that call to it are still there.

dadycoool

From what I remember from in-story explanations, Aspects are extensions and magnifications of the Name and Named. She developed Struggle because that's who she is and she developed Learn because she was Squire, a student-type Name. Later, as Squire II, I remember Black talking about how anything she can't Take, she would Break, giving her two personality-based Aspects. When she lost Learn, she remarked to herself that things were easier to learn when she had it, but for example, she's essentially been 'Taking' everyone she's spent more than five minutes with, as Hanno mentioned during their clandestine night-meetings. And when he didn't allow himself to be Taken, he was Broken, to some degree.

Wonder

I have just been Wondering, are they in some metaphysical astral plane where they have like chessboard vision looking vdown at their story pieces?

If Cat becomes Dread Empress Losara may she always resurrect, does that make Adjutant's Name grow into Chancellor?

Is it a Chancellor's bane to always back stab their Dread Empresses?

Dome Zasrekh

That is just a mold, and you know the fate of those!

Big I

Cat told the Pilgrim that if she became Empress her name would be Victorious. And I'd say Chancellors don't always have to betray their Empress since Malicia seriously considered becoming Black's Chancellor.

ohJohN

right, and their relationship is strong to this day! no yawning chasm of divergent goals and broken trust lies between them, no siree

Shveiran

Well, nothing lasts forever... 40+ years in a stressful job are not bad as a track record, honestly. It's far more than what most people ever experience. It's far longer than the Augur/Cordelia "I'll always trust you" thing, for instance. Or Cat/Hakram. 5 years in, Black/Malicia had no wrinkle in their partnership either, did they?

But also... if we are discussing Name traps, "considered becoming" is really not quite the same as "was" the Chancellor.

[sengachi](#)

"You're not too important, too big to be judged-"

Damn if that isn't part of the soul of the story right there. No one is too big or important to be judged. Not even the emissary of the Gods, not even the Gods themselves.

Letouriste

Anaxares is the soul of the story then?

ninegardens

Tyrant is the soul. Anaxares is the Thematically shapped cudgel that Tyrant used to beat the story into submission.

[Burlyraven](#)

One thing I'm noticing, is all the names the Bard and Cat are being identified by. This is very likely the story that finally cements Cat's Name, and the Trickster versus the god/old one/etc is an old story.

The Bard being identified as the trickster already is slightly concerning, but two Tricksters in an immortal duel is another fantastic old story.

Zoe

I was noticing that too! I wonder if the different names represent the way that different potential/unformed stories are swirling round in this encounter, ready to take shape. 'Scruffy trickster against mighty queen' is a story with very different paths to 'plucky orphan against ancient monster' and Cat and the Bard will both be trying to manipulate that.

[Liliet](#)

Oooo nice

Dread Emperor Ridiculous

Ever notice how much 'Intercessor' sounds like 'interloper'?

Clmineith

I think Archer made a mistake when she took Artificer, who has a grudge against Hierophant, to save Hierophant.

And now I wonder if that grudge, that we don't know because Cat never took time for it, is not the Bard doing.

And if it was not Cat's mistake to not take enough time to speak with Artificer about it.

[Liliet](#)

Bard def contributed to the crack there, but Indrani is implied to have seen something surprising, that she would have reacted to if she had the time, before being knifed. And Adanna was supposed to be behind her.

[Liliet](#)

(I think Bard exploited Name-induced hostility that Masego identified by feeding Artificer hints about Masego being up to something wicked, but it wasn't enough to turn her, just enough to stir the pot)

ninegardens

^This.

Seems like Bard probably was setting up like... 15 people on "path to betrayal". Some of those worked, some of them didn't... and some of them probably would have worked EVENTUALLY, if this whole mess hadn't been triggered already.

pedant

I think you meant Tarot Minor Arcana? Minor Arcana are numbered cards (precursors to modern playing cards). Major Arcana cards are Names.

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

Somebody managed to stick a knife in Archer by surprise. She's not going to be happy about that.

But the stabber is probably working with someone else – one from the Arsenal to provide access, one from presumably Archer's roving group to provide muscle.

Not enough info to put Names to these traitors yet.
Could also be a more subtle Fae. In that case, they probably are trying to leverage Hunted Magician's debt to them to gain access. But he'd probably be slow walking it trying to buy time.

Rogue Sorcerer and Concocter are likely en route to Severance, which should also contribute to spiking Bard's play with Mirror Knight.

I really want to see how Tariq reacts when he finds out about all this and that Bard was behind it. And I want Cat to rub his face into Bard's untrustworthiness with a massive "I told you so". I also wonder what would happen if Hanno flipped the Judgement Coin on Bard.

Bard and Cat are playing different games. It's to be expected that Bard cheats at cards. Question is, will Cat's ability to be playing a different game overcome Bard's card tricks, and at what cost?

ActionKermit

Why do I get the feeling that the Bard set up this exchange literally just to get Cat to tell her the plan so it can be countered?

[Liliet](#)

Cat's not telling her the plan, she's illustrating it as it happens, and Bard could see that much anyway.

Anonymous

You know, the "Set them up -> knock them down" naming convention combined with this card game and chess game theming leaves me feeling that we're not far off from Zap Brannigan's tortured mixed metaphors like "If we hit that bullseye, the rest of the dominoes will fall like a house of cards. Checkmate."

[Liliet](#)

That's just Cat playing board games.

Captain Amazing

Kingfisher's description of Cat's socio-politics was oddly adorable. It's one of the most amusing ways I've heard to say "champion of the poor". Probably from her orcish influence :D. The Bard is definitely in a villain guise for this. Bard mentioned that when she's a villain she does what is necessary when she tried to murder Catherine after the Prince's Graveyard. The fisherman comment confirms the chapter title metaphor referred to Cat's success and not the inevitability of fate. The "tides" part refers to a Dread Empress' last words. Something

like "Ours is the tide that will drown Creation. With each madman we get a little bit closer." right before the Queen of Blades kills her and brings down the Tower.

I think the fifth one has the Bard trying to reveal the mental influence she has from the Arcadia echo only to be countered by the Doddering Sage. Bard then sacrifices every losing fight to ram home her head-fuckery. No idea how Catherine responds.

[Liliet](#)

Oh nice!

[Liliet](#)

(I also love how he drew that conclusion from Cordelia's diplomacy-speak and how it ended up meaning that the presence of Callowans means there is no way the Queen of Callow is behind this) (logic!)

beleester

If the point values of the Arcana are the same as in our world, then Cat's losing all three Affrays:

Strength (8) vs The Emperor (4)

The Tower (16) vs The Chariot (7)

The Hermit (9) vs The Lovers (6)

There are still more cards to play, of course, but it's not a great start. As the Bard mentions, sometimes you just don't get the cards you need.

(Come to think of it, I think every time Catherine has played a game with her current nemesis she's lost. There's probably some symbolism there.)

Eternal Payne

Perhaps this is where Cat's Shatranj gives her the upper hand? It doesn't matter what the strength of the cards says, under Shatranj rules the attacking piece always wins.

Noldo

Wouldn't those values mean that if Cat would cede the Sword, it would give Cat enough points to play in order to save Masego by playing Emperor (Adjutant) to that pile? Or am I reading the rules wrong?

mamm0nn

Bard: For the fourth stack, I play the Magician card to summon the Haunted Magician, for he-

Cat: The Twins.

Bard: That card isn't even in the deck...

Cat: Don't care, this is about him sleeping with at least two women now.

Somewhere nearby

Haunted Magician: Yes, soon my plans will come to fruit- *Gets boner, loses focus and with a shudder he suddenly feels like both his lovers are converging to his location.*

Back at the table

Bard: ...

Bard: Well, th-

Cat: The fifth stack will be the Sinister Physician.

Bard: What's the symbolism?

Cat: Don't know, don't care. I played him.

Bard: Then I concede that deck so that I can-

Cat: Can't. You haven't played a card on that deck yet, so you can't withdraw one from it either. Thus, you cannot collapse that deck yet.

Bard: Fine, I'll leave it for now. Back to the first stack, I play the World for your precious Lieutenant is buried in more fey than he can deal with by stamina alone.

Cat: I play Death.

Bard: Oh, so you admit that you're dealing with the Dead King and are wil-

Cat: Nope.

Bard: Then pray tell, who else can fill that card's symbolism?

Elsewhere

Mirror Knight: Stay behind me! One way or another we will persev-

Zombie IV cool-aid's through the wall

Table again

Bard: I feel like you're not taking this serious.

Cat (who was drunk already, and the Ashuran haralm didn't help): You given me the power to make people appear and do stuff by playing some cards, and you think I'm going to play by *hiccup* your rules?

Bard: Well I-

Cat: I cast fist. *Stabs Bard's deck-holding hand to the table*

dadycoool

Oh, yeah. she is at this point borderline blackout drunk. Really, it's Bard's own fault for trying to play a semi-logical game against someone who can't be logical at the moment and never cared about the rules in the first place except for knowing how best to break them.

AceOfSword

"I cast fist!" *Proceed to stab opponent*

I love everything about this. But especially that bit.

FabulusFab

Something is bothering me. Cat currently is not Named, she is about to be again but not yet. So how come the Bard can interact with her ? Is it because she was Named ? And all previously Named character is fair game for the Bard (that means also Black). Because the Bard talked to Black when she informed him he was not the Black Knight anymore. Or is it because she has the potential to be the next Intercessor and in that case the Bard is allowed to sort of "coach" her ? When Cordelia had a budding Name, the Bard did not talk to her but to the Augur.

mamm0nn

Former Names are probably still with potential and Story weight. It might not be that Bard can only act towards and see Names rather than Providence and the Story, and we've seen that Black and Cat are by no stretch of the imagination excluded from that after they lost their Names. So them being important in a way that pivots and weaves the story strings can be what she needs, the Bard => Names might be a simplification or misinterpretation from that.

And we don't know for sure that she couldn't converse with Cordelia. She's not able to teleport around at will to wherever she wants to be whenever she wants to be. She's still bound to rules regarding to that, and it has been firmly established that there's no such thing like true teleportation, both somewhere in books 1 and 2. She was trapped by Augur using a few ritual, not expecting her to 'betray' the Bard and her expectations for she didn't yet know that Augur was against her at that point.

mamm0nn

*Fey ritual

Xinci

So just a sidenote, I am surprised no one else was interested in Cat more or less telling us that Fortitude as a Choir may have once just been Strength. Which does kinda imply the Choirs change over time to match virtues, similar to Names?

ninegardens

It was Cat saying that the Tarot card "Strength" used to be called "Fortitude". It's not the choir whose name has drift, they stay the same, its the name of the tarot deck.

ninegardens

Also, can I just say how beautiful and tragic the characterization of the mirror knight is here?

Like, it's repeatedly mentioned how indestructible he is, but just the realization of what that means, of how many times he must have been the last one standing, with all his allies dead, of the weight of survivors' guilt, and the fact that HE KNOWS he isn't smart enough, or good enough, or wise enough. All he has is the fact that he is hard to kill, and severance gives him a chance to USE that... though the consequences be ruin. Hell, you can't even hate him for that- that one is just entirely reasonable.

Liliet

There's also the sheer isolation.

His internal monologue is so far off on how everyone else thinks, it sounds like he hasn't had an actual conversation with another Named approximately since he first got his Name, also known as "ever" 😡

(No, hate-flirting doesn't count as an actual conversation)

Aranaya

A card was put down on the table, smoothly but without gentleness. Grey-clad and tanned, bearing a lantern and a staff: the Hermit.

I have to admit I'm confused why the card standing for Hierophant is Hermit, rather than, well, Hierophant.

Mental Mouse

The Hierophant card would indicate the keeper and guardian of the Mysteries, and that's not how Zeze rolls. The Hermit card indicates the solitary seeker after truth, which is more what he's about.

Interlude: Knock Them Down

*"The henhouse stands unlatched
All within, by the fox snatched
So here they go, once again
Chasing a red tail into the glen*

*But we know, oh we know,
That in the woods, the fox is king
Yes we know, oh we know
That in the woods, the fox is king*

*Run the hounds, rides the hunter
His spear in hand, banner aflutter
Charging that way, this one baying
Trampling the paths, again raging*

*But we know, oh we know,
That in the woods, the fox is king
Yes we know, oh we know
That in the woods, the fox is king*

*Over the hills, across the glade
Where the sun rests in the shade
He hides and waits, until the day
When the hunts are chased away*

*For we know, oh we know
That in the woods, the fox is king
Yes we know, oh we know
That in the woods, the fox is king."*

-*"The Fox in the Woods"*, a Callowan rebel song from the latter years of the Proceran occupation

The Wandering Bard set down her card with telltale nonchalance, to the side of the three affrays that had already been opened. Though there had once been many appearances for this one for hundreds years now one had come to dominate all the others: a dark and faceless woman, holding a red banner, and at her feet letters were written large – TRIUMPH. The Empress. The Bard withdrew her hand and smiled, gesturing for her opponent to act in turn.

"Silence?" the Black Queen said. "That's a new one for you."

"I have not a single new game," the Intercessor smiled. "Only a legion of old ones, given fresh faces."

"Stingy," the orphan queen complained. "You haven't revealed who it is that's the little helper you've still got running around the place, either."

The Miscellaneous Stacks had burned, but before that those who dwelled within had been forced to slumber by a gaseous poison. The hand that'd opened those bottles had yet to be revealed.

"You still go about this as if you were a general, Catherine," the Bard said. "Seeing battles and sending soldiers out to fight them until some nebulous war can be won."

"Doing it all wrong, am I?" the Black Queen mused. "By all means, Marguerite, educate me."

"Your teacher, in truth, is a finer hand at this than any might suspect," the Wandering Bard said. "So I shall borrow his words, spoken once to another: it is all objects in motion, Catherine. If you can see the trajectories of the spheres in the void, all that is required from you is the first nudge."

"Been talking to him?" the woman who had once been a girl said.

Even as the words left her lips, she grew vexed. The airiness she had affected as she spoke had been too sweet on the tongue for either of them to swallow it.

"He has no use for the likes of me, that enterprising blackguard," the Intercessor said. "But he seems to be having a great deal of fun out there, having every part the Wasteland hacking at the other as they try to catch his shadow."

"How pleasant for him," the tired general replied.

"But look at me, jabbering on about things so very far way," the Bard said, salting the wound. "It is your turn to lead the dance, Catherine."

"I'm just biding my time," the Black Queen shrugged.

"Archer is bleeding," the Wandering Bard told her. "Adjutant is spent."

"When you came up," the woman who had once been a girl said, eyes sharp, "it was alone, wasn't it? You weren't part of a band."

"Stories were not as... forgiving, back then," the Intercessor said, half a concession. "But I have been part of many bands, Catherine."

"No," the Black Queen quietly said, "you haven't. Not in the way that really matters."

"Do you think I've never loved?" the Intercessor disdainfully said. "That I've never craved, never lost? I am more human than anyone ever has been, or ever will be. All that is it to be that, I have been a thousand times over."

She leaned forward, a flush to her cheek that had nothing to do with drink.

"When I tell you that loves fucks always fucks you over, I no not speak in contempt or in ignorance," the Intercessor said. "I speak, Catherine Foundling, from *pity*."

The Black Queen, her hand certain and her fingers deft, place a single black pawn on the table from the shatranj she had stripped bare.

"One," the Queen of Lost and Found stated.

Her mind thrummed with an old song, the beat of it eerily resonant.

"You still believe they can't be touched just because you love them," the Wandering Bard said, almost disbelieving. "You cannot be that naïve. That is not trust, it is fantasy."

"It's fine line, between that and faith," Catherine Foundling said.

"The game goes on, whether you play it or not," Marguerite said, eyes moving to the wooden pawn painted black with something like wariness. "Whatever else you might be playing."

She slid a card above the Chariot, obscuring it. A man holding a broken scepter, at his side a golden cup filled to the brim: the Magician.

"Why now," the Black Queen murmured, "that's almost an admission, isn't it?"

"I will not hold your hand through all of this," the Bard chided.

"That's fine," Catherine said. "I've got better uses for mine."

A card was gently placed atop the last one, elaborate in appearance. A crowned man on a throne, seven nooses and one around his head and a sword in his right hand: Justice.

—

During his time observing that most of the foreign soldiery seemed to dislike his countrymen, not entirely without reason, Prince Frederic of Brus now realized he might have underestimated the extent to which they also disliked *each other*.

"I gave you an order, Inger," the Levantine captain – Hassar – shouted at the orc. "Get back in the damned ranks."

"You don't give me fucking orders, Dominion," Inger the orc snarled. "Don't you have sheep to go raiding your cousins for? Let the professionals handle this."

"Slight my honour again and we'll settle this steel in hand," Captain Hassar harshly said.

"I'd like to see you try," the orc said, to the cheers of her fellows. "Clear that scabbard and we'll give you another Sarcella."

"You ran from us across half of Procer before the Black Queen stepped in to save your hides," Captain Hassar mocked, to the cheers of the Levantines. "Try to give us a Sarcella without her, *orc*, see how that ends for you."

"I'll tell you how: with a lot less mercy, *feet-dragger*," the orc lieutenant jeered.

The Callowan legionaries banged their shields, the Dominion warriors shouted in anger and Frederic decided now was not the time to remind these fine people that Sarcella had been a Proceran city stuck in the middle of their fighting without much of a choice in the matter. Not unlike him, truth be told.

"If I might claim your attention once more," Frederic said, tone cheerful. "I would be much obliged if no blood was spilled tonight, my friends. We are, if I might remind you, yet under attack by common foes."

"Then throw down your sword, prince," Captain Hassar said. "You were caught red-handed, no talking will get you out of that."

"I was charged with the protection of the Red Axe from assassination by the current ranking authority in the Arsenal, Queen Catherine of Callow," the fair-haired prince said. "I understand you may doubt my word, but I do not require great concession – only that you allow me to see to her safety by sharing her confinement."

It was not ideal, but at least he seemed to have flushed out part of the Bird of Misfortune's schemes. And should his terms of surrender be accepted, he could use the walk to the holding cells as an opportunity to find out – perhaps from Lieutenant Inger, who seemed friendly enough in that orc way – who it was that'd sent all these soldiers after him. Learning that Name would likely unmask an agent of their great foe within. Yet Frederic's words were not met with understanding or consideration, but instead a great deal of anger from both the Callowans and the Levantines.

"You'll be dead before you take the first swing," Captain Hassar said. "CROSSBOWS, at the ready."

The lieutenant did not gainsay the Dominion officer, to Frederic's surprise, and the soldiers called at obeyed without qualms. Something was wrong here. Had his words been misheard? Suspecting the worse, he unsheathed his sword and set it down on the floor. There was no reaction from the soldiers.

"This is your *last* warning," the painted captain snarled. "One more step and-"

An illusion, Frederic grasped. Someone had laid an illusion on the soldiers and through the lie was misleading them to attack. The enemy was already here.

"My lady of Red," the Kingfisher Prince said, "might I trouble you to chase away the enchantment bedevilling these soldiers?"

"I can't," the Red Axe said, tone tormented. "It only protects me, not others."

Reluctantly, Frederic began to consider reaching for the sword he'd placed down. He would try to abstain from killing as much as possible and cease the moment it appeared the illusion might be faltering, but he would not fail in the charge that had been given onto him. The Red Axe would be good as dead if surrounded by soldiers under an enemy's spells, unarmed and still shackled. If the political consequences of this were focused onto him instead of the Principate, Frederic Goethal thought, and he was 'made' to abdicate by the First Prince, the Grand Alliance might yet survive the blow without sundering. Henriette would rule well in his stead, it would do no disservice to the people of Brus to crown her princess in his stead.

Breathing out, the Kingfisher Prince crouched to take back his sword.

"Stop," a woman screamed. "Stops this *right now*."

The soldiers stirred, turning to watch the two unexpected arrivals behind the Dominion swords: a woman of the Free Cities, visibly bloodied from hard fighting, and a young man that Frederic was more familiar with. The Blade of Mercy, Antoine of Lange. One of the two countrymen Cordelia had asked him to take in hand when she suggested she came to the Arsenal. The young man's greatsword was recognizable enough, and by the reaction of the soldiers the woman Free Cities was even better known.

"Lady Eliade," Captain Hassar said, "with all due respect-"

"With all due respect, captain, you are currently under an illusion," the Repentant Magister said. "If you would simply allow me to dispel it, the truth of this will be revealed."

Frederic Goethal was not above accepting salvation, particularly when it was so gallantly offered. He was not above the occasional theatrics, either, and so he rose to his full height and left his sword on the ground. It would make a more striking image that way. A moment later the painted captain grudgingly gave his assent, and the Repentant Magister raised her hand.

Sorcery bloomed, and there was a sound like a mirror shattering.

—

“Tricky, tricky,” the Wandering Bard said, eyes faraway. “How did you know it would clever little Nephele that stumbled into this mess?”

“Objects in motion, wasn’t it?” the Black Queen replied, lips quirking savagely. “She’s got maybe half the power to throw around that Hierophant had at his speak, and she uses it mostly on tricks and defensive spells – and she’s in a band, which means she’ll be using any spell she puts out six times whenever she uses it. A running battle against fae, of higher mettle than the one I tangled with? It was a given she’d be the first to grow exhausted.”

“That is hardly a guarantee she would end up *there*,” the Bard leadingly said, glancing at the other affrays.

“Archer’s was always going to be a fight, and she just left the other mess,” the Black Queen said. “Providence good as ensured she was going to end up where she could actually save the day. I can’t ride that horse, most the time, but a heroine like her sure as Hells can.”

“Those do not sound like the words of a villain,” the Intercessor smiled.

“The world’s changing, Bard,” the Black Queen said. “Whether you like it or not.”

“Such a brash one, you are,” the Wandering Bard chuckled.

She shrugged, cards peeking out the edge of her sleeve.

“But not without skill, I suppose,” she continued, then rapped a knuckle atop Justice. “I concede the affray.”

Trickster’s fingers went looking for a card she had set down – the Tower, the other glimpsed before the card was made to disappear with a flourish of the wrist – and she gallantly gestured for the opposition to proceed.

“One point to me,” Catherine said, eyes narrowing as she cleared out the rest of the pile.

Warily, she set her card down as the first of another affray. It depicted wings of bronze holding aloft a faceless entity wielding a pale sword, at its feet kneeling a humbled prince, priest and merchant: Judgement.

“Well now,” the Wandering Bard grinned. “What might *that* be about?”

"Silence for silence," the Black Queen retorted. "It will matter when it matters."

"How exciting," the Intercessor praised. "But I suppose it is up to me to get this game back on the right path, isn't it?"

The card she laid down over the Lovers was austere to the eye. A priestess in penitent's robes, pouring water from one cup into the wine of another: Temperance.

"It's not that she means to be a traitor, our dear Artificer," the Bard said. "It's simply that given what she is and where she is, she might as well be – she who tinkers with Light knows neither doubt nor restraint."

—

Indrani swung around, blinding striking at whoever it was that'd knifed her – and had suspicions, foolish as they might be – and the blade slid out as the attempted assassin withdrew before she could hit anything. She clenched her teeth from the pain, but at least she was fairly sure it'd not punctured the lung. That would have been a bloody and embarrassing way to die.

"Archer," the Blessed Artificer called out in fear and anger, "DUCK."

With a curse Indrani did, the sound of a twig snapping being followed by a strike of sizzling Light above her. The lack of even a grunt of pain was the only warning she got, and she didn't act quite quickly enough. Even as she began moving, the bolt of Light curved down and struck her back. Screaming as she coat gave, feeling aftershocks of Light going through her body even as the space between her shoulders was turned into a burned and bloody mess, Archer was smashed into the floor.

"Adanna, don't-" Indrani croaked out, but Light bloomed again.

A collar of the burning glare formed around the neck of the man looming standing behind her – and by the size of him, Archer's outlandish thought had come true – but a moment later it the Light was instead nailing Indrani's arm to the stone floor, having formed into a spike and burned through flesh and muscle just above her elbow. *Fuck*. She wouldn't be able to shoot like that or use both of her blades. The Fallen Monk eyed her for a moment, a serenely calm face over a bulging belly, but only bothered to kick her in the face before he flickered out of sight again. How was the man still alive, after getting Catherine to make darkglass out of a stone floor? Indrani had seen him fail to manipulate the works of Below before, she shouldn't have cut it against Night. Light bloomed again, as the Monk reappeared close to the Artificer and the green heroines panicked.

"Fuck," Archer cursed again, rolling to the side as the defensive net of Light that'd popped up was turn into a rain of deadly shard headed for her.

A few caught the edge of her wounded arm, but her mail turned what would have been a hard turn into mild burns. She ripped her coat rising to her feet, though, as one of the shards had nailed the edge of it down.

"Stop using Light, you fool," Archer shouted, unsheathing one of her blades.

Just in time to see the Fallen Monk slug the Artificer in the stomach, her hasty attempt at a guard blown through. Indrani grit her teeth and aimed before she could think, her longknife spinning as it sailed through the air. But the Monk slid behind the heroine, Indrani's throw missing him by inches, and he nudged up the Blessed Artificer's chin with his bloody knife. Archer already had her other blade in hand, but no opening to use it: frozen in fear, Adanna of Smyrna had gone still.

"Drop the blade," the Fallen Monk said. "Or I slit her throat."

"Shit, you got me," Archer lied, and without hesitation advanced.

The Monk withdrew his hand from Adanna's apron, producing a twig and snapping with his free hand. Light erupted and curved out in two staggered arcs towards Archer. She'd seen it coming this time, though, and it was not good enough a trick to take her by surprise. She quickened her step to pass the first arc, darted back to let the second pass before her and in the beat that followed she'd closed the distance entirely. Still reaching for another bauble inside the Artificer's stash, the Monk was surprised when she got hold of herself and elbowed him in the guts. His fat meant it barely stung, but the surprise bought Archer a moment – she carved at the man's wrist, and though he darted away with viperous quickness he had to leave Adanna behind.

Indrani had blood on her blade, now, and she fully intended to get more. Did the Monk think he'd been the only one to study the weaknesses of the Named in her band?

"Listen close, Artificer," Indrani said. "I have a plan to kill the bastard."

—

"So how's that one working out for you?" the leader of the Woe smilingly asked.

The Wandering Bard sighed, which was answer enough.

"All of Ranger's pupils are absurdly hard to kill," she complained. "She stayed out of that sort of thing until recently, you know, it's your bloody teacher who gave her the taste for it. Among other things."

The leer there was painted on, put there to irritate, but like most barbs of that hand it struck true.

"One can't account for taste, I suppose," Catherine said, wrinkling her nose.

"Gotta agree with you there," Marguerite said. "She's a looker, mind you, but everything else?"

"Funny," the Black Queen mused, "since I consider the two of you to have quite a lot in common."

"Harsh," the Wandering Bard replied, appreciative.

The other woman offered a shallow smile, amusement so thin a finger run across it would reveal dislike.

"I've been wondering," Catherine Foundling said. "Now that you're Alamans-"

"This is going to get uncivil, isn't it?" the Bard sighed.

"- does that fill with wine more often, or does it stay the same swill?" Catherine Foundling finished, gesturing at the silver flask.

The Intercessor considered the other woman, for a moment.

"The limp," she replied, "does it come and go the way you want it to?"

The other woman did not answer. Instead she reached within her mantle and pulled out a second painted black pawn. She set it down next to the first, the ring it gave as it hit the wood echoed of the word *mistake*.

"Two," the Queen of Lost and Found stated.

"Feigning a deeper game will not get you out of this," the Wandering Bard said.

The Callowan queen hummed under her breath, knowing that now the ugliness was to come, and the Intercessor eyed the pawns with cold eyes.

"We are not yet done," the Bard said, and set down a card.

It fell over the Severance's affray, over the Emperor, and obscured the card beneath it. It depicted a tall and well-formed

person, with chains around their neck going to the border of the card. Two details gave away the truth: claws at the end of fingers and red eyes. The Devil.

"Violence," the Wandering Bard said. "Violence bringing about the inexorable."

—

Adjutant's jaw tightened as he grasped that he had been just a little too late.

The soldiers the fae had enchanted had forced open the doors of the room using their blades and that was the beginning of the end. The steel doors had only been pried open a crack, but it would be enough: already his attempts to draw them shut were failing, the implacable strength of a great noble of the fae pulling against him. Now that the enemy had a way to cross the wards it came down to strength, and their strength had waned. The Vagrant Spear had been bloodied and could barely stand, much less fight, while the Mirror Knight had lost his blade saving the heroine and now had a look in his eyes — like a horse that'd smelled blood, fear and fervour all mixed up together. Hakram pulled at the doors again, but against the massive strength on the other side he failed: they pulled further open.

Snatching up the axe and shield he'd thrown to the side to struggle, he retreated just before a cloud of rot and decay hissed through the opening.

The fae began to hammer at the steel, shaking the doors and forcing them open inch by inch. Behind Adjutant, the Mirror Knight had retreated across the holy water through a path that'd risen up and was now carrying Sidonia into the stone cube where the sword was kept. Hakram followed, forcing down the throbbing pain in his leg where a spear had torn flesh, and was nearly across when the doors broke and the tide of fae poured in. A spear flew at him, and the orc's fangs clicked together in dismay — he would not be fast enough. Yet a hand jutted out from behind the wards of the cube, grabbing him by the arm and forcefully dragging him to safety. The Mirror Knight released him as the spear shattered on the wards, the way they shivered a warning that they would not hold forever.

"Thank you," Hakram said, and meant it.

The spear would not have killed him, but such a wound might well have been permanent. Some things neither sorcery nor Light could heal.

"Think nothing of it," the Mirror Knight said, eyes on the roiling fae outside.

The Prince of Falling Leaves was gathering them into an array of war, readying to batter at the wards keeping them from their prize. The Severance, sleeping in the pool of water in the back of the room. The surface of the water ever shivered, as if some wind that did not exist was caressing it. Both of them found their steps drifting closer to it.

"We will have to wait for reinforcements," Adjutant admitted. "We cannot fight them off alone."

"If we do," the Mirror Knight quietly said, "Sidonia will die."

"I can speak for myself," the Vagrant Spear wetly coughed, from where she lay propped up against the wall. "It will be an honourable death, Christophe. One worthy of being added to the rolls. Hold until the others come."

"Will they come?" the Mirror Knight softly asked. "Who is it that would relieve us, Sidonia?"

He shook his head, eyes hardening, and he took the last step up to the edge of the pond.

"No," the Proceran said. "We stand alone."

That growing iron in the man's eyes was a dangerous thing, the orc thought. It must be averted before it grew tempered, for it reeked of desperate decisions. How? His eyes found Sidonia, her breathing broken by a wet cough. A punctured lung, the orc judged. Yet even wounded and prone, she remained the key to salvaging this.

"Archer will be coming," the Adjutant said. "The other war party was a lesser one, it will have been wiped out by now. She must be headed our way already."

"See?" Sidonia rasped. "The Lady will see to it. She might even be dragging the Physician along by the ear."

The second part had been tacked on with more effort than skill, but for all that the Mirror Knight hesitated. Adjutant breathed out. If it came to a fight, the hero would win. That much was set in stone. But it would not come to that, and he could still prevent some foolish decision from –

–

The Black Queen paled, knuckles turning white from the strength of her grip. She rapped them against the last card placed down, the Devil.

"I concede the affray," Catherine said.

Without waiting for an answer she leaned forward and her fingers grasped the edge of the Emperor, trying to extract him from the pile.

"That's not how it goes," the Intercessor gently said. "You're playing the game, right now, but you're not playing the *Game*."

The old thing with a young face offered a half-hearted smile.

"He's not going to leave, Catherine," she said. "That's not the kind of man you made him into."

She shrugged.

"Take the card, if you want," the Intercessor said. "It doesn't mean anything. But as a last piece of advice—"

Even as the Black Queen, lips thinned, began to remove her card the Wandering Bard set down one of her own. Catherine's hand ceased, as she tried to look at the fresh card and found she could not.

"It's a damned scary trick," the Bard said. "For a damned scary woman. Think back, Catherine — how many cards are there, in the Major Arcana?"

Twenty-one, the Black Queen almost said, but she held her tongue. Now that her eyed had been drawn to the oddness she could feel out the shape of it, if not fill the void. It was as if what had lain there was now absent.

"The Moon," the Wandering Bard said. "The Maddened Keeper: the seal on darkness, who partakes of its powers. You did not remember her, or her card, because Creation finds her to be absent."

"Demon," the Black Queen said. "I remember her being added to the rolls, some months ago, but nothing more recent."

Her fingers clenched.

"How many does she hold, Bard?" Catherine Foundling asked.

"Seven and one," the Wandering Bard said.

Fingers clenched even tighter.

"I warned you," the Intercessor said. "Love always fucks you. You can't be... this and love them all the while, Catherine. It will hollow you out from the inside."

Catherine Foundling took the card, her mouth tasting of ashes.

"-might even be dragging the Physician along by the ear," Sidonia assured him.

Even she did not sound entirely like she believed it, but Christophe could see the sense in what she and the Adjutant had said. He could not find it in himself to wait long, but to not even attempt to put his faith in his comrades would be almost as grievous as sin. The fae hammered at the wards, the cube shaking around them, but these were not the works of middling wizards. They would hold for some time yet.

"We should prepare for the assault of the fae," the Mirror Knight said. "There is only one entrance, so-"

Before he could finish speaking, as if to mock him, a creature appeared. A strange woman, with long unkempt hair and a sickly mien. She was standing behind the Adjutant, and without a word she reached out towards the orc.

"Adjutant," Christophe screamed, and he would have done more but *he had no sword*, "behind-"

The woman's hands touched the orc's side and his flesh boiled, from the arm all down to his foot, as the reek of demonic corruption spread through the room. The Mirror Knight's hand plunged into the waters, seizing the sheathed blade within even as some eldritch force tore at his armour until only the bare skin of his hand was left – itself stronger than steel, from all the dawns it had seen. Sidonia threw her spear, and the enemy moved back even as the Adjutant dropped with a blood-curling scream, but the Vagrant Spear's aim had suffered from the wounding.

Christophe's did not.

The Severance came clear of the scabbard with a faint scream, as if it were cutting the very air, and in three steps the Mirror Knight was before the villainess who had struck at his orc companion. She raised her hand to protect herself, unarmed for all her monstrous power, and offered a faint smile even as Christophe swung and cut through both the arm and the head behind it with barely any resistance.

"Disappear," the Mirror Knight snarled, as she dropped lifeless to the ground.

But there was no time to waste, he knew. Hakram Deadhand lay on the ground, twisted in pain as corruption began to spread through his body. If the Mirror Knight did not act, the orc would be dead – or much, much worse.

"Gods forgive me," Christophe prayed, and like a butcher he *hacked*.

The arm, the leg, most of the side – he cut before the demonic taint could spread, and left his ally broken and bleeding. Unconscious. But it was done, he thought. Now there were only the fae left and –

“Christophe,” Sidonia screamed, “the corpse!’”

The stranger’s remains convulsed, once, twice, and a heartbeat later the Hells broke loose.

The first thing to go was the wards, and it was all downhill from there.

—

Silence reigned for a long moment. The Black Queen, gripping the card close, set down the Emperor above the sole affray she’d opened.

“Ah,” the Wandering Bard murmured, “so that’s where the Concocter went. If you’re lucky, she’ll be able to save your Adjutant, true. Or at least keep him alive.”

“The Mirror Knight is many things, but a poor fighter is not one of them,” the Black Queen said, voice tight. “He’ll slaughter her a way through the thick of it, come what may.”

She cleared away the affray she had already conceded, her every movement speaking to barely controlled rage.

“One to one,” the Wandering Bard said. “Let’s hasten this along, shall we?”

One affray had still lain untouched, the one she had never explained, and with a hum the Intercessor took out the Tower once more and placed it above that very affray, obscuring the Empress. The Black Queen’s eyes narrowed.

“You are trying to drown my first victory,” she said.

“I am succeeding,” the Wandering Bard corrected. “The Empress was from the beginning our old friend Cordelia Hasenbach, who is still headed this way. There are many ways to skin a cat, Catherine, and I know every last one of them.”

—

The illusion broke and Frederic Goethal smiled at the wave of exclamations from the soldiers, who saw the truth of his offered surrender laid bare by the sword at his feet. He turned to offer the Repentant Magister a bow but found that her eyes were widening.

He turned to find the Red Axe with his sword in hand, just as the blade hacked into the side of his neck.

—

The Black Queen's eyes strayed to the last remaining of the initial affrays, where Temperance still led the dance. The Intercessor caught her out and her lips quirked.

"Worried about Archer?" the Wandering Bard said. "Have a little faith."

"Funny thing about the Magician," the Black Queen said. "I happen to have one as well."

She dropped it atop Temperance, cocking an eyebrow.

"Must have been a mistake of some sort," Catherine Foundling said. "I would never accuse you of *cheating*."

"Quite right," the Wandering Bard grinned, stuffing cards back into her sleeves.

—

Archer put her useless side in the way, letting the knife blow through so that she might get a good strike in for her trouble. The blade tore through her coat but slid against the mail, the Fallen Monk trying to tackle her down but letting out a grunt when she stabbed him in the shoulder twice. He was strong, though, and heavy. If it kept up he'd be able to force her down, and then she'd be in trouble – save if Adanna... and there she was. The Blessed Artificer threw herself at the Fallen Monk's legs, trying to snare them with her arms and refusing to give even when the man kicked her and her spectacles gave with a crack. Indrani took the opportunity to push *him* down, toppling atop of him as he fell and stabbing away still. That cursed fat, it made hard to get at the parts that actually *mattered*. Half a dozen bleeding wounds, not a single one that would kill a Named.

The three of them were in a messy, writhing pile of violence but another kick finally pushed Adanna away, sending her rolling as she groaned in pain, and though Indrani got in a good knifing through the Monk's armpit the man still struck her across the face with his full strength. Archer felt her nose break and she rolled away, just in time to see the Fallen Monk crawl to his feet. She dropped her knife, snatching his ankle through the robe, and with her own full strength *squeezed*. Bone broke and the man screamed, but he tore out of her grasp and winked out of sight. Fuck, Indrani thought. That'd been their shot, and it wouldn't work twice. The Monk was in a bad place, but so were they and she couldn't use her bow one-handed.

"Auréole."

Indrani, wondering if she was going mad, found that her body was softly glowing. So was Adanna's, who was moaning as she tried to get up with trembling knees. So was the silhouette of an overweight man, glowing where there would otherwise seemingly be only air.

"Roland, you clever little artefact princess you," Archer praised, swallowing a scream as she rose to her feet with her knife in hand.

The Rogue Sorcerer, some wooden casting rod in one hand and a handful of shining rings on the other, was standing his ground as the silhouette of the Fallen Monk rushed him. The rod went up, there was a blasting sound and the Monk was forced back a mere foot. It didn't matter, because Indrani was moving too and she was fucking *done* with this one. The man reappeared in his entirety for the blink of an eye as he turned towards her just in time for his mouth to open in surprise as her extended arm slid the longknife just under his chin and all the way through this throat. He gurgled wetly, for a moment, and with a pained scream Archer turned her wrist and ripped her way out in a spray of blood.

"There," Indrani panted. "Try to walk *that* off, Monk."

She then slumped to her knees, eyes closing.

"If I might offer healing, Archer?" the Rogue Sorcerer gently asked.

"Why are you here, Roland?" Indrani asked. "You should be headed for the Severance with Cocky."

"I began to head there at first," the man agreed, "but halfway there realized that no one had stabilized the wards. It would be a shame to all die in the immediate wake of our victory, yes?"

"Zeze should be fixing them," Archer said. "It's probably already done."

"I checked moments ago," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "No work has been done."

Indrani went still. Where, then was Masego?

—

The Wandering Bard's head wrenched from faraway, returning to the small room she was sharing with her foe. Catherine Foundling offered her a hard smile and slowly, surely placed a third black pawn on the table.

"Three," the Queen of Lost and Found state. "Now it ends."

"Some affrays have yet to end," the Wandering Bard said. "You are-"

"I have no interest in your game," Catherine said.

Disdainful, she slapped the table's surface and the piles of cards blended in chaos.

"Your first mistake," Catherine said, knocking down a pawn with a flicked finger, "was believing you understand what it means to be part of a band of five. You *don't*. Like Ranger, you drift in and out of stories and bands without ever really being part of them. It's temporary to you, not something you give yourself over to. I'll wager you never had a moment like I did at the Battle of Dormer, when the Woe blended together and became part of a greater whole."

"If you want the right to lecture me," the Bard mockingly echoed, "w-"

"Your second mistake," Catherine said, knocking down a pawn with a flicked finger, "was telling me what you wanted. The song I already knew had stuck too much in my head to be a coincidence, but then you told me the exact nature of you what you were after by drawing the comparison between us. The Doddering Sage warned me: *rival*, thief, successor. You've been trying to make my Name into one shaped by opposition to you."

"And why would I ever want that?" the Intercessor said, tone calm.

"Because if it's that, it's not something else," Catherine smiled. "Whatever it is growing into, slowly but surely. And that is a balm onto my heart, Intercessor, because for you to intervene means that outside the walls of this place we are *winning*."

"You very much want that to be true, don't you?" the Wandering Bard said. "But-"

"Your third mistake," Catherine said, knocking down the last pawn with a flicked finger, "was never asking the right question until it was too late. Until I'd earned my way to this, one pawn at a time."

"And what would that be?" the Intercessor asked.

"*Why haven't you been using the Night since you came in?*" Catherine Foundling smiled, all teeth and malice.

The Wandering Bard went still.

"Hierophant," she said.

The Black Queen threw the card going by the same name on the table, contemptuous.

"There," she said. "And choke on it. We have what we need, Masego."

The darkness in the back of the room peeled away, its control long wrested away from the Black Queen, and revealed a tall man with blind and burning eyes.

"Finally," the Hierophant said. "My preparations are finished."

"Odds?" the Black Queen asked.

"Half and half, I'd say," the vivisector of miracles said. "And that is without considering your end of things."

"Quite the trick," the Intercessor admitted. "But it means nothing."

"I thought so too, at first," the Black Queen said. "But then, you're not the *goddess* of stories are you? You don't have a mantle, just a duty. In the end, you are still Named. The oldest and trickiest of our kind, but that does not change the nature of what you are."

"This is getting tedious," the Wandering Bard said, and blinked her eyes.

Silence was broken only by the sound of Catherine Foundling smiling a blackguard's smile.

"Your tricks can be learned," the Black Queen said. "They can be blocked. And you're in *our* little corner of the Pattern now."

"You've won nothing," the Wandering Bard said, tone arctic. "The affrays-"

"You were playing a game," Catherine Foundling chided, "while I was playing the Game. You bled us, but I have three mistakes now. We *earned* this, through that victory and the weight of what you did to us."

The Black Queen rose to her feet, leaning forward over the table as the Wandering Bard leaned back.

"Eyes open, Hierophant," the Carrion Lord's daughter said. "If she still has a miracle up her sleeve, be ready to *kill it* next time."

Her wrist flicked, a knife falling into her palm, and ever as the Intercessor opened her mouth to speak Catherine Foundling slit

her throat. Marguerite of Baillons twitched, clutching her wound, and cards went flying from her sleeves as two of the Woe coldly watched. It was only Catherine that thought, for a moment, that there had been a strange glint in the Intercessor's eyes. Relieved, triumphant, afraid?

Eventually, the body ceased moving.

"So?" the Black Queen asked.

"I could not catch the soul," the Hierophant said, "but even when in danger she cannot leave my bindings. It is possible she is dead and has gone Beyond."

Catherine Foundling looked at the corpse for a long time, clenching her fingers and unclenching them.

"No," she decided, "this isn't the last we've seen of her."

She dragged herself up, tired but knowing there was still chaos to put to order.

"We've got work to do, Masego," the Black Queen said. "Let's get to it."

Neither of them looked back, as they left, and so neither saw that by the sheerest of coincidence the struggle had left untouched one of the affrays – the Empress, the Tower – save for one card that'd fallen from the Bard's sleeve in her death throes.

Judgement lay with the Tower between it and the Empress, speckled with blood.

—

She breathed out and opened her eyes, a starry sky sprawled above her.

In and out, slowly. Unmistakably. She was still alive, though no longer Marguerite de Baillons. The Wandering Bard, the Keeper of Stories, closed her eyes and repressed the urge to scream until her voice went hoarse.

"I did it all right," she said. "And still? *Still?*"

Her nails dug into her palms until they bled.

"Fine," she whispered. "Fine. The hard way it is, then, *and on your heads be it.*"

[tkjarrah](#)

boy i really wish i knew what literally any tarot card meant cool visual though!

[Stable](#)

Yeah. If the Empress is Cordelia, maybe judgement could be the White Knight? And the Tower could be leadership.

Or if card meanings can change, perhaps Malicia and another Knight are going to find the tower separating them,

Gamer7956

Traditionally speaking, the tower refers to the Tower of Babel in biblical mythology. In tarot, it's main meaning is ruin or a loss of power. Hence why it referred to the Grand Alliance falling apart.

Judgement is so blatantly Hanno that nothing more needs to be said.

Empress is probably the result of the Wasteland, but it could also be Cat herself, could it not? And her fighting Hanno would end the alliance...

Cedrick the Sojourner

Actually, Catherine's Judgement is The Concoctor, so it's possible that the Bard slipping it there in her death throes might mean that saving Fredrick will delay The Concoctor and prevent her from reaching Hakram.

KingJulius

I am too worried to read further today for fear you are correct.

Theitzal

Tv shows like to use the death card to portray something bad happening but the death represents change and isn't necessarily a bad (or good) thing.

The tower however is what said shows should be using because it represents tragedy and is not something you ever want to see in a prediction.

[TeK](#)

Tower isn't all bad either. Sometimes you have to wipe the slate clean before starting anew.

[jubilee23](#)

"Destruction leads to a very rough road, but it also breeds creation," – Red Hot Chili Peppers, "Californication"

[Javvies](#)

I am concerned about Hakram. The guy keeps losing body parts. Also, he just lost an arm, leg, and chunk of his torso. He's tough, but still, that's not something that's going to be easy to get over.

Also, that Severance did the cutting suggests that attaching replacement parts or healing is going to be difficult.

Also ... Maddened Keeper's fate is concerning. Fortunately there are Heroes present to stab whatever she was containing.

I'm also worried about Frederic, the Kingfisher Prince.

And Red Axe did the stabbing? Hmm. I wonder if that's because of whatever illusion was cast (if so, by whom?) ... or if it's because she's an active traitor (which still leaves the question about who is responsible for the illusion).

Bard might have gotten her to be an active traitor because Wicked Enchanter was protected by the Truce and Terms.

[Just_a_Potato](#)

The Maddened Keeper and the Keeper of Stories, I'm sensing a connection there. Seven and one demons, maybe to create a realm where the Keeper of Stories can retreat to. Or maybe by using demons instead of human princes she's trying to attain true Godhood.

[mamm0nn](#)

I think it's more a matter of seven and one being a number with weight to it, similar to a band of five. We're not completely sure what it is, the pattern could be as simple as 'completion' or 'apex' in the Story. As in, the Maddened Keeper by having seven (Increasingly greater challenges meant to be won) and one (final boss to be lost against / mutual death), has ended her own story and surviving against the odds.

The seven and one likely refer to demons, and the number perhaps to control or the one being a demon that controls her or her being in control of them. We've already seen her use two demons' powers, corruption and absence, and for all that they've become the weaker first-book foe in our minds by now they shouldn't be underestimated. Especially in how elemental they are especially in being nigh impossible to be controlled.

Letsira

I wonder if the Judgement card symbolizes Hanno. The Bard seems to imply that the Judgement Cathrine played might symbolize the Concocter, and while Cat doesn't deny it, she doesn't directly confirm it either. Regardless, the Magician card demonstrates that both sides can play the same card to represent different actors. So I wonder, does the Tower at the end represent the Tower of Praes, or does it represent the pure ruin it did the first time Bard played it? Does the Bard's dying play foreshadow the death of Hanno? The Empress represents Cordelia, and the tower either symbolizes pure ruin or possibly even Malicia, so Bard is probably trying to either put the two into (near-) direct conflict or just trying to destroy Cordelia (literally or metaphorically). Does the bloody Judgement mean that neither leader will be judged for their actions in the end, that judgement will befall them cruelly and violently, or that Hanno might die in the conflict? Or maybe the Tower is the Dead King? On another note, I find it interesting how the Bard chastises Cat for not "playing the Game" just to have the same line turned back on her. The Bard cheated her way through her game, and even broke the spiritual meaning behind it when she tried(?) to off Hakram. Cat played a different game, and won while not once breaking the spirit of the Bard's game (upon discarding it, however, potential disaster was forewarned). Bard is too used to playing against lesser foes, and even in her attempts to treat Cat like the threat she is, she just can't, and it costs her the game.

Sorry for the wall of text. And thank you Erraticerrata for the amazing chapter.

JJR

I think the bloody judgment at the end symbolizes the choir. With the blood being Hierarchs presence inside it.

Konstantin von Karstein

I doubt that, it looks more like a foreshadowing.

JJR

I want to say that it might be foreshadowing Hierarch/ choir of judgment showing up in the story again. Possibly through the angel in the lake. But I'm pretty bad about predicting things in this story so far.

TeK

Calling it now: when the Judgement-corpse will be used, they will get giant Hierarch instead "So you are the

King of Death? Who decided that? By the Article 37.5 subarticle "b" citizens are forbidden to die unless as a result of a voting by a quorum of no less than 40% of the population"

NerfContessa

Sadly, nope.

But. Dang, that would be sooo funny.
Maybe as an alternate interlude?

[Liliet](#)

Bard was clearly disappointed by still being alive after this.

jamesc9

Disappointed, I agree.

Was it foreshadowed that she wanted to die? If so, surely she and the DK could have cooperated to arrange it.

[Liliet](#)

Part of why I think she cares about more things than just dying.

Sir Nil

Or maybe the Red Axe had already been killed and replaced by the Hunted Magician, it would certainly explain why Bard put the Magician card to counter the Chariot.

[Liliet](#)

Oof.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, didn't she just get revealed to have her fucking axe?

Valkyria

No, she stabbed Frederick with his own sword, not an axe.

[Liliet](#)

Oops.

shikkarasu

Let's not forget that the first bit of Hakram to be lost was at the edge of the Penitent's Blade. That which is cut by an Angel

Feather stays cut; it's the whole reason he couldn't have his old hand put back on. It's why Cat had a nasty scar until she became a god.

His second hand was removed by his own choice, which Pilgrim confirmed is a huge deal in this setting and makes it hard to undo. He didn't even *want* that one replaced. He still got a Ghost Hand to pair with his Bone Hand.

Maybe Severance can do what Angels and Narrative failed to, but I doubt it. He's the OG mirror knight, being thrown at demon summoning mages because he can be expected to **Stand** up afterwards.

Draeysine

Hakram must be trying to audition for a star wars role.

KingJulius

I for one welcome Darth Hakram with his energy sword able to cut almost anything, the ability to move things telekinetically, the ability to choke people from long range, at least minor future sight in battle.

AL

Saint wal all "cut the limb to save the whole" it would be weird if a sword made by her condemned those it cut to save from Corruption

moongazer13

If Hakram survives, and I kinda doubt that he will, because its been a while since someone important to Cat has been killed, they will have to give him replacement limbs. Forget Deadhand, he will be Deadhalf. But considering that the Maddened Keeper has 8 demons (7 & 1) in her, it will be a full on miracle if he survives untainted. and while i doubt the Keeper is fully dead, its possible, since why else would she explode like that.

I'm pretty sure the Magician on the Bard's side is the Haunted Magician, as Cat herself said earlier he had a high potential to be a traitor and I don't think we have been introduced to anyone else that has the ability to cast spells to that degree. Except possibly the Bitter Blacksmith, but considering that Magician is in his name, him being a traitor fits better.

As for Red Axe, its more likely shes a traitor then under enchantment, since one of her powers is not being affected by magic.

tithin

this chapter was *fucking incredible*

the only thing I don't quite get is the symbolism of the last affray, but I need to re-read it.
Bravo.

Big I

Judgement (probably the White Knight) is all what stands between the Tower (either general doom, or maybe the Wasteland) and the Empress (the First Prince).

Stable

I like this, but the Tower separates Judgement and the Empress. So Cordelia vs. White Knight?

Yitzhak Kornbluth

Read it again: The tower is in the middle, separating Judgement and The Empress.

Dsylexic Wofl

It seems more to me that the Tower (imo the Wasteland/Malicia), and since it wasn't specified I'm assuming it was played upwards, so it means disaster, will cause Cordelia to die, while the White Knight either kills Malicia or gets brought into a plan like the one the Hierarch had. After all, Judgement is out of the game, if there was ever a time to strike at the White Knight is now.

Dsylexic Wofl

Although if I'm going by what I said before, on the cards being upwards and not reversed, then this bails well for the White Knight, as the upwards Judgement implies that your path will lead to victory, the decision has already been made and you only need to walk forward and receive your just reward.

If EE wanted us to think whomever the judgment represents is going to suffer here, he should have played it in reverse.

Ataldu

Long time lurker. First time involving myself in a discussion. But was Cordelia not messing around with an angel corpse of judgement that got Corrupted along with judgement as a whole? One that would ruin them all to use? The flawed weapon the whole arsenal is trying to replace?

jamesc9

@DW, I am not confident that Judgement is out of the game. It just has to conform to Belerophan law in order to act.

Miles

The tower stands between Above and Cordelia?

Anonymous

What makes you so certain Mr "I do not judge" is Judgment? He can't invoke the choir's judgment either.

BritishTeaLover

Could Judgement here so refer to the Choir? We haven't heard much from them lately, and the imagery of them discarded speckled in blood is telling for what might end up happening to the Choir of Judgement (or, it's champion).

[TeK](#)

How does everyone forgot about a bloody WMD made put of Judgement-corpse that is in Cordelia hands?

Drunken Dwarf

I believe that means the Judgement intercepted the Tower's attempt to kill the Empress.

I wonder if the Bard did that on purpose or if the gods gave that victory away so the Bard could slip away. I wouldn't be surprised if they did given what the Bard said after her death.

shikkarasu

I think we are all over thinking that last Affray. Empress (Cordelia) + Judgement + Tower (Sh!t going poorly), unopposed.

What choir was the Angel in Lake Artoise again? I'm about 80% sure it was an Angel of Judgement.

Tom

I agree; the Judgment card there with the Empress and the Tower seems to me to foreshadow the dead Choir of Justice angel in Lake Artoise. It's this enormous Chekhov's gun that's been hanging over things for ages. It would be very odd if it doesn't have a significant role to come.

Also, notably the Judgment card was the one that literally flew out of WB's sleeve as she was killed, right? As in literally the last card up her sleeve that she can play,

with her own lifeblood on these cards on the table? So WB will be finding some way to get that thing into action herself.

[TeK](#)

Welcome to PGtE comments. We are always all over, but never in the right.

And yes, it was Judgement corpse. And Tyrant specifically blocked Judgement so that Judgement-corpse could be wielded without Judgement itself. It was one of the most important plot points of previous book.

shikkarasu

Oh, THAT's why the Dead King was so happy after the trial. I missed the implications of the Choir going silent regarding the Corpse That is Not a Corpse. Yeah, DK knows exactly what is going to go wrong with that, even if we don't. It also doesn't bode well that WB *also* seems to be backing that project. I am now 3X as nervous as I was before.

[TeK](#)

"What happens when a Judgement-corpse is wielded, if Judgement is dead?"

The right question, as he had expected. She had yet to disappoint.

"Truth of truths, my friend," he chortled, "I already gave you the only answer to that question worthy of being spoken."

A Rochelant, when they had first begun this dance of theirs.

"That's the entire point," she softly quoted, "*finding out.*"

caoimhinh

Judgement (meaning unknown yet) lay with the Tower ("Ruin to the Truce and Terms, heroes and villains at each other's throats beyond what can be mended") between it and the Empress (Cordelia, according to the Bard), speckled with blood.

So, "Judgement" speckled with blood, and the violence that will make the T&T fall apart is between that "Judgement" and Cordelia.

The key to this will be what exactly is Judgement. It's easy to say it's Hanno, but could be other things. I wonder if Hanno will be the one to ultimately execute the Red Axe.

moongazer13

I agree with the idea that Hanno executes the Red Axe, since she appears to be the only remaining traitor on the Heroes side that is alive, and she has clearly attempted to kill or has killed the Kingfisher Prince. Someone needs to be punished for this, and like it or not she tried to kill another Hero.

Also, one thing to remember is that while Cordelia denied a union, its not impossible she doesn't have some degree of affection for Kingfisher based on his backstory, and will want the Red Axe killed if she is the one responsible for his death. Plus, it probably won't be good for unity/morale if a war hero like him dies.

caoimhinh

True.

I really hope he is still alive. He's been an interesting character all this time, even before he got his Name (back then he was this weird but brave prince who liked to have a cup of wine at all times).

[Liliet](#)

I think the last thing is deliberately unclear.

[TeK](#)

No shit. There was much teasing about big-picture stuff, but nit much revealed.

Cicero

Wow... so the whole time the Bard was trying to lose?!

Ninestrings

Nah she was pretty pissed off, looks like she just has to go to Plan B now.

Dave

She might have been trying to die for real. That's the way that I interpreted it.

thearpox23

We knew that ever since her conversation with the Hierarch.

Insanenoodlyguy

Either way: She lost. She unmistakably did not get what she wanted. Her infailability has been broken.

Will

I suspect that is because she survived regardless though. She lost, and lost hard, yet there were no real consequences for her. I think she's looking for an end, be it death or replacement through succession and she "did it all right" to get that end. The gloves are off now though, cause one of the surest ways to die here is to become the villain of the story, and she's competing with the dead king for that honor.

[Liliet](#)

We'll see who the "hard way" will be hard for XD

TeK

My way is hard, Catherine. Can you feel it?

Stephen

I kept waiting for Kat to be able to reach in and take one of the bard's aspects after killing her.

Ninestrings

Hakram Deadbody really doesn't sound as cool as Hakram Deadhand.

Also how many people have wanted to be Cat's nemesis now? Is this her third hate-suitor?

tithin

First was William, dead through pattern of three.
Next came Akua, dead and turned to subservience.
Last came The Wandering Bard, presumably turned purely to subservience?

[Liliet](#)

You forgot Tariq.

tithin

First came William, dead through judicious use of a pattern of three.
Next came Akua, dead from vengeance and turned subservient in death.

There's a pattern here – someone will be the third, and their rivalry will be ended with willing subservience to Cat, possibly.

tithin

sorry for the double reply, I didn't think the first post went through..

[Stable](#)

Or the inversion. Cat subservient.

caoimhinh

Third was the Pilgrim, remember?

That's why they were entering the Pattern of Three that had Cathering making all those aerobics in the Princes' Graveyard. They were considered rivals/nemeses by Creation and Narrative, so if she had reached a draw with him there, the Pattern would have been set.

Tenthyr

I have the horrible feeling this nearly cost everything.

But god, it feels good to know the Bard really, actually got utterly destroyed at her own game.

I wonder what Cathrines name could crystalize into, now she's made sure it can't be in opposition to the Bards.

Pethrai D'arkos

Probably something like Black Fox due to her sides tendency to have Black in the titles (Black Queen anyone). It could be something like Fox Queen except she has been pretty adamant about abdicating the crown.

However it could just as easily be something like Departed Fox with her taking a ship across the Tyrian (I think that's how it's spelled) Sea to pull a King In The Mountain bit. I can just see stories in a hundred years that go something like this:

"The Black Queen, Sovereign of Moonless Nights, Departed Fox. Cathrine Foundling is known by many names, all earned by dread and woe. It is said that she stole from angels, drowned entire armies, and through a secret ritual gave birth to the crows which even now the army claims as patron. She was a villain as great as Triumphant and all the more terrible, for rather than spreading it out to all she saw she bottled up the terror to be unleashed all at once. But make no mistake lad, she was OUR

villain. One day Callow will need someone like that to once more sit on the throne, and on that day she will come back.”

dadycoool

Honestly? This. 100% this.

agumentic

Come on, we just got the confirmation that the whole Fox song was Bard’s play, and that Cat sidestepped it. Her name is not going to be fox-anything.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Would you say that Bard has been outfoxed?

[TeK](#)

Cat the Fox had ourfoxed by thinking outside the box.

caoimhinh

It’s not gonna be Fox anything. The song thing was something the Bard was attempting, and Cat prevented it. Now Cat will get her Name properly.

I’m still betting on the Guide. Not only for the Metanarrative of it relating to the title of the novel, but because that’s what she has been doing since the beginning: steering the continent away from destruction and pioneering a path out of their vicious cycles.

Her current latent Name started to form when she spoke and meant the words “I will get the east in order the hard way” (in the hypothetical scenario where Praes were to sally forth against them, possibly with Amadeus defeated). which could be interpreted as Cat becoming Dread Empress, but could be something else.

The Truce and Terms, The Liesse Accords, Villains and Heroes working together in Bands of Five, Good and Evil Nations all over the continent being part of the Grand Alliance, and the re-emergence of the Empire Ever Dark but not as a threat but as an ally to those on the surface.

All these are momentous changes brought by her hand.

After the death of the Age of Wonders, Catherine is **guiding** Calernia towards a new era. An era that has already been baptized by Amadeus as The Age of Order.

Evgeny Permyakov

>I'm still betting on the Guide.

Changer of Ways.

Dan Lawrence

Maybe she'll get seven Names and one.

[Zim the Vixen](#)

I don't care what anyone else says, as a fox, I'd be fucking ecstatic if Catherine got a fox Name.

[TeK](#)

Foxxxy Cat

[TeK](#)

Gone wild

[Mental Mouse](#)

She doesn't need to cross the ocean, just to go live with her Drow in Keter-that-was.

Miles

Pattern Breaker

[TeK](#)

Giga Pattern Breaker

Big I

Cat's got a lot of Odin imagery/association going on (two crows, staff, cloak, commanded the Wild Hunt, probably others I'm not thinking of). Odin's a war god, Cat's done a lot of war, and her sort of adopting Viv might sorta be like Odin and Loki. So something Odin adjacent? Makes me wonder if Hakram is supposed to be Tyr.

[TeK](#)

She also got a pretty unique horse, and traded a permanent injury for wisdom. Never thought about it really, for me lack of lack of one eye was always a definitive answer.

amc

NO SPOILERS, PLEASE!



hakureireimu

Well it looks like Hakram's adventuring days is at an end. Maybe he switches place with Akua in the band of 5?

forsheen

Or this sets him up to become the Cyborc.

erebus42

I mean they're in a place filled with maker and healer Named wielding both magic and miracle. Cyborc is looking increasingly likely.

Ninestrings

Time to graft Severance into Hakram.

I can just picture Masego standing there, looking at the sword... then at Hakram... then the sword...then at Hakram....

mamm0nn

We can rebuild him, we have the technol- scrap metal. We have scrap metal.

But, that's sufficient for orcs, right? The wastelands tends to rebuild them with sand and pointy stones.

[daegone823](#)

Shadow of war come on

Nobody played shadow of war

He comes back bigger and badder.

Masego will literally pick up body parts. Similar to the mantle of woe Hakram will be composed of Cathrines enemies

Hakram the Many

(Hand of ghost, bone of Warlock, lego of Fae, chest of a demon)

[sivarajan](#)

That sounds like a Red Letter idea.

Maddy

Wandering Bard is going to EFF UP SOME GODS yessss

[Liliet](#)

That's how I read this too tbh XD

[llined](#)

what a sore loser

Darkening

My personal reading of this is that she set things up so that either she'd win in the Arsenal, a win for her, or Cat would manage to kill her, another win for her since she views her immortality as more curse than blessing. So no, she's not mad that Cat beat her, she's pissed that the gods didn't let her die when she'd set it up so well.

agumentic

At this rate, by the end of the story, Harkam will have no flesh left.

tithin

Hakram Half-Slain is a beautiful new name.

Relyt118

Hmm, sounds like some more proof for the "Bard just wants to die" theory. It would explain why she 1) is building Cat as her rival 2) is coming at the Alliance with power not overwhelming. Let's be real, Cat can skirmish with the Bard, but letting the Bard coordinate and execute and ambush/blitzkrieg? Cat's just not on that level. Yet.

laguz24

Personally, I think that she can at least hold her own on that level. This book is the culmination of all their power and experience. She should be able to dance with the bard and maybe even break even sometimes.

[Liliet](#)

The real skill is in knowing when not to fight. As Bard said – objects in motion. Her setting herself in Catherine's path... Well.

:3

dadycool

Dead the man and dead the body. He'll strike quite the imposing image now.

Whew, Cat! And Masego, too? The Power of Friendship was a great boon here.

Such badass pawns. Cat's over here playing 6D shatranj while everyone else is playing roulette.

Well, things are gonna get REAL soon, but Cat'll take it on the same way she always has, with all her friends by her side.

MorningShine

Wait, I just remembered, where is Akua?

caoimhinh

What if the Judgement Card represents Akua, not Hanno?

I mean, Akua *is* still awaiting her judgement by the hand of Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

Hasn't been mentioned since Cat left for Arsenal. Possibly with the Third Army.

edrey

Judgment is the concoter, so the prince is saved, then hakram? The bard wants to die, but how is the hard way now? Way too many questions

hakureireimu

I think the Judgement at the very end might be Hanno instead, coming to judge the Red Axe, since it's creation that's shuffling them there.

[Adrian_V](#)

Hakran's Deadhand will be updraded, like he will come out stronger maybe, and who wants to bet the sword is now broken or at least damaged (as in maybe is more fragile now)

And until we know how he survived before i won't count the Fallen Monk out until then.

And last i really hope Frederic isn't dead, but the Red Axe just gave Cat a favour by that, no one will complain when she is executed now

mamm0nn

Yes, Red Axe's betrayal ties up the Terms' survival with a neat little bow. This almost seems TOO GOOD to be true.

Shveiran

If that is the Red Axe, though. Someone is casting the illusion, and I'm not completely sure the Red Axe has not been replaced.

Repentant saw through an illusion, but maybe there was a second one (a disguise) underneath that, and the caster just stabbed (lovely) Frederick.

Mateo

Looks like Masego replaced his magic with Night, a pretty convenient repowerup. Bard tried to kill herself but ended up failing. Glint in her eyes, relieved, afraid, as her throat is cut, and then pissed when she wakes up again. The game of cards with High Arcana seems quite contrived to me, but I think the symbolism is worth it (and it's certainly great fun to read). Bravo, great chapter, and I look forward to seeing how this concludes.

Xinci

Looks like he just took control over the Night with wield then changed some dimensional rules. So not really a powerup, just him using a temporary power source he can only use with Cat.

[Liliet](#)

I read it that way too. Cat just... lent him Night. He's better at wielding it anyway.

[alele](#)

So is it just me or are the proceran heroes dropping like flies? Mirror Knight and Kingfisher are the two biggest I think. Mirror dies due to Severance, Kingfisher is up in the air but I think he bites it too.

laguz24

No, they are too awesome and still have too much story left.

Shveiran

Well, one of them is.

tithin

Has it ever been stated explicitly that severance *kills* its wielder?

Entrerist

It was stated that severance is so powerful that it would probably kill the wielder. Masego and Roland thought about building a suit of armor to use it. The mirror knight is probably the only one who can use it without hurting himself too much.

Shveiran

It was also implied by the Bard that MK picking it up was one of her plans, so something is going to go wrong there.

moongazer13

I feel like, by the Mirror Knight using the Severance, its power will be depleted to the point it will no longer be a weapon capable of killing the Dead King. Because WB wanted all their options for killing the Dead King destroyed. I doubt that the Mirror Knight is the only character that could use the sword (with enough time Masego and everyone else could find another option like the armor), and if that was the case WB would have targeted him for death in some other way. She set it up so he would be forced to use the sword. WB wants the alliance in tatters and all other options destroyed so Cordelia has to use the Judgement Corpse.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As someone else (Liliet?) said, "you can't kill a god with a used macguffin!"

Insanenoodlyguy

Surgeon has yet to be tapped, even though he was introduced. That Chekov's gun is going to need to go off and presumably it will be to save one of the people who should be dying but are not quite dead yet.

[Liliet](#)

I think they'll both survive this.

Entrerist

And he will be called Hakram Deadman.

[TeK](#)

Dead the hand and dead the leg.
And another hand is dead.
Dead a shoulder, dead a foot.
Half a torso dead to boot.

laguz24

Wow, WB you really don't know how to lose. Also, I'm more worried about the long term. Assuming WK stopped the assassination attempt on Cordelia. Then how will the truce and terms fare now, since apparently there are traitors everywhere? Though now, WB's credibility is gone for good this time. That will cost her dearly, in ways she can't even imagine it.

Insanenoodlyguy

someone else pointed things out up above, but "Hard Way" Might be fueled by this as a contingency. How do you ensure you can die? By being the biggest, baddest villain around. Dead King has taken great time and pain to avoid the pitfalls of this. But what if you had a glorious bitch who rode it harder then Tyrant ever did deliberately? The plan might only be HELPED by all the heroes now realizing she wants to destroy them and uniting against her. After all, it take everybody working together to kill the ultimate threat.

dadycool

When someone with her level of meta-knowledge is trying to die, there are several ways to go about it. She could become a sacrificial mentor, but she doesn't care enough about the people around her and also can't Die For Real. She could be the Protagonist that topples the Big Bad in a Pyrrhic victory, but Triumphant, may she never return, and the Dead King are the only ones who could possible qualify, but here DK was the only one she could consider an equal and he made sure to never at any point in history be anything other than a far-off force of nature whose wrath can only be kindled in self-defense. The only option available that I can see is to check off every entry in the Biggest Bad checklist so a plucky Hero *has* to Kill her off For Real, facilitated by getting the whole world to unite against its oppressor, like as if Triumphant...now that's a scary thought: WB bringing back Triumphant.

[Liliet](#)

Triumphant is dead. Gone. Beyond. Won't return. She's history. She's an ex-Triumphant.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Triumphant is pining for the Fjords.

dadycool

I heard she was a "permanent" resident of a hell, with an unspecified number of Legions. I also heard there was enough uncertainty that she's still terrifying to think about.

[TeK](#)

We got a WoG that afterlife is not definitive in Guideverse, having Triumphant returning would be messy pandering, that breaks established rules. Besides, it's the last book, Triumphant does not have enough development to be a proper end-villain, she would not cut it.

dadycoool

I kinda feel like I could site DK owning his own hell and Warlock being able to escape a hell by exiting through another one, but you're right, it would be too much of a "Surprise! The real enemy was Hitler all along!"

Darkening

Just because there are hells full of demons that people can visit and return from, doesn't mean that's where souls go when they die. Hell, if that **is** where souls go when they die I imagine Warlock'd have tapped into that resource to power something long since. With very few exceptions, death is not cheap in the Guideverse. Pilgrim being one of those exceptions and now even that's been closed off.

[TeK](#)

Hell isn't an afterlife though. It's where devils and demons lived. That is why I quoted God... Well, EE. He was asked the question along the same lines and said that it's unknown where *exactly* souls go.

"After all, faith would be pretty meaningless if afterlife was a physical certainty."

He does have a way with word. It's not even an epigraph, but stuck in my head nonetheless. I swear, those epigraphs though are like half the reason I fell in love with a story.

[Liliet](#)

I actually genuinely cannot tell if you're memeing or confused. This fucking fandom.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure the hard way refers to her not dying from this.

I can't wait what the fuck that WOULD BE lmao

mamm0nn

"Been talking to him?" the woman who had once been a girl said.

Wait, who are we talking about here? This is literally every adult woman.

Thinks

Ah, *Nods sagely* it must be Inger the orc lieutenant, on her way to becoming a new fan favourite. Yes, makes sense.

But seriously, for all that these are two great chapters, the way they're continuously describing Cat by any stretch is starting to get ridiculous. It's like those writers that try any synonym and variation like 'she exclaimed' to avoid saying 'she said' repeatedly.

agumentic

It was clearly done on purpose, not just to avoid repetitions. Probably to indicate how many roads

agumentic

...for development of Cat's name there is.

PS: Typing on phone can be really annoying.

[Liliet](#)

Def on purpose. Erratic doesn't normally write like this, the narration was confusingly whirling around because in-universe narrative was confusingly whirling around.

Jordan Leighton

It's a reference to her relationship with Black. It's right there. Exactly how it's being done I'll leave to interpretation, but look back with that lenses and it makes perfect sense

[TeK](#)

I thought it was reference for "The girl who climbed the tower" thong.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Interesting typo there. Color me intrigued.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Cat's going up against the Wandering Bard. Every one of those descriptors implied a story about Cat.

mamm0nn

Do not worry, I shall dispel the illusion so that the truth shall be unveiled.

Fake Kingfisher disappears.

Ah, I see. It's-

The illusion Kingfisher's glorious moustache disappears to show his unhaired lip

Proceran gasp!

Kingfisher: *Menacing* Had I failed to save the Red Axe, I would've willingly go into impoverished exile for my failures. Had I struck down many a soldier, I would've accepted my abdication by the First Prince. But this- This... I'm afraid I cannot let anyone leave now that you've witnessed a truth that should've remained hidden... *Slowly picks up sword.*

[TeK](#)

That is why you **wear** fake mustache, you bloody amateur.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Wandering part > Wandering Bard
hundreds years now > hundreds of years, now
time," the > time." The
that is it > that it is
loves fucks always > love always
no not speak > do not speak
stead, it > stead; it
Stops this > Stop this
woman Free Cities > woman of the Free Cities
know it would clever > know it would be clever
his speak > his peak
villain," the > villain." The
are," the > are." The
she coat gave > the coat gave
it the Light > the Light
she shouldn't have > he shouldn't have
turn into a rain of deadly shard > turned into a rain of deadly
shards
hard turn (not sure what this should be)
her eyed > her eyes
Where, then was > Where, then, was
Found state. > Found stated.
you what you > what you
else," Catherine > else." Catherine

caoimhinh

Too bad, Bard. You lost in all senses, Cat beat you and you still couldn't die.

You Lost The Game

[Liliet](#)

I cannot fucking wait for what she means by 'the hard way' lmao

RoflCat

The way I understand it, on the assumption that Bard's goal is relieve from her Name:

She was a very competent worker that the superiors keep throwing all kind of works onto her, and they kept refusing to let her leave.

So she decided to train someone to be as competent at the job as her, and 'screw up' so the superiors might see this new girl and replace her position.

But they still have her keep her position.

So now it's time to burn the whole fucking office down for freedom.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, that's kind of my read too.

TIME TO SEE THE WORLD BURN, BARD EDITION

caoimhinh

What's your hypothesis for a possible "hard way" of the Bard? It could easily be messing with them on a whole new level to force more drastic measures.

Considering that this whole mess was done by new characters not even mentioned in previous books (except the Bard), it could continue with that trend, though it could be "the hard way" is something that had been glimpsed but not used before.

Assuming it won't be pulled out of the 2-years-time-skip's ass, I think there are 4 options from strong factions that have been named but not touched during previous chapters:

-Causing trouble with the Gigantes (Maybe sabotaging the meeting with the Gigantes representative)

-Making the Elves move. The Bard has history with them, though they are isolationists so this one is unlikely, yet we have seen them on the move before (they tried to prevent Akua's Folly but the Bard stopped them).

-Messing with Malicia, having her take a more active role in the war, though we already saw she is making a move, hence Vivi and Cordelia wanting to meet Cat soon.

-Bringing a threat from out of the Continent. (this one is highly unlikely, considering EE said the rest of the world won't be explored in this series and there are plenty of ways to mess with Cat without bringing an overseas empire at play now)

Liliet

I don't think it's Cat Bard's going to be messing with now. One, narratively that would be kind of ehh – Cat's already taken this personal step, rehashing it again won't be interesting or necessary. Bard is NOT Cat's story rival, we just established that.

Two, messing with Cat was "doing it all right". Whatever "the hard way" is, it's most definitely not more of the same 😊

TeK

She already had a plan that had continent-wrecking consequences, the use of a bloody Judgement-corpse. How do people ignore that?

SpeckofStardust

I would assume that 'the hard way' means she will no longer play games.

As in her duties are now the priority rather than her wish.

She can't die or get a replacement so that she can die.

Which leaves her with her job. After all...

She was not talking at Cat when she said the hard way, she was Talking to her bosses.

Liliet

I like the "burn the office down" hypothesis :3

Eileen

Well she must guide stories in creation... no creation no stories right? No more toys for the gods either.

[Liliet](#)

That's one version, but I think Bard cares about things outside of herself more than that.

JJR

"Gather round peasants, and I'll teach you the ancient secrets of Natural Philosophy."

ominous gnome noises

Anonymous

I wonder how many people here are familiar with The Game.

[Liliet](#)

So this has been fucking awesome.

I'm going to count "Bard did not want to win" in my corner for this one.

I hope Frederic is okay =x

Insanenoodlyguy

She still failed though. By whichever way her motivations truly ran, she failed. Tyrant was a minor mistake, but this was a major one. Her unbeatability has been cracked, and if cat won't grow into the person who can keep up with her, she's going to grow into a person beyond her.

ninegardens

Sounds a heck of a lot like the gods offered her an out: get Catherine to replace you, and your time is done.

That, or she thought she could make Cat into her new rival, so that the dance between her and DK would be allowed to finish.

Also: random question;

If Cat doesn't want to be set up/trapped as WB rival then ummmm... is playing games with her and then trapping her and slitting her throat a good idea? Seems like leaning into it to me.

Insanenoodlyguy

because it wasn't shaped yet. The idea would be to make Cat have a name opposing Bard, then killing Bard would slot her neatly into the complementary role. The rival, thief, successor, a title taken by combat and conquering. But

instead, Cat skipped that middle part and just BEAT her. Now Bard is just another person she's stomped down. You don't get made the successor of some bitch you stomped down.

[Liliet](#)

The mistake was, I think, hoping that Catherine would be able to kill her.

The thing about trying to achieve effects on this level, it's not really about pitting your strength against the opposition. It's about making sure your opposition's efforts are channeled in a way that helps you in the first place. Opposition, what opposition?

(See: Malicia, Cordelia and the Truebloods)

[TeK](#)

I think she hoped that killing her would be enough for Cat to succeed her Name, as for Villains that particular method is par the course. But Gods refused to let her go because they dislike whatever the outcome would be of Cat being the resident nudger.

So she was hoping that there would be enough weight for Cat to have succeeded her, which would've killed her as sure as dawn. And that is not an unreasonable assumption, given that many real reader theorised very much the same. She failed to account for Chekhov's theorem of unresolved plotlines however. If there is a gun hanging on a wall in the first act, a person who supposed to shoot it in the third act can't leave the story in the second. By assuring the existence of a contingency she made it near certainty that it would have to be used.

[Liliet](#)

> But Gods refused to let her go because they dislike whatever the outcome would be of Cat being the resident nudger.

I don't think the Gods were interfering or making any decisions here. This one was baked into her Name and Role from the start: either this would be enough to free her, or not. It wasn't.

[TeK](#)

Well she sure blames someone else for that.

[Liliet](#)

I mean. Gods were presumably the ones who baked it into there. Or responsible for it with some degree of distance anyway.

[TeK](#)

So they did interfere or made a decision there, because otherwise she wouldn't blame them, right?

And personally, I would reserve a condition to pick a successor when he is born, if such a condition existed at all. It's not like the Gods could not have helped her and made Cat into Bard 2.0, it's just that they didn't.

[Liliet](#)

Why wouldn't she blame them for a decision that had been made millenia ago and she found out just now?

[TeK](#)

That sounds like a poor HR. Rather than choosing a successor thousands years in advance, long before culture that would shape him/her is even born, would not make more sense to review applications as they come?

[Liliet](#)

Huh?

That's not what I mean.

I mean when Bard first got her employment contract there was small print about whether or not she's allowed to get successor'd at all, and Bard's only finding out NOW that the answer had been 'no lol' all along.

[TeK](#)

Oh. Well that is kinda hilarious, she just can't take the joke.

[TeK](#)

Amateur move really, she should've used Abigail's maneuver: act so incompetent they would have no chance but to lay you off. She should've arranged for Cordelia and Amaya to fall in love and legalise same-sex marriage by uniting their realms through the wedlock. With Tyrant undercutting Ranger in the fight of Black's affections. Make Calernia such a

clusterfuck of bad writing, the Gods would've facepalmed her to death.

[Liliet](#)

We have no evidence she hasn't tried this before.

I'm just saying.

[TeK](#)

And then she used the Demon of Absence.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, that's the real origin of the Free Cities

(She lated tried to fix it with Hierarch. It didn't work.)

[Liliet](#)

Also, same-sex marriage is legal, as evidenced by Wekesa and Tiko. Clear proof.

[TeK](#)

To be fair, laws of Praes also legalised cannibalism at one point. Can't judge everyone by Praesi standards, they are clearly much more progressive than the rest of Calernia.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I know you're joking, but same-sex marriage is almost guaranteed to already be legal. We have yet to see a culture in the Guideverse that stigmatizes same-sex relationships, and when Talbot's efforts to get Cat to start a dynasty were still being given screentime he mentioned that they can use miracles to enable same-sex couples to reproduce together.

I'll grant you that, as you pointed out, the one marriage of this sort we've seen for sure is an atypical one in an atypical country, but so far as I can tell homophobia has just straight up never been invented in-universe, so...

Scout

You forgot the dwarf pair who are only restricted due to rank, rather than gender.

[TeK](#)

True. However I did not really thought about same sex when I written this example, it was more of a “irreconcilable enemies” part. There are much more same sex rivalries in this story than not. Didn’t occur to me that it would be such a sticking point.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Fair enough.

ciara

Weird that your definition of bad writing is “marriage equality” (also Abigail’s maneuver has yet to succeed for poor Abigail herself)

[TeK](#)

More of an improbable marriage really. You can swap it to my old theory that Dead King wanted to marry Cat.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Yeah, that theory hasn’t aged super well.

[TeK](#)

I kinda like ot, in the absurd sort of way. It’s like cheese. The mold makes it even tastier 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I see what you mean.

Oshi

I will not be happy until I know what they do to Hakram. I have this stupid theory that Cat comes into her name with what she does with/for him. Everything about Hakram is tied to Cat and he can’t follow her into where she’s going the way he is now.

Jessica Day

This chapter and the last are riveting.

Wonder

It stands to reason the only person to wield Severance without it striking him dead is the Mirror Knight.

So Cat picked Masego along when she was heading to the Intercessor and he hid in the Night.

That is a lot of heroes turning traitors to their side. I can only hope that Cat rubs it in their faces the next time a hero tries to preach righteousness.

It seems the Grey Pilgrim and the White Knight were right to worry about Cat's Name at the end of last book. It appears to be something that can contend with the Dead King and the Wandering Bard.

How long are we going to wait until it grows fully? Cat's old Name didn't take this long ,did it?

Masego is the vivisector of Miracles, does that mean even without magic ,he can create and wield those miracles he has seen? That would be so badass.

[Liliet](#)

Note: Maddened Keeper was not, in fact, a hero. Also seems to have killed herself in this for some godforsaken personal reason.

My guess as to Cat's Name: Black Queen. V 2.0

Masego used Night in this one – not the replica, the original. Cat's power that she lent him / that he Wrested from her. Borrowing her stuff was how he got the Aspect in the first place, remember? ^^

Oshi

We don't know the Keeper is dead. I won't believe it until the story confirms it. All the hints are that her physical form is not very important to her existence. I keep thinking maybe she has a form per seal and they only destroyed one of them?

[Liliet](#)

I think the hints are that her death is a Really Fucking Bad Thing 😊

hakureireimu

She got cut by Severance, made with the Saint's aspect that managed to cut Winter.

Darkening

Yeah, I figured something weird was going on with Keeper when Cat thought of her as a villain and the Mirror Knight described her as heroically containing evil things. Didn't think it was gonna turn out quite this extreme though. I imagine serving as the personal seal for 8 demons isn't exactly pleasant, so maybe Bard just said to her, "Hey, go

here and do this and you'll die in a way that doesn't end up killing massive numbers of innocent people since they'll be able to kill the demons using the magic sword." And thus she gets to set her burden down. Would be an interesting mirror of the Bard's motivations as well.

[Liliet](#)

Huh, yeah.

[TeK](#)

She got a helpful stab by someone with an older Name and a right to appoint a successor.

Holy shit, was that whole arc just Bard's way of stabbing Cat to get her to the Name?

nick012000

What I want to know is who the Keeper of Stories is talking to at the end, there. Is she talking to Cat, or to the Gods Above and/or Below?

[Liliet](#)

I somehow just don't think it's Cat 😊

Xinci

So it looks like the Gods weren't satisfied with the depth of that victory. Fair enough I suppose, it didn't show complete methodological domination in all the functions Bard plays in their wager.

Also, the arcana having the same number as the numbered Hells is quite interesting. It seems that similar to Winter if things with domains are tied to a soul they can be affected by Creational patterns.

[Liliet](#)

I think Gods didn't give a shit. Maybe Bard hoped she would, but nope.

jack

Oh just _die_ you old bitch.

[Liliet](#)

Bard: WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE I'M TRYING TO DO YOU WHIPPERSNAPPER

Burlyraven

Listen, my boy Frederic better not be dead. Hakram's almost definitely alive (but damn, what a price), but I've gotten really attached to the Kingfisher Prince. And the Red Axe is almost certainly acting of her own volition (at least as much as a pawn of the Bard can), considering her supposed immunities.

There is a small chance that this could be her "helping", however, as she is an anti-mage.

Jworks

Did I read that wrong, or did Cat call Archer a Heroine?

Liliet

Where?

If it's in the section with Nephele, I think Cat's saying Nephele wasn't going to go where Archer is because she'll be exhausted and that'll be a fight.

That said, Indrani is Neutral, aka can fill the shoes of either.

sivarajan

Yes, you did; I did too. The "heroine like her" refers to the Repentant Magister, Nephele.

Oshi

Judgement lay with the Tower between it and the Empress, speckled with blood.

You guys think Catherine is Judgement?

TeK

I AM THE LAW!

TeK

Judging by the pattern, by the end of the book all that's left of Hakram would be a talking head.

Judgement, Tower and Empress are all appropriately ominous, given that both Judgement-corpse and Named Cordelia were Bard's plots that were, as we assume, thwarted. Except the thwartment of her plans left both the weapon and the hand on the trigger without a way for Gods to influence the outcome, be it through Name or Angels.

So Cordelia will fire Judgement-corpse, and that is Bard's final play. Divine Judgement without Divine guidance in mortal hands. Now that sets up a precedent, doesn't it? I wonder how that would kill her, if that is her game. That does seem a tad shallow and not enough though, as it does not fall under what Dead King would deem as "something that will make them all come after you". Although he could be meaning not mortals and Named, but rather Gods, and so she perhaps plans to do something to the Gods and the Fate?

And if she is the nudge of Gods onto Creation, does she perhaps want to bind them by their very rules to be unable to interfere with a Creation at all? Chess pieces conspiring to kill the players does have a rather poetic bent, doesn't it? Except unless that is exactly what Gods were after all along. The genuine spark of self-awareness stocked through conflict and fanned through the rebellion? With all due respect, any question having but two answers reeks of human perspective.

[TeK](#)

And given that this loss is likely the start of the Pattern of Three, Bard is owed a victory in a particularly gruesome way. Unless of course she plans to turn Bard's owed victory against Dead King, since she probably decided to tie him up as a gift for her retirement. Something along the lines of using that weapon against the Dead King, with the use of it bitterly opposed by Cat will count as victory enough. And if truly pressed, Boner can give some sweet deal against Bard Cat knows she will be tempted by, so having a guaranteed win will help Bard deny Neshie this chance. Moreover, allying herself with him will give Bard a clean shot.

Unless she actually secretly sympathises Bard and is planning to give her even stronger win against the Gods. There is a reason we have Interludes right now, as being privy to her plans right now would lessen the impact of whatever unexpected twist is yet to come.

[Liliet](#)

> And given that this loss is likely the start of the Pattern of Three

It's specifically not. Cat denied the rivalry.

[TeK](#)

While playing Bard on her chosen field, using her chosen tools, acknowledging that she *can* be a rival, and winning? Nobody asked Cat if she wants to be considered a rival, it's for Creation to decide. Like with Pilgrim, she did not

really had a choice in recognizing him as a rival, with Aqua she didn't even know she had a Pattern at all.

Mind you we still don't know her plans or even her goals, and my experience of three years with novel tells me that it is explicitly NOT what anyone thinks. Or at least, I've yet to read a correct prediction of major plot twist.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, Cat specifically used different tools than Bard's chosen. Notably she relied on a friend's help and physical stabbing.

[TeK](#)

And yet you can't deny that she rivaled Bard on her field. That she dunwanna be a Bard's rival is inconsequential. There may not be any pattern of three, but rivals they very much are.

[Liliet](#)

Nope.

"As good as" and "rivals" are not the same story, and one only implies the other if the two are opposed / trying to do the same thing at the same time.

[TeK](#)

They are opposed, they are very much alike. There is more rivalry going on between them than with Cat and any other of her nemesises. They both fight against the same enemy, but disagree on particulars, like with William. They both represent a particular approach to the way stories go, and a winner will establish narrative for decades to come, like with Aqua. And like with Pilgrim, they are both representative leaders of their side of the fence, striving against each other. And well, given how it went is Tariq, it can be argued that Cat is owed a third Pattern of Three to finish the narrative.

[Liliet](#)

You are taking "they are opposed" as gospel here.

[TeK](#)

Then that is the crux of an issue. I consider them opposed. You don't. Either way there is an irreconcilable difference in perspective. They would be rivals if they were opposed, right?

[Liliet](#)

Opposition is a funny thing. They're working on a high enough meta level where "are we opposed" is just one of the variables they can play with.

[TeK](#)

I guess that's too meta for me. I just don't see it. Unless she pulls "we where allies all along", for me opposition is undeniable.

[Liliet](#)

I very much expect Bard to have been helping Cat in highly questionable ways all along – since Second Liesse, to the degree that that counted as help. (One could argue it was better for Cat to not have become that version of The Black Queen.) (Bard's not motivated by Cat's best interest either way so the point is moot, Cat's a convenient tool that does what Bard wants, especially if shaped and nudged properly)

[TeK](#)

Quite.

[TeK](#)

Perhaps we differently interpreted some parts of chapter. Namely where Cat says that Bard tries to twist her Name into one in opposition to her, instead of something she naturally evolves into. And then implied thwartment of those plans.

I however see that what was denied not the fact that Cat's in opposition to Bard, for that indeed would be hard to deny, but rather, the shaping of a Name into something that would be a "rival, thief, successor" to Bard's Name. It was not a denial of rivalry, just the Name part of it, and Cat already had a Pattern of Three without a Name, so no reason for Pattern to disappear now.

[Liliet](#)

There... wasn't a pattern of three?

And Cat denied the whole thing. Bard was trying to shape her Role, and that encompasses both the Name and any patterns Cat's a part of. Cat won the struggle over the story period, here.

TeK

That doesn't mean she is not her rival. She defeated Bard in story-fu for crying out loud. Cat denied a Name revolved around being an eternal partner of Bards, a partisan just like Alistair the Fox, a perpetual underdog. A Name that would require Bard to continue living no less. She did not denied being in opposition to Bard.

Liliet

I'd say she went "you are not my rival because you are pathetic and not on my level"

TeK

Well that is patently untrue. She scraped a victory, but not the kind that will let her talk like that. We still see the repercussions playing out

Auston Varner

A regular, healthy orc head atop a skeletal/ghostly body would be quite a sight

TeK

Not on top of the body, but in the jar, like in Futurama.

Draconic

But we know, oh we know,
That in the night, the cat is queen
Yes we know, oh we know
That in the night, the cat is queen

Zim the Vixen

Hmmm.

I'm curious about Bard's motivation behind her use of Judgement. Arguably, this was a contingency she set into place in the very likely case that Cat couldn't kill her. But, what if Cat had killed her?

She'd be setting fire to the world and telling us to fuck ourselves as she left the (im)mortal coil. Does she really feel that much contempt for the world? Does she simply value her death over everything else? Is this something that she expected Cat to handle, if Bard weren't around to fan the flames? Or was this her Name literally and metaphorically forcing her hand in case she disappeared?

Also, I'm hecking pumped for getting the entire song being about foxes 😊

Letouriste

A great chapter but it was hard on the nerves, hakram in that state, the prince maybe dead, several traitors still around, the whole cat/bard thing etc..

I was scared for a second cat's Name was Trickster given the T and she could have transitioned without realizing, she was close after all

Darkening

Heh, I had to go back and reread the whole chapter at one point looking to see if she was referred to by name because if it kept vague I was sure she'd have a name reveal at the end of it.

Daniel E

As of this writing, not a single comment as mentioned- poor Adjutant 😞 I wonder if his spirit hand trick works on his leg.

Daniel E

Hey look at that, I can post in real time again, no more **** moderation! I'll take this opportunity to revive a crazy conspiracy theory I had several books ago; Bard is actually The Story incarnate, all of the metaphysical rules of Gods & Providence made manifest. To what end, I have no idea, but there it is.

[TeK](#)

Having your story try kill yourself juat so it would end (please) is a considerable self-burn.

Shveiran

A dead Adjutant was not what I wanted for my birthday, but still, this was one heck of a chapter.

As always, nicely done. Thank you for all you have gifted us.

Daniel E

Not dead, but his dancing days are over.

[TeK](#)

And he was never much of a ballet enthusiast.

Shveiran

I mean, he has lost half his body to a weapon that's sharper than Juniper's salute, there is no healer around, he is out of Stands, and Catherine clearly mentioned that "they", which I read as Woe, paid a price. Mutilation could be it, but I feel that would be too little. I fear our Adjutant could be a goner.

Thanatoss

Now we all know few things:

1. Bard wants to die.
2. Hierophant and Cat can not stop her infinite rebirths.
3. Maddened Keeper was traitor and dying fcked over Mirror Knight and Adjutant, but MK can wield Severence.

Now question is, how well can Cat help them, we know she will risk all to save MK and Adjutant, unless she sends Masego there...
Hmmm I can't wait.

Great chapter

flashburn283

Good lord, the Bard is harder to kill than Deadpool and Rasputin combined.

If Above is not setting her up to be locked in permanent combat with the Dead King in some tiny extra-dimensional prison, what the hell are they doing?

Daniel E

Wait wait, something just occurred to me. How in the nine Hells is Masego doing any of this? He still has his knowledge of magic, but lacks the power to use it. He shouldn't be capable of fixing wards or catching a soul.

laguz24

He was hijacking night and I suppose the wavelengths are similar enough to magic that he can.

[TeK](#)

Also he did it once already, and that is arguably how he fell into an aspect in the first place.

tithin

He is still named, he still has aspects so while he might not be able to use magic implicitly, he can use it explicitly via Wrest – which is what Cat hinted at very strongly.

[onedollargum](#)

Did Cat just break the Accords?

[Javvies](#)

Nope.

First, the Accords don't exist yet.

Second, Bard would not fall under the protection of the Accords because she keeps dragging other people onto things.

Third, even under the Accords, Named are going to be allowed to kill each other, there are just limits on the means and methods they can use and restrictions on involving other people.

If you meant the Truce and Terms, again, no, Cat hasn't broken them.

First, Bard hasn't signed on to them, and so would not be entitled to any protection from them.

Second, even if Bard had signed onto the Truce and Terms, she would have violated the fuck out of them, and so Cat's actions against Bard would constitute enforcing the Truce and Terms.

Third, Bard was in the middle of attacking the Arsenal and the Truce and Terms themselves, so principles of immediate self defense apply, and it's not like Bard can be stopped with nonlethal methods.

Eleron Pfoutz

Cat has won this Pattern of Three. This bodes either terrifyingly badly for the War for Calernia and equally greatly for Cat, or vice versa.

Shveiran

Not everything is a Pattern of Three. There is no reason to believe this is the start of one.

[sivarajan](#)

"Carrion Lord's daughter." That's never gonna stop being heartwarming.

0pointmass

Creation is just an experiment/piss fight for the gods Above and Below. The Choirs and the demonic forces are 'in' the framework of the system they created and it revolves and resolves itself with no actual interference except the interferences of Providence which we all have seen and that of the "last dues" which was clearly shown Hierophant's father when he destroyed Thalassina. Now I believe that the systems rules change or evolve according to the age (eg Age of Wonders) by the collective psyche of the beings that inhabit creation. That essentially means that

Catherine while ushering the Age of Order will have to be put against each and every crazy thing defined the Age of Wonders like the WB and the DK before the Age of Order is truly cemented by her Accords.

As for the WB she has said before that " when the time is kind I am also kind and when it's not..i do what's necessary. When it is mine, itry to find the story that will save creation." So she really just wants creation to escape Above's and Below's grasp. But she can only act through stories... So she has her work cut out for her.

Dead King is just the megalomaniac arrogant big bad ruler that he seems to be. And well.... He did kind of created his own system of magic and arrived at the godhead all on his own so he kinda has the qualifications...

Conclusion as pertaining to this chapter: probably the hard way refers to WB unloading the Age of Wonders baddies she has held captives aka Dread empress Triumphant who by the way is The most Renowned diabolist to have ever graced creation. Or at least I hope if only for the epicness that will follow...

P. S. Sorry for the big comment.

P. S2 E.E. keep up the good work

[Aranaya](#)

"Hierophant," she said.

Oh, THAT'S why

[Aranaya](#)

the struggle had left untouched one of the affrays – the Empress, the Tower – save for one card that'd fallen from the Bard's sleeve in her death throes.

I guess that's it for Frederic Goethal then? Still don't understand what Red Axe was doing there or why.

Chapter 23: Repercussions

"Giving battle is as being made to wed one of two ugly sisters—even if you get the prettier of the bargains to be had, it is still a dreadful affair all around."

– Princess Clothilde of Arans, the Cautious

It was a subtle thing, but when you were looking for it the change was noticeable. There was now a certain weight to the

place that'd not been there before, a resistance to power that'd earlier waned. My steps stuttered and Masego moved halfway towards glancing at me in question, though in truth his eyes of glass were merely staring at me through his own head.

"I think the wards were just restored," I said.

"Possible," Hierophant acknowledged. "May I?"

I nodded, suppressing a grimace, and the air shivered with the power of his aspect. The Hierophant used his will to **Wrest** the Night away from me, as he had earlier when we'd trapped the Intercessor, and I gave token resistance before letting him win. We'd found out if worked better if he got control by winning a conflict, even the resistance was largely ceremonial. I didn't much enjoy the sensation of having my power stripped from me, or of losing for that matter – I'd never been one to enjoy defeat even when the real victory was in throwing the fight. Masego shaped the Night into small pinpricks, gathering dewlike drops of it with a finesse I could not replicate despite my best efforts, and detonated them one after another. He varied the size of the pinpricks according to some eldritch arithmetic, observing the detonations with care, and only when the last had vanished did he slowly nod.

"Someone has activated the emergency wards," Hierophant told me. "Repairing the true arrays will take time and mage cabals, but these will be enough to prevent further incursions by extradimensional entities."

"Will it keep them in?" I asked.

"So long as they do not force one of the designated gates, yes," Masego said. "Though I do not speak in absolutes, as sufficiently powerful fae can brute force their way through such things and demons usually require wards tailored to them."

"We might have eight demons on the loose, Zeze," I cursed. "They need to be contained, and quick."

The tall mage offered me a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry about them escaping into Creation," he said. "In nearly all observed cases, they will first devour the entire pocket dimension before trying to move beyond it."

"And," I slowly said, just to confirm, "by 'pocket dimension', in this case you mean the Arsenal?"

"Yes," he smiled, visibly pleased by my understanding.

"The Arsenal, where we and a lot of people and priceless artefacts are?" I continued.

"Yes," Masego agreed once more. "So do not worry, since if the demons do get into Creation we will be *long* dead – or at least no longer truly aware, as living vectors of demonic infection."

The whole reassuring thing was a bit of a work in progress with him, I mused, but at least his heart was in the right place.

"Well, that's certainly something," I muttered. "Would you mind releasing the Night?"

"Of course," Hierophant agreed.

Much as he immediately complied when I asked him that, I thought it telling that he always kept the Night until that very moment. Indrani had told me he'd taken the loss of his magic well, and from what I'd seen of him I'd tended to agree, but no one took that harsh a loss without it leaving some scars. No one liked losing power, especially if you'd been skilled at using it, and there had been few mages more skilled than Masego.

"Let's go," I said. "The sooner we get to the Knot the better."

"I still do not know why we are headed there," Masego reminded me.

He got walking, though, and I got limping. It'd do.

"The Sinister Physician is there," I said.

I'd made sure of that, assigning him healing duties at the crossroads of the Arsenal before disappearing.

"He has already seen to your wound," Hierophant pointed out.

My hand almost went to the still-blood mark on my neck where the Fallen Monk's knife had sunk into my flesh. That'd been a nasty surprise. I wasn't a fool, I'd suspected that a traitor was going to come after me, but the metaphysical Night tripwires I'd put up on the stairs after the Poet and the Monk went up hadn't warned me of the coming backstab at all. I'd lost all hold on Night, maybe because of some aspect of the Monk's, and it'd poured out of me as a sea of blackflame. It'd gone around the Fallen Monk, though I'd felt him try and fail to seize control of it, but still singed him some just by the heat and killed every fae at the bottom of the Belfry besides. That'd been enough to spook him into fleeing, thank the Crows, because if he'd actually stuck around...

I'd had little to no control over the Night for an uncomfortable amount of time after the blow, and I'd come closer than I liked to admit to simply bleeding out. Even when I'd achieved mastery once more, the best I'd been able to do was prevent the cut veins from killing me by freezing blood flow and limp my way to the

closest healer, the Sinister Physician. Roland might have been able to help, but with fae still up there and other potential traitors it would have been a risk – easier to feign my own death, and slide the Monk's knife into the corpse most closely resembling me I had at hand. I'd figured it would warn Archer when she came to try to find me, and I'd been right: she'd grasped my intentions without a word ever being spoken between us.

"Catherine?" Masego gently said.

I shook my head. My thoughts were drifting, as much from the blood loss as the exhaustion.

"I sent him there as a beacon of sorts," I told Zeze. "He is a healer, in a known and easily accessible position. Any Named from my indirect conflicts with the Intercessor-"

"These *affrays*," Hierophant carefully said, as if trying out the word.

"I was trying to protect things, or people, and she was trying to break them," I agreed. "But if anyone got seriously hurt and they aren't dead, they'll be headed to the Knot and the Sinister Physician – because he's there and visible and obviously helpful."

"A beacon to gather people," Masego frowned, eyes swivelling as he thought. "So by heading there now, we will learn what has happened in your 'affrays'."

"I have some idea," I said. "If the cards were truthful, anyway. But it should get me the information quickly and in depth, yeah. There's also another use."

He half-turned towards me but said nothing, the invitation silent.

"There'll be mages and soldiers there," I said, "as well as Named. If we're going to contain the demons and the fae before this gets any worse, we're going to need all of those."

I was *not* looking forward to tangling with demons again. Hopefully Hakram wouldn't be too gravely wounded from whatever it was the Bard had arranged to hurt him, I thought, fingers clenching. A leg lost, an arm or perhaps an eye? Gods, why was he always the one who ended paying in flesh for our mistakes? The Mirror Knight would have taken up the sword, so if we were lucky he'd cut down parts of the opposition before we got there. If we were *unlucky*, well... Best be prepared to put down a corrupted Christophe of Pavanie, wielding a sword that'd been made to kill a lesser god. As much as you could ever prepare for something like that, anyway. The grim thoughts stayed with me as we passed

through stone hallways nearly indistinguishable from one another, hurrying as much as we could without running outright.

The Knot was a riot of activity when we stumbled in from one of the upper halls, the Sinister Physician having organized what looked like an impressive field infirmary from Arsenal supplies. Half the cots were filled with soldiers, only the most lightly wounded of them kept awake instead of placed under a sleeping spell. Priests and mages were swarming all around but the Sinister Physician himself was seeing to a pair of cots set apart from the rest and from each other. In more ways than one, I thought, since one of the people on the cots was bound by leather straps and had half a tenth of crossbowmen trained on her at all times. That did not bode well. The healers in spell and Light parted for the two of us, offering words I only paid half attention to as we headed towards the Physician and my fear was confirmed.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath.

One of those two wounded was Frederic Goethal, the Prince of Brus. The Kingfisher Prince as well, but it was the other princely title that'd be trouble in the coming days.

"Your Majesty," the Sinister Physician greeted me. "I am glad to see you in good health."

"As I am glad to be," I replied. "Would I be correct in assuming the woman tied down is the Red Axe?"

"She is," Masego said, before the other villain could.

The Physician eyed Hierophant with mild irritation but nodded.

"Her peculiarities mean initial treatment had to be done by priests, naturally," the Physician told me. "But I have been continuing the work with alchemies, which she does not seem to affect."

"How bad?" I asked.

"Prince Frederic will have scarring on the side of his neck, but no more than that," he replied. "Part of it was the Magister's stabilizing intervention, but there appears to have been another manner of interference. He was struck with his own sword, which seems to have sorcery laid into the steel that made it reluctant – if not incapable – to kill its own wielder. The blow was deep but avoided the jugular."

I glanced at Masego, who nodded.

"The Bitter Blacksmith, by which I mean not Helmgard but her brother, would be capable of this," Hierophant said. "He has the Gift, and skill with it."

Thank the Gods for him, then. I rather liked the Prince of Brus, and that aside his death would have been a political mess of legendary proportion.

"And the Red Axe?" I asked.

"Hovering at the edge of life and death," the sallow-skinned man frankly said. "She was shot by twenty-three crossbow bolts, including one that pierced her liver and two that went in her lungs. If another had been half an inch to the side, it would have taken her through the heart and she would have died before getting here."

My eyes moved to the woman in question, prone in her cot. She didn't look like much, not that people ever did when they'd lost that much blood. Brown hair, tanned skin, muscled arms. Not tall, either, even prone I could tell as much. A lot of trouble for such a small package. When I tore away my gaze, I found the Sinister Physician was studying me closely.

"Despite my best efforts and those of the priests," the Sinister Physician mildly said, "it is, of course, possible she will die. These things do happen, Your Majesty."

It was an offer, however indirectly made.

If I were a better woman, I would have refused it outright. Without hesitation. Instead I considered the notion. If the heroine died bedridden, shot by soldiers, I would not need to have her executed and deal with the outrage from Above's crowd over the matter. It would also nip in the bud the mess that would come from a Named having tried to murder a ruling prince of Procer, and how that was simply not something Cordelia Hasenbach would be able to *let go*. It'd be murder, of course. Sure, the Physician would be the one carrying out the deed for me, but the order would have been mine. The weight of this would be on my shoulders. But what was one more life, these days, one more splash of blood on the stone? How many had I killed by my hand or by my words?

I was a little late for scruples, wasn't it?

If it were found out, though, it's be a disaster. I'd be breaking the Truce and Terms and given my position in that arrangement the very foundation of them would be rocked. So long as the Sisters were with me, though, I was beyond truthtelling even if the heroes had suspicions. *It's a secret, and the Arsenal is a gathering place of Named*. Yet that was not an absolute rule, a certainty. If dark deeds were done cleverly, and cleverly hidden,

they could remain secret. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, looking at the Red Axe once more as the silence grew long. I should have felt pity for her, I thought, or perhaps sympathy – she had been forged in pain, like most Named, and it had led a pitiless ancient to make use of her. Yet I did not. All I could see was the consequences of her actions, all the way down to Keter swallowing this continent whole. There was no place for pity in that vision.

Yet I had made rules, hadn't I? Rules to govern these conflicts between heroes and villains, between Named and laws. The Truce and Terms had been raised in no small part by my hand, and they had been my design since their inception. They were, in the end, the first step towards the Liesse Accords becoming truth instead of remaining ink. If *I* broke those rules, if *I* didn't have faith in them, then who would? Who *should*? How could I ask anyone to follow them when I broke them at my own leisure whenever I thought it best? One of the Old Tyrants, Terribilis the Second, had once written that you should never make a law you did not intend to enforce – because allowing it to be broken lessened all other laws.

I would be lessening all I had built if I did this. Even if I got away with it.

"It would be best," I finally said, "if she made it through."

"I am sure she will, Your Majesty," the Sinister Physician said, just as mildly as he had offered her death. "I will return to my duties, if you have no further questions."

"Please do," I replied.

I watched him walk away, Hierophant standing at my side.

"Did he just offer to murder the Red Axe?" Zeze leaned in to ask, sounding puzzled.

"Quiet," I murmured, but nodded.

"He could have made it plainer what it was he was saying," Masego resentfully muttered.

He wasn't all that troubled at the notion of the killing, or that I'd seriously considered it, but then for all that his family had made him essentially untouchable Hierophant *had* spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Praes. People killed themselves over theatre seats, there. Politics saw enough red flow to rival rivers. I realized a moment later that I did still have a question for the Physician, though I supposed asking one of the officers would serve just as well. The villain had mentioned that Nephele's sorcery had kept the Kingfisher Prince alive long enough for him to be brought to a healer whose metaphorical gourd

wasn't running empty, but I'd never actually learned where she went after that.

A slower, more careful look around told me there was less of a force to muster here than I would have liked. Maybe thirty soldiers, from those a few of mine and more from the Dominion. A dozen priests were seeing to the wounded, with half that in mages – most of them Proceran, by the looks of it, so barely passable as war casters – and it wasn't like I could strip them from the infirmary without endangering those being seen to. The lightly wounded would survive that, but those who'd lost a limb or worse would be at risk. *We'll all be at risk if demons devour this place*, I reminded myself, *and none of the soldiers here will do much difference if a Duke of Autumn finds this place*.

I'd moved on to considering which officer to approach, as the ranking one here seemed to be a Levantine captain but my natural leaning was to rustle up a few Army sergeants and get my people forming up, when the first question I would have asked answered itself. The Repentant Magister emerged from one of the side halls, escorted by a good forty soldiers – two full lines from the Army of Callow – and the Blade of Mercy. Her eyes found mine and I nodded a greeting, watching as she thanked the ranking lieutenant with courtesy and headed straight towards me. *Us*, I was reminded when Masego shuffled silently at my side.

"She is on the very edge of burning out," Hierophant told me. "And nearly out of trinkets."

I nodded in acknowledgement, then pitch my voice low.

"If you wrested her sorcery from her grasp," I quietly asked, "would she still be at risk of that when you used it?"

"I am uncertain," he admitted after a moment. "The nature of the Night and your own prodigious affinity for it make you a poor subject to use as the base of a theory."

"You haven't experimented with the aspect?" I said, genuinely surprised.

He'd been the one who pushed me hardest to experiment with the limits of my mantle, when I'd been Sovereign of Moonless Nights.

"Not in a manner that would physically cripple or kill anyone should I misstep," Masego chided me. "There is much that can still be studied before only these mysteries remain."

Fair enough, I mused. The Repentant Magister was upon us, so the conversation ended, and though in other circumstances I would have been less than pleased to see the Blade of Mercy at her heels today I was even glad to see *him*.

"Your Majesty," Nephele greeted me, offering a bow. "Lord Hierophant."

"Nephele," Masego replied.

"Lady Eliade," I replied. "Blade of Mercy."

The boy hesitated but received an almost admonishing glance from the sorceress.

"Queen Catherine," the hero said, curtly bowing as well.

He did not greet Masego, not that Zeze cared in the slightest. By the fade of the glare behind his eyecloth, he was actually looking elsewhere while pretending to be paying attention.

"I understand I have you to thank for saving the life of the Kingfisher Prince, Lady Eliade," I said.

"I cannot claim to have saved him, only delayed until salvation came by other hands," the Repentant Magister replied. "But I receive your sentiment gratefully regardless."

"It's true, then," the Blade of Mercy said. "It was you who sent Prince Frederic to protect the Red Axe."

He was speaking somewhat rudely, but I could live with a little rudeness. Now was not the time to have a fit over manners.

"The Red Axe was used to sunder the Truce and Terms by a foe that kills through plots, the ancient creature known as the Wandering Bard," I replied. "I have been trying to warn people of her for years, but there has been... opposition from your side of the fence to having her declared an enemy. We are all paying the price for that dithering today."

There was no way the Grey Pilgrim would be able to keep fighting my push to have the Bard declared a foreign and hostile entity, one it would be treason to deal with, after the events of the last night and day. That didn't mean I wouldn't have him pay a tithe of blood and pride over this, though, or darken the Intercessor's name as thoroughly as I could with anyone who'd listen.

"Then your reputation was attainted without reason, and I offer apology for it," the Blade of Mercy stiffly said. "It was believed that you were attempting to use this affair to make the Chosen into your vassals, using the deeds of the Red Axe as a pretext to extend your influence."

It wasn't like he'd suddenly come to believe I was a good woman or ally, I thought as I studied him, but rather that he was perfectly willing to believe that there was another Evil out there who *had* been using the Red Axe for their own nefarious

plot. Rubies to piglets he was already thinking of the Bard as villain in his head.

"It takes character to own to a mistake," I replied, offering a nod and nothing more. "But if I may dispense with idle talk, there is a peril we need to address. I've reason to believe that there are demons loose in the Arsenal."

"Gods be good," Nephele hoarsely whispered. "Demons, plural?"

I nodded, appreciating her grasp of the gravity of the situation. Not that I'd expected otherwise of her. Coming from Stygia – and from the Magisterium at that, whose ranks boasted the finest diabolists of the Free Cities – she should have a decent idea of how *nasty* even a single demon could get.

"Where?" the Blade of Mercy sharply said.

"Near the Severity," I said. "There might be as many as eight."

"The wards will not contain them forever, even if they were unleashed inside them, which we do not know for certain," Hierophant warned, having resumed interest in the conversation. "The anchors are on the inside, as the pattern was primarily designed to resist assault from the outside. Eventually they will corrupt or destroy the anchors, and the wards will collapse."

"We need to contain them before it gets to that," I bluntly said. "Blade, are you capable of destroying their kind?"

Not all heroes could, I had learned, but the boy used Light and lots of it. The odds were good he was one of those with the ability.

"Yes," the Blade of Mercy said. "In principle. I have never encountered one before."

Gods, but I had the strangest headache. Was I forgetting something? No matter.

"Then we will do what we can to set up those kills," I said. "My priority is containment, so that we can gather numbers and Named to deal with this more safely, but none can be allowed to run wild."

"You'll be needing wards for that," Nephele seriously said. "And while in other circumstances I might be able to provide-"

"You are close to overdrawing," Hierophant interrupted. "We are aware. I have trained none of the mage around us here, which means none should be capable of the required work, but Catherine _"

"I'll conscript half so you can borrow their power," I agreed.

Or at least however many of the six weren't close to burning out themselves. The priests would have been able to see to most wounds, so it shouldn't be the case, but mages in an infirmary did a lot more than healing spells – the way so many of the gravely wounded men were spelled to sleep made that plain enough.

"I will choose them myself," Hierophant said.

"Use my name if you have to," I shrugged. "Lady Eliade, if you'd accompany him?"

Couldn't hurt to have a gentler touch along when gathering a few mandated volunteers.

"It would be my pleasure," the heroine replied with a smile.

Good, then she got my meaning by sending her along. I cast a look at the Blade of Mercy, noticing his hesitant look. He wanted to stick by the Repentant Magister's side but couldn't think of a reason why he should. Gods, how old was he? He couldn't be older than twenty. It was easy to hate the sneer and the accusations, too easy to forget that I was actually looking at a *kid*.

"With me," I said. "We're going to procure a few soldiers."

The boy jerkily nodded, falling in at my side.

"How old are you, Antoine of Lange?" I asked.

The boy offered me a mulish look.

"Nineteen," he still said. "There is no need to use my personal name, Blade will suffice."

A lie, I decided, or at least an exaggeration. He must be younger; it was a rare thing for that lie to be spoken the other way around.

"I was seventeen, the first time I fought a demon," I quietly said. "I'd fought devils before, and Named of some power, so I figured I knew what I was in for."

That, at last, got his undivided attention. His eyes were wide and went still.

"The fight itself was a terror," I said, "like few things before or since, but it was the aftermath that scraped me raw. The demon laid seeds of corruption within some of my soldiers. Brave men and women, who'd done nothing but their duty."

"What happened to them?" the Blade of Mercy softly asked.

"We killed all those who'd been corrupted," I said. "As gently as we could, but they were no less dead for it."

The boy swallowed.

"Why are you telling me this?" Antoine asked.

"The Mirror Knight is your friend, as I heard it," I said. "So I'm telling you now when you can still prepare yourself. He might be lost, Blade of Mercy. Corruption spares no one, and all it takes is a drop."

"He is strong," the boy insisted.

"Then pray they've not made something warped of him," I said. "Else that strength will be turned against us."

I left him to think on that, limping my way to the two lines that'd been Nephele's earlier escort. One of regulars I noted, and one that was a mix: on tenth of crossbows, another of heavies. The senior lieutenant was an orc, who introduced himself proudly as I approached.

"Lieutenant Inger, ma'am, it's an honour."

Herself, then. My mistake.

"Lieutenant," I replied, nodding amiably. "I've a task for you and your soldiers."

"I am at your pleasure," she replied, fangs bared eagerly.

"Before I forget, though," I said. "Where were you escorting Lady Eliade?"

"She meant to head towards the Chancel, so that the wards might be fixed," the lieutenant told me. "Yet she sensed them being established again on the way, so we turned back."

I hummed in approval. A good call by Nephele on both parts: a good use of her expertise and exhausted state, then a decisive cut of her losses when her effort proved unnecessary. From the corner of my eye I saw the Blade of Mercy coming closer, though the boy remained far enough he wasn't exactly standing with me so much as in my extended vicinity.

"This will be for volunteers only," I told Lieutenant Inger. "If you'd allow me to address your men?"

"You'll find no dragging feet among us, Warlord," the orc assured me. "But to have you address them would be a privilege."

Masego and the Magister looked nearly done, two mages already following them, so I didn't have long if I didn't want to start wasting time in a situation where it was precious. But I owed my soldiers, given what I was about to ask of them, what honesty I could offer. Lieutenant Inger barked out an order and my

legionaries fell into ranks crisply, offering hearty salutes as I limped up in front of them. Rows of expectant, eager faces waiting for some stirring speech I could not offer. I'd not do them the insult of cloaking this with the appearance of glory where there was none to be found.

"I'll be brief," I told them, "and blunt. Chaos has the run of this place, and it will get worse from here: demons were loosed and we don't know how many or how contained they are."

That sobered them right quick, though not as much as it should have. *I have won too many unexpected victories*, I thought. It was the foundation of my reign, this ability to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, but it had grown into a legend I was not always the equal to. There was no clever plan that would keep demons from melting them like wax, no surprising turnabout to reveal at the last moment. I could see in their eyes that they believed there was one, that the Black Queen would come through once more no matter the enemy, and it tasted like ash in my mouth.

"I'll be heading out with Lord Masego and the two heroes you've been escorting, as well as three mages," I told them. "We mean to contain this madness until sufficient strength can be assembled to destroy it outright."

In other circumstances I'd settle for a binding and a very deep hole, but if we had the might to outright annihilate a few demons I'd take the opportunity without complain.

"There will be fae and Named, some of them might be corrupted already," I said. "Not knowing the face and nature of our enemies, there can be no guarantees that our methods will be able to contain them. And so I ask you all to come with us, into the dark"

There was a roar of approval, and blades were smacked against shields, but I raised a hand to quell it. I would take them with me, because they would be useful – needed – but I would not let them pretend this was some sort of glorious adventure.

"I will take only volunteers," I said, and my hand rose once more to end the clamour of volunteering about to erupt, "but let me be perfectly clear about what I am asking of you. None of you can *kill* a demon. Swords and arrows cannot do it. What I am asking you is to stand between the mages and the horrors, to buy them the precious time that will make the difference."

I'd asked silence of them, and silence they gave me.

"Even those of you who survive," I said, "will likely be lessened in some way. That is the ugly truth of fighting demons, that

there cannot ever be a real victory. There is no cowardice in avoiding this fight: *I would, if I could.*"

I met their gazes, breathing out.

"But I cannot, and so I ask for volunteers," I simply said.

I could see the fear in them now and I knew I'd put it there. For a moment I wondered if I had been too candid but regretted the thought almost instantly. I could and had spent the lives of my men, those who had sworn oaths to me, but I'd not do it while lying to their faces. There were some who called me a soldier queen, and deep down I knew there was truth to the sobriquet.

If I was queen of anything at all, it was the likes of these soldiers before me.

"You'll go, won't you?" Lieutenant Inger asked, gravelly voice cutting sharp across the silence.

"I will," I said.

"You always go," the orc said, eyes hard, hands clenched. "And so we *follow*. I volunteer."

And so they went, one after the other, even after my every warning.

Forty soldiers, and I was left to wonder at how sometimes pride could feel like grieving.

[TeK](#)

Welp, fuck.

[TeK](#)

By the way, what happened to those three Demons back from Liesse? We never really got any explanation either way. Also the Demon of Corruption was just kinda gone too, even though Masego was supposed to have it. And now Maddened Keeper has another Demon of Corruption inside of it. Coincidence?

[TeK](#)

It was implied that he shaped Demon of Corruption into Demon-shaped prison for other three, given how Demons don't affect each other or anything already affected by another Demon, but that also implies that there is somewhere a dimensional prison

with four Demons inside, of which Masego has the keys, and nobody mentioned it all this time.

Well, nobody mentioned anything all this time, and given how we know Narrator is Unreliable, that doesn't bode well.

Are we sure time problems of the novel are really just EE being bad with timelines and not, say, Demon of Time? What a terrifying thought. Also a get out of jail free card, but that is unlikely.

haihappen

A demon of Absence would make everyone forget it exists, together with whatever or whoever it extends its influence to.

But the Prison (capitalized for emphasis) is likely a pocket dimension that contains 4 demons that are perpetually preventing each other from escaping because they want to escape itself, like the crabs in a bucket.

[TeK](#)

Not each other, they are enveloped in corruption from one Demon Masego has control over.

It's nothing definitive, mind you, I am just curious. It is plausible that Keeper is former Heroin who took Absence inside and then stole more Demons using power of "nothing to see here". Possibly with Bard's guidance/interference.

Thorium

I am pretty sure that prison eventually broke and Masego ended up dumping the last 3(?) demons into the middle of the battlefield, resulting in a whole lot of death. Gonna have to go back and reread Second Liesse to be sure though.

[TeK](#)

No, actually, only Masego reappeared (and a storm of Corruption)

Caerulea

If I recall correctly, the demons were 'summoned' which meant that they were brought to creation conditionally, with the spell that brought them in being the condition. Masago, after bring them into the pocket dimension, used the binding spell to attack the mages with corruption, and then dismissed the demons back to hell.

TeK

That makes sense alright, but what about Corruption Demon?

Sylfa

He used the ichor of corruption he had in his skin, but did he ever actually use the demon egg there? I can't recall what happened to it precisely other than it was confirmed gone at some point.

dadycoool

The demon got put back in its bottle (aka the banner) and I'm pretty sure he used the banner-bound demon as material for the prison. I seriously doubt he'd actually summoned the thing.

NerfContessa

That.... Would be horrible.
What a thought.

And cat and orks continue to go together like goblinfire and goats, or steak and salad, or Whisky and anything.

limwanya

I don't think there is only one demon of corruption

[TeK](#)

Not in the world, but really, what are the chances? Demons aren't exactly commonplace.

[TeK](#)

Keeper is Callowan, it is not impossible she stole Cat's demons somehow and then Absented them later. We know less than nothing about her after all, and there is damning lack of mentioning of those Demons Masego had, one of which, mind you, Corrupted him.

[amit27592](#)

What is Cat forgetting? Any theories?

[TeK](#)

He said he never encountered one, yet he was part of the band that *something* the Demon of Absence near Harrow back in the Crusade.

Tenthyr

Cat already knows there's an Absence demon about though, so hopefully it's not an issue...

... Unless she forgot she knew. Ahhh.

Big I

Huh, nice catch, I assumed it meant the Maddened Keeper was still alive and being forgettable.

Point Point

I assume that her ability to be forgettable is a result of the Demon of Absence demon she may have eaten during the crusade.

[TeK](#)

And given that he is one of the Heroes who actually can kill Demons, he would've been part of that band

chris S

Don't you mean: "He was part of the band that / /"?

[TeK](#)

No, / / is knowledge loss that exists, a hole in a memory, while influence of Absence is more like an absence of a hole.

Ninestrings

I mean if we're going maximum sad? Adjutant.

[Liliet](#)

Thaaat's where my mind went too =x

Dsylexic Wofl

I mean, lets be honest here, im already crying this chapter, and by the wsy things are going Adjutant isnt only in the splash zone, Hakram is pacient zero, the Keeper was almost GLUED to him.

IDKWhoitis

The Demon of Absence, it causes people to forget its existence. In all likelihood, the Keeper had it, so now its out and about (probably the One of the Seven and One)

Cicero

The Adjutant?

The Maddened Keeper? That she's likely dead and that's why the demons are loose?

If one of the demons is a Demon of Absence...

[Liliet](#)

There's no "if" to it. It's what she used to disguise her presence.

shikkarasu

She's forgetting the Maddened Keeper. Bard outright said that Cat would not be able to remember her. It's also why she forgot about The Moon and thought there were only 21 Major Arcana.

Maddened Keeper has a Demon of Absence and uses it to Keep a low profile.

moongazer13

There was a demon of Absence back towards the start of Book 4 that Catherine warned the Crusaders was bound to a hell egg. There were 14 heroes at the start of the incursion and 12 after they "dealt" with the Hell egg and Cat started getting the headaches. Plus, when we first meet the Keeper in chapter 14 it states "and had even turned herself into a living seal on a Hell Egg from Triumphant's days."

Ninestrings

What did you forget Cat?!

WHAT DID YOU FORGET

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I dunno, the entry in her memory seems to be ABSENT.

[Auston Varner](#)

Really hope nobody tries to make a vote reminder out of that last line. Any other line in the chapter, fine by me, especially if it's amusing, but the mere thought of twisting the ending to be about voting has me very strongly sympathizing with the side which argues that it defiles the story.

[TeK](#)

I know have kind of petty desire to do just that, but I will persevere.

Truly, I am a paragon of virtue.

Auston Varner

Indeed, your forbearance is most admirable 😊

Liliet



I also hope!

Miles

Best be prepared to put down a corrupted Line, wielding a call to “vote!” that’d been made to kill a lesser story.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

TeK

Originally it was implied they lost two Heroes in the ordeal, although it’s just that suddenly there was always only twelve Heroes instead of fourteen, but now I wonder if one of those lost wasn’t Maddened Keeper.

Drunken Dwarf

Hell the other one might have just been the Wandering Bard with how much the Pilgrim covers for her.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Yeah, the Maddened Keeper being one of them makes way too much sense. She probably ate it and wandered off with it.

Alex

Cat’s “strangest headache” – a reference to the Hell Egg with the absence demon the heroes killed offscreen near Harrow in book 4?

They went from referencing 14 heroes to 12 and Cat had headaches when that change occurred.

Ninestrings

That would line up with the Mirror Knight and the Vagrant Spear who are trapped in the demon zone.

ruduen

That sounds likely. I think the Blade was in the group which took out the first demon, so the headache might come from processing the comment of, “I have never encountered one before.” It’s entirely possible that he did encounter it as

part of the band that took it out offscreen, but that entire encounter was wiped out.

For those who want the references: From <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/04/20/chapter-4-warpath/>

“‘Wasn’t able to get all the Names,’ Thief said. ‘But I do have a number for you: there’s fourteen of them.’”

Compared to later on, from <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/07/chapter-10-allegro/>

“‘It’s just twelve heroes,’ Archer shrugged. ‘Nothing to worry about. Worse comes to worse, I shoot a few in the eye and run away.’”

Strange, it hadn’t occurred to me before now that the muster of heroes on the other side was essentially a tenth and two officers. I had been tired, and there’d been a few days a while back where I’d had vicious headaches. Must have been the lack of sleep having unforeseen consequences. “

Big I

Anyone else wondering about Inger being mistaken by both Cat and the Kingfisher? Now I’m wondering if she’s the Hunted Magician in disguise

[*TeK*](#)

Unless he went the way of Traitorous and underwent plastic surgery for the kicks, given how Magister’s trade is illusions and dispelling them, and that she was shot to almost death by crossbows, it’s a safe bet she really is Red Axe.

Cicero

Yeah, I think that the truth is simpler. The Red Axe is the third traitor in the Arsenal. The Bard offered her a chance to get back at the Named that raped her, who was otherwise protected by the Truce and Terms – thus making her susceptible to supporting a plan that broke those.

She didn’t want to kill the Kingfisher Prince, but when it looked like he might keep the Truce and Terms alive, she decided she had to strike at him.

[*TeK*](#)

I mean, plastic surgery is still possible, just unlikely.

Miles

I think it's even simpler than that. She heard him say he was working for her, assumed this meant she was in for a fate worse than death, and attacked him to try to escape.

Big I

I was talking about the orc Lieutenant , but the points the same, I guess the Magister would have seen through any magic disguise

[Liliet](#)

Inger is probably transgender.

[TeK](#)

Or you were reading too much of The Gods are Bastards.

[Liliet](#)

No, that's Ingvar.

[TeK](#)

It's just that there may be parallels where there are none.

[Liliet](#)

This wasn't even my idea, it was brought up on Discord immediately as a potential explanation for why Frederic made the mistake.

[TeK](#)

What mistake? Pronouns? Inger is an orc though, another species, and good chances it's first time Fred met one. He met goblins, but it's not given about orcs.

I thought about the same, and it was my personal explanation for my assumptions.

[Liliet](#)

He had Callowan reinforcements at Twilight's Pass.

And if it'd been the first time he met one, he wouldn't have reacted to the name.

[TeK](#)

Somehow it just skipped my attention.

[TeK](#)

I don't tend to operate in the "I was actually right" realm of possibility.

Miles

Pgte has had references to transgender characters before, even an extra who was called out directly.

[Liliet](#)

Two characters are confirmed transgender – Basilia the helikean general and Simon the house of light spymaster – and one confirmed non-binary (Raphael-who-flirted-with-Cat) (you might see it as transgender or not, I've no horse in this race).

Point Point

Might be, might not. Whether or not, she clearly looks like a man (at least in uniform) and sounds like a woman.

I wouldn't say it's a *strong* indication that she's trans, but it does seem like an unusual detail to mention twice in such an indirect manner.

[Liliet](#)

Frederic did not realize she was female from her voice but from her introduction. Inger is a female name and he recognized that, as presumably did Cat.

Shveiran

Probably? *Possibly* for sure, but even now it is far easier to just meet someone with an unfortunate face than to meet someone who has gone through the full process of changing gender.

We know it is possible (with House of Light rituals, and likely with mage ones as well) but isn't it more likely that Inger has been served both bravery and ugliness at birth? For every Aqua there is a Quasimodo, and thus is balance restored to the Average Look.

[Liliet](#)

Possibly, fair.

That said, the "full process of changing gender" is just changing your name and (most of the time) manner of clothing and telling everyone, it seems, in the guideverse.

[TeK](#)

Also orcs are generally have very little in term of gender bodymorphism, as far as I know males and females are the same slab of solid muscle.

thearpox23

I absolutely despise it when modern norms, schisms, and politics, move on to the turf of ancient fantasy story tropes. The language becomes loaded, old and accepted terms become replaced by new ones for no reason, and comments like to get heated over semantics.

I have no idea where you're drawing your conclusions from, Liliet, but sometimes it feels like you're score-keeping, eager to jump to your preferred conclusion whenever the story hints to lean that way. With Inger, say, she could just be wearing a helmet and heavy armor for all we know. No information one way or another, but at least it being Haunted Magician in disguise is funny as a thought.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, I don't disagree that it's funny.

And Guide explicitly doesn't have modern politics around assigned gender and changing it lol

thearpox23

And props to Erra where props are due, he tends to avoid immersion breaking anachronisms. I was referring to the lit sphere in general, and the comments section in particular. You cannot tell there weren't some strange arguments here in the past, including over lexicon.

My point is that you, Liliet, seem to be drawn to these subjects of gender/representation/et cetera, (I think it was you that drew attention to Malicia's skin color during the fallout with Black?) and I cannot fathom why. It just seems like an odd thing to focus on in a fantasy setting.

PS: If I read you wrong, or you want to keep this private or move to PMs, I'll respect that.

[Liliet](#)

It wasn't me, but I agreed with the person who did.

I don't focus on these things in a fantasy setting, I focus on them IRL, where you and I are, where Guide exists as a work of fiction that we, real world humans, read, and another real world human wrote it.

These subjects matter to me. And sure, I go to fiction to escape the world where things are shitty... and to me, THIS is a necessary part of things NOT being shitty.

thearpox23

Fair enough.

I somewhat forgot with all the corruption, attention-seeking, and author harassment mobs going on that some people just want these subjects as a part of their escapism. You do you, and I hope that IRL wherever you are gets better.

[Liliet](#)

Thanks, me too lmao.

Kingfisher Stan

I think the fog in her head might be Archer and Adjutant, as she mentioned checking up on Hakram and the other Named used in affrays earlier on BUT she forgot the moment she stepped foot into the infirmary. All I'm saying is if either Indrani Hakram is dead I'm serving hands.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani's with Roland elsewhere, and Cat knows the wards got restored which would be Roland's work. She's thoroughly not an urgent priority, and also nowhere near the demons as far as we know.

superkeaton

I'm wondering if Cat's headache is as "simple" as demonic influence leaking through the wards, but knowing dear EE it's something I've overlooked in a prior chapter.

Jworks

I think it's caused by her forgetting Hakram, who is such a part of her that not acknowledging him is hurting Cat. I'm pretty sure one type of demon has the ability to unmake things so completely that their isn't even a memory of them... really hope im wrong, but that would be a really cool way to kill of a character. Kill them so utterly that they are not even thought of again.

Ninestrings

It's definitely possible. It seems pointless that he got all carved up the previous chapter though if that's the case.

If so though let's pour one out for ol' whatshisname.

Miles

For whom? Why would we waste good booze on a stranger who's not even around to have a drink with?

General Chaos

It is implied that Blade of Mercy fought an Absence Demon before the Battle of the Camps. There was a Hell Egg containing an Absence Demon in Harrow, Cat informs the Grey Pilgrim about this and the 14 heroes the Crusaders brought north were retconned into 12. Cat gets a similar headache when talking about this after the event as well.

[Liliet](#)

I really REALLY hope that's what this is.

Jwirks

I think it's caused by her forgetting Hakram, who is such a part of her that not acknowledging him is hurting Cat. I'm pretty sure one type of demon has the ability to unmake things so completely that their isn't even a memory of them... really hope im wrong, but that would be a really cool way to kill of a character. Kill them so utterly that they are not even thought of again.

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, it appears that Absence is more focused on erasing information than actual people, considering its influence can be wielded defensively (see: DK's Revenants and Maddened Keeper)

Agent J

Cat had vicious headaches when two heroes she's literally never met went Absent. It doesn't take Haks' death to cause this. And this headache is far too mild to foreshadow the first death in the Woe. Hakram's fine, carved up like a Swiss ham, but fine.

Jworks

No other fantasy realm has scratched my patriotic itch as well as the Callowans. First into the breach every time.

[TeK](#)

Yeah good for you. The closest my nation got to representation are Drow. Who have pretty much nothing in common aside from

living in the north in the ruin of the formerly glorious empire they kinda fucked up on their own and everything is shitty.

Heh, it is Eastern Europe to a T.

[Liliet](#)

Callowans, orcs included :3

IDKWhoitis

I listened to [Light of Aidan – Lament] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9ocAUQnNdE>) when I heard Cat warn the soldiers, and it was creepy how fitting the song was for that scene.

Cheetah724

Cat is basically asking them to drop feet first into hell.

Jordan Leighton

That last line, god damn

amc

Do you think there's a cognomen coming? This line seems too good to waste...

Agent J

Cognomen don't go to lines, only Armies and Legions. Thus far, only the Third Army has one among Cat's forces.

TeK

It's been two years, I am betting half an opened can of cow anuses in marinade that some other Army also got itself a cognomen.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

So Hotdogs?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nah, my bad. You said "can"...
Vienna Sausages.

[Burlyraven](#)

Alright, so I'm really hoping that headache was Cat not-remembering the absence demon from the missing chapter and not Cat not-remembering Hakram.

Also, if the fates have aligned enough for Cat to come into her new Name, now would be the perfect time for a fresh Aspect to form, because this expedition is going to need all the miracles (light, dark, and any in between) it can get.

[Liliet](#)

YUP

Smr

I'm dissappointed. Kairos would have known to say that Mirror knight couldn't possibly have survived uncorrupted. Also something about this being a last stand without him.

[Liliet](#)

No, this kind of thing is a double-edged sword. Between causing things to happen by saying them and causing things to NOT happen by saying them, If Cat said it while hoping it would undo it, dramatic irony might just nudge it in the BAD direction =x

Shveiran

Yeah, as Liliet says. It doesn't work if you do it on purpose, unless you are Kairos and you are using it to screw with someone else by betraying them.

[Liliet](#)

It works if it working makes a good story in itself.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Again, story-fu doesn't work on demons.

Hagtan

Wait, it doesn't? I understand they're a violation of reality and the groves of fate, but do we have actual examples of Plot in motion getting upended by one? Also, what about Triumphant bullying them into her story?

[Liliet](#)

That's object level magic, not story-fu.

mamm0nn

Demons seem to be an absolute, more physics than beings. Where angels might be Providence kinda somehow, these guys are entropy or the void itself. There is no cure for

corruption, not even Story-bound. There is no way to retrieve that which is Absent, not even by a Named.

A scientist like Masego or someone specifically made for demons like the Keeper can manipulate and control it, even for prolonged times, and Story aids the Named in fighting demons, but from everything we've seen thus far demons in their essence aren't controlled by Story and their effects are absolutes. What's done is permanent and Story alone won't carry against them.

Mental Mouse

I think Javvies has the right of it...

Sir Nil

Once more, into the breach.

Juff

Typo Thread:

out if worked > out it worked
even the resistance > even if the resistance
Zeze," > Zeze."
"Yes," he > "Yes." He
still-blood > still-bloody
blood flow and limp > the blood flow and limping
I had at hand > I'd had at hand
people," Masego > people." Masego
it's be a > it'd be a
do much difference (either do much, or make much of a difference)
then pitch my > then pitched my
none of the mage > none of the mages
to," I shrugged. > to." I shrugged.
I figured I > I'd figured I
the dark" (missing fullstop)

Adrian_V

If the worse Adjutant is a victim of is absense then he has hope, since that one continent was forgotten and then remembered we know that ones effects are at least finite somehow, all the others not so much, although i suppose a demon of Order could alter things in a weird way that actually helps (remember people demons aren't strictly speaking evil) but just how lucky would he need to be?...or maybe all those lost body parts and being somewhat of a cosmic chew toy were preparation for this to actually be the time he gets lucky?

Speaking of the severity MK did cut their vessel and maybe them in half so some may be already destroyed or damaged?

[TeK](#)

Are you implying that Cat got lucky and we have a best case scenario?

[Liliet](#)

I mean. She IS kind of a hero in this situation.

[TeK](#)

She is the kind of "of course the McGuffin is in the most dangerous place imaginable" type of Heroes.

[Adrian V](#)

And adjutant, and on another note, something i forgot is that i hope that little speech (including Inger's retort) was heard by a lot of people, maybe it will even get into the BoM skull to start thinking and really see her character, i can dream right?

[TeK](#)

Well, aren't you a sweet summer child. Everyone will probably remember that Masego was last known owner of at least one Demon, and would you look at that!

[TeK](#)

Probably it's her scheme to smear the good name of poor Bard. The lows she would sink to, that Black Queen.

Nairne .01

A likely outcome, which makes me doubt it will happen in the way it sounds.

[Liliet](#)

yeah I think BoM will see the 'soldier queen' thing already the 'i was seventeen' thing got his attention

Morgenstern

Last seen he was lingering in her shadow, not quite daring to openly take the position of faithful do... student, but seemingly wanting to. =P

[Liliet](#)

Heheheh.

[Liliet](#)

(Now I'm picturing Cat and Christophe co-parenting BoM)

Tubes

It is a little strange. Usually if it's a case of gender identity there's some kind of context clue, and while orcs trend towards the androgynous for their species compared to humans I feel like it's been made pretty clear in the past that that's only a mistake people who haven't spent any significant amount of time around them make. There's no set up for some kind of "she's got a mustache" joke either. Given all the chapters she's in involve glamour or absence demon fuckery I'd be willing to believe something is up there.

[TeK](#)

Ok, this is the end of the Arsenal, no doubt about it. Because we all know what eight Demons casually released signify.

Bard's done playing nice, and that is just the first step of her "hard way".

[Liliet](#)

Nah, this was before the "hard way" declaration.

And that one wasn't directed at Cat anyway.

[TeK](#)

I kinda see it as her taking of kids gloves. First step is getting rid of Arsenal by exploding not one but A-bombs in a middle "just to be sure". I did say it was a first step. Or to be more precise, her contingency in case she lost.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I'm HIGH KEY not seeing it as that.

[TeK](#)

But convenient that it's happening after she lost, eh? If it was intended as a final "fuck you" from Bard, it would be unnecessarily petty, and I don't think she is that kind of person.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not seeing the 'convenient' you're referring to. Honestly I'm not sure it was even Bard's plot, Keeper sounds like a wild card.

[TeK](#)

She sounds like a can of Evil long in preparation, also the best way of containing those Demons, ironically, is to turn Arsenal into a giant prison. Demons are not Pokemons, to get this many, you need a helpful nudge.

Nairne .01

If this was such a gesture then it was very villainesque of her.

Konstantin von Karstein

For me, it sounded more like she would set other plans in action. And the Maddened Keeper was slain (and the demons let loose) during the card game between Bard and Cat, before the former knew she had lost.

Aston Whiteman

Inger!

Disguise/Cloak etc...

Danger Will Robinson...

Well played EE.

[Adrian_V](#)

Nahh, too many wards slowing the infection, like even when they get out of thsoe guarding the severity every section is kind of warded and there are other project, secrets, weapons etc, and the sheer weight of named guaranties there are mroe than 1 hero capable of slaying demons, and there are sure more coming like WK.

[TeK](#)

Except there are eight Demons. Who notoriously cannot be contained in a sense of the word. Eight, my man. Half the Arsenal would be corrupted and they would probably have to evacuate another, as a best case scenario.

Shveiran

So it is an overwhelming threat that cannot possibly be defeated of contained, dropped right in front of a gaggle of Named who have no place working together.

Those Demons could be eighty and not stand a chance.

[TeK](#)

That... Is actually a good point. But also there is something Cat said. There is no true victory against Demons. Even against Corruption they executed like a tenth of those fighting after.

Demon's Advocate

This is not actually the case. Demons are not of Creation and do not follow its rules. They're especially dangerous because heroic stories do not work on them at all. Providence can't really interact with them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Story-fu explicitly doesn't work against demons.

Daniel E

I just wanted to say that I love the concept of story-fu. At the end of the day, that is what Bard & Cat use to fight each other.

[Javvies](#)

The Narrative won't give Demons any penalties, sure. But it can still give Named some bonuses when they're fighting Demons.

Of course, you're not going to get as much of a relative boost, and you can't just ride the Story to automatic victory the way a lot of Heroes (and Named in general) are/were used to ...

The Narrative can give Named more of a chance than if they didn't have a supporting Story ... but they still have to put full effort in and carry through to take advantage of the opportunity(ies) they're given.

It's ... a bit like the difference between Custer's Last Stand, the Alamo, and the Bellau(sp?) Woods*. Custer went in stupid (relying purely on the Story), the defenders of the Alamo just didn't have enough to win/last long enough to be relieved, and the Marines gritted it out and survived long enough for reinforcements to relieve them.

*I think that's the battle I'm thinking of ... I'm pretty sure my point is sufficiently clear, even if it's not.

What qualifies as a Victory Condition gets more flexible when Demons are in play.

Konstantin von Karstein

The problem is that it was explicitly said that demons are not subjected to Providence, because they warp Creation itself. So it's theoretically possible that everyone in the Arsenal is sentenced to death (even if practically speaking it's not)

thearpox23

And so comes the beginning of the end of Cat's vacation hijinks. Truly, a welcome respite from the monotony of the front.

[Liliet](#)

[Do not let Absence demons eat your votes!](#)

[TeK](#)

Say who is that Hakram characters you guys keep bringing up?

[sivarajan](#)

I remember the song "Dead the Hand." Surely it referred to someone?

[Javvies](#)

This is not hopeful.

On the other hand, Mirror Knight did grab the sword and was in a last stand in defense of exhausted/downed allies (Hakram and Vagrant Spear) type of situation.

So ... I'm thinking he probably could have bought them time to escape if they could or pull a Boromir and keep trying to defend them throughout excessively mortal injuries.

But I suspect that the sword won't survive his loss or be useable by anyone else in the event he survives. And fighting the demons might leave the sword broken or out of power or something.

Hmm. Anybody think that recovering all the pieces of Willy's angel feather sword is doable? It might be able to kill the Dead King too, if restored.

[Liliet](#)

Lolno. Cat put EFFORT into that breaking.

[Javvies](#)

She broke it and scattered the various pieces into rivers in Callow, so as to make finding the pieces and restoring it impractical to the point of borderline impossible and not worth the effort in any sort of reasonable timeframe, certainly not without somebody noticing.

So yeah, it sure wouldn't be easy, and restoring the angel feather sword would almost certainly carry risks of its own. On the other hand, it's got to be safer than the angel corpse, probably less hazardous to the wielder than Severance, and presumably not part of any of Bard's current plots. And it'd probably work on the Dead King.

The question at hand is simple enough – is the effort required to find the pieces in order to restore it with the investment given the other needs of the war?

Before now, it probably wasn't ... but now? It might be, depending on what the permanent damage and other consequences of Bard's attack on the Arsenal are, mostly those related to Mirror Knight and Severance.

It might not be, too. But it's probably still worth somebody thinking about, even if it's only to realize that it's not practical.

[Liliet](#)

What would the angel feather even do?

[Javvies](#)

Optimistically, if restored, it may be a weapon capable of inflicting actual damage on the Dead King, allowing the wielder to harm, if not necessarily kill the Dead King.

Remember, what it cut stayed cut. Hakram got his dead hand because his original fleshy living hand could not be reattached after the angel feather cut it off.

The Dead King is, after all, believed to be highly resistant to attacks that don't reach certain thresholds. The Angel feather would likely constitute a weapon that would bypass much of his resistance.

I'm not going to call it equal to Severance in its efficacy against the Dead King at this point ... but it would probably be effective enough in the right hands, and would presumably enable the wielder to assist in taking down the Dead King for good.

That is, even if the restored angel feather sword isn't necessarily enough to kill the Dead King by itself, it can almost certainly be used to help set the Dead King up for whatever the lethal blow actually is.

[Liliet](#)

That's if you actually manage to face the Dead King with it.

Javvies

"They'd need to actually face the Dead King with it" is something that also applies to Severance too. And, I'd wager that any sort of ritual or magical strike would need relatively close proximity to the Dead King as well, at least for the final stages. Which gets uncomfortably close to "they'd need to actually face off against the Dead King".

Or pretty much any of their hopes to finish the Dead King off.

Also, quite possibly the objective of destroying his foothold on Creation, and blocking and guarding the gate to the Serenity. One suspects that he is likely to have objections to such an action.

Liliet

Severance has the narrative weight to find its way to hurting the Dead King. The angel feather doesn't feel like it would.

mamm0nn

Cordelia: Ah, Cat. I've decided to ignore your advice and dredge up the angel corpse after all.

Holds up a ridiculously massive broadsword

Cordelia: Remember when you were having problems with a single feather? Well, this is the whole wing.

Liliet

QUALITY

Javvies

...
What?

Are you trying to say that Severance would not need to be in close proximity to the Dead King in order to hurt him?

Or that Severance would allow the wielder to "find a way" to get close enough to the Dead King?

Or that the only reason Severance could hurt the Dead King is because Story?

And even if it could have done something in the nature of the former two ... (a) they weren't finished with it, and (b) it's been, at best,

distorted by Mirror Knight's use of it through Bard's meddling ... and it's unclear as to what extent Severance has been altered or how. Point is, it's no longer free of Bard's meddling, which has unknown consequences. As for the latter, no, it's not dependent on Story/Narrative weight to hurt the Dead King.

The angel feather sword would not need any special Narrative weight itself. I'm pretty sure that its innate magical and metaphysical properties would suffice to allow it to harm the Dead King if the wielder uses it appropriately.

Cat is trying to minimize the reliance on Narrative.

And I'm pretty sure that no matter what "solution" to the problem of the Dead King is employed, getting into close proximity with him will be required.

I'm not arguing that a restored angel feather sword would solve all problems. I am suggesting that it would probably be useful against the Dead King, if restoring it were thought to be doable in a reasonable timetable and reasonably practical in terms of the resource investment. Which, admittedly, is a pretty big set of "ifs", but in light of the unknown consequences of Bard's attack on the Arsenal, with respect to Severance and the ability to continue utilizing the Arsenal to develop weapons for use against the Dead King ... restoring the angel feather sword is something they might well want to put on the table for a feasibility review.

Hell, they might want to track down some of the pieces to get insight into how one goes about turning angelbits into useable weapons – using the Judgment corpse is a terrible idea, but chopping it up for useable parts to turn into gear might be safer, if probably more blasphemous.

[Liliet](#)

> Or that Severance would allow the wielder to "find a way" to get close enough to the Dead King?

This.

And Bard isn't a demon of corruption. As long as Christophe survives today, Severance should be fine.

And yeah my point is it'd be like a decade long quest or something to restore that shit. VERY not practical.

Also an angel corpse is not actually a corpse consisting of bits. The last one was a chapel, remember? That feather was freely given.

Auston Varner

@Lilliet the angel feather sword on it's own might not have had the narrative weight to let it's wielder find their way to the dead king, but assembled as a desperate stop-gap replacement for the original weapon it just might. I mean yeah, a tool made from the corpse of the hero most insanely dedicated to destroying Evil in all it's forms has more weight than the weapon of some dead scrub from five books ago, but at the same time, the angel sword would have some weight from the Chekhov's Gun-ness of it, and probably more from needing to be reforged (the reforged sword always plays a big part in the narrative, after all) so that but of extra desperation would help the narrative along pretty nicely.

Just imagine how it might play out: with Severance and the Arsenal destroyed in a Pyrrhic victory over the eight demons, the Dead King's trickery and new tactics begin taking the lead over the Grand Alliance's research, wearing away at the main front until it is on the verge of breaking. A band of five is assembled and sent to Callow to fetch the shards of the blade as the battered armies fight a desperate holding action, but a band of Revenants slips through the Alliance lines to hunt them down. Eventually, all contact with the team goes dark, and the surviving Alliance forces prepare for a series of dramatic last stands in their few remaining fortresses, cut off from each other and surrounded. When all hope seems lost, the Dead King himself appears at the place where Cat and Hanno fight side by side to keep the dead back just a little bit longer, bringing with him the force needed for the final blow. Then, just when all hope is lost, a portal opens, the band strides through with the angel sword held high, and strikes at the old monster, forcing him to retreat...

OK, that's probably not exactly how it would go, and I can't actually see DK showing up to his

enemies' last stand when they'll probably die either way, but if you want narrative weight, that would have quite a bit

Daniel E

I wonder if Night can do anything against Absence (the effect, not the entity itself). Admittedly that would be a serious Deus Ex Machina, especially when Light seems incapable of stopping it, but the Night has become grab-bag of tricks.

Terion

Night seems to offer the most protection of anything in the story so far, outside of being affected by a different demonic effect, which is only a protection in a technical sense. Catherine seems to be the only one who gets headaches and seems to realise that she might be forgetting something. Nobody else seems to be aware of the demon of Absence in any way.

[sengachi](#)

Hells. The self-sacrifice scenes in this story always hit me hard.

[Hydrargentium](#)

"I was left to wonder at how sometimes pride could feel like grieving."

Beautiful.

Hg

Terion

Does anyone have a method of protection against demons of Absence?

I had completely forgotten about the whole side-plot with the 14 to 12 heroes and the Absence hell egg.

mamm0nn

"It was easy to hate the sneer and the accusations, too easy to forget that I was actually looking at a kid of about 20."

Cat's like... 23 or something?

70-year old man: Goddamn 65 year old kids, thinking they're wise adults. Bunch of dumbasses.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Notably Cat has gone on record describing herself and Archer as horribly young too, so no hypocrisy here.

Satan

The Red Axe is short? She's basically a perfect match for our leader (forgive me for the treason).

[Aranaya](#)

Definitely a Good New, Bad News kind of day.

Chapter 24: Like A Hanging Sword

"Loyalty to an unworthy prince is treason against the Gods Above, for it places that prince before the teachings of the Heavens themselves."

– Extract from "The Faith of Crowns", by Sister Salienta

Four Named, three mages and forty legionaries.

It wasn't a large company to take into a demon hunt, but in hallways and narrow rooms being too many would be a disadvantage anyway. It'd be a lot more useful to be able to move swiftly and without getting in each other's way than to have another forty bodies to throw into the maw of the enemy. I'd have taken more mages if there were any to spare, mind you, but those didn't grow on trees. I'd sent runners out to gather reinforcements as quickly as possible and send them our way, but I doubted they'd arrive in time to make a difference – whether the demons got to run loose or not would probably already have been decided by the time the second wave made it to the fight.

We set out briskly even as I arranged our formation so that it wouldn't result in immediate collapse if one of the demons got the drop on us. A shield wall would be useless, so instead a tenth of regulars in a loose skirmish formation took the front. The sole tenth of heavies behind them, their tall shields meant to buy time for the soldiers behind them: crossbowmen, spread out both so they could fire from broad angle and so that Named would be able slip between them. Then came those same Named, Hierophant closer to the back where the three Gifted whose gifts he would be using stood, and behind that our rearguard of ten regulars.

The junior lieutenant was with those in the back, so that we'd still have an officer even if Lieutenant Inger died up front where she stood with the other tenth of regulars.

"For the four of us," I told the other Named, "the tactics are simple enough. I won't enquire too deeply about your bag of tricks or try to tell you how to fight with it, but I want our priorities established before we find the enemy."

Or the enemy finds us, I silently added.

"You are the seasoned battle commander among us," the Repentant Magister said, "and you've fought demons before. You will not be gainsaid."

I glanced at the Blade of Mercy, who silently nodded, and considered the potential powers struggle a done thing. Masego knew our business well enough and would not argue, though I still jabbed my elbow into his side to make sure he was actually listening.

"If we're lucky, the demons come at us from the front," I said. "Most of them are aggressive, in a tactical sense, which is where our first three lines come in: my legionaries will slow them down as much as possible."

My fingers clenched, knowing full well that the slowing would come through dead bodies and the corruption of the still-living.

"That's when we come in," I said. "After the crossbows fire, Lady Eliade and I will use what means we have to try to pin down the demon. Even if we succeed, it'll be temporary, which is when Hierophant will attempt a binding."

The Blade of Mercy shuffled on his feet, as if afraid he'd been forgot.

"There are no guarantees that will work," I said, "and even if it does, we can't simply leave the demon there: we need a killing blow, which will be provided by the Blade of Mercy."

Nods all round, until the Repentant Magister cocked her head to the side.

"I believe, Your Majesty, that your intention is not to try to slay all of these demons," she said.

It wasn't, because rolling the dice against eldritch abominations eight times in a row was a *shit* plan. Kind of her to indirectly reassure me she didn't believe me to be an idiot, though.

"No," I said. "We'll be trying to push through towards the room where the Severance was being kept. Hierophant, if you'd care to elaborate on why?"

I leaned a little closer.

"Simply, if you would," I murmured.

"There will likely still be ward foundations there," Masego said, "which I can use to trap the demons inside before closing the door on them."

He shot me a disgruntled look.

"Sword room good, demons go in," he peevishly added. "Much rejoicing. Was that simple enough, Catherine?"

"Rejoicing has three whole syllables," I replied without missing a beat. "A lackluster effort at best."

"Sometimes, when you fight other people, I root for you to get hit," he confessed.

"That's treason, you know," I gravely told him.

"It is not," he triumphantly said. "You kept saying that about a great many things, so I got my hands on a Callowan law codex. It's not treason to say you snore either, which you insisted to Indrani it was."

I heard the Repentant Magister politely cough into her hand to hide her laugh, while the Blade of Mercy looked away with slightly trembling shoulders.

"Tread carefully," I told him, "or I'll raise taxes on mage towers."

"I'll make it invisible," he defiantly said. "You can't collect taxes from an invisible tower."

"Don't think I won't contract it out to the fae if I have to," I warned.

He stared me down from the side of his head, before grudgingly nodding.

"Accusing you of snoring is treason," he offered.

Ah, selling out Indrani instead of admitting you were wrong. One of the classic retreat stratagems of the Woe, along with blaming anything from rain to mispronunciations on Akua's scheming.

"So is throwing wooden carvings at my court wizard," I granted him, magnanimous in my victorious tyranny.

He brightened at that, though for some reason Nephele's cheek went red. Had she thrown something at Masego's head? Curious as I was, now was hardly the time to ask. I'd leaned into the banter

at least in part because it would distract the four of us – and also the soldiers all trying very hard to pretend they weren't listening – from the grimness ahead, lighten up the air some. But we were well into the Repository now and wariness was the order of the day from here on out. We passed through a sort of confluence of hallways, like a lesser Knot, where the marks of Named fighting against fae were evident. Nephele confirmed as much when I asked, as it had been her band that fought here, and added that there did not seem to be any missing bodies.

Thank the fucking Gods for that.

Hakram had fought here, I could tell from the way some tall rocklike fae had been slain, but I set the thought aside before it grew too dark. I'd done what I could by ensuring the Concocter was there for Archer to send as reinforcements. Shy of the Sinister Physician himself, she was probably the best healer in the Arsenal. We hurried along, quickening our pace to a near run, and we'd just passed the corpse of another fae when a shivering scream sounded in the distance ahead. I felt it go through my soldiers, my allies, through my own bones. It'd sounded human, or at least ripped out of a human throat, but there'd been something... wrong about it.

"At least one is out, looks like," I said, forcing my voice to sound even. "Advance with caution, swords out."

I'd offered up my calm and it was drawn from by those who needed it – there was no need for a harangue here, simple confidence would serve the same purpose better. From the corner of my eye I caught Nephele staring at the back of the neck of my soldiers, and I raised a brow. It was man, Callowan by the paleness and the flush.

"Lady Eliade?" I asked.

"Please call a halt," she quietly asked.

I did, and a moment later the Repentant Magister was at the legionary's side and asking him the permission to perform an exploratory cantrip. The light on the sorceress' fingers was barely visible and she spoke no incantation, but a moment later she withdrew her hand with a grim look on her face.

"We are facing a Host-Breaker," Nephele Eliade said.

I looked at Masego, expecting an elaboration.

"Demon of Terror," Hierophant said. "I know little of their kind, few in Praes have ever summoned them."

My fingers clenched at the words.

"They're that dangerous?" I asked, pitching my voice low.

If the *Empire* thought they were too risky to use, it boded very badly for our little crew.

"No," Masego replied. "But it is known they can be subsumed by Demons of Excess, which made them a highly unpopular choice among diabolists."

No doubt Wasteland nobility saw it as a faux pas, like a tasteless bracelet or using a floral poison during winter court. Nephele looked fascinated and sickened by what she'd gestured heard, but she focused on the dangers at hand.

"I know of them, Your Majesty," the Repentant Magister told me. "The Magisterium has used them for war in past years."

I nodded in appreciation, gesture for the Blade of Mercy to cease standing at the edge of the conversation and come in closer so he'd hear properly.

"What are we in for?" I asked.

"Fear, in essence," Nephele said. "It can be carried by sound or by sight, though like with all of their kind direct touch has the most powerful effect."

"That sounds dangerous and potentially lethal, but not horrifying," I said. "Which given my past experiences with demons lead me to believe means I'm missing something."

"Permanence of contamination, Catherine," Masego reminded me.

I blinked then finally put it together. He meant that the fear would *never* go away, and the contamination – the fear – would only grow worse with every scream or glimpse or touch. Yeah, that was closer to the kind of despicable fuckery I'd expected.

"There it is," I darkly muttered. "How quickly does the fear escalate?"

"My people say it comes in three steps," the Repentant Magister says. "Fear, which can still be treated by Light and alchemies. Dread, which puts men to flight they will never break from. And terror, which breaks the mind and ends only in death."

Charming. And it was starting to sound like fighting this would be a headache and a half.

"So we can't even look at it," I slowly said.

"There are enchantments which would protect people from the effects, if not for long and not against direct touch," she said, then bit her lip. "Yet I am in no state to lay them, not on so

many. I do have an artefact whose effect is *similar*, but I did not make it to face demons and it will not protect nearly fifty people for more than moments. It has not the power."

"Trace the formula for the enchantment in the air," Masego said.

The Magister glanced at me and I nodded. Fine fingers left coppery traces in the air that Hierophant studied it for a moment before he sharply nodded.

"Now your artefact," he instructed.

Nephele, having discarded her hesitation, presented a ring in a pale and silvery metal, set with translucent stones whose shine was not natural.

"Ah, I see," Masego muttered. "Originally a torture spell, yes? To keep the mind from breaking under pain. The formulaic traces are still there."

The Repentant Magister, face grown ashen, silently nodded.

"It can be done," Hierophant decided. "Give me a moment."

Casually he reached towards one of the Proceran mages, seizing the man's magic with a ripple of will, and then he extracted the sorcery from the sorceress' artefact with a great deal more care. Lights spun up and formed themselves into runes – several wriggled their way out of my thoughts, which smacked of High Arcana – then rearranged themselves under Masego's dancing fingers and clucking tongue, before he finally let out a little noise of satisfaction. The runes collapsed onto themselves and formed into a series of small pinpricks of light that sunk back into the ring.

"There," the Hierophant said. "It will protect fifty people for a quarter hour, though the protection will be stripped permanently by contact with a demon. It will also break after use, Catherine, so spend it wisely."

The Repentant Magister was looking at him like he'd just knocked over a castle by blowing at it – split between disbelieving and awed. I sometimes forgot how brilliant Masego was, exceptional even among a people whose excellence in sorcery was legend. I thanked him and passed what we'd learned on to the two lieutenants, who in turn handled informing their soldiers. Advance resumed as I limped forward with the ring clutched tight between my fingers. Two corners we turned before another scream sounded and before it finished I broke the artefact – the demon sounded close enough to warrant it. There was a pulse of light and warmth, then a sensation like a wool in my mind.

"Quarter hour starts," I called out. "We finish this quickly."

The third corner we turned, mere heartbeats later, led us to the sight of the waiting abomination. It was far – knowing sight and distance worked in its favour? – and currently unmoving, at least as much as such a thing could ever be. Corruption had been a revolting twisting of flesh, but this thing was of a different mold. At its heart was a black, faded body that evoked a snake or a slug, but most of it was made up of translucent black veils that spread out like trails and tails and wings, ever moving. Five moon-round eyes, two angled on each side and a larger crowning one, stared at us like the glare of a lighthouse through the fog. Behind it I glimpsed delicate trails on the ground that were like smoke made liquid. Blood from a wound or secretions?

“Don’t step on the trails,” I warned.

It was unlikely that my soldiers got to hear the latter part of the warning, as before I was finished speaking some of the demon’s veil-like layers formed a triangular mouth between the eyes and it began *screaming*. I felt the protective enchantment on me begin to wane, like parchment being picked at by a swarm of insects. The screaming did not stop, for the demon needed no breath, and just like that our battle had begun. I reached for the Night even as Masego wrested power from our mages one after another in quick succession, but first blood went to my crossbowmen. Without flinching they brought up their weapons and fired a volley in good order, seven of the ten bolts fired landing on the enemy.

Four of those went through the veils, including one through the ‘mouth’, but they passed if through them as if they were smoke and ended up clattering on the stone further back. The last three shots, though, sunk into the dark flesh at the heart of the monster and remained there. The demon was unlikely to have been wounded by this but it was still moved to act even as liquid smoke began to sweat out of its flesh around where the bolts had sunk in. Layers upon layers of translucent blackness unfolded, splitting into wings and limbs and hooks as the demon skulked up the side of the wall and onto the ceiling with unnatural lightness.

“*Kytima*,” the Repentant Magister said, a slender wand of iron in her hand.

The metal length shivered and spat out burst of transparent sorcery that struck at the demon’s body even as I began to shape the Night I had gathered and Masego began to incant in the magetongue. The host-breaker was knocked down from the ceiling, slipping and falling but landing below with insect-like deftness. It was still screaming, and when another salvo of bolts was fired upon it instead of trying to avoid it the demon simply convulsed. The four shots that’d tasted of its flesh went flying out and I hastily abandoned the cage of Night I’d been crafting, instead

forming a sweeping scythe that would slap the projectiles aside. When the roiling Night came to touch the first bloodied bolt, though, it *winked out*.

Sve Noc had forcefully dismissed it from my grasp before it could make contact

Oh Merciless Gods, I realized. *They're the Night, or close enough. So they're afraid that the taint might seep into it, and of what that would bring when it returns to them.* It was not a senseless fear, I knew, but that was a hollow and bitter thing to tell myself as I watched the four bolts unnervingly find a targets. One glanced off a shield raised just in time, but the others sunk into flesh – neck or elbow or knee, the weak parts of the armour that brute force would be able to punch through.

My soldiers screamed loud enough that not even the demon's ceaseless hollering was able to drown it out.

I glimpsed their eyes turning white, the utter panic that seized them as their mouths foamed and their own screams served to amplify the spreading infection of the demon. Swallowing a snarl of bitter rage I swung out with Night, making a thick knot of it detonate in the air by the closest soldier's ear. Whether the shockwave killed or knocked her out I couldn't know, but before I could clear out a second the bolts fired into the demon earlier found flesh and my fingers clenched in dismay.

"Stop shooting," I screamed, but cacophony overruled me.

Hierophant stood utterly still behind me, save for his moving lips.

"Kytima," the Repentant Magister yelled again, knocking back the demon once more.

I put down another soldier with a detonation but the third taken had turned to flee and when the heavies got in his way he began hacking wildly at them, still screaming at the top of his lungs. The demon had landed almost flat on the ground when knocked back by Nephele, and instead of rising at full height once more it remained there and began slithering forward like a sea of tails and tentacles creeping along the ground. Gods, just the sight of it... A heartbeat later its veils burst open, like a peacock unfolding its tail, and the bolts it'd just taken went flying back. I was ready, this time: one after the other hanging orbs of Night exploded, scattering the bolts into the walls.

I only realized I'd missed the greater threat when one of the heavies struck down the last contaminated soldier and her blood went spurting out looking like liquid smoke. The soldier in plate began screaming in turn, clutching the dead soldier as he convulsed and so spraying smoke-blood everywhere. I lost four

heavies in that heartbeat, but a lot more worrying was the single drop that landed on a crossbowman's cheek. I killed him without missing a beat, teeth grinding my mouth raw, and then I saw the Blade of Mercy pass by my side at a run and hatefully cursed.

"It has to be now," the boy screamed, and charged forward with his greatsword streaming behind him.

But the demon had never ceased moving and it'd taken advantage of the chaos to push through. On veiled limbs it slipped through the last regulars of the front and through the screaming gap in the heavies. The Blade of Mercy swung his blade at it, glinting with Light and blindingly quick, but it cut only through translucent layers and the demon's body tumbled among the crossbowmen. One, two, three, four – seven orbs did I weave out of Night, detonating them in a perpetual circle I filled as soon as it broke so that the abomination would remain stuck, but tendrils shot out and the Night shattered again as Sve Noc fled the demonic taint. A thief's power, mine, not a soldier's, and now my legionaries were paying the price for it.

The creature, still screaming, struck out at still-whispering Masego but the Repentant Magister blew it back – in part, at least, for it had been expecting the blow and it merely spun about some as it was mostly translucence that was blown through. I spun Night into a vortex behind it, sucking it backwards, but with a bat of wings it stayed in place and the Repentant Magister was forced to blow back another reaching hand, screaming the same word of power in a ragged voice. The Blade of Mercy had swung round, slicing through a taken regular as he did, and now swung at the demon from the back but the thickening glare of Light ate away at my own working – the demon fell to the ground, a single long limb extending as it tore through the Repentant Magister's torso.

Nephele began to scream, face twisting in *utter terror* in a vision that would stay with me until I died, and the Blade of Mercy's strike faltered at the sound. The Light trembled, the demon was ripped back by the strengthening anew of the vortex I had not ended, and the limb unfolded into a dozen wings of translucent black that clawed to Antoine of Lange's sides as they were torn away. Was he... No. His armour, I thought, his armour would have been thick enough no blood was spilled.

"Dry rivers and sunder mountains," the Hierophant said, his calm voice cutting through the chaos like a blade. "Scatter chariots and snatch sunlight: I command that you will be *still*."

The demon froze. Immediately and utterly, as if it had been the decree of Creation itself.

"Now," I screamed through the screaming, "*now*, Antoine."

"Burn, you misbegotten thing," the Blade of Mercy hissed, and his blade shone bright once more as it went down.

It was blinding to look upon as it went through the Demon of Terror. The veils evaporated, the black flesh shivered and boiled and went up in smoke as the wrath of the Gods Above came down upon the abomination and eradicated it through their chosen champion. Like a sun at midday, the Light swallowed the hallway whole and chased away my Night. When it faded, there was nothing left of the demon but the aftermath. Screaming soldiers, who I knocked unconscious as gently as I could with spinning orbs, and one more yet. Nephele Eliade had slumped onto the ground and she was bleeding, but the red was turning darker. Soon, I thought, it would be as liquid smoke.

She bit her lip until it bled to swallow the scream, and unto me she turned a pleading gaze. I knew what it was she was asking.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, as I brought up my staff.

I made it quick, quick enough it'd be painless. It was the least I could do.

"Handle the contamination," I told Masego without turning. "Please."

I felt him nod without turning and left him to it, as began the roar of flames and I closed my eyes. It was a weakness, but I would allow myself it. Just this once. I only wished that, even with eyes closed, the only thing I could see was not the look of grateful *relief* in Nephele Eliade's eyes as I killed her. I did not allow myself more than a few moments, though. Now was not the time for indulgence. Our losses had been... harsh. Not only was the Repentant Magister dead, but we'd also consigned to ash six of our ten heavies, two of our ten crossbowmen and eight regulars. Nearly half our company had died in its first engagement.

Against a demon, that couldn't even be said to be a bad roll of the dice.

Before the ashes grew cold we moved on, carefully stepping around the rivulets of contamination the demon had left coming there. It slowed our advance, but we were close to the part of the Repository where the Severance awaited now. The slight detour we allowed ourselves was taking the hall the Demon of Terror had not at a crossroads we stumbled upon, so that we wouldn't have to keep stepping around death and worse as we tried to hurry up. I was on edge the entire time, but it wasn't a demon we ended up running into. It was a woman, with striking purple eyes and black hair pulled into a topknot. Not someone I knew from sight, but the Concocter had been described to be before and her appearance was unusual enough. It was what she was dragging behind her that had my heart rising up in my throat.

A makeshift litter with an orc on it.

It'd taken me a moment to recognize Hakram, for most of him was now a raw and bloody wound. With unnatural precision and severity his flesh had been cut, from his upper thigh to the side of his now visible ribs to the shoulder stump that'd been made of the same arm he'd once mangled for Vivienne. He looked more than half-dead, skin pale and wan as sweat covered his armour-stripped body. His wounds were not bleeding, I thought, but neither was he in any way *healed*.

"Gods Above," the Blade of Mercy whispered.

"Hierophant," I began, but Masego had already been moving.

He swept past the Concocter, whose face showed only relief at our arrival, and I was left to speak with her as Masego saw to our friend.

"He'll live?" I asked her, even though it was not the most pressing of matters.

"For an hour," the Concocter said. "If I get him to the Sinister Physician before that, he'll make it through."

I breathed out. At least there was that.

"Lieutenant Inger," I called out. "Our heavies are to help the Concocter carry the Lord Adjutant to the infirmary in the Knot."

"Ma'am," the orc soberly saluted, then set to passing along the orders.

"The Mirror Knight?" I asked the villainess.

"Doing his best to contain the mess," the Concocter grimaced. "When I left the Vagrant Spear was still alive, and she insisted on staying after taking a potion."

I nodded.

"How many demons?" I pressed.

"I couldn't tell," the Concocter admitted. "They got to the fae, it was..."

She shivered at the memory.

"I would not have stayed even if asked," the purple-eyed alchemist said. "We weren't pursued, so at least one of them should still be alive."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Not necessarily promising, but better than nothing. It'd have to do.

"Anything you need to keep him alive," I said, forcing myself not to look at Hakram lest my voice shake, "you have it. Use my name if you have to."

She dipped her head in acknowledgement.

"Concocter," I said, voice going low. "I am in your debt for this. I will not forget it."

She watched me, eyes considering.

"Neither will I, Your Majesty," she said.

Masego came back to me even as the Concocter and her escort of four heavies – half of them carrying the litter – left.

"He was struck by a demon, though I cannot tell which sort," Hierophant told me. "The Severance was used to cut the flesh, presumably to halt the spread of the taint. He will survive if properly tended to but there will be no reattaching the limbs."

I breathed out. Hakram would live. Masego himself had told me, and I did not doubt his words. The rest we could deal with when horror had been thrown back into the hole from which it had crawled out. We pressed on, our company thinned even further, until we had reached the threshold of madness. What I had expected to be waiting for us was two Named on the edge of annihilation, or perhaps a desperately fighting Mirror Knight devoured by grief at the loss of his companion, but what we got was different.

As we approached what had been the resting place of the Severance, we stepped into a charnel yard.

The corpses closest to us were fae, or at least had been. Several of the bodies were in hacked pieces, some of them twisted by what I recognized to be the touch of Corruption, and even those of the fae that had died without first being swallowed by demonic taint were a grisly sight. Carved through from head to groin or across the torso, spilling red or half a dozen other things as their faces remained frozen in ugly rictuses of surprise or anger. My boots waded through blood as I advanced, but other things too – red leaves, grown that as much from autumn as death, stuck to the bottom of my boots. There were precious stones and broken wooden shafts, silks and shattered dreamlike armours. The might of the Court of Autumn had come for the Mirror Knight, and he had *massacred* it.

Beyond those rested a thing that looked like a twisted afterbirth, hacked into and burned until it was no longer a threat. The remains of a demon, I thought as the lot of us walked through death. There was another, forced into a hole carved in the wall and both stone and corpse were scorched so thoroughly

nothing could be glimpsed of the manner of demon it had been, Beyond it a few steps up led us to open steel gates and the last gasps of madness beyond. At the gates, where the Mirror Knight and the Vagrant Spear must have stood and fought, the blackened and scattered remains of another two demons could be seen. It was further in that the fighting still held, past the three stripes of burned flesh that had my heart stirring in unease to look at and the... hole that it hurt my mind to even think of. There I first found the Vagrant Spear, the Levantine heroine named Sidonia, ever barefoot and holding her tall spear as she let loose the occasional small burst of Light from it to prevent the last demon from *escaping*.

Christophe de Pavanie's face was calm, but his eyes hard. Armoured in polished silver plate from head to toe he was hard for the eye to follow – he was quick, quicker than a man in such heavy armour should be, and the mirror-like plate obscured his movements to even a careful eye. His shield was dazzling to look at, a perfect reflection of all it beheld, but it was the sword in his hand that had my hair raising. Whistling softly as it cut through the air even when it did not move, the Severance sliced through a twisted shape of shifting mercury like it was butter. The demon screamed and tried to flee around the hero, but the Vagrant Spear drove it back with a burst of Light. One, twice, thrice did the Mirror Knight strike, his plate burning with radiance as the demon burned into molten remains from the glare of the reflection.

I no longer had to worry about madness swallowing whole the Arsenal, it seemed, which was a relief.

Less pleasing was the fresh peril that the day had brought to my door: if I fought the Mirror Knight, now, I believed I might just lose.

[ErraticErrata](#)

First release of the month, which means extra chapter in the corresponding tab. This is one is titled "Charlatan II", the continuation of the last – and it'll end up being a three-parter instead of a two as I'd previously thought, since the text was longer than anticipated.

Ninestrings

You spoil us EE 😊

Miles

What a twist on the unbreakable shield and unstoppable sword problem. Just make the hero wield both.

Onos

Possible minor lore discrepancy? You mention here that Terror can be subsumed by Excess, but Book 3, Interlude Liesse 3 has a little bit on how Demons cannot affect one another.

goliath1303

It's correct as is imo. It's the reason why they're the only type of demon that the Praesi avoid using. I know this was mentioned at some point previously but, unfortunately, I don't remember where that mention was. It's the exception to the rule though, and therefore unique enough to warrant mention, not the example that disproved the rule.

Dorothy Carmichael

Oh thank goodness Hakram will survive. Does no reattachment mean no prosthetics, or just that the original limb can't be put back on? If he becomes the Fullmetal Adjutant that'd be pretty neat actually.

Concocter is owed a favor, oh dear, that can't end well. And now Mirror Knight is incredibly powerful, which also bodes poorly for our protagonist...

dadycool

It bodes better nowadays, considering Archer triggered a "Let's make up for our mutual past" flag. She'll never be "One of the Family", but now she could at least be "Part of the Group".

[*Liliet*](#)

It means no returning the original limb, NOT THAT THAT WAS AN OPTION.

It's the same as the angel feather sword wound which took his hand in Summerholm, when he got his prosthetic.

(His first prosthetic lol)

Cicero

Seeing as the Concocter cooperated with the Bard (if not entirely with full knowledge), I'm thinking the favor will be to keep her part in the disaster of the Bard's attack secret.

Morgenstern

Seeing as this one was done by the SEVERANCE, though – I wonder if this time around he will NOT get ANY replacement "limbs". If

NOTHING can be attached where that thing cut. Not the original one, but also no bone or ghost ones, this tim around. Being not-quite-dying, not-bleeding, but still *wounded* and done for forever... (He's still got his mind – but will never fight again. That kind of ouch.)

Insanenoodlyguy

"Sometimes, when you make still more reminders to vote for practical guide to evil on topwebfiction, I root for you to get hit," he confessed.

"That's treason, you know," I gravely told him.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

So what are you saying that Hierophant wants us to vote for worm or something?

Klatn Yelox

Yes, Masego would be a fan of Worm I bet.

domboy

hey we can read both happily and not have to have enmity towards the other.

[Liliet](#)

Ok this one is good ♥

Sulomund

Hakram's finally gonna have to accept Masego's cyborg offer, yeah? :p

Tenthyr

Depends. Considering Masego knows Hakrams original limbs are likely either corrupted tumors or light-scoured ash, he likely meant that whatever the Severance cuts Can Not Be Put Back. Hakram lost lombs,. He will never again have those limbs.

Ninestrings

Not if you put enough narrative weight on the fix.

Hakram, the Orc slowly losing his organic parts, each piece replaced with unfeeling dark sorceries by the experimental mage? That's good stuff right there, creation loves that tragic monster stuff.

He does still have his wedding tackle right? is that confirmed?

Big I

I'm wondering if he's gonna go full Vader and become the Black Knight. I'm also wondering whether Mirror Knight is gonna go full dark side and become the Black Knight.

Miles

Now I'm wondering if Cat is going to become the Black Night

Floppy

Now im wondering if Robber is going to become the black knight.

NerfContessa

What do you mean, become?!

Also, adding my vote to full Vader Adjutant.

Kneeling before cat, and sayin yes my warlord.

erebus42

The limbs themselves are definitely lost to corruption but since Archer had her arm reattached after getting it sliced off by the Saint herself Hakram can at the very least get some replacement parts.

Decius

Archer got her arm sliced off by a sword that Saint was wielding, which is different from having it cut off by Severance.

[*Liliet*](#)

He will not have THOSE limbs, but this does not extend to prosthetics. Cannot Be Reattached is how he got the bone hand in the first place.

[*Liliet*](#)

> Considering Masego knows Hakrams original limbs are likely either corrupted tumors or light-scoured ash, he likely meant

Masego is a pedant that always clarifies, whether it's useful/necessary or not.

Miles

Hakram deadhand, pegleg, and floatyotherhand. The hand is still in storage somewhere right?

Abrakadabra

He will be 'da supa cybork'.

Recent Widow

not nephele, not our good sis nephele... don't fucking touch me I'm mourning.

[Liliet](#)

i know right

a well-measured hit

[tencko](#)

Yeah That was a heavy blow. I actually like how, well, reasonable she was.

[Javvies](#)

...
And she just had to put the Repentant Magister, a Hero, down.

Hopefully, the Blade of Mercy will be able to help deter the Mirror Knight from precipitous action.

This could be a problem for the long term. Mirror Knight might not want to or be able to release Severance to another's custody or use. And he's not the most reliable of Heroes. Also, Bard wanted him to take up Severance which pretty much automatically means it's dubious.

Decius

Cat had to prevent demonic taint from spreading from a Magister, Mirror Knight had to prevent demonic taint from spreading through Hakram.

If Magister had plot armor, it would have been identical.

erebus42

Except for Cat lacking a magic sword and the Magister not having a clear point of infection to cut so..

Miles

The fire came after she was already dead, you can't blame Cat every time there's a little bit of flame involved.

[TeK](#)

Technically you can, it just would be untrue.

byzantine279

She was corrupted by a Demon and it was witnessed by another Hero. There will be no issues with that – any Hero that has ever fought a demon would agree what she did was mercy.

[Liliet](#)

Nephele low key asked for it, if just with body language. This is not a setting where THAT becomes a conflict.

Nathan

Don't forget he's sleeping with the daughter of the Proceran lord(prince?) that wants to Backy-Stabby the drown and the Goddesses made it clear -There must be consequences to such plans-.

Ninestrings

Woo! no one of significance lost!

I guess EE had to establish the Mirror Knight as a bit more badass as he's mostly been thrown at things up to now.

Sparsebeard

I liked the Repentant Magister.

Ninestrings

She's in a better place.

Unless she didn't repent enough I guess, but voluntarily facing demons should get you a free pass upstairs frankly.

domboy

I dunno. i've always thought fighting demons and getting corrupted corrupts your very soul and bars you from ever entering heaven. a sacrifice in body and soul. kinda like constantine.

[Liliet](#)

Demons CAN corrupt/eat souls, but Nephele was at the very least still in her right mind when Cat finished her off. Might have been in time to prevent just that ^

[Liliet](#)

> no one of significance lost!

I'm sorry but fuck you

(I know it's really more like fuck EE but you said this...)

Ninestrings

No that's fair, I hadn't really gotten attached to her but I should respect she would be liked by many.

I was mainly relieved Hakram hadn't been absenced.

[Liliet](#)

I mean me too lmao

just, phrasing -_-

()'=)

Shveiran

Yeah... I can symphatize with the feeling, I truly can, but let's not insult each other over fictional characters.

This is a very civil comment section; let's keep it that way, shall we?

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, it's wonderful there is so much respect here, it's not very common.

[Liliet](#)

I said sorry >x>

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I'd have said it if you hadn't (and by that I don't mean "sorry").

anon

Does this mean that the dead king could have countered the entire Drow front by unleashing demons on them?

laguz24

They do not concern him, no one does. Also unleashing demons is Villain territory that gets you killed in the long run.

erebus42

Demons are the Dirty bombs of this world. You don't just toss them around willy-nilly when you have other options. I mean you could, but not if you actually wanted to make use of anything afterwards

thearpox23

No, but it is probably one of the many tricks he is keeping in reserve. I find the idea that Neshy is somehow above the use of demons to be silly. It's a tool like any other, he will use it if it fits.

1: The Night Cat uses comes directly from Sve Noc, and flows back to her. Whether an individual Rulleh gets corrupted or not likely won't matter to Sve Noc since the corrupted night would stay with them. In other words, the drow won't get their casts disrupted by their goddesses.

1: Using demons would have likely crippled the drow, and set them on the back foot for a while, but they'd develop countermeasures (new tricks) after a couple weeks or months. Case in point, Cat was still able to find herself useful in the fight even with the limitations.

Konstantin von Karstein

Story-wise it's not a good move. It would escalate things too fast, and give Above a way to act too.

Sir Nil

This was a costly blow. Several Named lost, not to mention the human resources in the arsenal. And a Mirror Knight driven in the direction of preserving Procer as he sees it now has the potential to grab as much authority as the White Knight.

Sir Nil

Damnit I just remembered that MK sees Cat and her methods as a parasite that nestles itself in Good and has gotten the weapon literally made from the woman of cutting rot out.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, he doesn't. He has power, but no natural leadership. He can get people to rally behind him in a fight but at rest, at peace? No way. Now that doesn't mean he can't fuck everything up, but it won't be an authority contest, but an ass-kicking one.

Miles

Heroic authority doesn't come from pure power. The MK lacks the intelligence and leadership to wield his power in a way that gets him listened to

[Liliet](#)

This. Heroes aren't villains, they don't form hierarchy based on power.

No, Mirror Knight is a lone loose cannon.

Now Cat just has to... un-loose it.

Konstantin von Karstein

Or point him at another target 🦴

Sir Nil

Ya'll are forgetting the Procerian nobles that still have their fingers in the MK cake. MK slew 7 demons in this encounter and now wields a weapon capable of killing their largest threat. If he ends the Dead King and the Procer nobles give him the thought of not letting the Drow settle... That may not be as easy to ignore.

Sir Nil

It is not the authority with the heroes I'm too worried about, but the authority with the people that live in Procer, which I would argue may be the equivalent of most the heroes combined. If more Procerian Princes support him, he may just be dumb enough to accept because he wants to preserve Procer as it is.

I'm especially worried after the war. MK has been set up as one of the hardest to kill characters, it wouldn't be a stretch to say he survives this. Most of all, MK has a lot of trappings that can make him a second Sword Saint. He literally wields a blade made from the woman who refused Evil on all grounds. I half wonder if the Severance actually is the Sword Saint given how her Decree was that she was a Sword.

[Liliet](#)

> the authority with the people that live in Procer, which I would argue may be the equivalent of most the heroes combined

Kingfisher Prince >>>> Mirror Knight.

[Liliet](#)

That girl who tried to manipulate him but failed to even talk him into considering himself owed some land to rule? They've got barely a touch on him.

Shveiran

Failed? Why is that, because the vision ended without him being fully convinced?

Manipulation doesn't need to be finished in one post-coital session to be working. Especially since it is meant to "work" after the war.

[Liliet](#)

True, more like failed to convince him in one go.

But my point is that now that Frederic has been tasked by Cordelia with knocking some sense into his head (it's in his PoV when BoM shows up) and Catherine is now paying attention to him needing guidance and mentorship (and having needed it all along), the nobles basically don't have a chance.

Shveiran

We shall see. My read of his character is rather less forgiving than yours, and that is where the heart of the matter lies. One does not draw blood from stones, no matter how much you stab it. Even if I must concede that Catherine is likely to stab it a lot, and I do have a hard time saying anything is beyond Frederic's capabilities.

His vast, dreamy, supple capabilities that are awakening within me things I never knew were there in the first place...

Ahem. As I was saying, we shall wait and see. Yes.

[Liliet](#)

To swerve the topic in a completely unrelated direction, what do you think about the Fred Axe ship? 😊

Shveiran

In his own POV chapter, Cristophe sure didn't seem to think of the drow (or even Levantines, let alone Callowans) like trusted allies, but rather ungrateful fuckers. That doesn't seem far from the "alliance of victor is like a heart in summer" mindset the Prince and her daughter seem to sponsor.

Liliet

Christophe is confused as shit, and between Cat and Frederic is about to be served a helping of gentle guidance and education.

Javvies

You do realize that that requires Mirror Knight be willing to actually listen to Frederic and Cat, right?

He might listen to Kingfisher Prince, since he's a Proceran Prince and a Hero (presumably) ... but Kingfisher Prince has spent significantly less time as a Hero than Mirror Knight, and so might not be listened to as closely as he should be.

And Cat ... is neither Proceran nor a Hero. In fact, she's basically a Villain, with Villain followers, and anything she says is thus inherently suspect to Mirror Knight.

Liliet

Christophe has already accepted Hakram as a peer and a friend. He's ignorant but not wilfully ignorant. He listens as best he can, it's just that no-one has actually *talked* to him so far. Cat pointed that out in her POV.

Shveiran

And you know, the more I think about it the less that makes sense to me.

I think that's kind of why I'm so mad at Cristophe, in fact. Because from my perspective there is no way he was tragically left out of the loop unless he wanted to be. I guess if it was proven that wasn't the case, I could warm up to the guy, it's just... how?

I mean, way back at the start of the War of the Dead, he was serving in the north with several other heroes, right? Among which was Hanno. Who in his own POV specifically stated the divide between Cristophe and the Levantine heroes was a problem. Who we saw actively use his pull to try and mend as many bridges as he could.

It's true that we never saw Hanno actually take action on-screen on this particular hero's mind farts, but... I really, really have a hard time believing that not only he didn't, but he also

apparently forgot and failed to remember this was a thing during the last two years.

I mean, it's not like the Mirror Knight was a random Hero, he has several times been described as one of the most powerful ones.

And besides, considering how he reacted to Cat in this Book, I have a hard time believing Cristophe was never vocal about the T&T in the past.

How is it possible that both Hanno and Tariq failed to ever recognize this – nay, remember this – as a problem? Enough to warrant a chat, at the very least?

I guess I could buy the Pilgrim being told by Bard to sit this one out, but... I don't know, I really don't see it. That he was the one to never listen makes a lot more sense to me; Hanno doing nothing for years feels out of character with his comments back then.

[Liliet](#)

> It's true that we never saw Hanno actually take action on-screen on this particular hero's mind farts, but... I really, really have a hard time believing that not only he didn't, but he also apparently forgot and failed to remember this was a thing during the last two years.

Note that he only did anything about Nephele's state of mind because she was visibly falling apart right in front of him and willing to engage with him about it.

Hanno did not do anything about the Raphaella/Catherine feud, either.

He's a swell guy, but he's not very... competent? He's not a professional therapist, he's not a professional mediator like Cat in many ways is. His idea of his purpose in life is 'stab evil, not stab non-evil even if it's Evil'. It's been two years and he still pushes back against Cat saying he is an actual authority figure for heroes.

Hanno didn't "forget", he just never parsed it as something that would be his responsibility in the first place. In that conversation he did not actually bother taking Christophe aside and explaining *why* his words wounded, and that's when it nearly did come to a fight (which it only did because of Nephele egging them on). As long as

Christophe wasn't actively picking fights Hanno would assume it was handling itself somehow. He's the "my judgement sucks" guy, the "oh hey can the Black Queen be in charge please? I know I'm supposed to be her equal and counterpart but she seems nice enough I'm sure I don't really have to be keeping tabs on her – uh what, it's been two years and she's falling apart from doing the job meant for two people alone? shit i think i fucked up" guy.

And Tariq has clearly been deliberately distancing himself from anything political in the last two years. Probably a compound effect of him being more tired than ever with a third of his Name gone along with a chunk of his soul, of his long-time friend dying before his eyes with, factually, his permission, and the given away crown meaning he had to stay away from anything even remotely resembling ruling Levant, which considering their attitudes he'd have to do actively and aggressively, and of him having been *that* wrong about the Black Queen.

He wasn't playing a leadership role since the founding of the Truce and Terms, he'd been murder hobo-ing it around the front mopping up messes as Ophanim led him to them. Christophe's ignorance didn't happen to be within his mandate, or at least didn't make the priority list with the whole Dead King plagues thrown around thing.

Morgenstern

Where are you getting the *seven* from? I only counted *five*, according to the bodies indicated in this chapter. That would make two still loose, unless the "hole" is another one. Do you count the "three stripes of flesh" that hurt Cat to look at?
Or do you count something from an earlier chapter?

laguz24

Oh, Hakrams alive, that's a relief. But how do they patch things up after their little disagreement along with the side effects of severance plus the anti drow plot?

[*Liliet*](#)

What disagreement?

[*sivarajan*](#)

If you're disappointed in the lack of a demon of Absence (yes, I know), read "Lost City" by Alexander Wales: alexanderwales.com/lost-city.

Miles

I don't remember anyone mentioning the hole it hurt to think about?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Presumably the Absence demon itself. I note that four of the demons have already been destroyed, presumably so that EE only needs to come up with half as many utterly unique and horrifying battle sequences. 😊

Miles

Absence demons exist only in theory. Nobody has ever encountered one.

Eleyvie

That's a nice theory, but it is absent of proof.

Decius

There are reports of every other type of demon being encountered, including ones which exist only in theory. The absence of reports of Absence Demons is proof that, whether purely theoretical or not, their powers are effective, and work pretty much the way the lack of reports say they do.

magesbe

I understand why Catherine is wary of the Mirror Knight now, but this is basically what they were looking for. A strong named who can wield the Severance. Mirror Knight won't move against Catherine unless she turns on him or is framed, at least so long as the Dead King remains a threat. Afterwards? Well she has time to convince him that she's a necessary "evil."

erebus42

You're working under the dangerous assumption that the Mirror knight will be able to see some semblance of reason. He might, but given the state he was in going into this and the whole lovely experience itself...well...he hardly needs to be corrupted by demonic taint to have been warped by this.

[Liliet](#)

He was warped by this alright... into considering Hakram a close comrade he grabbed the sword for the sake of.

Liliet

Yup. A challenge: he will be either liability or asset. It's what Cat was MADE for really.

Shveiran

Sure. Heaving an emotionally-unstable, gullible imbecile in charge of the key weapon of mass destruction is peachy, especially with one of the two Bad Guys being specialized in story manipulation.

I expect MK will prove a danger to enemy armies, and no one else. There is no red flags here, no sir, none whatsoever.

thearpox23

One of? One of?!?!?

Dead King.

Bard.

Malicia is the only one not specialized in it, but then she's specialized in manipulation period, and that's not better.

So I have no idea how you arrived at that statement unless you count as Cordelia or Sve Noc as one of the two Bad Guys, because they're honestly the only major political players that AREN'T specialized in story manipulation.

IDKWhoitis

Malica shouldn't be on the list. Her schemes, while exquisite, are strictly mundane and have no bearing on the meta level. She has shown repeatedly she has no understanding of the meta level, with Super weapons, with her treatment of Black, with her methods to win the 2nd Civil War.

She is a wonderful Chessmaster, just like Cordy, but neither are storytellers. They do not shape conflict and the theatrics of the world like DK, WB, Black, and Cat do.

thearpox23

She is explicitly relevant when it comes to such schemes as turning allies against each other, via forgery and common blackmail if nothing else. The focus here isn't here on who will get to shape the coming age, but whether MK is a liability.

Shveiran

I said story manipulation, not manipulation. Which is Bard's bread and butter.

Malicia is an extremely good schemer, but she doesn't use narrative to ensure her success.

As for the Dead King, he is narrative skills are mostly spent to avoid the traps the wrong story structure would force on him (since he is stuck in the Villainous role, stories are almost always a danger and not a resource).

I didn't say only the Bard is dangerous, merely that the most dangerous traps will come from MK being driven by the wrong story, which will happen on its own or nudged by Bard. Could the Empress' scheme also cause it? Sure. She can play people. I just said that I find the Bard the most dangerous.

thearpox23

She is the most dangerous I agree, it just wasn't what you wrote. It's a little leap between saying she's the bigger possible influencer in the situation, and saying the Dead King isn't specialized in story manipulation when that's one of the two big things he's always had going for him, the other being his magical aptitude.

Malicia's not even one of the two villains you were talking about, I just included her to show that no matter which way the flugel turns the MK can be fucked with. Doesn't matter what kind of manipulation you were referencing if any does the job.

Shveiran

That is what I said, thank you very much.
We simply have a different definition of "story manipulation".

I don't count the DK as a master because his skill is about not being manipulated, and exerting non-narrative skills in safe way (as known as, his panoply of eldritch undead horrors).

That is remarkable, but he doesn't use that skill offensively; if anything, it has been remarked he doesn't seem to understand human, emotional attachment anymore. He is not well-suited to manipulating a Hero's emotion into stepping in the wrong story. That is not his backyard, it is the Bard's.

I could be mistaken, of course. If you would care to show me one instance where he used story manipulation offensively?

thearpox23

Off the top of my head... Getting Proceran Princes to tribute their human children to him. I can't see himself establishing himself as the Eternal Big Bad as anything but offensive.

Do consider that while he appears to have a long running tally of failures, most unrecorded and unmentioned, he is also directly opposed by the Bard who is more skilled than him. So what we get for him offensive oriented plans is the following trajectory.

First, we have a plan with clear strategic long-term benefit. Something like conquering another layer of hell for example.

Then, once the Dead King starts implementing it, he finds Bard in opposition to that.

A multitude of schemes and plans later, the Bard usually wins, and the Dead King goes skulking back to his wasteland.

I don't have a ready example for him specifically corrupting a Hero, but let's be honest it's a long and unreliable way to get rid of someone, and Dead King is a utilitarian who's yet to need to resort to it. But consider the sheer variety of Revenants, That MK is bogged down in human politics, and the already seen human-disguising ghouls, and all the tools are there.

erebus42

Demons are horrifically awesome as always.

It's a shame about the Magister, she seemed like she had a good head on her shoulders.

As for the Mirror Knight, from what's been said about the Severity, unless he's become some sort of Saint of Swords (may she never return) reborn forged in horror and blood, I can't see whatever role he's been on continuing after this fight. I would guess he'll probably keel over once his momentum is spent. A legend and a monster for a day. The question now obviously is whether or not he's too far gone to see reason and if the Blade of Mercy will have to live up to his Name.

erebus42

*roll

Insanenoodlyguy

On the plus side, since Cat obviously won't be sleeping with her now, the way is clear for her to hook up with the Kingfisher Prince.

[Liliet](#)

First, ew.

Second, Catherine is already in a poly relationship, she could hook up with as many people at the same time as she liked as long as they were onboard with the premise period.

Third, ew.

thearpox23

You do not like the Prince?

[Liliet](#)

I love the Prince. I just find the concept of 'kill the third wheel' utterly and indescribably gross.

thearpox23

Eh, it's a work of literature, it's not like you're actually hurting real people. If you like a certain pairing, nothing wrong with wanting for them to get together other characters be damned. Not like you have to care about things that don't interest you. I know I often outright skip scenes with certain characters in works I find mediocre.

Used as an actual writing tool, it is often a sign that the writer is a hack, and I don't really when it is used. But that is not a moral judgement.

[Liliet](#)

That's where we get to "Catherine is in an actual poly relationship right now and I find people ignoring that kind of questionable in the first place"

but yeah 'ew' was not a moral judgement just a statement of being personally grossed out 🤔

thearpox23

Because everything Cat's fling with Archer screams 'temporary'. People (in-world) wouldn't be shipping her otherwise, and Cat hasn't been someone to have multiple romances going at the same time.

Not sure 'ew' translated well to text then cause you just confused everyone.

[Liliet](#)

It's been temporary for two years now lmao. In the meantime they've settled into sugar sweet sappy domesticity, with Archer making a fucking table for her and making carvings every time she visits and Cat's officers even having their own routine around that!

Secondary relationship doesn't mean temporary and doesn't mean unimportant :3

And Cat hasn't had *romances* period – she loved Kilian but wasn't in love with her, and was hurt at breakup not by stopping the romantic relationship but by Kilian then saying she doesn't want to stay friends then either.

thearpox23

No one said unimportant, but I wouldn't expect Cat to keep fucking Archer if she started a thing with someone else. They'll stay a part of the Woe, and I'd expect it to be an easy break-up. I used 'romance' as a general term, and the exact fact that she hasn't had one besides the one with Kilian and Archer tells me she takes this sort of thing seriously.

You are welcome to disagree, and we could easily have an long argument, since I can actually find evidence to back up my claims. I don't wholly agree with your take on Kilian, and with Archer who knows how much of their interactions can be taken to them being a part of the Woe. But I'm not aiming to convince you here, just showing this perspective exists and is valid. Point is, if I were shipping Cat I wouldn't think of her current dynamic either since it doesn't look setup to get in the way.

[Liliet](#)

> No one said unimportant, but I wouldn't expect Cat to keep fucking Archer if she started a thing with someone else.

Archer is currently in a relationship with Masego, has been for two years. She has also been in a relationship with Cat for these same two years. They're two people who matter most to her. (But the relationship with Masego is the primary one – slightly more official)

I can see that this perspective exists, I disagree that it is valid. I think it's disrespectful and erasive of the actual polyamory representation in Guide (as well as aromantic representation, though that's another tier deeper into the rat hole).

I am very much prepared to present quotes to support my point as well.

thearpox23

>Archer is currently in a relationship with Masego, has been for two years. She has also been in a relationship with Cat for these same two years. They're two people who matter most to her. (But the relationship with Masego is the primary one – slightly more official)

None of that contradicts any of what I said though.

If you want to clarify, by all means go ahead, but for the sake of your own time please don't actually go quote-hunting.

And mate, any perspective which requires niche terminology and/or extensive quoting to disprove is valid to have. Even if the matter can be objectively proven to one side, requiring good memory and/or rereading to make 'what ifs' is just a dampener on creativity.

Also, when you're saying something is disrespectful, you're effectively saying "Hey, you're wrong about this thing. But unlike other things, being wrong about this is worse than being wrong about other things." That's just not how being wrong works, you either agree that you're wrong or you don't. The most you can get is to get others to shut up because they don't want to hurt your feelings, like how you wouldn't comment on the dress of your aging aunt who still thinks she is dressing to fashion because you don't want to hurt her feelings. You don't actually think she dresses up well, you just keep silent about it. Except in this case it's fictional characters whose feeling are hurt.

[Liliet](#)

> Except in this case it's fictional characters whose feeling are hurt.

I understand that aromantic and poly people being fictional characters is a widespread view, but it's not actually accurate. I'm not fictional, for example – easy mistake to make, I know, what with the near-complete lack of representation in either fiction or popular non-fiction, but believe it or not, it's true!

thearpox23

Wtf dude, hold your horses. Because either I suck at writing or you suck at reading, but in no way did I imply that non-conforming sexual preferences don't exist in real life. I thought it obvious I was referring to the fact that it is impossible to hurt the feelings of a fictional character. In other words, things that would be rude and disrespectful to say in real life are quite appropriate and may even form a base for an interesting fanfiction.

[Liliet](#)

I am talking about how fiction matters to real life people, and people's interpretation of fiction matters in real life, impacting other people they interact with.

I don't give a shit about you hurting Catherine Foundling's feelings. She's not real ~~and also deserves it~~. But she's acting as representation for real life minorities.

thearpox23

She can act as a representation for real-life minorities for you. But it is up to each reader to decide individually how they view her, and you are trying to put chains on that by appealing to real life interactions. As if the readers have a moral duty to read the work in a certain way, to shift their thinking/behavior solely to make life easier for (collective) you.

So you are tone-policing. And morality aside, there is a practical reason not to tone-police. There is no clear red line of what to write and what not to write. There is no defined group that gets to set the standards, but just individuals with their own quirks, morals, and beliefs. Some reasonable, some crazy, some just to troll. Follow this to it's logical concision, and you end up

with toxic cesspits and echo-chambers that you are well aware are prevalent on the internet.

As for fiction mattering to real life, that conversation is usually resolved with "Okay, so this is real life and it works a little differently from fiction. Here how..." at which point no normal person will go "But that was written a work of fiction, so it must be true." Works of fiction can be used to popularize brand products or motivate people to do something they already want to do, but they don't overwrite the things people already know to be true.

So of course someone's reading of fiction can be used to stereotype their beliefs, but I wholly reject the idea that anyone's reading is invalid just because their real life beliefs might be wrong.

PS: While I did accuse you of tone-policing, do note that I do not believe you to be obnoxious about it, as you are denying the validity of my take in the politest way possible. (And I am still half-convinced that your issue with my take is a misunderstanding in itself. Of course, that is no longer relevant to this post.)

[Liliet](#)

> She can act as a representation for real-life minorities for you. But it is up to each reader to decide individually how they view her

That's not really how representation works. You cannot, for example, read PGTE and say "I headcanon Cat as straight just really confused", that's a straight-up, how do I put it, *wrong* reading of the text. Part of the point of representation is to introduce people to new concepts and ideas that they wouldn't have encountered in their everyday life (perhaps not so much because they don't know anyone belonging to these groups as because those people don't discuss their personal life with them, or if they do aren't honest about it, as marginalized minorities often do).

And obviously this cannot be done forcibly. If you don't *want* to read Catherine as being already factually in a poly relationship (and likely to continue it just as it has been for the last two in-universe years), I cannot make you. But this is

a public forum, and I'm explaining not only to you, but also to anyone who happens to read this and maybe learns something new.

> So you are tone-policing.

You're a bit confused about terminology. Tone policing means telling someone that they're talking in the wrong tone, ie too hysterical or too calm or too passionate etc. That hasn't happened in this conversation. You're looking for some other phrasing of what exactly I'm doing that's wrong.

And I am not trying to instruct people on what they should write. Erratic is writing what he's writing, and the reason I hang out in this comment section and not in, I don't know, metaworld chronicles, is because he writes things I like and want to see more of. I avoid fandoms that aren't as, well, *good*.

Representation is not a morally neutral issue, and "real life beliefs" are not a morally neutral issue. And beliefs can be wrong and right. If I believe that England is not real and the English are all secretly robots pretending to be humans, that would be, how do I put this, *factually wrong*. And beliefs (factually wrong and otherwise) can engender actions that are morally wrong, which I will not go into here, but – it's not a neutral issue. Things I'm saying do need to be said.

(And "I'm sure Cat will stop fucking Indrani" IMHO really doesn't. First of all, that's a gross way to put it...)

thearpox23

"You cannot, for example, read PGTE and say "I headcanon Cat as straight just really confused", that's a straight-up, how do I put it, wrong reading of the text."

And I return to my earlier point that that the validity of an interpretation depends on how long it takes to disprove said interpretation. Proving that Cat's not straight is easy, but I'm not even arguing that she's in a poly relationship. Just viewing the finer details a little differently.

That said,
"If I believe that England is not real and the

English are all secretly robots pretending to be humans, that would be, how do I put this, factually wrong."

Some shippers have a tendency to do the exact equivalent of that and I fail to see the problem. Makes it more funny than anything.

"Representation is not a morally neutral issue, and "real life beliefs" are not a morally neutral issue."

Everything is morally neutral when applied to fiction. If you're not budging on that then I think we've found the cornerstone of the disagreement. Everything else is dressing. That said, if you do for some reason want to continue this we should stop cluttering up the thread at least.

"Tone policing means..."
Yeah, my mistake.

"(.... that's a gross way to put it....)"
Didn't think it was, but I'll phrase it differently if I chat with you again.

[Liliet](#)

> Proving that Cat's not straight is easy

...unless your Personal Views are that what she is can be read as straight. It's pretty outdated by now to insist that bi people don't really exist and are either confused gay people or confused straight people, but it's still an existent position historically.

"Everything is morally neutral when applied to fiction. If you're not budging on that then I think we've found the cornerstone of the disagreement. "

See, I agree with that. I just think that once you are engaging with the fandom and other commenters, particularly in a public space, it's no longer purely about fiction.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

If the writing makes someone feel gross, then it is hurting real people. Not to the same extent as murder of course, but while it is important for art to be able to be transgressive there is nonetheless such a thing as being in poor taste.

thearpox23

Different people like different things.

Aotrs Commander

Ew why?

[Liliet](#)

"This character stood in the way of my ship, now that they're killed the way is clear!" <= ew ew ew ew ew ew ew

[Liliet](#)

(You're probably joking. It's not funny)=)

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm not sure where this really negative reaction is coming from. if you mean the "She just watched an interest die, show some tact" it's not funny, fair enough. I am of the opinion that Cat could use some comfort when this is all done and Archer being around didn't change her previous plans before this.

if it's specifically Kingfisher Prince that's the problem, then I admit I'm at a loss as to your vehement opposition.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, Frederic is fine. It's the "she just *mercy killed* her interest and sees the scene whenever her eyes are closed" part, plus the "Nephele Eliade just died aaaaa" part.

Miles

She claims to be bi, but she's shown a distinct lack of interest in male characters (except flashbacks) when it comes to doing more than ogling them sometimes.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, that's a subset of bi. Bi can be leaning in one direction, the qualification for the definitioin is just 'non-zero attraction to others too'.

[Adrian_V](#)

Mmmmm, i kind of makes sense the Mirror Knight seems like the kind of named that was made to fight demons, and with all the whoop the Severance has been described it stands to reason it can hurt and kill demons.

My take in this is that there being so many demons actually helped since they each got in the way of the other, the fight probably got harder after they killed half of them. Also there were 8 did anyone count so we saw 7 corpses (counting terror too)?

erebus42

Not to mention the Inverse Ninja Law which no doubt gets factored in by Providence

[Liliet](#)

Demons are immune to providence.

erebus42

I dont recall that ever being explicitly said but even if that were true Heroes are not and so you could achieve the same effect by providing a boost on their end.

[Liliet](#)

True!

[Adrian_V](#)

I was just going to point out that!, even if all seems lost all that needs to happen is for 1 hero to develop an anti demon aspect bam, wich is what i think MK did, either that or 1 evolved so to speak (unless the sword did it all)

[Liliet](#)

I'm going to guess it's the sword + what he already had.

[Liliet](#)

...I counted six.

- 1) the Demon of Terror;
- 2) Beyond those rested a thing that looked like a twisted afterbirth, hacked into and burned until it was no longer a threat. The remains of a demon, I thought as the lot of us walked through death.
- 3) There was another, forced into a hole carved in the wall and both stone and corpse were scorched so thoroughly nothing could be glimpsed of the manner of demon it had been
- 4), 5) At the gates, where the Mirror Knight and the Vagrant Spear must have stood and fought, the blackened and scattered remains of another two demons could be seen.
- 6) the one Christophe just finished off.

One more can be presumed to be Absence.
And one more... oh boy. If we're lucky the Corruption one died along with Maddened Keeper because she was using it at the moment.

TeK

>if we're lucky
I don't know, but it feels narratively that we are coming to a lowest and darkest point of the story. We haven't even started fighting DK, and Bard had implied he's not even getting serious yet.

Liliet

But that's exactly it – the lowest and darkest part of the story *is still coming*, we're not there yet.

caoimhinh

The 8 Demons are accounted for. Besides the six you mentioned, there's this part:

"It was further in that the fighting still held, past the three stripes of burned flesh that had my heart stirring in unease to look at and the... hole that it hurt my mind to even think of."

The "hole that hurts to look at" is obviously the remains of Absence.

And you missed "the three stripes of burned flesh that had my heart stirring in unease to look at" which would be the remains of the other Demon.

Valkyria

We don't really know that though. I agree with the Absence speculation but the three stripes of burned flesh? I don't know.

All the other corpses had a location to their description, we don't know for sure that the stripes are a different corpse. Why would you describe a single corpse like that? Also, for me "past the three stripes" implies that she already counted them before, than just "past three stripes". But before that she mentioned only two burned heaps next to the door.

Maybe I'm not right, but one could also be counting the three stripes as the demons liliet counted in her comment as 2,4,5 and the "hole" as the literal hole demon 3 got smashed into.

It would technically fit, since the fighting is going on further in the back, past all the corpses she saw.

Do0d

That was obviously a live Beast of Absence. No one can even acknowledge it's existence.

Valkyria

There has to be someone who can, since people know they do exist. You maybe forget about it or it changes/alters your memories, but someone has to be sort of immune or people would not know things like demons of Absence even exist.

[theorel](#)

The three stripes of flesh are bits of Hakram

Jose

Arent the meat stripes the cut parts of adjutant? An arm, a leg and part of the torso

[Javvies](#)

Can't be.

Hakram was inside the containment chamber for Severance when the Maddened Keeper betrayed them. Not out in the hallway.

Hakram's severed parts would logically be inside the room, more or less where he fell and Mirror Knight cut them off, not out in the hallway on the path to the chamber.

Do0d

Unless those parts tried to reattach themselves ...

[Liliet](#)

It's unclear whether it's the hallway or inside. Would be real neat if it wasn't Hakram bits, but Catherine's reaction suggests otherwise.

[Liliet](#)

No, that's Hakram's cut off leg, arm and side.

agumentic

"Leg, arm and side" are not in any way stripes of flesh, I don't remember anything about them burning and why would they lie in the middle of the battle and not where they cut off?

[Liliet](#)

Because they were cut off in the middle of where the battle then started, 'stripes of flesh' is what was left of them after corruption, and Light would have burned them to stop it spreading.

Now I do want to double check the location though you're right. Hakram got shanked by Keeper inside the stone chamber...

"eyond it a few steps up led us to open steel gates and the last gasps of madness beyond. At the gates, where the Mirror Knight and the Vagrant Spear must have stood and fought, the blackened and scattered remains of another two demons could be seen. It was further in that the fighting still held, past the three stripes of burned flesh that had my heart stirring in unease to look at and the... hole that it hurt my mind to even think of."

Hmm. It can be read either way.

Saint of Swordfish

I think the "hole it hurt to look at" was the body of the Demon of Absence. Assuming the strips of flesh on the ground were pieces of Hakram's body, this leaves one demon unaccounted for.

Also, I think that the "twisted afterbirth" might be the Demon of Corruption, as it roughly matches the description at Marchford.

[Liliet](#)

THAT WOULD BE BAD

[Adrian_V](#)

Pardon the double comment but i forgot the most important part i wanted to say: chances are that Cat's name will be either the Queen of Blades or some other manner of soldier queen name, in fact i wouldn't be surprised if it finishes coming along with an aspect to counterbalance the MK, that and she both wants and needs more power that isn't night related, we saw how she is lamenting the nature of night.

Mmmm either the aspect will be flexible meanign it can be used to protect (remember she lamented strongly she couldn't protect her soldier or Nephele) or 1 will be defense another offense.

Ninestrings

Eh any kind of power is limited in some ways, That's one of the reasons Cat jumps between mantles and roles situationally.

Adrian_V

Yeah but the nature of that power is what i meant, Night is fragile, it has been pointed out many times so i bet at least 1 of her aspect will be blunt, at least at first glance (like Sain'ts Cut).

And probably something that while usefull to attack will be stronger protecting others. Or it could be like 1 of Black's old aspects and buff her troops.

Shveiran

It won't be Queen of Blades; she is changing Calernia's face in a fundamental way, and so her Name will be a new one.

Liliet

Also she's not associated with blades in any way. She bears a staff these days, and none of her signature achievements actually involve her using a blade in a memorable way.

Raved Thrad

Oh poor Nephele. We barely knew you.

Anomandris

And whatever we knew, we kinda liked...

Adrian_V

Erra needed to kill someone, i am glad it was her and not Hakram.

And ever head towards their grace

I'm gonna be honest i was hoping hakram would die. I'm already at the point where if viv gets her head cut off, i'd believe she wouldn't have actually died. I cant remember the last time i was actually worried something would happen to any of the Woe and it seems like the last book would be the place to establish some actual danger.

It would also have been nice for the bards plans to be in any way actually doing things (even if actually dieing was the goal that also failed).

Demons are canonically outside Providence and narrative rules which means there isn't an in universe law that would necessitate him staying alive either.

Raved Thrad

The Adjutant cannot die until the Black Queen releases him from service.

Adrian_V

That actually could be worse, it would be like with Nauk where even alive he wasn't really himself anymore, or when he dies is a mercy kill.

Also of course they won't die until their deaths serve as a pivot or in the climax.

caoimhinh

Well, he really didn't *need* to kill more characters (we already have a high count of dead Named in this arc), and definitely not one that was completely unharmed and was just getting an interesting story (She got her own moments in two Extra Chapters and now everybody was shipping her with Cat). Her death feels... empty, meaningless beyond the "hey let's kill this character that readers are starting to like, lol".

I'm more surprised that the Vagrant Spear not only survived but is standing and fighting without issue when the last we saw of her was her barely breathing and needing medical assistance.

Concocter passed by them for a short while, but still...

Shveiran

I disagree.

Someone needed to die among MK's band and Cat's, and Nephele is the one that was in both.

Plus, she was built up enough to create attachment, but shipping aside... she was pretty much done, wasn't she? From a narrative perspective. I don't really see her getting in a meaningful relationship with Cat, nor anyone else. She is too focused on her endgame, and no one else really is, not in the same way. It could be another Killian, but not a meaningful relationship between peers.

What did they really have in common? How would that make either grow?

I'm rather glad we didn't go in that direction, to be honest.

We got an emotional gut-punch when we needed it, and that's that.

Insanenoodlyguy

I was kinda hoping as she felt better about her self and her past and alignment, she'd end up persuing Hanno more ardently. Admittely I ship a lot of people with a lot of people.

TeK

I ship Hanno with Witch, although it had been steadily implied that it's not gonna happen.

Mental Mouse

> I'm more surprised that the Vagrant Spear not only survived but is standing and fighting without issue when the last we saw of her was her barely breathing and needing medical assistance.

I'm guessing Concocter provided a "last stand" potion, similar to what Kairos used for his finale. In which case, she will die after the fight.

Liliet

She might not if given healing promptly. Concocter is good at her job, I can easily imagine her having a complement of potions that would stabilize Spear and serve as stimulator.

And Masego is right there with some battery mages. He can heal.

Vagabond

Hm, I think a death that feels meaningless is not meaningless.

Attempt to explain:

Deaths in reality are often meaningless as well. a lack of meaningless deaths in literature where there should be high risk of death often for many characters... It does reduce immersion (for me anyway) and helps foster (to my sensibilities) an ignorant picture of war and strife in readers, at least those who are for whatever reason easily influenced or are already leaning towards an attitude of "war and conflict is glorious"

Sorry for bad english.

P. S.

I loved this whole chapter. demons are terrifying! The interlude is awesome – really hyped for the third chapter!

Anomandris

RIP Magister – kinda liked her a lot.

Maybe MK's disdain towards villains have been tempered a bit by Harkram's actions in his presence. But boy, him with Severance seems like a powerful combo.

laguz24

I'm wondering what can kill him at this point. No doubt Nessie has something in the works.

Anomandris

The whole abridged Time thingy that Cat used on the Saint, maybe?

Miles

That only worked cause the sos was already ancient, and still took multiple arcs of DBZ style charging up

Saint of Swordfish

Also, the same trick never works twice, narratively. It would be anticlimactic.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, it can, but it has to be applied in a very creative way, like a variant that specifically relies on the countermeasures taken by those who knew it's previous usage or some-such. Though absoutely just straight up using the exact same tactic in a second climatic fight because it worked before is asking to get your face stomped in.

[TeK](#)

I kinda wish to see someone using the same exact tactic to win and getting away with it because "there is no way he would use the same tactic twice\$

[Liliet](#)

That would honestly count as a twist specifically relying on countermeasures XD

caoimhinh

That might actually hilariously backfire on whoever tries it. He gets stronger with each passing day, so accelerating his time might just boost him.

True, it seems like it needs a new dawn to activate, but we never know. And making assumptions about a Hero's limit is not wise.

Raved Thrad

It would also be funny if, as a power interaction between his “get stronger every day” thing and the magical aging, the meta forced him to subjectively live through each and every day of however many years were applied to him. In which case, he’ll either go insane or, irony of ironies, die of starvation long before he could die of aging.

[Adrian_V](#)

Lakes, just throw him into a deep lake and he will drown eventually.

MatthewTheLucky

Lakeomancy wins again!

Shveiran

Unless he cuts the lake. There isn’t really a lot you can do against a I-cut-everything absolute. Like with most absolute.

I mean, when you get down to it, it was not really time but narrative weight that killed Saint. One could rewrite the scene in a “Laurence the Monfort is a sword, and a sword doesn’t age” if the set-up was right.

There is no clear-cut way to defeat dominions.

magesbe

Except swords can totally age? They can get brittle then break with time.

Shveiran

Yes, but not in 8 years.
That’s how long the StafSwordPrayer aged Saint, remember?

[Liliet](#)

11, but the point stands lol

Shveiran

Also, not really how steel works.

It’s the elements that could make it rust, not just spontaneous decay.

Raved Thrad

The obvious solution is to trick Christophe into cutting a fart. Since it's so blatantly unheroic, and probably unProceran, he will likely slink off in shame and die of embarrassment in some corner somewhere. 😊

Mental Mouse

Mirror Knight's Name comes from lake guardians, I would not be at all surprised if he is immune to drowning.

David Stone

But as the foremost Lakeomancer of her age, I think Catherine has dominion over lake guardians, therefore she can control the Mirror Knight.

dadycool

That how it be, sometimes. No war is clean, friends are lost, stories/Stories get cut off beyond all hope for completion, and unnameable horrors get unleashed that really ought to have stayed in the box. Like she said, losing less than half your force/friends was actually a really good outcome, especially against a foe known for exacting a massive blood price, especially one you can't even look at.

Wonder

The Night is a thief's tool. Cat's Name will be that of a Soldier queen. She needs to get her oomph back.

But if Night devoured Winter, and Cat can still Take , why can't she Break and Fall with the Night?

TeK

Now it will be a Dark Knight, mainly because EE is somewhat annoyed by any theorised Name with Knight in it.

grzecho2222

NIght Knight

TeK

That is perfect.

Letouriste

This is so tacky, I love it!

Would be lesser than priestess of Night tho

Mental Mouse

If Cat does get stuck with a Name, it's unlikely to be Queen of anything (possibly unless Queen of Lost and Found becomes a Name). As I noted on the Discord, one of Cat's distinguishing marks, (and one reason why other rulers cooperate with her) is that she's not actually interested in *ruling* anything – she's been fobbing the details of ruling her own kingdom off on variously Anne, Hakram, and Viv whenever she could get away with it.

Raved Thrad

The way she acts, I wouldn't be surprised if her name was some variant on "Mother of All." In which case she just might have aspects that allow her to spawn broodlings and overlords.

Haha! "Zerg Queen" as a name would be hilarious!

(and I'm joking. I hope.)

Juff

Typo Thread:

tenth of heavies > tenth of heavies was
broad angle > a broad angle
powers struggle > power struggle
been forgot. > been forgotten.
was man > was a man
gestured heard > heard
a hand > at hand
gesture for > and gestured for
lead me > leads me
studied it > studied
if through > through
out burst > out a burst
it instead of trying to avoid it > it, instead of trying to avoid it,
a targets > targets
convulsed and so spraying (maybe remove the and so)
cut only > only cut
remains stuck > remain stuck
wings is stayed > wings it stayed
ragger > ragged
began the roar of flames > the roar of flames began
to be before > to me before
mess," the > mess." The
wall and both > wall, and both
eyes hard > eyes were hard

[Liliet](#)

Nephele)=)=)=

I guess she was doomed by being a character heavily built up to be likable and having an arc with Cat but not one of the Woe and not plot critical)=

Well played erratic, well played.

Raved Thrad

I wonder if that's a sign of the times? "You've had a personal interlude. You can die now."

In which case, Roland's swan song may be coming up.

[Liliet](#)

A personal interlude?

Raved Thrad

Well, I guess they *all* are personal interludes. It's more a sense of "ok, I've given you character development, and you're no longer a faceless mook. Time to die."

[Liliet](#)

Nephele hasn't been faceless since the Winter extra chapters.

Frivolous

Considering how casually and often Masego used Wrest to borrow the sorcery of others, I'm beginning to suspect that he can use Wrest as many times as he'd like, not just once or 3x a day.

And yeah I'm glad that Masego and Hakram both survived.

Also, I wonder and suspect that Masego wrought a kind of back door into the Severance. I mean, he's pretty careful, and he's Praesi, so he's paranoid about betrayal. Something that dangerous should have a loophole so that it could not be used against Masego.

Gamer7956

Some aspects have active effects, some have passive effects. And some have different scales to them. For Wrest, taking the power from a willing mage or a small trinket is probably the merest flex of power. Taking the full might of an unwilling deity? That's gonna put the aspect on cooldown... (Though it is likely the true form of the aspect)

beleester

Some aspects run on an “exhaustion” mechanic rather than a cooldown. E.g., Hanno’s Recall gets slower and slower the more lives he uses in one fight, Roland gets exhausted by constant Use, Black’s Lead tires him out the more soldiers it’s spread across.

Liliet

This. I think Wrest is potentially infinite but requires exertion. Taking power from someone willing to give it is basically free real estate, it’s offensive use that ends up with a functional cooldown because Masego will be exhausted by the effort (especially if he then also uses what he took away).

TeK

Guess now he’ll be known as... Halfram.

Mental Mouse

Ow ow ow.

TeK

Disarmed and defeeted.

Burlyraven

RIP Nephele. You were gorgeous, but sadly lacking in useful demon fighting powers. Also, kinda saw it coming for a while; way too many mages in a lethal story.

What worries me is the fact that Cat really has been stepping into a trickster role, and both her established and potential moral anchors have been neutralized in significant ways. This is definitely a slippery slope situation brewing.

dadycoool

Hakram, Vivienne, Black, Akua, Hanno, GP, and Cordelia are the landmarks she uses, I think. I imagine there’s some level of “What would _____ do?” going on somewhere in her head, but they work far better when they’re present. All she’s had available to her recently have been Archer, Rouge, Masego, and a bunch of annoyances/traitors. And Nephele.

Also, Names aren’t generally handed out in a vacuum. As Squire I, she had to crawl and grasp for every inch, so she was molded to take advantage of that. As Squire II, she was established as her own power and as one who has the option of Taking everything she sees and Breaking what was denied her. When she was about to become the *Black Queen*, she was essentially being endorsed by Praes, so she likely would’ve been molded to

fit that. Her current and imminent position look like a Story of a mortal Rising to a position where she can Break gods. In fact, I think it was implied that that is exactly what Masego was suggesting at the end of Book 5. After all, he knows how to do it now. With her being a trickster, she's always been one to peruse Bard's armory and pick out a weapon to suit the situation. Outsmarting gods is exactly what trickster gods do (Loki). What better way to attain godhood than to trick the Gods into endorsing you?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, Cat was always something of a trickster, finding a "third path" in what other think is a blank wall (or a sea of fire). She suffers the usual hazard as well, like any trickster she often gets caught in her own schemes.

[Liliet](#)

The ur-examples are in Book 1. Letting a hero go to start a war to advance in which she came to straight up regret for moral reasons, and tricking her way through the 5-way melee until she and Juniper were the last ones standing – and she'd been effectively 'caught in her own scheme' there at the end, with most of her company gone from Aisha's counter-betrayal, if it wasn't also for necromancy providing her a brute force way to cheat.

thearpox23

I'm mostly just confused at what the Maddened Keeper was/is going for. Just because she was Mad doesn't mean a complete lack of reason or planning, else she wouldn't have been useful to Bard as a tool. And I don't peg her to be like Black, planning out something hellishly complicated. So whatever it is/was, she'd got to be getting something out of the whole ordeal.

More Dakka

It could be as simple as a safe death. carrying so many demons would have had one hell of a toll and if the bard convinced her that if she died where she did it would stop the power of a villain who would corrupt the heart of callow (Cat) and wont allow demons to escape into creation where they could wreak destruction

Honestly she was a time bomb and this was a containable defusing. The Bard could spin her into believing it was a heroic sacrifice

[Liliet](#)

Bard doesn't need others to reason or plan to be useful to her. She runs on narrative manipulation far more than person manipulation. All it would take for Bard to know what would happen is know she was running on empty and was about to break, and arrange a narrative situation where it would inevitably happen at the worst possible moment (and then arrange for what exactly this moment would be).

thearpox23

All that is true except when the person in question has to worm herself into a party, stay nondescript, position herself at the appropriate place at the appropriate time, and then self-destruct on cue. That requires actual ability to reason. MoreDakka's hypothesis is a possibility at least.

[Liliet](#)

It's certainly a possibility, but it's also a possibility that Maddened Keeper herself was utterly ignorant of there being a plot involving her and just self-destructed because the eighth demon was one too many. Christophe invited her on his own initiative, staying quiet and unassuming is pretty easy when you're barely conscious because of an internal demon battle, and 'appropriate time appropriate place on cue' are all generously provided by Creation's propensity for drama.

thearpox23

She didn't self-destruct. She was sliced by Severance, and may or may not have died from that. That right before that she used Absence to hide and position herself and her choice of target speaks to that, nor did she display any signs of loss of control or tried to talk to any of the many experts present at the Arsenal. Whether or not she was aware of her fate does not absolve her actions of purpose.

[Liliet](#)

V true! It's a plausible suicide by cop but not necessarily.

ninegardens

Okay, so look, can we all just give MK some respect on this one:

Cat brings a small army and attempts to N vs. one ONE demon (still loses soldiers and magister).

Christoph (while injured) 1.5 vs 7s the ALL THE OTHER DEMONS.

What the heck?

... I know the sword helps, but bloody hell, the boy is a powerhouse.

A stupid, stupid, misguided powerhouse.

But a powerhouse nonetheless.

...Also, interesting seeing that THIS is Bard's victory condition for the Affray (apparently). ... not (for example) something more immediately destructive.

MatthewTheLucky

Bard does claim to be Good. Loosing demons for funzies doesn't really fit that, even in a sociopathic greater good way.

[Liliet](#)

Bard lost the overall game, and one demon escaping (what Cat cleaned up) might have been fully enough to fuck everything up. (Also, one or two demons might be missing already anyway).

And Light users have a categorical advantage over demons. The entire rest of who Cat brought with her (soldiers, herself, Nephele, Masego) were liabilities in a demon fight in a way a Light user capable of immediately protecting themselves isn't. I honestly suspect that fight could have gone better if BoM solo'd that one. Of course, that's presuming he solo'd it while protected from the taint, which is what Nephele and Masego brought to the table...

The feat of beating 5 at once (that's how many bodies are confirmed) is indeed pretty absurd, but 2 Light users (both of them clearly more skilled than BoM at actually using their weapons and working together with someone else) are a better matchup than Cat's part categorically.

Bitan

Can anyone list the various types of Demons for me?

I read it in a previous book, but I can't remember which one.

[Liliet](#)

There is a total of 23 types, and we haven't heard of all of them.

The ones we know are:

- Corruption
- Madness
- Absence
- Order
- Apathy

- Terror
- Excess

Liliet

- Time

Daniel E

Demon of Absence is gone, which is good. Mirror Knight is now arguably more powerful than Saint, which is bad, though not nearly as experienced, so Cat might still have some leverage. On a lighter note, I'm really hoping Hakram accepts the 'lightning-shooting prosthetic' now. For both his leg and arm, which would be hilarious.

IDKWhoitis

A couple things.

I'm suspicious of the Concoctor, how did she pull Hakram, a large Orc who needed 4 heavies to lift, in the middle of an area that went FUBAR? Especially with a Demon still on the loose. And with potential Fae around, corrupted or not. What is the likelihood she is corrupted? It could be a deeper madness or something from another Demon, we never clarified which ones were in play.

I think Cat already fucked up by letting her through without looking closer. Masego was busy with Hakram, and Cat was distracted.

Furthermore, I think MK will have to be put down. You don't stay in a locked box on fire with 8 demons and crawl out in any semblance of OK. Going back to the 5 types of demons that were not identified, I think we are being optimistic that they got every last one, which corpse was the Keeper's body? She is still alive or a Demon is. And following that, I think we are bound to have a room with only named soon, as I don't see the troops surviving for long after making contact with MK. They'll either die to a demon or MK.

Just listing off some fun thoughts of Demons:

- Wrath
- Hunger
- Paranoia
- Chaos
- Entropy
- Time
- Legos
- Momentum
- Imitation

Auston Varner

Concoctor could be suspicious, or she could just have dosed herself with a strength-boosting potion. It's kind of unclear just how many things her potions can do

Insanenoodlyguy

A basic strength enhancing potion, or an antigrav "anything covered with this weighs less for a while" sort of thing, either of those seems like something that'd be in her wheelhouse.

Shveiran

Plus, she is lifting only about two-thirds of Hakram. It would still be heavy, but not quite as much. And you can drag a lot more than you can carry, besides.

Shveiran

On a smooth, hard surface, at least.

Insanenoodlyguy

I mean, we should hope she's not dragging a freshly wounded limbless body around. Named or not, there has to be a point where infection or exsanguination kills you if your getting treated that roughly.

[TeK](#)

Demon of Lego...

beleester

"Half of them carrying Hakram." Only two people were needed to carry him, the others were just for escort. A stretcher normally has one person holding each end, so there's nothing unusual about the weight.

agumentic

I really like how EE reminded us just how utterly terrifying it is to fight demons, even when you are prepared and have both heroes and powerful Named on your side and then shows just how strong Mirror Knight with Severance is by murdering the fuck out seven of them. It is a simple narrative trick, but it was very expertly done.

[308924810a](#)

RIP Nephele

Also it occurs to me that the Mirror Knight's invulnerability to various things seems to come from his oaths, so it'd be possible

to kill him by manipulating him into breaking whichever oath makes him immune to the effects of the sword.
I wonder if the Dead King will realize.

Also it might be a good idea for Cat to familiarize him with exactly what the Drow are doing for the war effort, so he doesn't sign off with that conspiracy.

Geno

Totally possible DK arranged for things at Cleves subtly. At this he really could be capable of anything

flashburn283

Well, after this not even the Pilgrim will be able to stop the bard from being declared an enemy.

Causing the deaths of several heroes then unleashing demons, I think the coalition just found it's next war, so nice of her to help out Cat, wouldn't you say?

[Liliet](#)

That last part, unironically.

Geno

So totally random thought that just came to me. Has anyone noticed how nobody mentions Killian anymore? I keep expecting some huge twist with that

Isi Arnott-Campbell

She's still around. It's been mentioned that Cat keeps pestering her to hang out with the rest of their shared social group and thus unintentionally persuading her to socially isolate because she can't heal enough to hang out again with Cat's anxious pestering. She's not being mentioned often because of this fact.

[Liliet](#)

Kilian was established at the Prologue to be at Morgentorn, where Kingfisher Prince is regularly stationed.

Geno

I've felt for a while now that The Woe need a proper 6th ranger/mysterious stranger. At first I suspected Hanno, but I'm started to feel like it might be the Bard

MatthewTheLucky

Um, Akua?

Morgenstern

Wait, wait, wait... "the last demon"...? I counted TWO **after** that one that should still be out. Unless the "hole" is meant to be a dead one. Then it's still one more... Or is the "hole" the still-living absence? Which is the second, though? Or did one get killed with the Maddened Keeper, not escaping the seal? Anyhow, we're missing one at least and possibly two. Oh dear...

Morgenstern

So.... he **can** wield the sword for much longer than just once.

But is he possessed or not?

Morgenstern

Mirror Knight > demon remains this chapter: 5
Cat & Co.: 1

We were told about **8**. 5+1 does not make 8. Does someone count the three stripes of flesh as being a demon corpse? (I thought this was the flesh and bones cut from Hakram.) And the "hole" Cat can barely notice, but from which her mind is forced back seems to be the Demon of Absence, unsure if dead or alive. But that's still one missing from the "seven plus one", in my count, unless you actually count the three stripes.

Morgenstern

Eek. Finally my connection finished loading all the comments. So, some peeps, DO count the "hole" and the "three stripes" as two other demon corpses, interesting. I hope we'll get some clarification here or I might still be waiting for a reveal when this book is all done and over XD

Chapter 25: Sanitize

"Though it is not poor advice that one should imitate excellence, one who follows this advice alone can only ever aspire to be an imitation of excellence."

– Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

As the radiance in his armour slowly faded, the Mirror Knight turned towards us.

With the echoes of Light that'd shone within his plate dispersing, the aura of power that'd hung around him should have gone the same way – and it did, some. Christophe of Pavanie no longer seemed like an implacable thing fashioned out silver and light: he looked human again, the raised visor of his barbute revealing dark locks pressed by sweat against his brow. Yet I could see the certainty he was moving with now, that certain something that came from being in your element and knowing it, and grew no less wary of the man. The softly whistling sword in his hand he sheathed without a word, sliding it home in a beautiful and heavy piece of iron, but even his putting away the Saint of Sword's cutting rectitude made blade was not enough to have my shoulders loosen.

Losing the unearthly touch had simply left behind a man, I thought, with dark green eyes and narrow lips. Flawed, yes, but not unpleasantly so. It made him seem more attainable, the stark opposite of the Exiled Prince's golden perfection back in the day – which had been beautiful but also somehow unnatural to the eye. This one, though, he looked cloaked in might but no less *human* for it. It was a dangerous thing, that mix of vulnerability and power. I should know, given how often I'd used it to bind people to me. Soldiers were willing to pay dues to a faraway idol, but real loyalty came from sharing in blood and mud. Christophe de Pavanie, to speak the words that had my fingers clenching in dismay, looked like someone people might rally around.

That was dangerous, when the man being rallied to bore both a sword forged for deicide and a child's understanding of politics.

The Mirror Knight had carved his way through seven demons and half a Court's worth of fae in a single evening, so there was no arguing that the man had the might to back anything he chose to say. Much as my mind wanted to argue that providence and another lesser hand had provided in this, that the Severance and Light made him uniquely suited to demonslaying, I knew those whispers for what they were – a tinge of fear and dismay. Behind them was the knowledge that, right now, the one trick I had that might still be able to curb him was beyond my reach: now that the emergency wards had come on, I could no longer try to gate the hero to his demise. *The Saint could cut gates*, I thought. *So would it even be enough if I could still use them?*

"Black Queen," Christophe de Pavanie greeted me. "One of them slipped by ua, a dreadfiend. Did your party catch it?"

Only then did his eyes slide away from me and onto the rest of our company, ignoring the legionaries and barely paying attention to the mages before lingering on Masego and at last offering the Blade of Mercy a slight nod. Even that was enough to have the

younger man blooming in pleasure, whatever gilding having been knocked off the Mirror Knight today freshly plastered back on by this victory.

"It's been destroyed," I replied, voice even. "There were losses."

His face fell into dismay, the peace on it whisked away in a heartbeat.

"Lady Eliade?" he hoarsely asked.

"And sixteen of my soldiers," I replied, tone growing sharp.

I grieved Nephele's death, but power and a story had not somehow made her life worth more than those others.

"I did not mean to dismiss their deaths," he stiffly said.

I forced myself to breathe out. It'd been an unkind interpretation of his words, and I'd known it even as I spoke the words.

"My temper is not at its best," I replied, stopping short of an apology.

The Vagrant Spear, who I'd barely been paying attention to, began to pant noticeably as she suddenly went deathly pale. Earlier upright and dealing in Light, she now began to lean heavily against her spear – and even then she looked about to topple over.

"Sidonia," the Mirror Knight exclaimed, catching her elbow.

I stepped forward, though he had things seemingly in hand so I did not try to offer my own arm.

"Hierophant can provide healing, if you're willing," I offered as I kept limping forward.

Now that I was paying closer attention to her, the ironically eye-catching scorched eye was not the worst of what she'd gone through tonight. There were subtle tells of harsher wounds. For one the flush she'd had while fighting had not abated in the slightest since, and she was sweating badly enough it was making her face paint run. Some tells were less subtle, like blade marks including one puncture that would have gone through her lung by the angle. Nasty stuff, lung wounds, even for Named. Some slender blade had done it, but definitely a sword. The marks weren't bleeding, though, and even looked to be healed some: scabs had formed, though they looked bloody and crusty. The Concocter's work, no doubt.

"The second of the peddler's potions has run out," the Vagrant Spear admitted. "It was champion's brew, Black Queen, or close enough. There is little that the Hierophant can do. With a few days of rest, I should be on my feet again."

"Something can be done about the fever at least, surely," the Mirror Knight insisted.

"He's right," I said. "Consider it an order by an officer of the Truce and Terms. I might still have questions for you, so you can't disappear into sleep and avoid all the unpleasant work that'll come after this spectacular mess."

She let out a weak chuckle.

"As relentless a taskmistress as your reputation promised," the Vagrant Spear told me, though it almost sounded like a compliment.

Masego had come to stand by me, having already wrested away sorcery from a mage, and by the look on his face I suspected he would have healed Sidonia regardless of her answer. Zeze was not a foe to other people's pride, usually, but he did tend to draw the line at what he perceived to be willful stupidity.

"Close your eyes," Hierophant ordered, yellow light coming to wreath his fingers. "And if you feel muscles spasming, tell me immediately."

I heard him mutter *champion's brew* with a pronounced degree of distaste under his breath, then add something about calling poison what it was. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, considering how I was now to deal with the Mirror Knight. From the corner of my eye I could see that the Blade of Mercy was hesitating to approach, likely afraid of interrupting a conversation between two people that were his social superiors, and in a snap decision I gestured for him to approach. It'd buy me a bit of time to think while they chatted, and I took the opportunity to send some regulars doubling back to get mages and priests here in all haste. I wanted every inch of this bloody place scoured clean until even layers of bedrock had gone.

Hells, if we could figure out a way how I was going to dump this entire section of the Arsenal out of here and then find a way to ensure not even a sliver of any kind of taint was able to crawl out of the destruction visited onto it.

I still had one loose end to clean up before I could pass supervision of this to competent officers and crash into a bed, though, and now I had to decide whether I wanted to take the Mirror Knight along with me when I saw to it. The man had no position under the Terms that'd warrant that, of course, and by treating him like he did I might be lending him that authority in

fact. If *I* acted like he was important, a lot of people would follow suit. That was the argument against it. The opposite side of this was that the Terms were an abstract, an ideal: in practice, power mattered. The Mirror Knight had the Severance, he was nigh-unkillable and was also a rather famous Proceran hero – arguably the most famous of them all. The Kingfisher Prince had spent most the war up in Twilight's Pass, after all.

It was indisputable that Christophe de Pavanie would end up with clout, after tonight, so shouldn't I begin to bring him into the... fold, for lack of a better term, as soon as possible? Even if it happened that he was intent on being an enemy, it'd be best to find out early. It felt like a mistake, but then it'd be just as much of one to go the other way wouldn't it? The Intercessor knew her way around a scheme: her works left me only shades of loss to pick from. From the corner of my eye I noticed the conversation between the two Proceran heroes had come to an end, which meant my delaying must come to an end.

"Mirror Knight," I called out.

I gestured for him to follow me when he glanced my way, stepping away from the closest soldiers for a degree of privacy. I hid a wince when he came close, as the last glints of Light in his armour unsettled the Night within my body – like wind on the surface of a pond. I could understand now why Firstborn would find him deeply unsettling, being so much more deeply dyed in the Night than I could ever hope to be. But it was the sword that had me wariest of all. Even sheathed, I could feel its hostility. *You know who I am*, I thought, sneaking a look at it. *And there's just enough of Laurence left in you to hold a grudge, isn't there?*

"Black Queen," Christophe de Pavanie said. "You wanted to talk?"

His eyes were wary, but he did not strike me as spoiling for a fight. I supposed even his stamina must run out eventually, or at least dip downwards.

"This isn't over yet," I said.

He slowly nodded.

"Antoine says you have fingered the culprit behind all this," he said. "The Wandering Bard, yes? More fearsome an enemy than her Name would have one believe."

"The Bard can't act directly," I bluntly said. "Think of her as a devil or a fae: her weapons are deals and persuasion, not blades. And she had helpers in the Arsenal from the start."

The Mirror Knight's face went cold.

"Traitors," he spat. "That will need seeing to."

"Most are dead, outed by their actions during the crisis," I said. "But there is one still unaccounted for – the person who unleashed the Concocter's creations in the Miscellaneous Stacks, likely the same collaborator who tried to arrange for the Kingfisher Prince to fight guards."

"Then we are still in danger," the Mirror Knight said, side of the neck twitching as he forced himself not to look to the side.

Where Masego was seeing to wounded Vagrant Spear. Wasn't the danger to himself that was worrying him, evidently. I was going to have to look into that relationship, wasn't I? Gossip about Named tended to be a lot more useful than you'd think in figuring them out, at least when it was halfway credible.

"I don't believe the individual in question to be a current threat," I noted. "But neither do I believe in letting loose ends linger."

Dark green eyes narrowed.

"You've been vague on purpose about the traitor," the Mirror Knight said. "Are you afraid I'll take justice in my own hands?"

That edged on a challenge, and it had my blood quickening. My instinct was to slap him down, to set a tone for the coming days that established very clearly where we stood in the pecking order, but that was a *risk*. I'd be antagonizing a useful resource and, to be blunt, if the challenge turned to a fight the consequences of a defeat here would be disastrous. I must walk a fine line, remaining convivial without bending my neck – weakness would invite pursuit, not restraint.

"You barely know the third of what went on in the Arsenal this night," I flatly replied. "Justice is not something you're even remotely in a position to provide."

His lip curled in displeasure, but there was nothing there he could argue with.

"You could, however," I continued in a calm voice, "assist me in my duties under the Terms as witness for your side. Something I brought you aside to invite you to do."

"If there is still a traitor, this fight has not ended," Christophe of Pavanie insisted.

"This is not a battle, it is a disciplinary matter," I said. "If there are sentences to be doled out, then that will be done by the high officers of the Truce and Terms – and after discussion and trial, not by dragging people to the nearest hanging tree."

Too confrontational, I chided myself, but then what choice did I have? I could not let him believe, not even for a moment, that he had the right or authority to pass judgement over other Named. That'd be the end of the Truce and Terms, an implicit admission that its rules would always favour the side with the biggest stick. Without the perception of fairness, they were nothing but ink and air.

"I do not speak of summary executions, Black Queen," the Mirror Knight said, sounding appalled.

"Then we have no issue," I said. "Will you be accompanying me, or will I be reaching out to another Chosen?"

That particular trick I'd learned Akua. The false dilemma was an older lesson, but the little deceit of refraining from specifying something – which hero I would be reaching out to, in this case – while letting the wording do the thinking for the interlocutor. Chosen, I'd said, and there was only one other Proceran hero. The Mirror Knight's eyes flicked to the Blade of Mercy. Young, exhausted, more than a little shaken by his brush with a demon. And the older man would see the younger as in his charge, too, not exactly a subordinate but at least a responsibility. The question had decided its own answer.

"I accept your invitation to ser- *stand* as witness," the Mirror Knight said, hastily changing the sentence halfway through.

"Good," I said. "See to your affairs here, then prepare yourself to leave. We'll be going as soon as enough mages and priests have arrived to contain this properly."

The man nodded and briskly walked away. Fair enough. I checked in on Masego, to see how the healing was doing, but was shooed away. I did manage to slide in that I wanted him to lead containment and purge protocols here, which he agreed to without missing a beat. Our reinforcements were there before long, first a few careful squads of lightly armoured Dominion warriors sneaking in to have a look and then proper companies. Mages and priests aplenty, led by the Harrowed Witch and an earnest-faced man in armour who introduced himself as the Forlorn Paladin. Right, the hero with amnesia – one of Indrani's band. Much as their presence was appreciated, it was an old Lycaonese captain I left in charge, with a note that he should follow the recommendation of the specialists regarding containment to the letter.

With that left in good hands and the Mirror Knight having made his goodbyes to the Vagrant Spear and the Blade of Mercy, the two of us left. No escort came with us, though Lieutenant Inger offered, as I did not want to spook our target too soon. The downside of that was that I was left alone with Christophe de Pavanie, who for some godforsaken reason took it upon himself to attempt stilted small talk.

"I heard that you dealt handily with the undead plague in southern Hainaut," the Mirror Knight said.

I eyed him sideways, and seriously debated simply telling him he didn't have to do this. Good odds he'd taken as an insult, though, so I supposed we were fated to suffer through this.

"Would that we could have prevented that instead of suppressed it," I said, then made effort of my own. "I heard through the White Knight that you were part of the band that sunk a turtle-ship near Cleves – a well-done thing."

I bit my tongue a heartbeat later when I recalled what Hanno had told me of *how* that'd been achieved: throwing the man to my side through the shell, like some sort of eldritch trebuchet stone. His cheeks reddened and his hand slipped towards the Severance. Not to grasp its handle or threaten to unsheathe it, I thought, but... cautiously. Disbelievingly. As if to reassure himself it was there. Fuck, that might actually be worse. There were ways to handle a swaggering bully with a new toy, but this looked like a deeper thing.

"It was necessary work," the Mirror Knight said, tone steady. "Perhaps we might discuss where we are headed, and to meet whom?"

Yeah, I wasn't going to look that particular gift horse in the mouth.

"This is one of the paths to the Workshop," I said. "And we're headed towards the persona quarters of the Hunted Magician."

The dark-haired man jolted in surprise.

"One of the Damned?" he said. "I had thought..."

Wait, this entire time had he thought that I was trying to off one of the heroes and using him as a witness and helper? Had that been why he was so appalled when I mentioned hanging? Neither of those questions were something I could really ask outright, so I swallowed them and pressed on.

"My proof of his dealings with the Wandering Bard is weak," I said, "but I have enough that I should be able to startle more out of him. Besides, his troubles with Autumn came back to haunt all of us."

"He has given an oath to the Fair Folk?" the Mirror Knight asked.

"He never paid the debt," I corrected. "And Autumn came here in part to collect."

"Then every life taken by the fae is on his head," Christophe de Pavanie coldly said.

I shook my head.

"He didn't invite them, and as far as I know his enmity with them is older than his signing onto the Truce and Terms," I said. "Quite a few Named have old enemies that'd take a swing at them if they could, that's not a crime."

"Corpses strewn across the Arsenal speak otherwise," the Mirror Knight said.

"He was a tool in that, not the culprit," I flatly said.

That, to my surprise, actually seemed to strike a chord.

"But he is a traitor still," the Proceran hero said.

"*That*," I muttered, "I won't argue with."

And I suspected I already knew exactly what the Intercessor had bought his cooperation with, which while understandable did not make me want to burn him at the stake any less. When we actually got to the Workshop I had to ask for directions, since I didn't know where his quarters were, but the Arsenal was crawling with soldiers now so it was easily done. I shot a look at the Mirror Knight when we got to the door, waiting for his nod, and only then knocked. Before it opened I already knew he'd be behind it: the buzz of sorcery against my fingers, the telltale mark of something being warded up to its neck, assured me as much. He'd clearly made his rooms into a place where it would exceedingly difficult for enemies to find him.

The door was cracked open, the Hunted Magician carefully peering through. His eyes widened when he saw me, but he mastered his surprise and opened the door wide. Only then did he notice Christophe de Pavanie looming tall at my side, and the mask of affability he'd halfway put on lapsed into blankness. Whatever he'd believed me to be here for, the Mirror Knight being along did not fit with that belief. I used my staff to gently but firmly finish pushing open the door.

"Hunted Magician," I mildly said. "You know the Mirror Knight, I take it?"

"I know of him, Your Majesty," the Proceran mage said, inclining his head in a silent greeting. "What bring me the pleasure of your companies, if I might ask?"

"Not the sort of conversation to have in a hallway, yes?" I smiled.

"It would only be decent to offer seating and refreshments," the Mirror Knight pointedly said.

The look of pure genuine dislike they traded after that allowed me to take a look inside while they were both busy. Classic Alamans tastes, all cushions and painted wood with the furniture alone being worth as much as some houses back in Laure. We didn't pay the man nearly enough for that, but there was no telling what wealth he'd squirrelled away or favours he'd called in since.

"Alas, I only have one set of cups fit to witness royal lips," the Hunted Magician said. "I'm afraid you will have to some servant set I have lying around, Knight."

"Your hospitality matches your reputation," the Mirror Knight replied without missing a beat.

Point went to Christophe for that round, I decided.

"Oh, we won't be here for long," I said, still smiling. "I only mean to put some misunderstandings to rest, then we'll be off."

The Proceran villain glanced at the hero, brow quirking.

"I can just imagine," he thinly smiled, "what manner of misunderstanding you mean."

The Mirror Knight shot me a burning look, but if he hadn't wanted me to use his being an ass to my purposes then he shouldn't have been in the first place. We were invited to sit, myself on a seat like the Hunted Magician himself while Christophe was made to stay on a padded red footstool by my side.

"You are aware of the troubles that struck the Arsenal, of course?" I asked.

"Indeed," the Hunted Magician said. "I fought in defence of the Workshop, but found myself alone and so withdrew in the face of the enemy. I did return to help with healing at the Sinister Physician's infirmary when the immediate peril had passed, though I returned when I grew tired and my services superfluous."

He probably *had* done all those things, I mused. He seemed like the thorough type in some ways, so there'd likely be witnesses and everything. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't *digging* at the truth – I already had it. What I wanted from him was an admission.

"I did not see you at the Workshop when I fought there," the Mirror Knight accusingly said.

"There's more than one room in it, as it happens," the Hunted Magician drily replied.

"You're familiar with fae," I said. "What's your take on their presence here?"

"I see," he mused. "As you've grown to suspect, Your Majesty, our foe must have used my past dealings with their kind to muster them against the Arsenal – though I was not hunted for long, and so their true reason to have come here must be a deeper game."

Halfway believable, I thought, but still a little weak. He had to know that, so odds were he was counting on mere suspicion not being enough considering how useful he was to the Grand Alliance as an artificer and enchanter. In most circumstances that would have been a correct read of the situation, to his credit. These were not circumstances, and it was not just anyone he'd bargained with.

"That was also my conclusion," I mildly said. "And who would you name our foe?"

"It must be the Dead King," the Hunted Magician gravely assured me.

I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff, thoughtfully.

"Let's try this again," I said. "But with you being aware that I slit the Wandering Bard's throat after extracting every secret I could from her, including her multiple collaborators within these walls."

The man paled, grey-blue eyes dilating with fear.

"I understand that questions must be asked, Your Majesty, but I have never dealt with a foe of the Grand Alliance," he assured me, voice impressively calm.

"Liar," the Mirror Knight coldly said. "You stink of it."

"Do be silent, *péquenaud*," the Hunted Magician snarled. "I must protest at the presence of one of the hounds of the Heavens, Your Majesty, this is most-"

I sighed and slowly I reached for the long dragonbone pipe within my cloak. The eyes of the two of them on me as I slowly opened a packet of wakeleaf – Hanno's gift, amusingly – and stuffed it before passing my palm over the bowl and letting a flare of back flame light it. I breathed in deep, then leaned back into my seat and crossed one of my legs over the other. I breathed out the smoke slowly, letting it curl up around my face.

"Your Majesty," the Hunted Magician tried again. "If I may-"

"Who am I, Magician?" I patiently asked him.

"The Black Queen, as all know," the man replied. "I question not your authority under the Truce and Terms-"

"No," I said. "You just take me for a fool. Now that with the Bard's help you were able to have the prince holding your debt killed, you think you can wiggle your way out of this without too much trouble."

"I have never heard of this woman you accuse me of having made common cause with," the Hunted Magician said, exasperated.

"It must have seemed like a sweet bargain," I mused. "Open a few canisters of gas, weave an illusion or two, and just like that the great sword ever hanging over your head would go away forever. Hardly even a breach of the Terms, even if you got caught. There are others under this roof who have done the same or worse."

I breathed in the smoke. The Mirror Knight was watching me in silence, visibly eager to speak but forcing himself to remain silent anyway.

"I brought worthy concerns to you, Your Majesty," the man said. "Why would I do such a thing, were I a traitor?"

I breathed out the smoke, then leaned forward.

"Right now," I said, "the only thing standing between you and a tribunal of heroes, of angry Grand Alliance officers? It's my word, Magician. So I want you to take a moment to consider, *really consider*, exactly how much of an imposition on my patience you want to be after the night I've had."

The Hunted Magician fell silent.

"This was a bad bargain," I told him, tone cool and calculating. "I don't even need to lift a finger to destroy you, after this: all I need to do is stop extending my protection and they'll have you gagged and chained before the hour's out. And even if you escape, where do you go? We're half the continent, Magician, you'll be hunted like a criminal everywhere we rule. Even in the League we're owed favours, and if you somehow make it to Praes the best you can hope for is a gilded cage – though more likely they'll use you, then murder you so you cannot be used by another. You traded one faraway fairy prince as an enemy for the lasting anger of *half fucking Calernia*."

"This is coercion," the Hunted Magician tightly said. "Is that not an abuse of your authority, Black Queen?"

I spewed out a long stream of smoke.

"Authority," I repeated, amused. "Are you going to begin listening to me, then? The word goes both ways. You cannot hide under my wing and sink a knife in my flank at the same time – I am not so tolerant a soul as to allow *that*."

His appeal to my better nature – which had always been pragmatic enough to know when it was time to go for a walk and let the other one handle things – having failed, he turned to the other way out of this mess.

“What do you want?” the dark-haired mage asked, teeth gritted.

“I want a reason I should go through the effort to keep your head off a pike,” I said. “Because the more you keep wasting my time, Hunted Magician, the more I begin to consider how putting it there instead would solve *so very many* of my problems.”

The enthusiasm I’d spoken that last sentence with, I thought, was what tipped him over the edge.

“I know you can extract memories with Night,” he suddenly said. “So I can give you the Bard.”

“I have the Bard already,” I said, unimpressed. “Try harder.”

“I know how the Blessed Artificer and the Repentant Magister were tipped off to the existence of Quartered Seasons, and by whom,” the Hunted Magician said.

My pulse slowed. I wanted that. Most the traitors of this night had come from outside the Arsenal, and that meant the Intercessor was likely to still have helpers out there. A way to begin ripping out her influence root and stem was a decent prize to bargain with. Not, though, quite enough to tempt me.

“Better,” I said. “But sweeten the pot a little more.”

First he looked insulted by the cavalier treatment, then hesitant. He licked his lips.

“I know,” the Hunted Magician slowly said, “where to find the ruling crown of Autumn.”

I breathed in smoke so that a triumphant grin would not reveal the truth of my thoughts. And like that, the pieces fell together. If Hierophant could get his hands on it, Quartered Seasons became more than an idle notion.

“That will do,” I said.

The Hunted Magician’s relief was not as well-hidden as he probably believed it to be. I rose to my feet, brushing some ash off my cloak.

“Don’t try to leave the Arsenal,” I said, not bothering to add on a threat. “I’ll send for you when the situation calms, likely with the White Knight and other Alliance representatives sitting in.”

"As you say," the Hunted Magician said through gritted teeth.

I glanced at the Mirror Knight and saw the face of a man who was moments away from blurting out a great many opinions.

"Escort me back to my rooms, please," I said.

Christophe de Pavanie stiffly nodded, and even opened the door for me.

I suspected the conversation that was about to follow, though, would be a great deal less civil.

matesbe

Cat will have to move fast, lest she alienate the Mirror Knight even more. It may require being more open about just what the information he's providing will mean. Mirror Knight is a pretty black and white guy, but it might mollify him a bit to learn that this information might lead to the Dead King's defeat.

Hantag

Nah, you're not thinking like Cat. She's gonna use this moment to, as she put it, "bring him into the fold." She'll explain the politics he's been missing and help him pull his head out of his ass. He's halfway to the idea of pragmatic heroism: That good deeds and faith aren't enough, you need to be **effective**.

She's just been faced with a threat that could end her, armies and all. You haven't been paying attention if you don't think she's at least going to **try** to beat people around the head with it.

Zggt

I kinda think that this chapter reads a lot like a first date by two very clueless people who obviously think the other is their type. Cat was basically "damn that stupid, sexy, dangerous, man whose heart is in the right place" throughout the chapter, and it kinda reads that the Cristophe is mirroring (yes, yes) this attitude.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh dear god. That's how she kills him. After all of this is done, she takes him to her bedroom. He falls head over heels for her, and thus ensures he will die before this war is

over, probably saving her life, and rides the grief to kill Dead King. The perfect scheme!

Insanenoodlyguy

Meanwhile, on the other end, we discover that every time Hanno finishes drinking and leaves Cat's tent, he walks right over to Akua's. That first night she'd invited him in, he heistated, and she offered to flip a coin. At it like rabbits since.

It's the stupid ship I only just realized I wanted!

Nairne .01

This comment sub thread made me laugh so hard.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

Now. Cat, ask your important questions quickly, or. That traitor will likely be dead.

shikkarasu

I want Hannua so bad, now.

[Mental Mouse](#)

LOL!

Jack

That puts her in a love triangle with Mirror Knight's scheming royal lover, which in story terms is almost a 50/50 chance of Cat dying in some torrid and ridiculous manner.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. Scheming royal lover doesn't have the weight to keep the odds even.

[Liliet](#)

i'd say now's the time for Cat to teach some nuances to him lol. "A child's understanding of politics", as she said, is a bit of a problem.

[Also, vote for Guide on topwebfiction!](#)

Salt

Preach, dude. Cat needs to be the adult here and calmly help him along even if he yells and gets angry and says irritating things.

"The Mirror Knight" isn't some old zealot who's completely set in his ways. He's more or less just a kid who's had almost zero proper mentorship to moderate him. All the insecurity, angst, self doubt, and overzealousness we've seen from him so far + his POV shows that. He means well, but he's been handed way too much power for his level of experience, and his awkward flailing isn't doing him or anyone else any favours.

Cat knows this too, she monologued to herself at the start of this arc that no one had ever taken the time to set him straight. She mentioned that this is a failure on her and Hanno's part, that a Named with that much power was left to spin his wheels on his own for so long. Even the Bard mentioned it, how he's "lost and angry", how he's been "left to fester too long"

Cat had the luck to be taught from the start by one of the most patient, reasonable Villains on the continent. It wasn't even a decade ago she was a similarly naive kid strutting around with "justifications only matter to the just" as a catchphrase, trying to solve every problem by angrily hacking at it with her sword. It's about time she passed on that same kind of patient mentorship she got from Black, to another kid with massive potential and the best of intentions.

[Liliet](#)

...alas, she might have a better foundation, but she's maybe not even older than him. Is 23 plausibly "a kid"? In context, I'm going with yes =x

Sir Nil

Just realised something, Severance is the only Night artifact that wasn't one use only. SS put alot of work into that thing.

[Liliet](#)

That's because it's not exactly/entirely a Night artefact.

> The aspect that Catherine had extracted of the Saint of Swords' corpse had been a temperamental thing even before seven Named and one had lent their hand to making a proper artefact of it.

Edward Kim

Why would the Christophe be allowed to keep Severance?

Sir Nil

He may literally be the only one capable of using it. He had a whole story about losing his powers (glamour blocking) then gaining a new one (bf sword) at the darkest hour. In the eyes of the story Severance is already his.

Ninestrings

Yeah he literally Took Up The Sword, the only other way to get it narratively is probably from his cold dead hands.

Miles

That particular story is one that Cat needs to disrupt anyway. The sword in the pond and heroine's aspect mirrors the story of the lady of the lake granting King Arthur the right to rule.

Given the way Cat used a similar story to win against angels it may already be too late.

Ninestrings

Lots of stories involved taking up the sword, this story began with taking up a knife.

This is a magic sword destined to slay a Great Evil though, lots of momentum there it's gonna be hard to deflect, we even have a literal knight in shining armour.

[*Liliet*](#)

Why does she need to disrupt it?

Ninestrings

Because it's basically giving a ten year old a Kalashnikov and hoping he'll shoot a bad guy.

[*Liliet*](#)

As we see in this chapter and him keeping his mouth shut as Cat gives him a crash course in behind the scene dealings, not entirely! 😊

Dsylexic Wofl

Well, there is the fact that the Severance was Saint's aspect, and as seen in this chapter some of her conscience is still in there. This makes for a bad story to Cat, and one that she probably already realised, after all it was Bard that wanted to make the Mirror Knight to take up the Sword.

Morgenstern

Saint's aspect, made by 'seven and one' into an aspect... seven and one demons coming for it... Is the *sword* tainted or possessed now? Hmm...

[Javvies](#)

Even if there's no lingering demonic influence ... it's not what they were trying to create, because they weren't done working on it, and then there's the Story influence/taint that Bard has arranged for it and Mirror Knight.

I'm inclined towards there not being any demonic influence because Mirror Knight had already taken up the blade before Maddened Keeper started using demons she contained (and before the demons were loose).

medailyfun

An experienced woman is going to introduce the child to the wonderful world of people's relationships

Oshi

Creepiest thing I have read tonight but yep

Miles

Because it's a king's story and if a Named comes out of this as a ruler then that's it for the truce and terms, and for any similar arrangement they want to make.

[Liliet](#)

Ah.

No, yeah, I don't think that's a king's story, in context.

[MadeThisAccountJustForYou \(@MadeThi54U\)](#)

Doesn't necessarily kill Cat in the crib. Our Arthur still appears to need a Merlin

tithin

Who's going to take it from him?

Jworks

Why take it away from him? That blade is so far their best shot at killing the Dead King, and not only did they find someone who could wield it and not die, they found a wielder near impossible to kill.

RoflCat

Because so far he's been too much of a dense brick to read the bigger game.

On one hand, it makes him very much against the idea of betraying the Arsenal, thus the Bard never use him as one of her traitors.

On the other hand, he failed to notice he IS being used as a distraction to keep Catherine busy with the fake rumors of her trying to kill Red Axe (who as we've seen turns out to ALSO be a traitor) relying on his heroic bravado.

Though with the event of this night, he might improve a bit. Not the whole reading bigger game, but becoming self-aware about him being a dense brick and thus relies more on people who can see the bigger pictures on guidance (not direction, guidance, because his reputation also requires that he act like a Leader at times)

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Who's gonna take it from him?

Insanenoodlyguy

At this point?

A. "Allowed" assumes there is anybody who could keep that Sword from him.

B. Worse yet, "Allowed" assumes there is anybody who could keep HIM from that Sword.

They both made the kind of choice you don't just withdraw. At this point even if he was convinced to give it up, It's certain that it will be a disaster to try to let anybody else use it, and it will find it's way back to his hands. If by no other means that one day at a moment of need it will simply be in his hand.

Best not to be part of any story that involves getting between them.

Decius

Who would take it from him?

[onedollargum](#)

I seem to remember that most people who try to wield it sustain serious cuts. Cristophe seems to be handling it okay, overeager to use it that he is.

Sprouting_Bud

Would you volunteer to take it from him?

[Mental Mouse](#)

First and foremost, who's capable of taking it away from him? Cat could try to use her authority, but she also knows the story-issues others have mentioned – basically, the Severance is part of Christophe's story now. The best she can do is to try to guide him away from Betrayer Of The Kingdom type stories and keep him pointed at the Dead King instead of being a loose cannon.

That said, having the Mirror Knight take up the Severance does seem to offer a way out of the "used macguffin" problem!

mamm0nn

Pretty much the whole drawing Excalibur from the rock thing. If you can do it, it's yours to keep. The acid water and literally burning plus killing those that try just made this one dangerous rock to pull from.

Edward Kim

A clarification point-

I guess I assumed that due to Cat's pivotal role in creating the Terms, Arsenal, extracting the aspect from Saint's cold dead body, Zeze's role (I think?) in forging that aspect into a physical manifestation, she would have more of a say/ownership over how it was used/in whose hands it would be best put.

That being said, I agree with all your points, like Severance being a part of Christophe's story now, etc.

[Javvies](#)

That's part of what makes the play around Severance a Bard win and a Cat loss – Bard got to pick the wielder of Severance who picked it up at a time, place, and manner of Bard's choosing.

As opposed to Cat having control over where Severance went when Masego and Roland (and whomever else was involved) finished working on it.

WealthyAardvark

I'm kind of surprised this hasn't been focused on in this group of replies, but when the sword was introduced in the Terms Interlude, Masego is careful to not stick fingers or clothes into the water it sits in lest that act alone cause them to get cut off. Then he think about drawing the sword:

> The odds were at least six in ten that anyone drawing the blade would die, after all.

Given that the Grand Alliance was only able to gather 27 Named for the crusade's invasion of Callow, even with the recruitment efforts when losses over the years are taken into account I doubt there's more than 50 Named on the GA's side in the war. Of those, 10 were permanently assigned to the Arsenal, and we know there's others like the Forgetful Librarian and the Beastmaster who don't serve on the front lines. And that's before the losses from the last few chapters are accounted for.

Frankly, there aren't enough Named around to even *try* to give Severance to someone else. How can Cat justify possibly killing off 10-25% of their remaining Named forces trying to find another wielder? No, better to shape the Mirror Knight into a proper wielder than that.

Insanenoodlyguy

Those are the odds to DRAW the blade without dying. It says nothing about USING the blade. That probably kills a good deal more.

Edward Kim

Yeah, I see your point. Thanks!

[vernal.ancient](#)

So... we still haven't seen what actually happened to Archer after she got stabbed, right?

Ninestrings

She killed the fallen monk afterwards I believe.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Ah, right. Thanks for the reminder

Frivolous

Does this mean Cat won the battle with the Intercessor? Because if she can identify the remaining undisclosed traitors, then she can cut out the infection in the Arsenal.

I think this episode advances the theory that Quartered Seasons involves giving a crown of the fae to an enemy and then using that crown against them.

I'm beginning to think Masego lost only a little when he lost his magic. Wrest seems to allow him regular access to sorcery anyway.

I wonder how much raw power in magic Zeze had, as opposed to sensitivity and control and knowledge. Was he very strong in magic, or was he only mediocre that way, with most of his prowess coming from his refinement?

Javvies

I believe Masego was significantly above average in the strength of his Gift, in addition to the sensitivities and control necessary to utilize High Arcana. Plus he would have had a magical education as good or better than Akua, starting in his early childhood, plus he got the Name of Apprentice quite young as well.

He had plenty of natural talent combined with top tier education and training, then he got a relevant Name. And while Warlock wasn't going to teach in a school ... he put at least a decade of dedicated, personalized tutoring into Masego.

Insanenoodlyguy

Like Cat, he's much weaker now, in a way that's made him far more dangerous.

Liliet

Yep, Cat won that fight! Not as thoroughly as the Intercessor would have liked her to, but the Arsenal is hers :3

WuseMajor

As Cat noted, the scheme was sufficiently thorough that Cat didn't really "win" so much as she "got to choose which way she lost." And even that was only partly.

Hakram is mostly dead, the Repentant Magister (someone who could have been the Mirror Knight's moral compass) is entirely dead, the Maddened Keeper is dead, the Mirror Knight is now probably the most powerful hero on the continent and his powers seem designed to kill Cat, the Bard did something tricky with Cordelia and the economic stability of the alliance, and all she has to show for it is that some of the Bard's traitors have been exposed and that more people aren't dead.

Well, that and she was able to prevent the Bard from leaving when the Bard wanted and the next time the Bard takes a swing

at her, Cat will probably kill her permanently. Which....it's not nothing, but....

Konstantin von Karstein

What did the Bard do to Cordelia?

beleester

We don't know, but during the affrays, she put down The Empress, with The Tower on top of it, and said it represented Cordelia, on her way to the Arsenal.

[Liliet](#)

Hakram is fine, Nephele was not doing any such thing. I'm pretty sure the economic stability was not Bard,

Konstantin von Karstein

He had an above average strength and was very good at using it.

Anomandris

Now this is a conversation I so very much want to read. Friday can't come up soon enough.

Christophe seemed to come out a little better this chapter... Doesn't seem that the newfound power is going to his head yet. Also interesting that there was absolutely defending the bard or putting that issue to one side, like Pilgram usually does...

Insanenoodlyguy

I misread this before, but Christopher is becoming a leader now. This day has many people looking up to him, and now he'll play the part required. Thankfully, this seems to be the sort of personal growth story where he's actually getting smarter instead of the bruce force story where he's just kicking so much ass people shrug and get behind him. Before this night he would have already started a fight with Cat, tried to kill Hunted Magician without discussion, or both. Now some of that stuff that's never clicked for him is finally starting to. He's not going to become a diplomat, but his head might be getting more uses than headbutting things.

hakureireimu

People looking up to him isn't new. He's still very very far from leadership material.

[Javvies](#)

Well, Bard gave Hunted Magician a compelling case to do what little she asked of him.

On the other hand ... based on what we know of the Fae ... they'll presumably just respawn in a year/next autumn ... which sort of negates the point of killing the guy holding the debt if he's only temporarily dead.

The source on the leaks around Quartered Seasons is very important.

Mirror Knight is going to need to be handled carefully. And he'll probably still be a problem for some time to come, even in a best case scenario.

wikipedia

Maybe not, if there was a weapon that could permanently shut down fae. The severance would be it.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, we've seen earlier that Fae do not come back identical. The Prince of Falling Leaves is dead. Next time he comes back, he'll be something else. The debt to the Prince of Falling leaves is already void and the Duke of Buried Deciduous or whatever he is next will have no such claim, though likely would be happy to run into the Hunted Magician if he was foolish enough to make additional deals. Still, even when Autumn comes again, I expect even if he has the same name and title he simply won't be considered the prior creditor. .

[Liliet](#)

Larat came back identical every cycle, and Hye hunted him for his eye every time.

Now, the cycle is broken now...

[Javvies](#)

We only know that the Summer/Winter cycle has been changed. We don't know if they still respawn/reincarnate after being killed.

And we don't know what, if anything, the changes to the Summer/Winter Courts have affected with regards to the Spring/Autumn Courts and their respawn/reincarnation cycle.

[Liliet](#)

V true!

Nairne .01

The thing that keeps puzzling me is how did the Winter King come up with that scheme at all. Larat explained they don't learn like we do and they only mimic. Did he know a story like that already? Peace through marriage I mean. Or did he pick cat as a wild card and just roll the dice? She is literally a wild card so she might change things, that king of thing.

ninegardens

Preas and Callow.

The trecherous empire being folded into the lush kingdom.

Winter king copied Black Knight.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think it was that. He introduced Cat on the equation to make a change. He didn't care about what change, it's not like she could have kill him for real.

[Liliet](#)

Peace through marriage is a classic. The game-changer was the idea of peace period, and that one was aped from Amadeus's Praes/Callow fusion.

Shveiran

He didn't come back as exactly the same, though, there was a reset involved in the process: just like Ranger had to carve out the eye again every time because the loss was retconned, I believe any claim of THIS Prince of Falling Leaves died with him.

The story ends, the story starts anew. But it does so from scratch, even if it follows kind of the same patterns.

Also, I think seasons take a long time to change. We have so far seen just one seasonal change over several years, after all.

[Liliet](#)

This is probably true!

Insanenoodlyguy

We know Larat game back every time. Do we know that he was always the Prince of Nightfall? The King implied that he wasn't always the same. It may also simply be that the prince is one of the exceptions.

Javvies

As I noted earlier, the only known changes from one cycle to the next is which of the four Princes/Princesses is King/Queen for that cycle. They rotate ... but when they're not bearing the Crown, they always have the same Title.

Shveiran

Yes, but the King or Queen changes the stories going through the Courts. This was stated in Book 3.

Therefore, while it is true that Larat is likely the Prince of Nightfall 75% of the time (that is Winter/Summer time, so more like 37,5% of the time), it is at least suggested that the stories available change in each incarnation, which means he falls into one of a limited number of story groves, but not always the same.

For the purposes of our discussion, that seems like evidence that once a Prince falls, your debt to him is erased, because though a Prince will come back, it will be your Prince only in part.

Liliet

He would be King some of the time and Prince of Nightfall the rest.

Javvies

Based on what we know of the Fae, the only "changes" in the respawn/reincarnation cycles is which of the four Princes/Princesses of each Season is instead King/Queen for the current cycle ... and they remember who they are when they aren't in a cycle where they bear the Crown.

And that the Fae can and do retain what memories they form from one cycle to the next.

Remember, Larat remembered that Ranger kept going after him to put his eyeball on a ring every cycle since she first started doing that. And he held a grudge about that, but, since, y'know, Ranger, he hadn't been able to do anything about it.

Debts owed to or by mortals? They too would be significant enough to be retained from one cycle to the next ... even ignoring the magical compulsions around oaths and recognized debts inherent to Fae nature.

thearpox23

While everything you wrote makes sense, it also completely invalidates the whole Hunted Magician's scheme. And he hasn't been shown to be an idiot. Ergo, you must be missing something.

Javvies

There's no way of knowing how much Hunted Magician knows about the Fae respawn/reincarnation cycle or if/how it may have changed as a result of Summer and Winter unifying.

Or maybe Bard misled him, implying that the Summer/Winter unification permanently and completely broke the respawn/reincarnation cycle for Autumn/Spring as well, which it may or may not have – we have no idea if it did or not.

But previously, the only way to permakill a Fae was to capture them and drain out all of their energy and use it for something else.

So ... this move certainly seems like it's not as useful as it sounds like.

We obviously don't know everything, but ... we don't know how much Hunted Magician knew or thought he knew either ... or what Bard may have said or implied to him.

Frankly, I'm pretty sure this just gave us more questions.

vernal.ancient

Yes, because we all know intelligent people are entirely incapable of making faulty plans due to lack of information or simply overlooking an important detail /s

ninegardens

I wonder if Larat is holding a grudge against Hye.

... I wonder if he will be inclined to take it out on Amadeus... take something from her she can't get back....

Shveiran

Larat is now both mortal and not suicidal, so I'm pretty sure he is not planning that. Hye's whole thing is to hunt down things, and he is very aware he never could take her on, much less now.

TeK

I guess we all know where the Not-Fae has gone. Helping Malicia.

Shveiran

What? How? Why?

[TeK](#)

I mean there is only one obvious place...

Shveiran

So you reckon the obvious place for the smart individuals who no longer have any magical power or survivability that also saw first hand how terrifying Catherine can be, is to put themselves between her and another powerful, ruthless woman that has no real reason not to push them under the bus the first time it is convenient.

What would they even gain, revenge? It's possible they want it, but this is not a smart way to try to get it. This would be the desperate attempt of a consumed individual, not something done by smart individuals that want to live first and foremost.

Besides, in the grand scheme of things, I doubt they want Catherine to fail. Fey like playing with mortals, and a continent of corpses is a dull place to live in.

Dotar

The story ends with the death of the fae. Next Circle he might remember and have a grudge but the debt would be gone because in a story sense he is not the same person.

agumentic

>Debts owed to or by mortals? They too would be significant enough to be retained from one cycle to the next

They would be, if he "died" to Arcadia's changing of seasons or some other unrelated cause. However, this time that story played out – he came to collect his debt and got murdered, the end. He might revive during next cycle – we don't know how the marriage affected this – but he doesn't get to pretend that this story didn't happen.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Right now," I said, "the only thing standing between you and a tribunal of heroes, of angry Grand Alliance officers? It's a vote for Practical Guide to Evil on Topwebfiction, Magician. So I want you to take a moment to consider, really consider, exactly how much of an imposition on my patience you want to be after the night I've had."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

"Vote now," I said. "The only thing standing between apgte and ward, the current top story because it just finished? It's Worth the Candle, reader."

Oooff, being third

Darkening

Man, Worth the Candle is a good read, but it might be even more depressing than Worm, and the main character is nowhere near as likeable :(.

Shveiran

Would you recommend WtC as a read?
I tried reading it, but it really rubbed me the wrong way.
Does it get better, in your opinion?

Kytin

Depends on what aspect it was that irritated you. If it was the grimness of the setting, then yes I would say it gets better, especially as the characters get more powerful and therefore able to affect the world. It's still pretty dark stuff though.

If it was the main character being unlikable... Then yes he also gets better. In fact that seems to be the heart of the story. It's slow progress though.

[TeK](#)

So, since Ward is now basically a second worm, does it mean it is worth reading?

[vernal.ancient](#)

Pretty much comes down to how much you like sprawling stories with a heavy focus on the psychological states of the characters involved. If that's your jam, Ward will be a good read for you. If you prefer tight pacing and plotting and not so much psychoanalysis, it's definitely not going to be your thing. I've also heard that probably the most common complaint, excessively long arcs, is a lot less noticeable on a binge than when you're being drip-fed two chapters a week, so it probably will be a better read now it's finished than when it was in progress

Ninestrings

Cat just straight up bullying someone is a nice wind down after all the Demon-Stress.

[Liliet](#)

I love that she brought MK in on it. Political education!

laguz24

What I'm waiting for is when Cat has to broach the betray Sve Noc plan to him and how he will deal with that, though luckily Cordelia will deal with the noble half of the conspiracy and nothing more will come of it.

WealthyAardvark

Aw heck, I forgot about that. Yeah, that's going to be a thorny knot to untangle.

[Liliet](#)

Oh man, this was some delicious fucking food.

I hope the next chapter is going to be exactly what it says on the tin (the conversation between Cat and Christophe)

crueldwarf

>he looked human again, the raised visor of his barbute revealing dark locks pressed by sweat against his brow.

Barbutes do not actually have visors. They are classical greek-style hemets with T-shaped vision slits.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Might be confusion with a bascinet, which generally would have visors (though I just learned there were apparently open-faced bascinets as well). Bascinet fits the 'Knight' title better too, since barbutes were primarily infantry helmets

Sprouting_Bud

Barbutes can have a visor.

Wonder

I really hope Cat doesn't bend over backwards for this guy. And when at all is her name going to ripen, it's being two fucking years and still nothing.

Isn't Cat worried the Magician could be attacked in this now obviously msade pit of backstabbers?

Juff

Typo Thread:

out silver > out of silver
by ua > by us
layers of bedrock > the layers of bedrock
way how I > way how, I
I must walk > I had to walk
learned Akua > learned from Akua
godforsaken > godsforsaken
he'd taken > he'd have taken it
persona quarters > personal quarters
and using him > while using him
would exceedingly > would be exceedingly
wood with > wood, with
have to some (missing words)
have been in > have been one in
These were not circumstances > These were not most circumstances
them on me > them were on me
Magician, you'll > Magician; you'll
half fucking > half of fucking
Most the traitors > Most of the traitors

Gabe

This seems like the beginning of a great romance.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Copying my comment from Discord:

> Frankly, I think if Cat can handle it, this might actually be the opportunity to "save" Christophe. He's taken up a sword... but in the same act, he's taken up a torch. Saint's beat was cleaning up the disasters from when other people's stories went really bad, and slaying 8+1 demons is a decent start. And taking up a sword is a classic rite of passage – it may be that with her sword, MK will also gain some maturity. He's surely gained more of a sense of identity!

Wonder

We have discord ? Send me a link , will ya?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think this should work: <https://discord.gg/cwX7GwF>

mamm0nn

And now next chapter, we hopefully getting Cat telling MK that he needs to stop sleeping with that backstabbing Proceran Princess, that yes she knows of it (wonder how she'll do that without... issues?) and that the drow are carrying much more of the war's weight than MK thinks.

Shveiran

Regarding Hakram, is no one else worried about the fact that he is going to get prosthetics?

Warlock has always said that the danger of arcane replacements is that a necromancer can usurp them or turn them off, and they are going against the Dead King...

Morgenstern

After *Severance/Severity* cut him up good this time, I would be highly disappointed should he get ANY prosthetics at all and not just be left a suffering mess (bodily), if still usable when it comes to his super-mind.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Necro-Hakram? I guess MechaHakram is Out of Genere. 😞

[vernal.ancient](#)

Depends how many red letters they're willing to get

Daniel E

I wonder if there is any manner of 'Pattern of Three' that would lead to a Hero's demise, much like how Pilgrim tried to push a Redemption story on Cat. MK's relative ignorance of story, politics, and leadership could give Cat an opening to put him down.

Ninestrings

Needs to be a tragedy, last stand against an overwhelming foe, having sex with your liege lords wife, being granted absolute power and slowing becoming the thing you hated...

Tragic romance is generally a good bet for hero death though.

ChillyPepper

Was Archer caught in a demon's wake?

Daniel E

Not that we know of. All the Demons were in the hallway & room containing Severance. After the fighting near Masego's room, Archer was 'outside', looking for him in the courtyard.

ChillyPepper

My memory seems to be extremely on the fritz, I remember her heading towards Hakram as reinforcements.

Morgenstern

She was looking for Masego, thinking the enemies were coming for *him*, as one of the goals (mastermind of Quartered Seasons, which would die with him).

She did send the Concocter to help Hakram, after getting tangled with the Monk who tried to assassinate her, after having failed doing the same to Cat.

laguz24

I just realized something, Assassin is an Expy of agent 47. Has the power of disguises, check. Kills people in hilarious accidents or over the top methods, check. Had to kill all the other people at his school to claim his name, check. Regarded as a boogymen by everyone else, double-check. Also, we don't know his name either.

Shveiran

So, since I started another re-read (yes, yes, sue me already) I stumbled on this little pearl.
This is from Chapter 5, Book I.

"Doing nothing is worse than being Evil," I told her, striding forward. "Getting people killed because you won't compromise is worse than being Evil. I'm going to change things – maybe not all of them, but enough. And if that means getting my hands dirty, I can live with that. I don't have to be a good person to make a better world."

This was Catherine's creed 5 chapters in, and blimey, it still applies today almost to a word.

This is some consistent writing ... her motivation has not shifted one inch, she has simply been learning what those words meant. We say she has grown, but she actually has the way a person does: learning how to live by her ideals in the real world without losing them, smoothing the edges she can do without so that she won't cut underserving people and keep her blade sharp for when it counts.

Good Lord is this character consistent.

My sincere compliments, EE, once again. This is a truly magnificent work.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As I've said before, Cat @15 would be astonished by later developments, but she'd totally recognize and appreciate who she's become.

Chapter 26: Palaver

"Hold not even the least of the laws of men in contempt, for where their like is absent rule only the laws of beasts."

– Isocrates the Harsh, Atalante preacher

I'd learned over the years that there were a lot of unspoken rules in Alamans culture.

Many them seemed about social status at first glance, in a way that made every mudfoot Callowan hackle in my body rise, but I'd eventually been forced to admit it was a little more nuanced than that. The Alamans were the most populous of the three Proceran peoples – Vivienne believed that there might be as many as three times more of them than Lycaonese – and I suspected a lot of their culture had been shaped of need to keep that massive amount of people at least halfway orderly. The Ebb and Flow might be a vicious wastrel thing by anyone's standards but the Wasteland's, but not every custom should be painted with the same brush. As an example; the typical Alamans reluctance to ever contradict a social superior in public wasn't from their ways being more set in stone when it came to the aristocracy, but arguably from the *opposite*.

Proceran royalty worried a lot more about public opinion than I'd ever believed such a rapacious lot would, because to them it could be a lethal thing. The Alamans understanding of authority was fundamentally rooted in a ruler having the graces of the Heavens of the people, so losing either tended to have an ambitious sibling or cousin remove you for the good of the family – when it wasn't done by another noble family entirely, one which had recently proven competent and popular. That sort of thing was exceedingly rare, in Callow. Back home when rule of holdings passed to another house it was usually because the last one had died to battle or Praesi madness, or the sparse cases where the Albans and Fairfaxes had stripped a house of its titles for some manner of treason. And that last one was *damned* rare, since some houses had flown the rebel banner and even fought battles against the Fairfaxes while still retaining their titles after their loss.

I'd found it fascinating that while back home it was broadly assumed that Proceran peasants were starvelings constantly robbed by their princes, the common folk of Procer in truth had their rights guaranteed by law: a set of rights known as 'Salienta's Graces', which royals naturally tried to squeeze around but were very leery of outright breaking. The sole lawful check on noble abuses, in Callow, was the crown being petitioned for intervention. Sure, it was an open secret that if some baron

began to trouble their people too much they were likely to one day not return from a hunt or mysteriously choke on their supper, but if violence was the only way to end a crime then there was a weakness in the law. It'd been humbling to realize some of the last remaining Callowan nobles might get outright rebellious if I tried to cram down their throats the legal rights for the commons that Proceran folk took for *granted*.

Not because they intended to abuse their subjects, no, but simply because the crown would be weakening their authority. Right or wrong didn't enter the equation, just the balance of power, and that was a hard thing to swallow even for me – whose opinion of Callowan nobles had long been, one might say, *uncharitable*. It'd also made me reconsider a lot of the conversations I'd had with Cordelia Hasenbach over the years, approaching them with fresh eyes. Her threshold for losing power in Procer had never been outright rebellion, as it could be argued to be for me, but simply growing unpopular enough that there would not be much trouble if someone of good reputation toppled her through the Highest Assembly. Hells, hadn't people tried to overthrow her with only middling backing just because it seemed like her decisions were getting unpopular? A lot of what had seemed to be hemming and hawing for its own sake back then could now be understood differently, if not necessarily be more forgivable for it.

It'd been almost as fascinating to me that lowborn Procerans tended to cling to those unspoken rules even more tightly than the nobles, as if deviating from them would be taint on their character. Christophe of Pavanie was, from what little the Jacks had been able to dig up on him – genuinely obscure origins had, there, been an even finer shield than an empire's worth of spies – of middling but not outright lowborn birth. His family would have been from the equivalent of a town's elders, in Callowan terms, but not necessarily influential or all that wealthy. Comfortable enough to ensure he'd be able to read and write, though, and evidently have some tutoring in the etiquette of the *well-bred*. Which was why the Mirror Knight had not spoken a single word about the conversation I'd had with the Hunted Magician, even though he was very clearly itching to.

I was a queen, you see, and a duly recognized high officer of the Grand Alliance. If I wasn't going around breaking the Truce and Terms myself, making myself into an outlaw and so throwing away all privileges, he might hate it to the bone but he'd not deny that I was his social superior. Mind you, that would only hold so long as we were out in public. And considering we'd long left behind the Workshop and entered the Alcazar, the thin barrier that'd ensured his sullen silence as we walked was soon to be stripped away. My first instinct had been to bring him to the small room where I'd received him earlier, but since it was currently filled with a mess of cards and the Wandering Bard's latest corpse I'd naturally reconsidered. There was a small

private parlour in my quarters here where we ought to be able to talk, though, and it'd do just fine.

The protective working of Night I'd laid on my door had dispersed when I'd been stabbed by the Fallen Monk earlier, so all it took to open my rooms was the use of a key. I gestured for the Mirror Knight to follow me in then closed the door behind us.

"Do you drink?" I asked, unclasping my cloak.

The man looked taken aback by the question, standing awkwardly in his full plate as I tossed the Mantle of Woe atop a dresser. I could hardly mock him for that, since if I'd been wearing proper armour instead of ceremonial dress I wouldn't have gotten stabbed in the neck by the Monk. Black's insistence on wearing plate seemingly at all times had never seemed more justified.

"Er, yes," the Mirror Knight said. "Your Majesty."

"Good," I grunted. "Do take you helmet off, and stash that sword somewhere I don't have to watch it seethe at my continued existence. I'm not going to stab you in my own parlour, I assure you."

His eyes widened.

"I did not mean to imply faithlessness of you by keeping my arms," the man hastily assured me, sounding like he very much wanted to wince.

He left the Severance near the door, propping it up against the wall like it was some farmer's hoe instead of tool for deicide, and after looking around for somewhere to place his helm and failing he simply held it in the crook of his elbow.

Uncomfortably, one assumed. Meanwhile I unearthed what looked like some Proceran bottle of red from an overly fancy drink cabinet before liberating two crystal cups – a donation, I hoped, since the thought of Callowan coin going into paying for those had me more than a little displeased – and setting all three of those things on the table.

"That ought to do," I said, and flicked a glance at the helm. "Put that on a dresser, would you?"

Amusing as it might be to watch him try to juggle holding his war helm and drink at the same time, it'd bode ill to make sport of him before our conversation even began. I uncorked the bottle with a pop and had moved to pour when I caught sight of the appalled look on the hero's face from the corner of my eye. Ah, yes. I was of higher rank, so pouring was either a breach of etiquette or implied a nonexistent degree of intimacy between us. Smothering a sigh – it'd be hypocritical to benefit from useful Alamans ways then complain of their inconvenience in the same

breath – I flipped my grip and offered the bottle to him. With surprising deftness for a man still wearing gauntlets, he poured first for me and then for himself. I nodded thanks and sat, while he followed suit in the latter a heartbeat later.

“You have questions,” I said.

Safer to frame them as that than objections. Someone confused could ask for clarifications without it being a threat, but to *object* implied a degree of authority I had no intention of allowing him in this conversation. The Mirror Knight’s lips thinned.

“You as good as solicited a bribe from the Hunted Magician and threatened to purposefully fail your responsibilities to him if one was not offered,” Christophe de Pavanie flatly accused. “Worse, when that bribe was offered you *took* it.”

I hummed.

“If I had simply asked questions of the Hunted Magician,” I said, “what would have happened?”

“He would have lied,” the Mirror Knight curtly said. “But you would not have disgraced yourself and the office you hold. He should have been imprisoned until a truthteller could be brought to the Arsenal.”

I wasn’t sure whether it was basic grounding in reality or a belief in the general perfidy of villains that had him aware that the Magician had no real reason to tell the truth if pressed, but I could work with it either way.

“Assume I had done this,” I allowed, to his visible surprise. “What would have followed?”

“A truthteller-”

“Who?” I pressed.

“The Peregrine,” he said, “or perhaps the Exalted Poet.”

“The Poet was a traitor who openly sided with the fae in battle,” I noted.

And thank you a hundred times over, Indrani, for passing that piece along. The dark-haired man’s face went slack in utter surprise. They’d fought on the same front, as I recalled. They must have known each other. I would have a lot more sympathy for his dismay if that friendship might not have led to the Bard getting her picked truthteller in a key position, had this all happened differently.

“I – are you quite certain?” the Mirror Knight croaked out.

"It has been confirmed by multiple witnesses," I said. "And that is not the heart of the issue, regardless: every single truth-teller in the Grand Alliance is a *hero*."

"I do not see the issue," he replied, sounding entirely honest.

Because that just wasn't how he saw the world in the end, was it? Heroes – the Chosen – were honourable and good, so even us wicked Damned must recognize these qualities and believe in their word when it was given. It was a shade of the same sentiment I'd so deeply despised in Tariq, that bedrock assumption that only the mad and the lost could ever choose anything but service to the Gods Above. It was a way to see the world that simply did not allow for disagreeing equals.

"The word of heroes isn't trusted by the Named I have in my charge," I bluntly said. "Most of them have fought Chosen at some point in their lives-"

"It is not a crime to have *stopped* crime," Christophe burst out.

"No, but it is ridiculous to ask villains to believe in the impartiality of heroes when they've almost certainly fought with one of their friends or companions in the past," I patiently said. "You yourself came into the Arsenal all but accusing me of plotting to murder the Red Axe-"

"For which I apologize," the Mirror Knight said through gritted teeth. "I was given reason to believe such a plot was afoot."

"And you believed it," I said.

He began to apologize again but I raised my hand to stop him.

"I'm not here to rake you over the coals for that," I said. "Mind you, I'll want to know *why* you came to believe that, but my point is that you did believe it. Because there is no trust between us."

I paused to let him digest that, taking up my cup at sipping at it. Some strong-flavoured red. From where in Procer I had no idea, but it was pleasant enough to drink.

"You are saying," the Mirror Knight slowly said, "that the lack of trust goes both ways."

I'd led him to that, true enough, but that he'd gotten there at all meant he was likely someone I could deal with. Not like the Saint, whose principles had cut both ways and never bent an inch even when they led her to facing death standing all alone. Ignorance I could mend, zealotry I could not.

"At best, using heroes to settle villain affairs would be seen as weakness on my part," I bluntly said. "At worse, it would be seen as collusion and plot."

"Whether that is true or not," Christophe said, "it remains that you threatened the Hunted Magian with withholding the protections he is due by law."

"Is he?" I said. "He plotted with the Wandering Bard to help an assault into the Arsenal – this is fact, not supposition, even though my proofs are limited. I would have been well within my rights to cut him loose and offer him up in chains to stand before a military tribunal."

"Then it is even worse," the Mirror Knight said, "for that was your duty, and you laid it aside for a *bribe*."

I rolled my eyes.

"I laid nothing aside," I said. "He'll still stand trial as he should under the Truce and Terms and I have received nothing from him save for words."

"Just because the bribe was not delivered-"

"I asked him for reasons his coming tribunal might have to refrain from a brisk hanging being the sum whole of the judgement rendered," I sharply said, growing irritated with the constant accusation of bribery. "Not for any sort of *bribe*."

I'd bloodied my hands enough for three villains, but the accusation that I might be corrupt was still enough to infuriate me. I was a cheat and a killer, but I was not godsdamned crook.

"You were promised a fairy crown," the Mirror Knight unflinchingly replied. "That did not escape me, Black Queen. The purported scheme that brought me here was your attempted seeking of queenship over Named, and this eager pursuit of Autumn's regalia does nothing to abate my fears."

I breathed out, gathered my calm.

"I don't care," I bluntly said.

He blinked in surprise.

"That entire project is being kept secret for a reason, and it's been approved by people a lot more important than you," I said. "If the White Knight wants to bring you into the circle of those aware of its nature I'll consider agreeing to it, since you've already stumbled onto the outskirts, but ultimately that's not my decision to make."

That was the pivot, I thought. I was asserting that I had little direct authority over him, which should please him, but it came with the added implication that he was still subordinate to Hanno. Those were the lines drawn by rules and agreement, though, not something immutable. If he decided to push anyway this was going to be trouble.

"Then there should be no trouble with the Hunted Magician being placed under guard until the White Knight can speak of this matter for the Chosen," the Mirror Knight said.

It wasn't an unreasonable thing to ask, when it came down to it, and in principle I had nothing to lose by agreeing to it. In principle. Practically speaking, I'd be admitting that Christophe de Pavanie was someone who had a right to ask things of me. If I gave in now, would it just invite him to push for more? On the other hand, digging my heels in over even the slightest bump in the road was a good way to ensure this went to the Hells in a handbasket. I'd have to take the risk, then, and maybe phrase it so that I wasn't actually making a concession.

"I'll consider him to be the subject of a complaint under the Terms, then," I said. "The Rogue Sorcerer can see to it that no unseemliness happens when he's freed from other duties."

Roland was not the most trusted of heroes, he was too close to me for that, but he wasn't outright distrusted by his fellows either. He'd serve as an acceptable compromise candidate since I sure as Hells wasn't putting the Blade of Mercy in charge of anything – much less guarding an experienced villain. I'd even managed to make this happen within the appearance of lawfulness, keeping to the Terms. But it was an illusion, I knew that all too well. Pick at the gold on any crown for long enough and you always found the steel that'd put the gilding on.

It was not a pleasant thing to be the side with the gilding instead of the steel, for once.

"That would be acceptable," the Mirror Knight said, and my fingers clenched.

I drank from my cup to hide my sudden urge to break his nose. *Acceptable*. Like he was doing me a favour by deigning to accept. The Magician was one of Below's, there was precisely no fucking part of this that Above's crowd had a right to dictate to me over. I breathed out, slowly, and forced calm. I glanced at the green-eyed man, finding him looking faintly embarrassed. Not because of me, I decided, I was not so easy to read these days.

"You look like you want to say something," I said.

"I yet remain in the dark about much of what went on during the attack," the Mirror Knight admitted. "And it occurs to me I am unlikely to find anyone more apt to tell the tale."

I hummed. After that little sentence I was less than inclined to indulge him in anything, but that he was asking at all implied a degree of trust in my word: there was no point in asking an explanation from someone you believed a liar. That belief was worth encouraging, I decided after a moment.

"To my understanding, the Wandering Bard's plot began with the Wicked Enchanter and the Red Axe," I said.

"Someone passed as the latter in Revenant form, when attacking the Stacks," Christophe said.

I watched his eyes tighten, his fingers clench, and remembered the few barbs I'd thrown his way when disguised as the Wicked Enchanter's corpse. Evidently, they'd stung deeper than I'd believed they would. I could confess to that deception, with or without revealing Indrani had been my companion, but to be frank I saw no real need to. There'd been enough chaos going around the Arsenal that it should comfortably remain a mystery, and even if it were suddenly revealed down the line by a twist of circumstance there was nothing all that damaging to reveal in the first place. Arson and skirmishing were not laudable behaviour, but given the circumstances I doubted my word would be gainsaid if I stated it'd been necessary.

"So I've heard," I said. "The object of the plot was to arrange a deep enmity between a heroine and villain, then ensure that they met where many other Named could see the violence that'd ensue."

"An attack on the Truce and Terms," the Mirror Knight nodded. "Clever, given that Damned were certain to ask for her head no matter how justified her actions were."

I wasn't going to touch that, considering how ambivalent I was feeling at having to pass down sanctions on behalf of an animal like the Wicked Enchanter. Safer to move on, I decided.

"From there, the Arsenal would become a dry bale of hay awaiting a match," I said. "The Blessed Artificer and the Repentant Magister were made privy to incomplete but dangerous information about a restricted project, while you and your fellows were summoned to fight a false plot that would still have been weeks away from existing at all when word was sent."

There I paused in significant silence, inviting him to elaborate on that. Just because I was sharing information didn't mean I wasn't going to try to learn any. The Mirror Knight frowned.

"It was a letter," he admitted. "From one of my friends within these walls, though when I arrived and sought her out she told me she had sent no such thing."

"And that friend's name?" I asked.

"You would know her as the Bitter Blacksmith," he said. "She passed through Cleves on her way to the Arsenal, and the friendship we struck then remains."

His friend had been sleeping with the Hunted Magician for some time, I immediately thought, which meant he might have been the one to send that false letter using his access to her quarters. Although that hardly fit when I considered it more deeply: the Magician's relationship with the Intercessor had been transactional, and he was unlikely to have taken a risk like leaving a parchment trail on her behalf. *Especially not a letter coming out of the Arsenal, where everything is read through before it's allowed to leave.* No, most likely he or another of the Bard's helpers had gotten their hands on some writing of the Bitter Blacksmith's before passing it on. Another traitor would have then forged the letter outside the Arsenal and sent it to the Mirror Knight. Considering that the Concocter had ties with the smuggling ring of this place and bargained with the Bard as well, she seemed a more likely suspect there.

I'd still ask the Grey Pilgrim to confirm the Bitter Blacksmith's words if he could, just in case.

"A forgery," I said. "One that ensured you would come here and act aggressively."

His face soured but he did not argue with my words.

"I suspect we were meant to be at each other's throats," I said, delicately skipping over the part where we actually had been. "So that when the Court of Autumn struck we would be divided and unready."

Back in the Stacks, the Mirror Knight had varied wildly between tales when addressing my impersonation of a Revenant. I'd dismissed that as stupidity, back then, but in retrospect a more charitable interpretation might have been that he'd been utterly confused as to *why* he was there at all. It wasn't anyone's natural leaning, not even mine, to begin by entertaining the notion that you'd been brought in because you were bound to fuck things up somehow. It made sense he would have been grasping at straw instead, desperately trying to figure what was going on around him. Yet the Intercessor had known *exactly* what she was doing, on the other hand: he'd been picked as much for his... inflexibility as for his potential to take up the Severance. A danger in both the short term and the long one. Gods but I hated fighting the Bard. Even when you won you lost.

At least we'd made it through better than she must have anticipated, my little trick of going directly to the Doddering Sage forcing her to use the Hunted Magician early – which ultimately came back to bite her, since it was one of the things that allowed me to figure out he'd been working with her – and the stroke of inspiration that was sending in Adjutant leading the Mirror Knight straight to my door later, no longer seeing me as an immediate foe. The memory of Hakram's body on that stretcher came back and I gritted my teeth. Inspiration had its costs. Yet when the fae had hit the Arsenal, they'd not fallen upon a pack of twitchy Named ready to blame each other but instead faced a few separate bands of five hunting down the Bard's schemes. What should have been a hard blow instead became a distraction, which I was honestly rather pleased about. If it'd really gone to shit in the Arsenal, the fae likely would have been able to make straight runs for the sword and Quartered Seasons and broken both.

"The fae went for both the Severance and the Hierophant's research, both of which represent a potential way of killing the Dead King," I said.

"But *why*?" the Mirror Knight quietly asked. "Why would anyone, even one of the Damned, try to doom Calernia to an eternity of undeath?"

"The Bard's been pulling strings for a long time, using a lot of different faces," I said. "She led the First Prince by the nose towards the creation of a weapon that might kill the Hidden Horror as well – the corpse of an angel of Judgement – but it has since been gleaned that the use of the weapon might have catastrophic consequences for all of Calernia. The idea of using it was laid aside, for now, but if Cordelia Hasenbach is stripped of every other option and annihilation comes to call..."

"Then the First Prince will do as she must, and sacrifice many to save the rest," the Mirror Knight said, sounding admiring. "How like the Damned, to attempt to make use of virtue as a flaw."

I didn't mention that, according to the Dead King's parting words in Salia, when the Painted Knife arrived we'd be learning the exact magnitude of the mess that would have ensued from Cordelia pulling that trigger. I suspected it was... not negligible, which might go some way in explaining why the Intercessor had struck now of all times. With her secrets about to come out, she urgently needed to cut down on the Grand Alliance's options or there would be absolutely no reason for the First Prince to even consider using the Bard's preferred path. It also explained why this had been rather open engagement, by the Intercessor's standards: if that secret being revealed would burn all the bridges that were currently aflame, she was not losing much in a longer sense. And while trying to shape my Name might have been

one of her reasons for coming out, I very much doubted it was the only one: it wasn't the Intercessor's way to get only one bird per stone.

"We fought better than the Bard expected," I said, which was not exactly true but not exactly false, "so she had to tip her hand further. Her traitors within the Arsenal took action – the Hunted Magician, the Exalted Poet, the Maddened Keeper–"

Christophe's brow rose.

"Was this Maddened Keeper the one responsible for the demons?" he asked. "I did strike down a woman, after taking up the sword."

"That was most likely her," I said. "Information is sparse about how she got here or why she did anything, since there's nothing quite like a demon of Absence to obscure your trail."

"How grotesque," the Mirror Knight said, disgusted.

I wouldn't disagree, there. There wasn't really much of anything that could ever justify use of demons.

"The Fallen Monk and the Rex Axe are the last two known collaborators," I continued. "The former attempted to kill me and then the Hierophant, while the latter tried to assassinate the Kingfisher Prince after I sent him to ensure her safety."

The man started in surprise.

"You tried to ensure the protection of the Red Axe?" he said.

"She's a prisoner," I flatly said. "And therefore in our care until she has stood trial. Prince Frederic struck me as the man to see to her safety and I was not wrong in my judgement, though that task ended poorly for him."

"Antoine tells me he was wounded," the Mirror Knight tried.

"He'll live," I said. "I'd be surprised if it doesn't leave a scar on his neck, but he'll still be ridiculously pretty even with it."

The green-eyed man snorted, though he then tried to disguise it as a cough.

"It is an act of gallantry for a man to receive a scar in the defence of a woman, even if it is in the defence of herself," Christophe de Pavanie said. "I'm sure he will wear it as the badge of pride it is."

I had my doubts any sort of a prince would take to a murder attempt so lightly, but you never knew with Procerans. Not that it'd mean a thing, anyway. Whether or not the Kingfisher Prince

complained under the Terms, such an egregious and open breach of them would have to be addressed. Not that we could hang her *twice*, anyway, though some of the Named in my charge were bound to argue for me to at least try.

"Might be," I said, noncommittal, and sipped from my glass.

The dark-haired man half-smiled and reached for his cup, until now left untouched, fingers closing around the gilded crystal rim before he froze. Slowly he looked up at me, dark green eyes narrowed.

"We wouldn't have had this conversation," the Mirror Knight quietly said, "if I'd not taken up the sword, would we?"

I hesitated for just the fraction of a moment and my mind whispered *mistake* as Christophe de Pavanie's face closed down. He rose to his feet, curtly bowing.

"If I might take my leave, Black Queen?" he said. "If there any need for further discussion, we can speak again after the Red Axe is released."

Wait, what? From what part of this conversation had he gotten *that*?

"And what do you mean by that, exactly?" I mildly asked.

"That once the White Knight comes, it must be recognized that like myself and other Chosen she was made a tool to the Wandering Bard's schemes," the Mirror Knight. "The only righteous outcome is to pardon her for her actions."

"That is not my understanding of the situation," I coldly said. "And neither do I believe it will be the White Knight's."

Christophe de Pavanie, risen to his full height, stared down at me with green eyes.

"I pray you are wrong," he said, "else I will be forced to ask a question I would rather not."

"And what would that be?" I replied, thinly smiling.

"What is the Sword of Judgement, without Judgement?" the Mirror Knight asked.

Just a sword, he didn't say, but I heard it anyway as he left with the Severance and I didn't stop him.

Just a sword, and he had one of those too.

ruduen

I'll keep it simple: Go vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>
[*Javvies*](#)

...
That ... ended badly. Not as badly as it could have, of course, but badly nonetheless.

And after such a promising (relatively speaking) start.

Red Axe isn't going to get to walk away from what she did.

Mirror Knight is still dancing to Bard's strings. That's unfortunate.

Mirror Knight is going to ask Hanno to invoke Judgment/flip the Coin on Red Axe, isn't he?
That's not going to go well.

Anomandris

Would the flip still be working with Hierarch's blockade of Judgement?

agumentic

We already seen that it does not.

JJR

He still has the coin and showed Cat in an earlier chapter (can't remember which one though). And he can flip the coin just fine now, it's just that it is a completely ordinary coin.

Frivolous

The Mirror Knight, I think, is not so invulnerable a target than Cat believes.

His main weakness, in D&D parlance, is that he tends to fail Will saves. As revealed in the earlier update, he has, through the loss of his virginity, become vulnerable to glamour and other illusions.

Therefore he can be made to destroy himself.

The main problem with that path is that he is still needed to wield the Severance and kill the DK. If not for that, the Mirror Knight could be disposed of by now.

Ninestrings

I'd argue his main weakness in dumping Wisdom is not his low will saves, but that he has no defence against a decent bluff check.

[Liliet](#)

...and Bluff checks only work if you are lying.

Cat decided not to, this chapter, and wouldn't you look at the backfire lmao

ThatOneGuy

I would say Will because he is a low born noble feed upon stories of the righteous slaying the evil villain who dare decide the righteous. He now has a magical sword making him think he is righteous and that his word is the word of above.

who cares if the "hero" broke the treaty twice because she is a hero? They should kill the villain because he broke the treaty.

He should be in charge because he has the magic sword while the white knight lost his angels. For this hero of low birth is on ascendant... And it shall not step until he is the one to save everyone that "matters" in these lands.

nothing is more dangerous than the self-righteous.

[Liliet](#)

"who cares if the "hero" broke the treaty twice because she is a hero? They should kill the villain because he broke the treaty. "

Note that at no point did he argue for both of these.

Zggt

I think that Cat decided not to hold up a mirror to him. It wouldn't end well. The truth is this: when villains betray us to Malicia, will you allow them to get away with 'they were tricked' and leave it at that, no matter how many dead, no matter that it leaves a weapon capable the slaying of the Dead King solely in the hands of an uncompromising villain with a history of influence from said party, say, a Knight? That's a good way to get dead fast. Let him fume, relax, think it through, and when

there's no chance of stabbing, then slap him down for being a petulant child with his "when we do it then it's fine" attitude. Basically, she needs to treat him like an eight year old that's running around with a lightsaber until he stops behaving like one.

Shveiran

The problem is eight years old usually trust adults to know better and can be put in detention if they act unreasonably.

If she tried telling him the "what about tricked villains" line, I personally believe he would have balked.

"That is completely different" Cristophe would say "for Villains are Evil, and therefore betrayal is naught but the proof that they cannot be trusted."

[*Liliet*](#)

"Well yes, that's why Hunted Magician isn't walking dead, isn't it?" I believe Christophe would say.

Don't forget Cat talked him into no longer disputing she was within her rights to act as she did with Hunted.

[*Liliet*](#)

Alas)=

[*shikkarasu*](#)

Common misunderstanding, and why he skill was renamed to *deception*. Cat may not have outright lied, but she let Christophe believe lies he was inclined to. That part worked just fine, ironically. He still believes that she had nothing to do with the 'revenant' or the fire, for instance.

You can Deceive in many ways, and Mirror knight can only trust blindly in what he already 'knows'. What kills me, kills me, is that Cat just showed multiple times that she is willing to do whatever she must for the sake of the continent, but MK somehow came to the conclusion that she would have killed him if he hadn't picked up the sword.

....Also yes I did catch the OotS reference. Well played.

[*ayon96*](#)

MK doesn't think Cat would've killed her. He thinks she is trying to bring him into fold cause he has the sword

and that makes him powerful. he might be right implied by Cat's hesitation.

Morgenstern

Basically, he seems annoyed that, AGAIN, someone only seems to see him in terms of his worth as a TOOL. While he is SO very clearly rooting to finally find a mentor/friend that is willing to see HIM and teach/love/like him for HIS sake, not his power's sake.

... Whatever happened to the power of friendship, Cat? Are your powers of bringing in people out of the wilds failing? Does it only work on villains because you can't see past your own blinders whenever it comes to heroes? (For reference, see how she treats every misspoke word of his in this chapter, even though he clearly does seem embarrassed (about her obviously disliking what he said).)

Did Akua steal that? 😊

... so... time for Akua to step in? =P

shikkarasu

I read this as "Oh, you are going to kill the Red Axe because she's a problem. If I wasn't necessary for the war -if I wasn't holding Severity- you would kill me as well, wouldn't you? Well in *that* case I'll *make* you spare her, just like you are sparing me."

He's trying to do something noble, using his privilege to help the less fortunate by calling upon the parallels between himself and RA. Cat can't kill RA for a crime that MK also committed; not without losing the Sword. Classic Hero move and 9/10 times it's the Right Thing to Do....

if you don't have a child's grasp of politics and a continent wide treaty on the line. I just wish he would wake up and treat with Cat instead of lob accusations and slap down ultimatums.

Liliet

...I think that's far too uncharitable a reading, considering the circumstances.

Liliet

-bows-

> MK somehow came to the conclusion that she would have killed him if he hadn't picked up the sword.

No, he came to the conclusion that she wouldn't have cared to speak to him / listen to him if he didn't have the sword, because then he wouldn't be important and his opinions would then be disregarded.

[TeK](#)

Wisdom is a dumpstat though.

Salt

It went about as well as could be expected I think. Like Cat was saying at the start, it's not much of a secret that there isn't much trust in each other. Low chances she could make him change his spots with one conversation over wine.

For now he's been made aware enough to not do anything rash and stupid before WK shows up, at which point he is officially Someone Else's Problem. There is some trust between him and Hanno by sheer virtue of both being Heroes, so it's really up to Hanno to pull his weight and bring the kid around.

If that doesn't entirely take, the Pilgrim could chip in as well. He tends to make a strong case for being practical even if it isn't necessarily Just, what with him being the spokesperson for Mercy and whatnot. MK is probably never going to call Catherine "dearest", but it's still very possible to turn him into a reasonable actor.

moongazer13

So the problem here is that MK is in direct opposition to doing anything besides letting the Red Ax go, and will strongly oppose anyone trying to stop him on that, especially since he now has enough power to back up his wishes. So lets say WK tries to convince MK to back down; as MK said himself, he will probably challenge WK for leadership of the chosen, or at least to have his will enforced in this particular regard. And considering both his newfound power from the sword and inflexibility on what he believes is right, he could probably get a decent other number of Heroes to side with him.

As for the Pilgrim dealing with MK, the problem there is that, in MKs eyes and the eyes of multiple other heroes, he has lost a lot of influence after he made a deal with Cat. She said as much herself. So i don't think the MK would be inclined to listen to him at all.

Worst case scenario, you have the heroes splitting into two different groups. One, lead by the MK that wants the Red Ax being given amnesty on the grounds that she was manipulated, and one that sides with the Villians and argues for her

punishment on the grounds that she is A. a traitor and B. tried to kill the Kingfisher Prince, a fucking Proceran Noble and Hero in his own right.

Which still creates fractures within the Truce and Terms, as you now have a potentially sizeable and powerful segment of Heroes unwilling to follow the rules. Plus Cat's potential failure to have the Red Axe killed will make her seem weak to the Villians, especially if the Hunted Magician ends up getting punished/hanged for his crimes. He's the only other traitor left alive that we know of.

Cat's problem is still the double standards: if the Red Axe was a villain, the MK would be happy to see her hanged. And while yes her backstory is tragic, so is literally almost everyone's. Her origins would allow a light sentence for her killing of the Wicked Enchanter, especially given everything else that has happened recently and how the entire situation was manipulated by the WB, but she had no personal reason whatsoever to try to kill the Kingfisher Prince. She can't be manipulated by illusions per her own powers, so its obvious she tried to kill him under her own free will and should be punished as such. But since shes a Hero, it is all fine. Again.

Salt

It definitely won't go without a problem or ten, but I have to highly doubt whether he'll go so far as to take action that fractures the Truce and Terms.

He's repeatedly shown that although he can be stubborn and abrasive, he genuinely understands the need to band together against ol Nessie here, and has shown a pretty straightforward disgust toward any traitors – heroic or villainous.

Yes, at the end of the day he, like every Named, has a vision of what the world should be like. But it's been made clear that one of his lines in the sand includes a world where they lose to the Dead King.

Christophe is many things – naive, sure. Stubborn, yes. Abrasive, beyond a doubt. But a willing traitor he is not. As long as he's made to understand the consequences that some of his actions could have, he'll toe the line.

At the end of the day he is someone that genuinely is trying his best to do "Good" – however nebulous a concept that might be in his emotional young head right now – not just someone trying to win at any cost.

Morgenstern

You know, I DO keep wondering who created those illusions... and if the recent "Red Axe" is not an ILLUSION of the Red Axe that has already been replaced before the Kingfisher got to her... or at least somewhere down the line, hidden by illusions.

Many seem to be pointing to Inger..? I was actually wondering if the "Red Axe" in this scene were the one casting the illusion(s), after she tried to kill the Kingfisher Prince.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's been good as confirmed that the illusion caster was Hunted.

moongazer13

I don't think MK is going to ask Hanno to flip the coin at all, he's just going to outright say that Hanno no longer has the power of judgement, so why should he be in charge of the Heroes? MK now has the power and prestige to back up whatever he wants, and considering that his mentality is pretty much "anything Heroes do is forgivable, Villians are all evil and should never be trusted" he will probably find a fair amount of support amongst the Heroes, especially those that don't like working with Villians under the T & T.

So we're going to see the Heroes fighting amongst themselves, with accusations of influence from the Villians coming strongly from the MK. He still seems very convinced that Cat is planning to take control of everything and thinks that the WK is not strong enough to oppose her, so naturally its his job now that he has the Severance.

Sidenote, i wonder what they did with that one titled fey they captured and interrogated. If he is the same as the one that Cat/Hierophant killed back in the lands of summer, i can't imagine Cat is going to be happy to see him.

Morgenstern

To be fair, he isn't per se shown to believe that anything and everything Heroes do is forgivable (that's just CAT'S mistaken blinders-on INTERPRETATION) – he simply is still so naive, he cannot quite believe that a Hero would DO that of their free will (and NOT "fall" and become a Villain, as he obviously now thinks the Wandering Bard has...) and assumes they just "have to" have gotten manipulated and wouldn't WANT (to do) that, if only they KNEW. He is the "lost kid", wandering around cluelessly.

hakureireimu

"To my understanding, the Wandering Bard's plot began with the Wicked Enchanter and the Red Axe," I said.

should be former right?

[Liliet](#)

Or in a different order in the previous sentence XD

Ninestrings

He's getting there!

He's so close!

Ooooh drops the ball with just a couple yards to go.

I've said it before but gosh that boy is dense as can be.

RoflCat

If I may use an old joke:

He's the Mirror Knight.

Self-reflection just isn't his thing.

oaclo

Say, does that old rule about relying regularly on magical weaponry ensuring its eventual failure apply to heroes too? If so, the Severance may have been ultimately crippled by him taking it up so early.

The Bard may have been willing to compromise on setting up a story where it fails in the end against the Dead King.

Although I'm not sure whether it being made from an Aspect would make it more or less susceptible to that kind of story-based weakness.

Salt

I would guess the opposite in this case. The sword isn't so much magic as it is the distilled essence of one of the incorruptible, most unflinchingly pure Heroes that ever lived. Say what you will about the Saint, the only answer she would've given to the Hidden Horror attempting to corrupt her would be to immediately chop him in half.

We also know that she was potent enough to cut through nearly anything that exists. People, sorcery, domains, creation, mantles of power, common sense, you name it. A favorite trick of hers was to cut the sky and use the wound in Creation as a

foothold, Masego complained about her cutting a door in a spell that could contain demons, and Catherine was at one point seriously worried that she had the ability to cut the future, whatever the hell that would've entailed.

All in all, the story behind the sword means it leans heavily into the old "Above always wins" axiom, and likely the only real way to deal with it is to work around it in true "but Below always gets their due" fashion.

I'd personally bet that the Bard was yet again trying to kill an entire flock of birds with one stone, by shaping a weapon that could hurt both Catherine or the Dead king. If Christophe turns on Cat, great. If not, he was still a decent distraction. Regardless, he's still going to be a pain for ol' Nessie, as the Mirror Knight has an even bigger hate-boner for the Dead King than he does for the Black Queen. Even after the war is over, you've still got a raid-boss in Christophe, who is the most traditional Proceran hero to ever Proceran.

There's a damned good reason that Catherine considers the Bard to be the final boss to end all final bosses.

Salt

Although, I didn't think of this at the time, but separating him from the sword might actually be feasible. There are variations of that trope you mentioned, where said character simply loses the tool itself, even if the tool is still perfectly fine.

The sword is immune to pretty much everything, as well as the Mirror Knight as a Name in itself, but Christophe de Pavanie as a person is full of holes. What would have happened if a stealthy traitor – like the Fallen Monk – had been around when Christophe casually left the Severance lying unattended in a corner of Catherine's room? If the Thief of Stars could steal Catherine's staff in a moment of distraction, Christophe is likely not immune either.

Anomandris

Ah, and it was going so well too...

A more naive version of the Saint with potentially more power ain't gonna be fun to deal with.

[TeK](#)

Oh come on Christie, you were so close!

dadycoool

Uh oh. I don't know what the danger is, but something just went very wrong. I wonder how he came to that conclusion.

Ninestrings

It's quite simple actually.

He's an idiot. A well meaning, colossal moron.

erebus42

Don't forget prone to potentially catastrophe-inducing dichotomous thinking.

Salt

Maybe seeing some of the Heroes argue amongst each other might help him there a bit. Judging by how he seemed repeatedly surprised at Catherine not being a pants-on-head-comically-evil tyrant, he seems to have a child's understanding of Good-aligned morality, not just politics.

If he was surprised that Catherine tried to protect the Red Axe – you know, to not sabotage her own life's work and stuff – it's going to blow his mind when he realizes that Mercy and Judgement would give wildly differing verdicts in a lot of situations.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

It's more surprising when they agree on something.

...

Especially when it's Catherine.

[TeK](#)

Basically, HM is getting away with a bribe, why should a Hero be punished?

Konstantin von Karstein

The HM is not getting away, he offers something that can diminish his punishment at the trial that will take place. The RA offers nothing of the sort.

[TeK](#)

I was answering the question of how he came to the conclusion, not agreeing with the conclusion. Urgh.

[Liliet](#)

> he offers something that can diminish his punishment at the trial that will take place. The RA offers nothing of the sort.

...and that's nothing like justice.

Konstantin von Karstein

I am maybe wrong, but IRL if you collaborate with the police, the judge will be more lenient in some cases? And Cat has yet to interrogate her.

[Liliet](#)

yeah but that is a compromise of justice for practicality, especially when taken too far

and YEAH LMAO OH MY GOD CA

[Liliet](#)

Ironically, it's exactly what Cat was worrying about every time she was wondering about giving him an inch. Does authority result from common agreement, or from the biggest stick? Cat managed to give him the (actually wrong) impression that it's the latter.

(Wrong, because the stick is a factor, but so is savviness, which he lacks entirely)

dadycoool

Yeah, Hanno isn't the Hero In Charge because he's the Sword of Judgement, he's in charge because he's got the natural (if rather oblivious) charisma to keep a herd of cats in line. I'm sure as MK witnesses this...I was about to say something charitable regarding his observational and decision-making skills. Nevermind, he'll butt heads with Hanno, splintering the Light faction and giving the Carrion Queen an opportunity to pick at the scraps that remain. Because that's exactly what he said she would do when he confronted her way back before the Autumn Invasion.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Arguably, Cat's savviness is part of her own stick. Yeah, she's got Night, but she herself still struggles to contend against WB, who's essentially savviness. (Including story-awareness.)

[Liliet](#)

Well, if he realized that that means his own stick is still rather small...

[vernal.ancient](#)

If you're referring specifically to the conclusion that Cat only talked to him because of the sword, he spent much of his viewpoint feeling bitter about being treated more as a tool to be used than a person, he likely feels that this whole conversation only happened because the sword made him a more useful tool.

[Liliet](#)

Either a more useful tool or a potential player, and clearly the wicked Black Queen has brought him into her confidence to ensure it's the former rather than the latter.

It's close enough to what's actually going on that there isn't really any evidence that would indicate to him it's not that 😊

ninegardens

Novel concept MK... but it feels kind of like... you should judge people for what they did?

Red Axe murdered one dude, and attempted murder on another.
(Why?)

You showed up and threw around some dumb accusations.
Concocter helped with smuggling that she shouldn't have.

There's a reason RA is in trouble but not you (with Cocky in between).

Also... oh god, is WK going to be dead? I'm so worried WK is dead. Possibly in defence of Cordelia. I feel like one of those two might be getting offed soon, and from Bard's point of view, Cordelia is still needed, and replacing WK with MK seems on brand.



RoflCat

The first murder he see as heroic vengeance and just action (admittedly it's hard to sympathize with Wicked Enchanter given what he did)

The second attempt murder will just be seen as her being tricked by a Damned's scheme (note how he refers to Bard as a Damned even though she's seen as part of Good before for the most part)

It feels like he might be subconsciously pushing anything 'bad' as Damned.

erebus42

Yeah, I believe Cat has speculated in the past about how many Proceran Named may have been labeled "damned" simply because they had gone against the grain.

Konstantin von Karstein

Or were in the way of a Proceran invasion.

erebus42

Dammit Christophe, and here I thought I'd written you off too soon. Oh well I guess while not every villain is a Calamity or a Woe not every Hero is going to be White Knight or even a Grey Pilgrim (on his better days).

[amit27592](#)

Though it is inconvenient for Cat, isn't what Mirror Knight saying true? Concocter & Magician also conspired with the bard, both are still alive because of their worth. Why would the Red Axe not be accorded the same?

She should be given a chance for redemption or at the very least, to explain her side of things.

RoflCat

The crimes committed are different.

Hunted Magician did some sabotages, but nothing to the level of outright betrayal, much like when Catherine threatened him he basically only did things that even if found out wouldn't get him executed.

Concocter is the same, she only made some dealings, but in term of actual actions she didn't do anything against the Arsenal outright, even come to help when she learned the truth to try and redeem herself (albeit with a push from Archer)

Red Axe intentionally killed a member of the Terms AND attempted murder of another hero, who was sent to protect her mind you. She WILL stand trial (Catherine said to ensure she's alive until then last chapter) but Catherine basically has no expectation she'll survive it.

[TeK](#)

HM arguably caused Fae to attack an Arsenal, with all that it implies.

[Liliet](#)

Very, very arguably.

[TeK](#)

Well yeah, I actually agree with Cat there. I'm just trying to point out that Mirror Knight has some points beyond "Big good hero is right"

Shveiran

No, he doesn't. Because he has a child's understanding on what made possible for the Fey to breach the Arsenal. Him opening his mouth on the subject, without ever asking someone he trusts and knows better on the subject? That makes his argument invalid. By default. It is based on nothing, and he even refuses to admit that much.

"Big good hero is right" is enough for him, and that's that.

[Liliet](#)

Mood.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Well, here's the rub. To most heroes, arguments goes into one ear and comes out of the other. No matter how sound the argument is, it doesn't matter as long as it comes out of a villain's mouth.

dadycoool

Sounds like the "Me: gives a valid argument. Parent: DISRESPECT!" meme.

Salt

That's why I have a lot of hope for Christophe to be perfectly honest. He's not perfect, but in the span of a day he admitted he was wrong, acted in everyone's best interest instead of sabotaging Catherine just out of principled and even came to a partial understanding about what exactly just transpired here, instead of stubbornly trying to lay it all at the feet of the most convenient Villain at hand.

That's... I mean he's not perfect, but it's a hell of a lot more open minded than a good half of Above aligned named and most of Procer besides.

[TeK](#)

Plus illusion cast by HM would have resulted in two Chosen corpses. He should very much go hang.

[Liliet](#)

This one, though? This one is real.

[TeK](#)

I am just saying their crimes are not that much different. Two attempted murders vs one attempted and one successful. Both warrant severe punishment, in a peace time Red Axe will get more years in a sentence, but in a wartimes...

erebus42

Eh, they have to come down hard on someone, might as well be her. I don't see her having a whole lot to bring to the table and considering she attempted to murder Frederick in cold blood I don't think this is gonna go her way. But we'll see I guess

[Stable](#)

Could it be that the mirror knight isn't the only biased one?

erebus42

Could it also be that the situations aren't equivalent?

[TeK](#)

Let's be honest, HM would have been in chains right now if not for the bribe.

erebus42

Probably yes, but this is a far more practical decision. The Magician's transgressions were far less direct and overt, and he brings far more to the table than the Axe does. She is guilty of at least one very public attempt at the premeditated murder of a Hero sent to protect her (and the successful premeditated murder of the Enchanter (though we can table that considering the whole messy debate around the mitigating factors of the situation). They need to make an example of someone and it's very unlikely she has anything to offer up (though they could ask I suppose). At this point she just seems to be more useful dead than alive.

[Liliet](#)

Unfortunately, Christophe is not wrong that justice based on who's more useful is no justice at all.

erebus42

By itself no. But but as a supplement and mitigating factor it can ensure the continued existence of a system that can promote future justice. I'm not saying

it's particularly faithful to the ideal of justice on the face of it just that justice can only really become an important concern and be served in an environment that's stable enough to allow it.

[TeK](#)

Still, argument "law should be observed for all" does not work well after a shady backroom deal.

Shveiran

There is no shady backroom deal. Cat offered nothing, here, save for a trial. Which the Red Axe is also going to get.

All she gave him is that she wouldn't straight-out abandon him to the Heroes, something that is not going to happen to Red Axe either (because Hanno, duh).

There is no double standard here, just Catherine getting things she needed to help the Alliance out of the process. What laws have been infringed here, exactly?

Salt

I mean, not to take any sides here but it seems like the argument is based on a theme that'll probably come up in the actual trial too. Whether principle or utility should take precedence for the basis.

Cat is looking at it based on utility when she wants to consider his usefulness in the verdict, Christophe is based on principle when he says the punishment should fit the crime, not how much he can offer to wiggle free.

Neither one is right on its own, pure principle gets you a Laurence de Montfort and pure utility gets you a Black Knight. Cat, MK, and pretty much everyone in the grand alliance would at least agree that those extremes aren't where you want to end up for the Truce and Terms.

But as far as exactly where they want to set precedent for what might end up being a landmark trial under the Truce and Terms (and eventually the Liesse accords)? That's going to be an insanely complicated issue that'll have to take both into account, not necessarily one or the other.

agumentic

To be fair, while Hunted Magician is not literally in chains, neither is the Red Axe. And both of them are very arrested anyway.

[TeK](#)

My point exactly. Not that Chris is right, but that is his thought process.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

And Cat did not go into detail explaining this one.

Shveiran

Yeah, it's almost like leaving the room impaired a conversation or something.

[Liliet](#)

very true lmao

Salt

To a degree, he does have a point.

At the least, I think the trial is going to be a lot more interesting and a lot less straightforward than what a lot of the comments section seems to be leaning toward. You're going to have Catherine chiefly concerned with sustaining the Truce and Terms & avoiding showing weakness to the Villains, Hanno who's probably going to be the most concerned with the Just course of action, Tariq with the most Merciful course of action, and if grand alliance leaders get a say there's going to be a strong voice from the non-named crowd for more mundane (but no less important) concerns – namely Cordelia who will likely see the vast array of political consequences and have a completely different read of the situation. Not that anyone with a brain would ignore Cordelia Hasenbach's concerns, regardless whether or not officially supposed to have a say.

I'm expecting a banger of a four or five-way clusterfuck over the nuances of the trial, plus Christophe the pink elephant in the room, who can barely keep up but can't really be ignored now that he's taken up the sword.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"pink elephant in the room"? Christophe's certainly an "elephant in the room" – a big thing that nobody wants to

quite acknowledge – but he's definitely not a drunken hallucination.

[vernal.ancient](#)

He'd be a lot easier to deal with if he was

Shveiran

If only.

JJR

““We wouldn't have had this conversation,” the Mirror Knight quietly said, “if I'd not taken up the sword, would we?””

Cat probably could have side stepped this with a, “no, we'd be dead or worse from the demons.” I'm not sure why she didn't, it seems to fit her character. Probably just didn't think of it.

Ninestrings

He was upset she was only speaking to him because he had the sword and was now a part of her plans and too powerful to ignore.

Christophe knows Cat doesn't respect him as a person, and is only listening to his opinion because she doesn't have much choice.

So realising he was in a position of power, he did the noble thing of making a demand passive-aggressively and fleeing into the night.

Insanenoodlyguy

I said last chapter, I think the way he's changed his story, he's actually getting smarter. Of course, this has been exactly smart enough to cause more trouble and not smart enough to have a good solution.

Ninestrings

A moron getting too much power is not a good story track to be in.

The villain equivalent would be screaming “I am invincible!” while absorbing an energy field bigger than their head.

Salt

Or some random orphan girl suddenly getting all the influence and power of being the apprentice Squire to the Black Knight?

Granted, Cat's early days were a horror show of mistakes, among which is one near-genocide of a city and one actual-genocide of a city, but she's living proof that it's possible to grow into the mantle of power rather than just being taken for a ride by it.

WuseMajor

Yes, but she had the Black Knight to be her teacher and mentor, someone who could rein her in if need be. Granted, he mostly didn't, but he did teach her how to think.

The Mirror Knight, as near as we can tell, has been treated as a battering ram by pretty much everyone so far. Instead of being trained or mentored, he's been told "go kill that thing" or "ok, stand here, I wanna try something."

And now he's got a degree of power that frightens the Black Queen, who has a degree of power that had Tariq willing to sacrifice a significant number of human lives in order to get a story ready to kill her.

I'd say that this is the Bard going "You're only delaying the inevitable kiddo." Also, possibly her weapon to kill Cat.

If he's going to be salvaged, he's going to need a good assistant/teacher. Someone he trusts, someone who can help him sand off those rough edges and grease his interactions with others, but without making him feel like a fool or simply doing it for him, because doing it for him would do him no favors.

And I can't help but notice that the Repentant Magister and Hakram were taken out of commission in the fight with the demons. Not that Cat would ever give up Hakram, but she might have loaned him to the Mirror Knight to help him out a bit.

Possibly the Rogue Sorcerer might be able to get through to him? Become his surrogate "big brother" or something.

Salt

Agreed, absolutely.

Personally I have my fingers crossed for Hanno, who's shown so far to have a degree of patience and moderation that flabbergasts most people who interact with him, and genuinely has the best of intentions in basically everything we've seen him do so far.

A lot of people would react badly to Christophe's brashness and naive sort of well-intentioned zeal, but Hanno might be the kind of person to disarm him there, simply by being able to turn the other cheek to almost an unbelievable degree when needed.

ninegardens

Except here, is last line is basically "Sword of justice is no longer important"

Salt

That isn't even close to what he said though?

He said IF Hanno pushes for the execution, he would have to "ask a question he would rather not". The question being "what is the sword of judgement, without judgement"

Basically meaning he doesn't want to go up against Hanno at all, but if Hanno takes a different stance then he's going to have to stand up to him based on his own beliefs.

That isn't even remotely similar to just dismissing Hanno as unimportant

Insanenoodlyguy

No, which is why he'll continue to get smarter. But first, hijinks ensue!

Shveiran

He doesn't need to grow smarter, he needs to grow less self-righteous. My God, no one is right all the time, and no one is always prepared to deal with the situation. One of the most basic parts of intelligence is realizing you are ill-prepared for a task and not attempting it.

Luckily, it's not like he is messing with the alliance of power trying to prevent the apocalypse or anything, so I'm sure we can wait for him to mature.

Insanenoodlyguy

I agree with everything you say, but I believe that he's growing smarter instead. he didn't need to grow any stronger either, but here we are. 😊

[Liliet](#)

> Cat probably could have side stepped this with a, "no, we'd be dead or worse from the demons." I'm not sure why she didn't, it seems to fit her character. Probably just didn't think of it.

She paused for a second to think of an answer, and he (more or less correctly) took it as confirmation.

WuseMajor

I feel like correct response was "Maybe. However, I'd already been thinking that you needed to learn more about how politics is played lately and this seemed like a good opportunity to teach you. Or did you think I wasn't aware that you were involved in /another/ treasonous plot?" Put him on the defensive for a second, explain what's going on with that northern princess, and, maybe, that would have gotten him to consider that he needs to learn how to be a better leader and get a better BS detector.

[Mental Mouse](#)

But working that out took her a moment. "Only for a moment, and the moment's gone...."

[Tek](#)

I feel like a correct response would be honestly...

... Because I believe that is always the correct response.

Salt

Have to agree here, she needs to be fully honest with him.

Especially since Cat is properly trading blows with the Bard now. Even not admitting her little deception in the miscellaneous stacks feels like a mistake, better to get it out now while he's receptive and the situation is under your control. Show that she's willing to be fully honest with him all the time, not just when it benefits her or when she's forced to.

If I was some sort of immortal boogeyman with a near-omniscient eye for stories and details, that's the kind of secret I'd let the mirror knight find out at the worst moment. Like when he's just at the cusp of placing some sort of trust in Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

It is, but being honest means "communicate the idea that is true" which presumes "communicate the idea fully" and for that you need to 1) be able to finish the sentence, 2)

COMMUNICATION IS A TWO-WAY STREET AND THE LISTENER'S JOB IS INTERPRETATION

so... saying "be honest" is like saying that the best way to win a war is to win it =x

[TeK](#)

Nah, being honest means "do not attempt to lie, misdirect, leave out information, omit important details, lead on, use a faulty logic, etc"

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but it's not helpful. It tells you what NOT to do, but it doesn't help you what to do.

Also "don't omit important details" is physically impossible unless you somehow magically convey the whole volume of information at once.

[TeK](#)

Important details, not all details. It's a distinction, if a flawed one.

[TeK](#)

Also winning the war is a most reliable way to win a war, unless this is a war you don't want to win.

[Liliet](#)

I mean you're not WRONG

laguz24

That's the problem with cat, she already has her band, and is reluctant to let anyone else in. She needs to do so with the MK because he does not want to be a tool anymore.

[TeK](#)

She is in the position of authority though. She juggles many people, she can't afford to be chummy with everyone.

erebus42

As was said she can't be everyone's friend and it isn't her job to take care of every Named who's dealing with issues. And even if he's tired of just being a tool he still needs to learn to work with people and to see more than what's right in front of his nose.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine damn well tried. And that's what led to this problem, because she gave the MK the exact impression she was trying to avoid: that authority in the Grand Alliance / the Truce and Terms is based on who has the biggest stick.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Many them > Many of them
of the people > or the people
be taint > be a taint
Terms myself, > Terms,
you helmet > your helmet
of tool > of a tool
cup at sipping > cup and sipping
that'd put > they'd put
Rex Axe > Red Axe
there any need > there is any need

ALazyMonster

It's kinda delightfully ironic that the Mirror Knight's flaw is that he never looks in the damn mirror for where the problem is. I mean he seems to think that Procer can do no wrong despite evidence to the contrary, any perceived flaw in himself is just a lack of power not the fact that he's denser than the metal of his plate mail, and he doesn't ever acknowledge the broader picture with anything more than nebulous principals of good and evil.

erebus42

Honestly he almost sounds like the main character of a tragedy...

erebus42

Honestly he almost sounds like the protagonist of a tragedy...

erebus42

Sorry for the repeat, the first response didn't show up until after I posted this one.

[Liliet](#)

Almost? 😊

[vernal.ancient](#)

I mean, he's not the main character, except of his own life. ... which would imply that his life itself is a tragedy. I don't know whether that's darkly hilarious, or just dark

[Liliet](#)

Fucking Named, amirite? :3

Big I

Can't help by think of this quote from Jehan the Wise: "One should not confuse doing good with fighting evil, lest good become the act of striking."

All the Mirror Knight is is a huge mess of self loathing and insecurity. He's the Shinji Ikari of the Guideverse.

dadycoool

"What can a mirror show?"

"Everything it sees."

"And what can a mirror see?"

"Everything."

"But not itself."

I think that mock-sage encounter is a good summary of him. He can't see things from other perspectives because his design forces him to only show things from his own perspective.

superkeaton

As soon as I noticed he kept calling the Bard a Villain, I knew this would be an issue.

[Burlyraven](#)

...And this is why I wanted Kingfisher to be the one to take up the sword. Mirror Knight just has too many issues with seeing beyond tradition and honor.

That being said, I wonder if Cat might not need to expand her own views. She's treating Mirror Knight like a cougar on a leash, and not giving him the respect that his story's started to insist he's due after years of even the heroes treating him as little more than a battering ram. If you really look at the path Mirror Knight's been on lately, it should have been obvious that the best move really would have been to fully read him in and treat him as an equal. It might have put Hanno in a precarious position, but Hanno's not the one wielding the most powerful handheld weapon in existence.

hakureireimu

Not really; Mirror is expendable, but Hanno is not. There's always the possibility that someone else can take up the sword, but there's no one who's close to replacing Hanno.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine damn well tried. This is what this chapter was: her trying.

That's why she paused when he asked, because her instinct was to tell the truth, and the truth is that yes, this specific conversation is a direct result of her being scared of how much damage he can do, otherwise she'd have gone to sleep and left his ignorance to other heroes to mend.

caoimhinh

That conclusion felt very forced.

Christophe made a complete U-turn from how he had been through the whole conversation.

I mean, it's not strange that he noticed he was only being considered important due to the Severance, nor that he would be offended by it. But it's the brusque way he shifted gears that is weird.

He was calm, listening, and agreeable after his questions had been answered; then he pauses as he was reaching for the cup, has a sudden thought and gets out of there making demands not-so-subtly threatening to use violence to get his way.

If they had traded a few more sentences after he said that before he made the demand of the Red Axe's release, or if Cat had been unreasonable thus making him get gradually angry, it would have been better. As it is, it feels like he was possessed by something mid-conversation.

Also, Cat could have attempted to reason with him further and talk more, maybe calling him out on how his declaration was something only a Damned would do, using violence to do as he pleases above the law.

But no... Cat went "I don't think so" on him and let him go without an attempt on diplomacy. Hanno was right, she really has trouble when dealing with someone not hostile if it's not from a position of authority.

[Liliet](#)

It makes perfect sense to me. Note how Cat noted he was already pushing more than she considered acceptable mid-conversation. And she let him, which ended up a misjudgement, as instead of comforting him / showing she was reasonable it pissed him off. If he can get things by pushing, cannot anyone? Is it not then his duty to push, if only just to push back against hypothetical other pushers?

And justice based on how useful someone is is no justice at all. The idea of Hunted Magician hypothetically getting off scot free after what he'd done, while Catherine's phrasing

implied she did not think it was even a possibility for Red Axe... Yeah, that was a *bad phrasing*.

Mirror Knight is a mess of insecurities both about himself and the situation. Catherine cared about him being untaught already before he took the sword, but he doesn't know that. Catherine was not pushing back because she was trying to be diplomatic and not because she recognized his right to push, but he doesn't know that. The White Knight is the heroes' representative because of his savvy and ability to engender respect in other political players and not of his power, but he doesn't know that.

(He was, in fact, considered the head of the heroes because of the power the Heavens vested in him, which is THAT unpleasant chicken coming home to roost. The Hierarch's trial issue – heroes DO have a tendency of assuming (heroic) might implies right)

The Mirror Knight just now found himself in a lawless world where the strong push around the weak, and he's being invited in the highest circle because he's now strong, but at the same time is still expected to sit tight and listen to his betters. And he has no reassurance that it's not because they want to hold on to their own already existing power and don't want to share.

I mean, if you took off a book of an unfamiliar fantasy series off a bookshelf, opened it randomly in the middle, and what was there was this conversation but from Christophe's POV, what would you assume?

caoimhinh

Nah, the turn of mentality was so abrupt that even Catherine immediate reaction was "Wait, what?". She was caught so unaware that she couldn't muster a response to him.

I'm not saying his reaching to that conclusion is illogical (he is right, after all), what I'm saying is how abrupt it was.

He was listening to Catherine and had even seen the sense in her explanations as to why she did things and what would happen with the Hunted Magician. He had accepted that.

But then while reaching for the wine he has a sudden thought and was "oh, you bitch!" and stood up in anger, leaving the room with a threat of violence against a fellow Hero if Hanno doesn't do what he wants.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I smell the Wandering Bard's hand there.

[TeK](#)

More like he was thinking about it nonstop, wondering why Cat even deign to talk with him and walk with him, and then it just reached a point and got released.

[TeK](#)

I actually did similar thing in the conversations a few times, not proud of that.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's what I saw too.

[Liliet](#)

Makes sense.

Salt

I mean it's understandable why he's not happy with only being considered after getting a big enough stick, but the irony (and almost outright hypocrisy) of it is almost comical

The only reason he's ever given Catherine any consideration, and actually the only reason she's breathing right now, is because she's powerful enough that a tenth crusade couldn't put her down. A tenth crusade in which the mirror knight actively participated. Diplomacy was only an option after she beat them back by force.

It's a bit childish for him to be miffed at her for only taking him seriously after he got a large stick, when we know for a fact that he would've cut her head off and trampled her corpse into the ground without a second thought rather than sit down for a chat over wine, if it wasn't for Catherine having a very big stick of her own.

A wise person would realize the irony of it, how shitty it is to be on the other end of that deal, and realize why it's important to enforce the truce and terms as intended rather than throwing his weight around.

But he isn't one of those, which is where our much wiser friend Hanno needs to come in, I suppose.

[TeK](#)

Not really? He isn't miffed at Cat for not recognizing him, Cat just confirmed his suspicions that NOBODY cares about his opinion and he is just a dumbfuck who is tolerated

because of his power. Which is somewhat ironic, yeah, but the moment your greatest fears and anxiety build up in through the most brutal war are confirmed it is, understandably, not a time for self-reflection.

You judge him under standards basically no living human can live up to, and I don't understand the undercurrent of hostility in your tone because while he shares the blame, he shares it. Cat is the one acting like a superior with authority, and she treated him exactly like Cordelia treated Cat in the Crusade. Which is ironic on it's own, but I guess noone is able to appreciate it at the time.

If you don't remember, at the time of Crusade he basically was a footsoldier and nothing more. He can't probably doesn't even know how all the situation with Cat came to be, he was just doing what was ordered. As far as he concerned, Crusade was called after diplomacy failed.

Salt

I know you're trying to make him more sympathetic but this is really a bit of a dramatic stretch.

Continental players only caring about your opinion in major conflicts if they have a particular reason to, isn't exactly something unique to Christophe. It's not like Cordelia, Catherine, Hanno, and Tariq decided to make a cool kids club one day and leave poor Christophe out in the rain. They were in various ways at each other's throats in one form or another before being forced to acknowledge each other, all of them not just for power but for the degree of demonstrated restraint and good judgment in their own way. Christophe has never really acted in a way or in a role that lends him that same kind of respect for the latter – he's always been a foot soldier until now.

You said it yourself. He acted as a blind foot soldier in the tenth crusade. He also wasn't a leader in most of the war against the dead king, and was just made an unwilling pawn in the bard's game to destroy the two sharpest swords bared at the Dead King, chosen specifically for his naïveté and inflexibility.

Why, then, is it so wrong for people to consider him to have the judgement of a foot soldier, when that's all he's ever shown them? What makes him so special as to warrant special consideration there that the entire rest of the continent isn't afforded?

If you continually take the role of a foot soldier, then I'm sorry but people are going to see you as a foot

soldier, not a divine prophet or a wise king. That's not judging him to "a standard no human being can live up to". That's judging him by the exact same standard that everyone else has been judged up till now, at least internally in the story setting.

Shveiran

Very well-argued.

[sivarajan](#)

Now he wields a sword that can kill gods. He will be a foot soldier no more! You see why it might have been better to accord him special consideration before he got the power to demand it?

Shveiran

But he is! He is a "foot soldier", at least as much as he was before!

It doesn't matter how powerful he is, he is just a foot soldier!

He didn't suddenly become a strategist, did he? He doesn't suddenly speak for any group larger than himself, does he? He has no skill, no resource, no authority whatsoever that justifies involving him in the decision process!

The only reason to indulge him is because he is dangerous if he decides to start chopping heads; so the only reason this conversation is happening is because he is not enough of a man to admit that "this whole continental crisis and unprecedented alliance? I don't get it. It's almost like my basic education and hitting things labeled "Evil" didn't prepare me to deal with it. Perhaps I should listen to someone with more authority and experience."

But nooo, he has a magic sword, so he knows best!

Seriously, @#! Cristophe.

[Liliet](#)

...but Catherine is suddenly NOT treating him as a foot-soldier. She even called it out in her own internal monologue, that she's giving him importance where none is warranted and might be jumping the gun and creating her own problems in that. But she chose to take the risk because ultimately sharing power and bringing others in is Catherine's core impulse.

And now he's being brought in on the highest level dealings and *silence is compliance*.

Liliet

TBF, heroes and villains, like... really ARE different categories. "That I'm a hero is reason enough to listen to me" is NOT an entirely unreasonable stance – sure, the result of listening will not necessarily be agreement, but you really cannot buy a heroic Name in a corner shop. And the reverse goes for villains – even Catherine had admitted that it's childish to whine about everyone trying to put her down and nobody giving her the benefit of doubt when she's standing under the flag saying "Enemy Of All That Lives".

This is a cornerstone problem with the premise of the Truce and Terms and the Accords that they need to handle like it's a nuclear bomb with faulty wiring: heroes and villains aren't just opposing factions of big-endians and little-endians, heroes DO have that high ground to stand on and higher expectations to live up to. Wicked Enchanter WAS a rapist. That he was given pardon was a compromised forced by the objective situation, and T&T and Accords are this compromise made permanent.

It's necessary, but you need VERY solid and specific grounding in what's going on before you can see that yes, THAT exactly is the thing that is necessary, it's the optimum and the only possible stable solution.

I won't say that none of MK's behavior was childish here. Leaving the room after asking his question without even waiting for an answer WAS. I'd compare it with Amadeus's urge to end the conversation with Bard by bashing his head against a rock until he blacks out in Epilogue 4, which brings me to the point... well, it's a pretty high bar to set for a character to never do that XD

Aotrs Commander

Aaaaaand the Mirror Knight shows that that he's a still just stopped clock and the previous glimpses of something approaching... competence, frankly (outside of Hit With Sword) were merely nothing more than that twice a day.

dadycool

His minute of clarity has ended, and now he's back to pointing in the completely wrong direction.

SpeckofStardust

People talking about justice,
Same people who where arguing for red Axe to live though this and that be a good thing.
Also Cat is the worst person to give a HERO lessons on how to act.
Hanno assuming he isn't dead will be able to fix this.
Considering the man already taught some heroes to care about collateral damage and was in relative charge over the fighting up north he should set Mirror Knight on a less messy way.

[TeK](#)

Did you guys noticed how Cat was acting like Cordelia back in the Crusade Ark?

"You are ignorant and we are in the right, the only reason we even talk is because you fight gut, now do what I say also I am better than you"

SpeckofStardust

Pretty much, this isn't justice after all.
It's how the world works.

Shveiran

I have no idea what you are getting this from.

From the perspective of politeness, Cordelia was refusing to acknowledge Catherine as a ruler, insulting her, and straight-out blackmailing her.
Here we have Catherine explaining her reasons, pointing out she will solve this in concert with his appointed representative, even making a concession in exchange for nothing, only for him to be outraged at a moment hesitation regarding the answer to "would you bother to be explaining things to me if I was one of the hundred Named fighting and not one of the most powerful ones, considering I was ready to draw on you ten hours ago?".

They... are not the same?

From the perspective of the subject matter, Cordelia was threatening the conquest of her homeland and the slaughter of most of Catherine's friends. Here Catherine is... saying that both the HM and the RA will be put on trial with their representatives in attendance?

Again, really not the same.

Finally, from the perspective of their relationship... Cordelia was infuriating because she refused to acknowledge Catherine as a peer. Despite her being the de-facto ruler of a country – which she was invading. And also shaming her over having

conquered her crown while she herself had to fought a civil war to become First Prince by killing the other claimants. That still gets me angry.

But here? Catherine is the queen of a member state of the alliance, the prophet of another, the diplomat to the Kingdom Under and the Representatives of Villains. If Cristophe dethroned Hanno, they'd still not be equals, and that hasn't happened besides.

Not to repeat myself, but... really not the same.

beleester

The downside to admitting that you're a ruthlessly practical person who's willing to do anything to win the war is that you're telling useful people they can get away with a lot of shit.

Shveiran

This webnovel is crazy good at creating characters I need to strangle. The only downside is that most of them end up getting away with it scot-free.

Salt

To be fair, the Mirror Knight here is in his early years, that's almost a given. His sort of behaviour right now is the kind that'll cause a more seasoned Mirror Knight 10 years down the road to turn a little red in embarrassment at the memory.

No doubt, if they all end up living long enough, that some of his friends are going to tease him about it for years.

Shveiran

You and several people have pointed this out, but I'm sorry, I don't think that is any excuse.

Everyone was young and stupid at least once, but this is not being disrespectful, or pulling a prank, or behaving stupidly in a relationship. This is drunkenly swinging an iron bar into the glass shop of international relationships during the greatest crisis since Triumphant.

Come on, this can't be hand-waved with a "ah, youth". He might not be as bad as the Tyrant (I can acknowledge he at least means well, if only toward his side of the aisle, which is rather narrow) but I'd pick teh Concocter or the Magician over him any day of the week. Because they didn't mean well, they were petty and dickish, they were bloody disgusting in their egoism, but at least they considered the possible ramifications of their actions before making those bad

choices. I'm not absolving them, by the way, but Cristophe is both more dangerous and more stupid.

C and HM tried to skim the edge, MK assumes there is no edge and just walk straight into the chasm, dragging everyone along and reassuring himself every step of the way that it was the right choice.

Salt

I don't think anyone is denying that he has flaws or that they're somehow excusable, but I think there's genuinely more sympathy for him there as his POV interludes have been showing that he isn't intentionally ignoring consequences or being insulting. He's just so inexperienced and awkward that he physically can't help it.

Which doesn't change the fact that he IS abrasive and incompetent, but the knowledge that he understands how flawed he is and that he's so angry at himself for not being able to mend those flaws, means that it's hard not to sympathize for him a bit. It's hard not to hope that he does find a proper teacher rather than being abandoned to turn into some worthless self-absorbed zealot.

For example, the Mirror Knight's internal monologues on his tendency to spew insults:

>"That would be wise," Christophe agreed, cursing himself for not having thought of such a delicate way to send her away.

>Must he always give insult? It had not been meant as one even if it sounded like an accusation.

>The Blade of Mercy cast him a look and Christophe nodded jerkily, hoping his eyes could carry the apology he could not allow himself to speak before this company.

>The orc could not be called silvertongued, he did not have the... cunning mien for that, but he had a calming and orderly way about him. Christophe, who half the time seemed to infuriate when he meant compliment and praise when he meant to insult, could only envy that.

The Mirror Knight's internal monologues on his strategic incompetence:

>Obvious. That had been obvious, so why hadn't he seen it? All these blessings, but what were they really worth in his hands? The Dames had chosen him, back home, but he'd wandered a long way from that home. Would they choose him again, he wondered? Somehow he doubted it.

>Before long, Christophe of Pavanie knew, he would be standing alone surrounded by corpses. Again. Too slow, too weak, too stupid, again.

Christophe isn't a Saint of Swords. Not yet, anyway. We saw that Hakram convinced him with good common sense during the fight with Autumn, we saw that he genuinely held no animosity for him despite being an orc and one of the most infamous villains on the continent. We saw that in the heat of things when Hakram went down, his first instinct was to try to help him as best as he could – there was no hesitation because he was a Villain, no consideration of allowing him to die to weaken the Black Queen – the only thing that went through his mind when the chips were down was how he could help. How many Heroes, much more competent Heroes, would have simply let Hakram die to lessen the Black Queen and rid the world of a powerful Villain in one fell swoop?

His **actions** are as hypocritical and stupid as always. But the recent revelations shine a very new and very positive light on on his **intentions** and potential to change for the better. Genuine good intentions, endless self-criticism, an awareness of his own (many) faults, and a willingness to learn and become better.

[Liliet](#)

> How many Heroes, much more competent Heroes, would have simply let Hakram die to lessen the Black Queen and rid the world of a powerful Villain in one fell swoop?

None, I think. Actually.

[violentink](#)

Still think he's going to do a massive Heel turn, an Anakin Skywalker style "best and brightest turns ton the dark side." The vagrant spear just has to eat an axe to the face in circumstances that the Grand Alliance could have prevented and boom.

Big I

I could definitely see him becoming the Black Knight

Wonder

I think the MK can get away with threatening Cat for now because his Name is tailored to go up against Knight: a soldier to take out a thief.

But Cat's Name is something that has the WB worried to the extent that she tried to shape it to hers.

I believe the moment Cat gets her Name ,Christophe will lose any power he holds with Severance over her

Eurus

It's kinda funny that Christophe, despite now being one of the biggest weapons the Heavens have, doesn't actually seem to have any angels whispering to him. Not that I think more angels would *improve* the situation, but he might have less of a complex about the whole thing if he wasn't forced to rely on his own rather lacking instincts and social graces! XD

Ninestrings

Christophe appears to be in the mould of the Arthurian knights.

So there's a lot more pagan and celtic flavour to his power source, I wouldn't be terribly surprised if he had a fairy godmother of some sort rather than an angel on his shoulder.

[308924810a](#)

So rethinking Catherine's Liesse Accords: I think she's going to fail, because her planned multilateral enforcement of voted upon resolutions won't really work, because her idea for where to put the city she wants to build for this is bad, and because the opportunity to see a hero foil a villain's continent-spanning scheme, even when that scheme is for the better, is too much to pass up.

BUT, I think it should be remembered that even if Catherine fails at the scheme, the scheme itself doesn't have to be a failure. I've been thinking it through, and a lot of the reason that UN resolutions regarding protecting trade and arms limitations worked out was because a formerly isolationist superpower that's only really interested in making a profit (America, or potentially in PGTE, the Dwarves) was the one to push enforcement of them.

There's just too much in common between America's former diplomatic position and that of the Dwarves, it has to be deliberate. Which means the best path to victory is getting the dwarves to push this as their agenda.

They actually have a reason to do so, one of the only things that's been revealed about them is that they're having trouble dealing with the high rate of appearance of Named in their giant kingdom.

They'd also probably insist that any administrative/negotiating center of the treaty be put in Mercantis(I remember something about there being a big entrance to the Kingdom Under there), which has an actual tradition of neutrality, and the terrain to

make countries want to keep it that way, unlike Catherine's proposed location.

[sengachi](#)

Ohhhh. So the Mirror Knight is who we all used to assume the White Knight was.

Shit.

Chapter 27: Nigh

"When using tigers you don't have enough time to gloat, when using rats you risk awkwardly running out of gloat before the end: true equilibrium is found in a pit of humble man-eating tapirs, beasts that have never once failed me."

– Dread Empress Atrocious, later devoured by man-eating tapirs

I woke up with a stiff back and an aching leg.

I'd courted as much by sleeping in a chair instead of a bed, but I'd not had it in me to retire to my rooms. Groaning as I shook off the last pangs of sleep and felt out the throbbing side of my leg – today wasn't going to be one of the goods days, I could already sense it – I pulled back my hand to settle my messily loose hair some. The pale glow of the magelights in the healing ward's private room was hard on the eyes, somehow harsh and cold compared to the way the light of day felt. The Arsenal was not growing on me: the endless bare hallways and the dusty air had me more restless than even the Everdark had back in the day. Below the earth, moving through caves and tunnels, it'd still felt like my feet were on the ground. Here, though, it all felt fake. Unnatural.

Swallowing a yawn and stretching, I finally made myself look at the man lying on the bed by chair. Hakram's upper body was bare and I could see his hairless and muscled chest rise and fall as he breathed, the steady rhythm ensured by the sorcery woven over his mouth and nose. A ball of spelled air, made thicker and almost translucent by the nature of the spell, was ensuring that he would keep breathing steadily even should his body fail as it already had several times. Gods, my heart still clenched every time I looked at him. I could not see the leg and the chunk of hip – including bone – he'd lost, as they were under the blanket, but there was no hiding his carved-up flank and the stump of his

arm. The priests, the mages and even Masego were all in agreement: there could be no healing most of this.

In time flesh would grow back over the bared ribs and the stumps would cease to be purplish scabs, but there could be no question of attaching another limp even if we managed to get another one from an orc or even grow something through sorcery. Wounds inflicted by the Severance could be fully mended by neither sorcery nor Light. I'd already asked Hierophant to begin work on prosthetics, but the cuts through bone at the hip and leg were... Hakram's fighting days were likely over. After months of bedrest and the finest prosthetics the Arsenal could create, he might be able to walk around without help. Might. But he would no longer be fit for battle, that much couldn't be denied. I did not realize I was worrying my lip with my teeth as I looked at him until the door was cracked open and I released it.

My lips were dry, and my teeth sharp, so I tasted a fleck of blood against the roof of my mouth as I turned to see who'd intruded.

"Cat?" Archer quietly asked as she poked her face in. "Ah, good, you're awake."

She opened the door further with her foot and came in with a wooden tray. The smell from the pastries on it, some sort of Proceran pasties filled with cheese and herbs, wafted in.

"Breakfast," she announced.

"Thanks," I wanly smiled, waving her in.

I noticed a steaming mug besides the pastries, filled with something liquid and dark. Indrani crossed the room, letting the door close behind her, and passed me the tray even as she sat down in one of the seats by mine. The moment my hands were occupied supporting it she pre-emptively stole one of the pastries, which had my lips twitching, and I settled the tray on my knees with a nod of thanks. I sniffed at the mug and my brow rose when I recognized the distinct scent of the herbs Masego used to give me for pain back in the day.

"Cocky had a few," Indrani shrugged in answer when I glanced at her.

How like her, I fondly thought, to mention that in a transparent attempt to draw attention from the gesture of bringing the mug. Or from having remembered this precise recipe even years later. It was rare for her to bother with little things like this, usually when someone brought me a meal it was – the thought soured me, and I breathed out shallowly. I made myself take a bite from one of the remaining pastries, the crust falling apart in my mouth and the warm cheese drowning out the taste of the

herbs. It was tasty enough, and filling, so I tore through two before stopping to breathe.

"Thanks," I told Archer. "Didn't realize how hungry I'd gotten. What time is it?"

"An hour before Morning Bell," she replied.

Past dawn, then. This would make it the longest night of sleep from the four I'd had since the culmination of the Bard's plots in the Arsenal. Indrani had not, I noted, bothered to wipe away the mess of crumbs she'd made eating her own pastry. Hiding a slightly crusty smile at the sight, I sipped at the brew. The taste was as dubious as I remembered, but it'd do wonders for my leg without needing to draw on Night.

"You don't usually wake me, much less bring me breakfast," I leadingly said.

"I did in the Everdark, sometimes," she defended.

"Like we didn't make Akua cook whenever we could," I snorted.

Indrani was a much better cook than either Akua or me, in truth, but she was also in no way above taking a nap and letting someone else handle it after a long day of marching.

"Making the only known poisoner among us handle the stew," Archer dryly said. "Yeah, that sounds about right for our little Everdark walkabout."

I snorted. That whole affair had been an exercise in recklessness, it was true, for all that in the end it'd turned out mostly well. I did not immediately answer, instead enjoying the silence as I sipped at my mug. She'd probably come for a reason, but I was in no hurry to press her for it.

"Sometimes I wonder how it would have been down there, if he'd come along like he wanted to," Indrani said, eyes going to our unconscious friend.

Not even Masego could tell us when he'd wake. There wasn't exactly a known precedent to call on for demonic taint followed by a cut of the Severance.

"We would have been better off," I said. "And Callow would have fallen to pieces."

She hummed, not exactly in agreement but not disagreeing either.

"Always thought you were much rougher on Vivienne and the Hellhound than him, for that mess we found in Iserre," Indrani suddenly said. "He had just as big a hand in it, but his chewing out was had in private."

"Juniper and Vivienne had titles, he didn't," I replied. "I wouldn't have been quite so brutal with those two if not for their blunders in 'welcoming' me, either. Couldn't afford not to, after those."

"You also like him most," Indrani frankly said.

I jolted in genuine surprise, looking askance at her.

"It's fine," she waved. "I'm not getting all jealous on you, Cat. And it's not like you really play favourites in the Woe. Hakram's been with you from start, the longest of any of us, so you two have always been the closest in some ways."

I didn't bother to argue that I didn't sleep with Hakram, since we both knew that was a different thing. Her nebulous but inarguably existing partnership with Masego involved not a speck of bedplay, as far as I knew, but that in no way took away from the importance of it to both involved.

"Sometimes I think I might be afraid of becoming Black, if we make it all through the next decade," I admitted.

She didn't immediately speak, and I appreciated the moment to gather my thoughts as I drank.

"The rest of you wandering off to see to your own lives, the way the Calamities did with him," I said. "I never had to worry about that with Hakram. I knew he'd stick with me into Cardinal and the Accords."

It was never something we'd outright discussed, but more than once common plans had been drawn for things that the two of us would be able to do when the city was raised, together. It seemed faraway now, watching him breathe on that bed. I snorted.

"He wants to make cisterns up in the mountains, you know," I said. "With canals that'd lead the water down to the city since water's going to be an issue if it gets too large."

"Wouldn't that be something to see," Indrani softly said.

"Nonsense it what it is," I smilingly said. "We should drain one the lakes up there and gate it down instead, much more practical."

How many times had we had that debate? Must have been at least a dozen, I knew all the arguments for and against by rote. It'd gotten stale, retreading the same grounds, but I'd still give a queen's ransom to tread them once more with him right now. I breathed out, looking away.

"You know you're going to have to leave him behind, don't you?" Indrani gently said.

I turned so quickly I almost dropped the tray.

"Excuse me?" I flatly said.

"He's in no state to be transported," Archer said, not cowed by my glare in the slightest. "And even if he was, the Arsenal is the best place for him to recover. He can be fitted for the prosthetics here as they're being made, and there's not a place with more or more kinds of healers on the continent. If you take him with you Cat, it won't be for *his* benefit. It'll be for yours."

"I can't just let him rot here," I hissed.

"Masego will be attending him," Indrani said.

"Masego will *remember* to attend him in between more important things," I bit out.

A moment of silence passed, Archer saying nothing.

"I didn't mean that," I finally said.

It was doing a disservice to him. Masego was sometimes forgetful, but never when it came to taking care of one of us.

"I know," Indrani said. "Like you know you won't be able to stay here by his bedside forever. There's still a war on outside, and it needs you."

"Some days I wonder," I darkly said. "We managed to chase off the Intercessor, 'Drani, but what else do we have to show for this? Entire sections of the Arsenal trashed or tainted, a pile of dead soldiers and Named, a fucking knot of politics to entangle that just got even more knotted. The Mirror Knight has the fucking sword, and he's not going to give that back even if asked nicely."

"You drove back a creature that gives even the Hidden Horror the shivers," Archer said. "If there *wasn't* a pack of ruins on fire left behind, Cat, I'd be a lot more worried."

I took my mug in hand and reached to set aside the tray, swallowing a hiss at the way the move pulled at my leg, but Indrani leaned over and set it on the ground instead. I gestured in thanks, which she airily dismissed.

"And Mirror Knight trying to play politics won't amount to shit," Archer continued. "Most Dominion people can't stand him, and it's not like him having a real cutty sword is going to impress Hasenbach or Malanza. And if both those two tell him to sit down and shut up, I don't care whose daughter he's fucking: there's no one in Procer who's going to argue."

"It's a sword made to kill the Dead King, Indrani," I said. "And we only have one of those. That gives him clout, whether I like it or not."

"Balls to that," Archer said. "I don't care how many Mirror Knights we throw at Keter, it's not going to get shit done. You think it's the first time the Original Abomination got some scrappy hero with powerful aspects and a fancy sword knocking at his gate? He'll snap that boy over his fucking knee, Cat. The Saint might have pulled it off, 'cause she was hard and canny and gone feral in the Heavens way, but the *Mirror Knight*? He's just some asshole. Not the worst I've seen, and sure he tries, but when it comes down to it he's still just some jackass with a sword."

"If he was just that, I'd have gotten him under control by now," I said.

"Way you told it to me, you treated him like Black and the Empress treated you back in the day," Indrani said. "That wasn't going to work."

"It usually does," I said through gritted teeth.

And Christophe de Pavanie wasn't an idiot: I'd shown him how I did things, and then explained *why* they needed to be done that way. I'd even thought it was working, for all that I was wary of him and probably not hiding it entirely. I still had no real idea what had set him off at the end, though there was no denying I'd botched my handling of his little tantrum.

"Yeah, but you're the Black Queen," Archer said. "If you're being nice to him, it's probably a plot. If you're being mean to him, it's probably a plot. If you're not being anything to him, *it's probably a plot*. There's a reason it's Shiny Boots in charge of the heroes and not you, Catherine. Most of them still think you're out to get them."

She might be right, but I wasn't convinced. Still, there was no denying I was in a position where trying to keep forcing the matter would do a lot more harm than good. For now all that I could do was let sleeping dogs lie – and keep an eye on the dogs, just in case.

"Shiny Boots will be coming soon, at least," I grunted. "By midday tomorrow."

"The Painted Knife and her band the day after," Indrani said, "then Vivienne and Hasenbach the day after. It's going to get lively around here."

I didn't answer, resuming sipping at my brew as I watched Hakram from the corner of my eye. Silence stretched out again, almost peaceful.

"I want to be here when he wakes up," I said. "I can't help but feel that is the least of the least I could do, 'Drani."

"The conference won't be done in a day," Archer replied.

But it wouldn't last forever either, I knew. And if it ended and Hakram had not yet woken up... Gods, how was it a harder decision to leave him behind than to send soldiers into battles where I knew many of them would die?

"Yeah," I finally said. "It won't be done in a day."

It was the coward's way out, but I still hoped it was a decision I simply wouldn't have to make. My mug was nearly empty now, so I drank down the last of the bitter brew and set it aside.

"So why is it that you came to wake me, anyway?" I asked.

"Prince Pretty is about and kicking, the Physician finally cut him loose," Indrani said. "He was looking to speak to you when you have a moment."

I groaned and began to rise to my feet.

"Might as well," I said, reaching for my staff. "I feel like I need to stretch my legs a bit."

"That's the spirit," Archer grinned. "I'll keep watch on Hakram, you go and breathe some slightly more fresh air."

—

I washed myself and changed clothes first. With a washbasin and a cloth, not a bath: the Arsenal had no source of water, which meant it had to be brought in from Creation by barrels. The practical limits to doing that meant it was permanently rationed, and though I could have probably flouted the rule I saw no real reason to. I dragged out a leather hunting doublet – which I'd never actually used for hunting – and loose black trousers I could tuck into my boots, pulling my wet hair into a braid and loosening my cloak around my neck. It wasn't exactly court clothes, or queenly ones, but I had a limited patience for both and the only way I'd ever put on full Proceran royal dress was if they dressed up my corpse. Cordelia somehow managed to make it seem natural, but I had a deep and instinctual distrust for anything involving that many ribbons and knots.

I'd asked attendants to find out where Prince Frederic was before going into my quarters, so by the time I left them the answer was awaiting me. It also had me raising an eyebrow, since I'd

expected any conversation between us would be taken care of in a private audience room or either our quarters. Instead the Prince of Brus was currently breaking his fast in the meal hall where I'd found Archer on the day of my arrival. Except she'd used it when it was empty, while around this time there were bound to be more than a few full tables. Well, at least my hair would dry a tad on the way there. I'd somewhat learned my way around the Arsenal, what with all the traipsing about I'd done here, so to get to the hall I needed no guide.

It was a quick enough walk – the architects who'd designed the place had clearly known the Alcazar would be hosting the people who paid them, and so positioned it very conveniently – and I got through it briskly, the herbal brew having finally kicked in enough I could put a bit of a spring to my limp without swallowing a wince every time. The meal hall was a little over half-full, as I'd expected, offering up the sight men and women from their twenties to their dotage in three colours of robes. I would have expected some degree of clannishness but even those who most stuck to their own kind, the white-robed priests, had but a few islands of pale while most were spread out. The mages and the scholars, in red and bronze, were seated seemingly without thought to affiliation.

The closest thing there were to clans were actually the tables with Named, which everyone else avoided. In the back, near the corner, the Blade of Mercy and the Blessed Artificer were quietly speaking as they ate together. Closer to me I saw the Kingfisher Prince laughing at something Roland had said, the Harrowed Witch looking at them warily but also seemingly a little charmed. More than a few gazes turned my way when I limped in, a hush falling over the room. I said nothing, only making my way to Prince Frederic's table and clapping Roland's shoulder in thanks when he made some room for me to sit by his side.

"Your Majesty," the Harrowed Witch greeted me.

"Good morning," I said, then nodded at the others. "And to the both of you as well."

"Better yet for the pleasure of your company, Queen Catherine," Frederic Goethal smiled.

"Yes," the Rogue Sorcerer drily said. "That."

My gaze flicked to the side of the Kingfisher Prince's pale neck, where a thin red line went around with an even neatness that was somehow pleasing to the eye. Hells, if I'd not known better I would have believed it a tattoo. A rather tasteful one, at that.

"This is highly unfair," I complained. "How does the scar make you *prettier*? Mine just make me look like I got mauled."

I got treated to the sight of Frederic Goethal's eyes going wide in surprise, and the Prince of Brus politely coughed into his fist as Roland loudly choked. I glanced at the Witch, cocking an eyebrow and she reluctantly offered me a nod of agreement. See? *It's not just me.*

"I thank you for the compliment, Your Majesty," the Kingfisher Prince got out.

"Catherine," Roland muttered, aghast. "You can't just hit on a prince of the blood in the middle of the meal hall."

"I'm just stating the truth," I protested. "Look at Aspasia, she's not disagreeing is she?"

"I have finished my meal," the Harrowed Witch hastily said, "and so take my leave, with your permission."

Before said permission could either be offered or denied, she just as hastily bowed and made her escape. A cannier tactician than I'd expected, that one.

"Look what you did," Roland reproached.

"War makes beasts of us all," I solemnly said.

This time it was the Prince of Brus that choked, but in amusement. After mastering himself he poured me a cup of what looked like warm milk – with honey and something else in, maybe cloves going by the smell? – and offered it, which had my eyes sharpening. This was a rather informal setting, but he'd still poured for me. To an Alamans, which this one was for all that he'd spent the last few years being the darling of the Lycaonese, that implied either intimacy or the sort of admission of lower status that a prince of Procer would not, strictly speaking, need to offer me. Over the years First Princes had often tried to pass kingship of Callow was a rank of nobility below their own office, making it equivalent to that of the lesser western royalty instead.

Cordelia Hasenbach had never tried that with me: even back when she'd called me Your Grace instead of Your Majesty, it'd been with the implication that a *proper* queen of Callow would have warranted the latter appellation.

"Thank you," I slowly said, cocking my head to the side.

It was a statement, what he'd just done, and he'd chosen to do it in front of more than half a hundred people. Including several Named. The sole Named among Proceran royalty had just implied intimacy and trust in me in a subtle but very public way, which would not be something without consequence. I drank from the cup, and though it was too sweet for my tastes forced myself to

swallow. Frederic Goethal had been raised to the Ebb and Flow during an era that Procerans still called the Great War, so I did not doubt he knew exactly what he'd just done. It explained why we were meeting here, even. It also left me feeling somewhat indebted to him, even if I'd not sought out the gesture, which I doubted was a coincidence.

"How is the Adjutant, if I might ask?" Roland quietly said.

I told him, and the conversation drifted towards that and other idle talk about the state of the Arsenal – there would need to be a hard look taken at the tainted parts of it before the First Prince could step foot here – that lasted until my cup and their plates ran empty. The Rogue Sorcerer skillfully took his leave after that, which left me alone with the Prince of Brus.

"I must confess to a degree of restlessness, now that I've been allowed to escape the infirmary," the Kingfisher Prince idly said.

"I can sympathize," I said.

I'd spent a lot of my early years as the Squire going from one healing ward to another.

"Then perhaps you might care to escort me to that fighting pit in the Frolic, Your Majesty," Prince Frederic suggested. "If I do not exercise my arm at least a little I might just go mad."

Mhm. A genuine request, or just an excuse for the two of us to be able to talk in a more private setting? Either way I had little reason to refuse.

"I could use the walk," I agreed.

—

It'd been idle but pleasant talk all the way to the Frolic, which was empty at this time of the day.

Mind you it was an amusingly fresh experience to pass by a brothel with a genuine Proceran prince, an establishment he couldn't possibly have missed even if he was too polite to comment on it. The fighting pit was just as deserted at the rest of this area, rafters empty and sand untouched, although by the looks of the pair of practice swords left at the edge of the stands a servant must have come through at some point. I cocked an eyebrow at the fact that there were two swords there: unless the Kingfisher Prince had ceased using a shield, that meant he expected to be exercising his arm against someone. Unhurried, the fair-haired man went down the stairs and undid the straps keeping the dull swords in place.

"The First Prince will be arriving tomorrow, along with your Lady Dartwick," Frederic Goethal told me. "Word was sent to me overnight."

Quicker than we'd thought. They'd get here the same day as the White Knight, then.

"Good to know," I cautiously replied. "We have much to talk about."

The pale-skinned man took up one of the swords, testing its weight first by holing the grip and then by a succession of swift swings.

"You and I do as well, Your Majesty," Frederic Goethal seriously said.

He tossed me the sword, which I'd half expected. It'd been well thrown so I snatched it out of the air easily. The balance was a little off for me – I preferred a heavier pommel and a longer blade – but I was out of practice anyway. It'd hardly make a difference.

"It's been some time since I used one of those," I warned him.

"So I've heard," the Prince of Brus said, eyeing me openly, "yet the instincts will still be there, and you have the fitness for it."

I might not have been entirely opposed to being looked up and down by Frederic Goethal in different circumstances, but it hadn't been that kind of look: he'd been gauging callouses and muscles, not how well I might fill my clothes.

"Swords and a chat, huh," I said. "Fair enough. I can work with that."

I made my way down the stairs, leaning on my staff, and after dulling my bad leg with a quick touch of Night leapt down and landed on the sands in a crouch, Mantle of Woe billowing around me. Prince Frederic's boots touched the pit floor a moment later with catlike grace. His loose white long-sleeved shirt – with those puffy Alamans sleeves – and silken trousers would have made him seem like some lordling who'd stumbled into the wrong place by accident, if not for the comfortable way he held his dulled blade. Idly I spun my own sword to loosen my wrist, considering how best to approach. He'd weigh more, and be quicker on his feet, but that'd been true of a lot of my opponents over the years. It was hard to decide how best to attack when I still only had vague notions of how skilled he might be.

"So the swords are bare, but what is it we're meant to be talking about?" I probed.

"We have trouble brewing," the Prince of Brus said, "of a most inconvenient kind."

Ever light on his feet he approached, and I tested his guard with a flick of the blade he allowed to touch his but otherwise ignored. The fair-haired man began to circle me rightwards, which I reciprocated in the opposite way.

"You'll have to elaborate," I said. "It's been one of those months."

The prince darted forward, sword going to the side in what I realized too late to have been a feint, but when he struck at a sharp angle that would have hit my swordholding wrist he found instead that a hard blow of my staff forced him to withdraw.

"How unsporting," Frederic Goethal boyishly grinned.

"I don't recall agreeing to swords only," I nonchalantly replied.

He laughed and we began circling each other again.

"I have decided not to press charges against the Red Axe under the Terms," the Kingfisher Prince said, and my eyes narrowed, "though I am not unaware that ultimately means little."

"There was no need for that little piece of theatre in the meal hall, if you meant to throw in with the Mirror Knight," I noted.

"It is a personal decision, not a political one," he admitted. "I have known hatred, how it can twist you. The Red Axe was done great wrongs, and the depth of the hatred born of them makes anything I have partaken of a pittance. I do not forgive or forget her attack, but neither would I see her slain on my behalf."

I slid a step to the side, sweeping low with my staff and baiting the attack I'd expected to follow. He was too quick on his feet to resist such an opening, dancing around my sweep and darting a strike out at my shoulder. Grip shifting, I grabbed the edge of my cloak with my freed fingers and swept the strike into the cloth, nearly ripping the blade out of his grasp. Yet nimbly he went, retreating out of my range before I could try to hem him in. The tricky bastard.

"It won't change that she killed the Wicked Enchanter," I said.

"Or that she tried to open my throat, lack of complaint or not," Frederic of Brus acknowledged. "Unfortunately, the latter of these might turn out to be the most trouble. Though I am of the Chosen, I am also a prince of the blood and the anointed ruler of Brus. The First Prince is of the opinion, and to my regret I

cannot disagree, that my attempted killer must stand trial under Proceran law."

"By any reasonable measure she'll get the-" I almost said headsman's axe, but it would have been both ghastly and a pun, "-noose for the Enchanter, which would allow us to sidestep that issue outright."

It wasn't that I couldn't see where Cordelia was coming from, really. One of the heroes had just stuck a sword in the neck of one of her empire's ruling nobility, if she *didn't* act then she was legitimizing the right of heroes to pull shit like this in years to come. On the other hand, coming from the side of the Truce and Terms, we were going to see more than a few desertions if turned out that we were all subject to Proceran laws. People just didn't trust the Principate that much, and given what the Sisters had shown me of the plotting in Cleves it wasn't without reason. The unspoken conflict of authority between the officers of the Terms and the crowned heads of the Grand Alliance had been from open conflict so far, with great care, but this seemed like just the kind of mess to make it into a very spoken conflict instead.

"If the situation in the Arsenal had unfolded differently, that might have been an elegant solution," the Kingfisher Prince acknowledged. "Unfortunately, the Mirror Knight now wields the Severance and he has ties to the Langevins of Cleves. Whose loyalties have waned even as their ambitions waxed."

The Prince of Brus raised his sword high, blue eyes cool.

"If Chosen striking at royalty is left unpunished," Prince Frederic gravely said, "we believe that my neck might just have healed from the first blow struck in the Principate's next civil war."

[TeK](#)

We are the knights who say "Nigh"!

Big Brother

Not Ni, Nye. Pronunciation's a strange thing.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

pretty sure the difference was purposeful 😊

NerfGlaistigUaine

What is it with man-eating tapirs being described as humble? I mean, I've never met one but what does a mute man-eating animal have to do to be renowned for humility?

[TeK](#)

It does not presume to speak out of turn.

dadycoool

It also eats whatever is placed in front of it without question or suspicion.

[TeK](#)

Truly, a most loyal subject.

shadw21

If only we could get them, or the sentient tigers, to pay taxes.

[TeK](#)

We would have to pay them a salary first to do that.

[shikkarasu](#)

What if they paid in Kind, rather than Capital? A percentage of all goods or services rendered rather than coin?

dadycoool

Fertilizer?

zfglx

Are you sure the Tapirs are mute? I seem to vaguely recall that one or more of them tried for the seat of Dread Emperor

Valkyria

No, they were considered, since whoever kills the current Dread Emperor/Empress has a legal claim to be the next one. They did not claim that for themselves though.

Valkyria

There has been an army of sentient tigers though... But I can't recall if they were able to talk. Didn't they also rebel or something?

[TeK](#)

Sentient invisible tigers did indeed rebel, which was used as a legal precedent for animals to be considered traitors. However the court ruled that while tapirs were guilty of treachery, they did not meet the requirements to be considered the next Emperor (probably because there was more than one and so no clear successor could be discerned).

Valkyria

Ah right. A most famous tale. Thank you for refreshing my memories.

Nairne .01

This is another argument for man-eating tapirs being humble.

dadycool

I predict a frustrated snarl from Cat at Politics, and not only that, but Proceran Politics, muscling in on her turf. There have been times when I've almost wondered if her insignia has been less than accurate, but then moments like this next arc happen and the sword is joined by a lead weight.

Catric confirmed? Or at least offered? He propositions her in the Proceran way, then takes her on a date that's tailored to her: a ring fight against a superior opponent.

[TeK](#)

The last person she was potentially shipped with didn't, er, survive the attempt.

dadycool

Oh. Right. And the one before her lost his Angelic Sponsor, before him was Indrani, who's a Woe and also had her own 'issues' that they had to get through last book, and before her was...the half-fae that couldn't control her powers and they broke up over several related issues.

Possible counterpoints: the half-fae (still can't remember her name) wasn't part of Cat's entourage and chafed because of it, in a way that Captain's husband didn't. Hanno needed to grow beyond merely being a vessel for angelic Judgement, and Cat's ongoing story is that anyone who doesn't immediately go to heel loses something dear to them or in some other way no longer has any other option. I remember feeling a sense of dread when he essentially said "I might join you in the future, but I can overcome the urge right now." back when they were having their nighttime walks.

Indrani's issues had always been there, they were simply boiled to the surface by her and Cat's experience and they are even better friends because of it. Finally, the Repentant Magister was exhausted, her redemption and part-of-the-group arcs were complete, and compared to Cat, Masego, and an up-and-coming Hero that's learning from both Heroic and Villainous sources, she was the expendable Named in a fight guaranteed to kill at least one Named. She might've survived as a cripple the way Cat did that first time (Squire I), but Hakram used up all the good karma, especially since Villains cost more.

[Adrian V](#)

Hanno isn't out the picture, in fact the more they try to deny it the more i ship them!!! In fact i am happy Nephele bought the farm!! It clears the way for the one true ship, she needed to die for our ship

MUAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA*Insert Kira's evil laugh here*

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"In fact i am happy Nephele bought the farm!!"

Big disagree on principle, but whatever. You do realize that Cat's already in a poly relationship with Archer while Archer simultaneously dates Hierophant, right? Without monogamy there's no point to killing off characters for romantic reasons, and while Cat is currently only sleeping with one person she's doing it in a context that very strongly suggests that that's incidental and not a specific feature of their relationship.

[Liliet](#)

Poly Person Currently Only Having One Partner Mostly For Lack Of Trying is an excellent take and I wish there were more different poly stories that were just... many enough to be different from each other XD

Letouriste

Special Tribune Kilian . That's her name and current rank. We last seen her In the prologue of this book, on the Morgentor of Twilight Pass when reinforcement arrived. She is with Robber and Pickler.

[shikkarasu](#)

Much like Robber; I don't want Kilian in a relationship with Cat, but I desperately want her back on screen.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh Robber x Cat would be great though. Terrible for the world by and large, but great.

iLissuin

I don't see Catric as being a thing or this chapter as proving it. All this proves is that Friederic is good at diffusing tension before delivering bad news and that Cat will check out anyone hot (especially when it's been a while), two things we already knew. Also, I thought that he was in love with Cordelia?

(Or I might just be willfully misinterpreting things because I really ship Cat with Hanno.)

dadycoool

I could be reading too deeply, too. I haven't read his Extra Chapters yet, so I don't really know who he is, beyond being an Alamans Prince that was brave enough to get a lot of support among the Lycaonese, which is basically impossible. I also like her ship with Hanno, and was really expecting it with their clandestine meetings back in Salia, though at the moment they kinda seem like a couple that are having a somewhat tense break that she's taking a spa day to ease. Or she would if the spa hadn't caught fire.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I highly recommend you read those Extra Chapters because they are amazing and will get you a lot more invested in the Kingfisher Prince. I think the Extra Chapters in general are some of EE's best chapters maybe because they're mostly focused character pieces.

dadycoool

OK. I'm invested. This guy knows what Doom looks like because he's been staring at it practically nonstop for about, what, two and a half years? Three?

Zggt

To be fair, Cat is experienced with the issue of how unreasonable it is that people are trying to murder you while you are trying to save lives. Not a bad choice to look for advice there. I'm half expecting the first line of the next chapter to be something along the lines of "have you tried burning things?"

[Burlyraven](#)

Aw, Kingfisher and Cat's first date. The Trickster protagonist and the Name partially built to handle deceivers. Should be a spicy courtship.

Also, I have to wonder what would happen if Cat commanded Hakram to get on his feet? When she commanded him to grab Scribe's throat with a hand he no longer had, his Name provided one. The demons and Severance have probably thrown too much literal and metaphorical scar tissue into the mix, but I do still have to wonder if we might not see a bit of dark heroism out of the orc (especially considering his Villainous Name already likes to bastardize heroic concepts and actions).

thearpox23

"Also, I have to wonder what would happen if Cat commanded Hakram to get on his feet?"

I imagine we'd get another Nauk. And no one wants another Nauk.

One of the central themes of these works is managing wish-lite powers so they don't screw you over, so Cat won't resort to such measures unless she's really cornered.

dadycool

I hadn't considered a deceiver-handling Name thrown into the mix. I didn't even know he has one. Honestly, that's one of those combinations that can lead to either the best Nemesis stories or the most fitting Romance stories. In a Trickster/Clairvoyant pairing, it might involve Cat getting up to her tricks and Freddy content to humor her, armed with the mutual understanding that he could dismantle her fun, but playing by her rules because it's more fun that way.

Cat is Hakram's Warlord and he is her Adjutant. If she gives a Command, he MUST obey. Even if they must together Break the rules of Creation. When you throw in "Dead the hand and Dead the man" into the mix, sooner or later he could very well become a brain in a jar, managing Cat's Empire, in whatever form it might take. Great, all of a sudden I'm imagining Darth Vader, but as a secretary/clerk/whatever.

[Burlyraven](#)

Kingfisher's Name is meant to handle the Wolves (he's designated the Dead King and the undead there), the Snakes (the other princes and courtiers), and to be a leader of men. I'm going with assumption that handling of snakes would give him some equipment for general Trickster shenanigans.

dadycool

OK. That actually sounds like a nice counterpart to Cat. Queenfisher?

[TeK](#)

Going really deep here.

Decius

Cat can't give that order unless the drama requires that Adjutant obey it.

My worry is that Pickler, or worse, the dwarves have a solution to Hakram being only mostly there.

agumentic

>they don't have to obey Procer, but that's completely different from not having to obey the country's laws

If they have to obey Proceran laws, what exactly stops Procer from passing a law that would demand obedience from all Named? They are subject to the tribunal, but it would be a tribunal of officers from the entire Grand Alliance and Truce&Terms, not any single earthly power, especially one that is still distrusted.

>He could entirely bypass the political trouble for Cordelia and prevent the civil war by doing so

How exactly would making a sharp problem of conflict between the royal authority and the personal allegiance of Named to their leaders even sharper help?

agumentic

Damn, posting from phone sucks.

[Adrian_V](#)

To me is less than she will order him and more that he will push his name into it, maybe he will even get a new name since the whole deadhand thing was suspicious and we don't know where it came from. Remember at the end of the day Severance is an aspect, so something name related even if not an aspect could defeat it.

Another angle is that Bard wants him to archive just that somehow since that would "prove" the sword is not enough to kill DK

dadycool

His Name is Adjutant, not Deadhand, the same way the Black Knight wasn't Named the Carrion Lord. It's just a title people gave him that's more "Oh, that's Hakram" rather than "It's just some glorified clerk somewhere."

Tyck

Adjutant's Name isn't going to change unless what Catherine needs from him significantly changes – his entire Name is built on complementing Catherine, that's what it is to be the Adjutant. Possibly his Aspects will take on different manifestations, or turn out to have been damaged by demonic corruption and/or being cut by Severance – I would not be super surprised if Rampage changes significantly or is no longer usable at all, metaphysically speaking, to go along with the physical damage to Hakram's body meaning he can't functionally use it anyways.

CipherSKT

As far as I know, Hakram's spectral hand is a prosthesis, not conjured by name shenanigans.

beleester

One hand is a skeletal prosthesis, but the ghostly one is a Name ability – it just appears out of nowhere when Catherine gives the order.

[shikkarasu](#)

I'm not sure she even needs to give the order anymore. He was fighting unimpeded recently, which suggests that he has full agency with both hands. I wouldn't be surprised if it turns into grounds for a new Name, though.

He failed at one of his defining character traits, the one that granted his first Aspect; his durability. It's like when Black was captured. The Black Knight is not a prisoner, so he stopped being the Black Knight. The Adjutant is a warrior-aide, so if he is cut down he is not the Adjutant.

I suspect he will get a new Name that leans *hard* on the whole ghost limb thing and probably focuses more on the secretarial half of his role.

Shveiran

A bit of a stretch there, in my opinion.

Black didn't lose his Name because he was captured, but because he took a long series of actions that brought him outside the shape of his Role.

It wasn't that he wasn't conquering (he hasn't been

conquering since the Conquest when you get down to it) or that he wasn't destroying or leading; it was that he was no longer the Emperor's enforcer. He had become at odds with Malicia and therefore had the choice between claiming the Tower (which at the time he refused) or be human. He could no longer be the Empress' attack dog, which is pretty much what Praes' Black Knights are.

Hakram didn't fail his Role, here, because he didn't fail period.

He set out to do something his warlord deemed essential, and did it despite overwhelming opposition.

He saw her will done. That is his Role, to enforce the Black Queen's decisions and facilitate her work.

He just failed to also not be maimed by a shit-ton of Demons, which, I mean, can you blame him?

But he isn't the Undefeated Champion. Losing is not anathema to his Name.

It could have repercussions, sure, but it is not against his Role.

[shikkarasu](#)

Definitely a stretch. The most fun theories are the ones that strain probability, just like some of the best ships will never sail 😬 Not to mention, my fan theories always lean toward hoping that someone will get a giant mecha-arm, or in this case be 35% ghost-limb.

That said, there were 2-3 bits lot of foreshadowing in Books 1-3 about Villains not getting captured alive. I can't find it off hand, but I noticed them in my third re-read after Black was captured. I think EE intended for that to be what took his Name away from the start of the story, but hid the breadcrumbs well. Just like how the war with Procer was a B-plot even in the first book or how the Battle of Camps & Princes' Graveyard were referenced back in Interlude: Commanders during the Fae Campaign.

Cpt. Obvious

Black started to lose the name long before the capture. It was mentioned that even though he never had the largest pool of name power, and that he'd been pushing one of his aspects to the limit for an extended period his recuperation was taking much longer than he expected. There were also physical changes to his appearance, much like the Thief noticed her hair starting to grow as she started to lose alignment with her Name. Note that this happened before she lost the

name.

Also if you think back to book one or two Cat experienced how the name powers got harder to use and less powerfull as she actively tried to act against the Name. It wsa also mentioned that this was a sign of slipping out of alignment with the Name and that she was risking losing it.

In the Black Knight's case the name probably started to vane the moment he ignored the order to return to Praes. When he realized just how close to the insanity of previous rulers of the Tower Malicia came when she more or less funded Second Liesse so she could get not only a flying city, which trumps any flying fortress, but also a doomsday weapon of ridiculous proportions it broke their bond, and when he ignored her order the name started to fade.

Xinci

Saying Laurence went feral in the way of the Heavens is a very succinct way to describe how she saw the patterns of destruction and construction societies go through(which does appear to happen in Guide).

I really am quite curious about how the Dead King would kill Christophe. Its a bit tricky, since we don't know the effect of the rest of his oaths but with what we do know.

1) It would be hard to do it with revenants as he has simply become very hard to kill at this point. He's very tough and very strong, perhaps more so than most of the DKs revenants.

2) Use of common soldierly and traps. Again runs into the toughness issue and adding in demons to the traps probably won't work since it looks like his Domain is tied to Light. Which is an issue, when it comes to methods to kill something.

3) He gets renewed at Dawn, so if you could possibly toss him into a Hell he probably wouldn't get the renewal. Given he doesn't have senses like Laurence I doubt he could sense the dimensions well enough to cut his way out there accurately. But if Dawn is tied to Creation in a continuous manner like Winter was, then chucking him across dimensions might not stop it.

4) He has lost his mental shielding since he broke an oath but Severance may kinda make up for that? There is probably an angle for killing him there. He still needs to breathe, so you could get a kill squad and maybe magic him asleep to keep him unconscious and do something like bury him alive.

Anyway, on Hakram, we saw souls will integrate foreign powers/sources, so could you theoretically remove some soulstuff from

something else and use it to make a scaffold to properly fill in his missing parts?

Slight ethical issues perhaps but surely the binders know some useful creatures for something like this.

[TeK](#)

"Nooo, don't slice this McGuffin, it is the source of all my power!"

thearpox23

You kill Christophe by making him do really stupid decisions. Like having him charge alone into a burning inferno after everyone supporting him dies or betrays or seems to betray him.

You just need to make sure there is no one to rescue him at the eleventh hour, and the fucker will go down eventually. A project to be sure, but doable, and the loss of mind shield definitely makes it easier.

WirelessGrapes

The issue with that plan is that the DK would basically just be punting his big plan years down the line. That big of a sacrifice would 'cripple' him and sent him back, when he wants to take care of the botched Bard scheme. It's something he'd do in the past, but now would result in the same status quo.

thearpox23

Did your comment get moderated or something? Because the publishing time and my notification don't match.

Decius

You'd have to make the rescuer betray him, or possibly be genuine but untrusted.

A little bit of manipulation, and then have the rescue be by Archer but look like revenge for Hakram.

Konstantin von Karstein

You could send him in a sea in Arcadia/a Hell, so he would drown. You would just have to take dispositions so that no one can come save him.

beleester

The trick is getting him there. I suspect that if you tried gating Saint into Arcadia she'd cut the gate apart.

hakureireimu

Separate him from support; he's dead the first time he has to sleep. If he refuses to separate from support, attack where he isn't until he does.

Ninestrings

Fire a crossbow into his throat while he sleeps.

Any villainess with a seduction angle could cut his throat in bed too.

A Femme Fatale knocking off her powerful but naïve good boy pawn is a pretty easy story groove to slide into if you'll pardon the expression.

Konstantin von Karstein

Was the double entendre intentional? 😊

The only way the DK could pull something like that is by having people bred specifically for that need, and good luck to make them interact that closely with the MK without arousing suspicions.

dadycool

Hmm. Maybe kill an attractive woman, make her a Revenant, and put her in the right position? It was able to fool Cat long enough to kill her almost-apprentice. The kill someone and replace them, not the attractive woman part. Of course, it probably would've worked anyway.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Probably would have worked even better on Cat than the plan DK actually pulled off

Ninestrings

We don't know DK isn't currently doing that with any number of characters, not to mention faceless soldiers.

It's unlikely, but far from impossible.

Dome Zasrekh

MK has the same weakness as the Saint had: Time, something DK has a Demon for or can craft some sorcery. He is resistant to most things, but that makes him blind/vulnerable to the things he is not. And that's without him being so damn STUPID! Like man, you even know most of your flaws and turn to denial! And Hakram's greatest weapon is his mind, not his arm! hehe

Taichi22

Well, MK's not unlike Lawrence— he'll take a lot of killing but what he ultimately lacks is scope and flexibility. While that's admittedly less of a disability on a combat-focused hero, who can rely upon the heavens to cover his weaker areas, those are still liabilities to be exploited.

Consider: what if Cordelia has him tried for treason and declared persona non grata in all of the Grand Alliance? Any competent villain could make that happen to him, were he without support. Similarly, he's vulnerable now to mind control, and likely, given his inexperience and lack of mental fortitude, quite possible to be turned to a villain by someone as powerful as Ol' Bones, even temporarily. And that's before you consider that he surely, at some point, must tire. And the fact that were the Dead King simply to avoid him altogether I sincerely doubt that MK would actually be able to catch him without a story at his back.

MK's a maul, not a catch-all weapon. Nearly impossible to block, and difficult to handle in the hands of a skilled wielder, but the trick is in not blocking or parrying him; dodge, lock, bind, and go on the offensive, at which point he becomes a liability to the person wielding him.

What happens if the Dead King manipulates him against ALL of his allies? When he's the last one standing in a field of corpses of his former friends?

Mirror Knight fighting the Dead King on his own is like trying to beat a skilled swordsman with a steel bat.

ThatOneGuy

Why else do you think Old Bones is going to enjoy this new disaster? If he plays his cards right there things can happen.

1 – MK goes “true king” route with his heritage, sword, and belief he is the one to save them all. Gets into fights as he waves “heroes are better” banner playing Lawful Stupid while his supporters remove the two current candidates on the throne for him to step up and “accept” it like a good hero king. Then hero boy plays king... Or does the final charge and breaks proving “the folly of fools” moral story.

2 – heroes and villains break away due to political laws trumping treaty laws. Less heroes, more bickering, a low decline until Old Bones drops the axe on their necks or sets out his new territory and calls it a day as everyone falls back to old roles... With fewer allies and named.

3 – actively cause problem by applying pressure when MK is not near by while our old friend/enemy in the tower pulls the

needed strings and funds to make everything devolve into a bloody civil war only with her and Bones bringing the clean up crew.

4 – stare in disbelief as heroes talk it out like rational level headed people... But who really expects that?

[TeK](#)

It says a lot about this fandom that we are so eager to get on “how to kill MK” train.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Well it’s an interesting thought experiment even when you don’t factor in his abrasive personality. When you do, well, that’s just fuel for the fire

hakureireimu

He’s not exactly a likable character.

erebus42

Well yeah. He’s an obstinate asshole who’s actions could potentially lead to the unnecessary deaths of countless. Not to mention he has a very unlikable personality which makes it much easier to be ok with bad things happening to him

alele

“Feral in the Heavens Way” is sorta like Cat’s “Below’s Hero”. Essentially stealing some of the other side’s tricks in specific scenarios. Saint’s conflicts were carefully curated to keep her “heroic immunity”. The way she got caught by Rumena and held hostage showed how she crumples when unable to “legally” cut the opposition. Ironically, she either needed a Band to babysit her or to be the “Final Solution” to a problem. Which is kind of sad considering how in her POV she regretted not reaching X place earlier when Heavens/Providence made sure she didn’t so as to not risk their very sharp, very specific problem-solving blade.

Miles

I think the trick is to not fight him at all. Just get him in hot water with malicias help

Sir Nil

The problem of executing a hero is now a problem of whether to execute them as a breaker of the terms or an attempted regicide. Glad to see one knot is traded for another even more knottier knot.

Konstantin von Karstein

I hope the regicide thing and Hasenbach will be enough to convince the MK.

Taichi22

The thing is, like – Cat could wash her hands of the affair now and be like, “Here, look, I did as you asked – I let her walk free.” to Mirror Knight and still have Red Axe hanging from a noose on the gallows behind her.

Honestly, she could even turn around and tell the villains, “Yeah so I chose not to try her by the Terms because I knew this would happen.” just to keep everyone happy. I suspect there are a few story beats there which might lead towards negative results, but it’s certainly a more mundane option.

Ninestrings

What if they stand on either side of her and both decapitate her at the same time.

erebus42

Truly an elegant solution

Ninestrings

Gods below can these two just cut each others clothes off already.

You wouldn’t seed severance to cut the tension here

Tom

> “If the situation in the Arsenal had unfolded differently, that might have been an elegant solution,” the Kingfisher Prince acknowledged. “Unfortunately, the Mirror Knight now wields the Severance and he has ties to the Langevins of Cleves. Whose loyalties have waned even as their ambitions waxed.”

> The Prince of Brus raised his sword high, blue eyes cool.

> “If Chosen striking at royalty is left unpunished,” Prince Frederic gravely said, “we believe that my neck might just have healed from the first blow struck in the Principate’s next civil war.”

I want to see the Dead King as kind of threatening, but his strategy seems to mostly be “wait for everyone else to kill themselves.” And apparently it’s super effective..

Miles

A heroic axiom comes to mind: Never send multiple bands of heroes to fight the same villain or they'll trip over each other and all die. With the t&t getting everyone together to fight him, they're guaranteed to prune some heroes.

[Liliet](#)

The thing about being immortal is that it makes "wait for your enemies to die on their own" a valid and effective strategy XD

thearpox23

Didn't expect Frederic to bring up the looming Clevian treachery, nor for Red Axe's trial under the Proceran Law to be an issue. You'd think being charged in a civil court for premeditated murder of someone in an allied nation doesn't mean submission to Proceran Law. T&T already requires everyone to play nice, which kinda has to include murdering allies, so the Red Axe being punished isn't unreasonable. Maybe if the conviction under Proceran Law was significantly different I could see the argument, but murder is murder. Seems like splitting hairs to me.

All that aside, the tangled mess is just growing larger every chapter, which should mean a good number of chapters in the Arsenal yet. Everyone should find time to talk to everyone, and with my gut estimate that's more twenty chapters or so.

Not that I'm complaining, but it's gonna be a tight fit if erra is aiming to finish this saga this book. Book VII hope?

dadycool

It's only been 27 chapters. Not counting the Interludes, that's the length of Book 1. Accounting for the length change, we might be up to Book 2 in length.

thearpox23

Looking at the first book is pointless. I am going by Book 5, which has 90 numbered chapters, translating to expected 110 chapters for this one.

27 current chapters + 20 Arsenal/intrigue + 20 killing Dead King + 10 killing Bard + 5 something else + 10 Malicia/Black/Praes + 10 afterstory = 102 chapters according to my totes accurate math

Thinking on that, that actually works out. But then again, that is all assuming no meandering, and we've just had a surprise base defense, so I'm not betting on that.

dadycool

Yeah, the past, what, 14 numbered chapters have been about the Arsenal, which I personally had assumed would be essentially a meet-and-greet in preparation for the meeting, with maybe something cataclysmic going down due to all five Woe being there. I didn't think the meet-and-greet would BE the cataclysmic event. And all that in four days.

superkeaton

Ah, Hakram, you were just too reliable. Bard's pulling the same trick she did with Black, attack not the master, but the loyal, beloved hound. Trying to unbalance things, give her too many plates to keep spinning.

I still don't trust the Kingfisher Prince.

Konstantin von Karstein

Why? Absolutely nothing that he did was suspicious in any way.

dadycoool

Maybe that's just it? Making himself too pristine, especially after two years on the front lines, which were likely only more glorious than what we saw in Book 5? That reminds me, I never actually read his Extra Chapters. Welp, I guess I'd better get to the Backstory before he becomes a front-and-center character.

Shveiran

Not to be that guy, but are you sure it's fair to express a judgment on how pristine the character is without having read most of his POV chapters? It's pretty much half the evidence we have on the guy being actually a lowe case hero.

beleester

His Name is pretty much built on being ridiculously over-the-top gallant. And he knows this and he's leaning into it. He's kind of like a comic relief role – by being so heroic it's almost funny, he ends up shifting the tone of the story in his favor.

He might be putting up a front in the sense that even when he's not **feeling** super heroic he still has to act the part, but I can't imagine him turning traitor.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yes, read his backstory, it's why most people have a good opinion of him.

He's making himself pristine as a « fuck you » to the DK, showing Neshama that not even the Apocalypse will stop himself from being badass and impeccably dressed.

hakureireimu

Then why are you spending time here instead of reading his extra chapters? Why? What is wrong with you?

superkeaton

I dunno , I jist don't.

Morgenstern

Afraid of ending up liking the guy? ... or disappointed, after all the hype about him here... ^^°? 😊

superkeaton

He's just too... loyal and reliable. Too reasonable. Puts me on edge, waiting for another shoe to drop.

laguz24

I really want to see the red ax talk.

agumentic

Ah, the return of the Principate Civil War plot, with vengeance. Book 5 wasn't quite enough to deal with that. I wonder if this is the outcome of the last of Bard's affrays.

dadycoool

I think this is a possible Pivot to what the Sisters showed Cat that one night.

Zggt

I've been meaning to touch on the subject of what Cat's becoming. She's not actually had a chance to see the positive results of her actions directly since... the fourth book? It was cheesy, things like a Callowan giving an Orc thanks, but it was also inspiring; it helped Cat remind *why* she's not wrong on an emotional level. Heroes get inspiration from Above to have the strength to forge forward – at this point, does the war with the Dead King might probably allow an “it would have been theoretically worse under someone else” (something not necessarily true; Above's intervention alongside a competent Queen is something that was available to Cat, and she now has to live with the results).

At what point does Cat understand how trying to make everything *less bad* with all you have will just give more and more, with no promise of anything good coming out of it? It's been brutal watching her go down this path. At this point she's a bunch of aches and scars, both physical and metaphorical. She hasn't, and won't, get time to heal. By the time it's over, how much of the Callowan in her will even be left? Her story is that of Callow, and Callow and herself are becoming more irrelevant to one another each day that passes because there's a war against the Dead King going on and she isn't there on Callow's behalf. There's a case that at this point, whatever she was in the first books is either dead or dying, and it's been catching up with her body for a while now.

At a certain point, I had hoped that Cat would get her happy ending after setting things right. Maybe a Name like the Rogue Queen, her story being wandering around and stabbing things in the name of Callow's good with her friends while not having to worry about anything else. Now, even ignoring the fact that Black got something similar as his "next chapter after leading the forces of pragmatism against the a-holes of the world for the most important years of his life", and therefore wouldn't be Cat's path (Black was unwilling to compromise on winning and therefore his result was failure and being forced to move on, while she's clearly willing to lose to achieve her goals). The fact is that while Black wanted to beat Above, Cat doesn't really care about winning, she cares about people.

Villains can only get their redemption once they're dead. Cat might think she's made peace with that (yeah, with Struggle being so natural to her, that's a clear delusion), but at this point it feels like the metaphorical boiling frog, and Archer is the only one both perceptive enough to see it and that cares enough to help now that the one who usually does that is in a coma. It's similar to the Mad Queen ASOIAF theory (that was badly executed in the TV rendition) where her disconnect from the people she cares about (usually from them dying under her banner) and being forced to take part of greater and greater battles with bitter sacrifices each time eventually turn "remaining strong" into "inhuman monster". Cat won't allow it to come to that, but the sentiment remains.

And that's if something like "the Crows decided Cat could not do enough to stop the treachery from Above, because it seems the heroes are unable to compromise; fine, let the humans deal with the Dead King's horrors then, and we'll plan to exterminate their entire nations and see how they like consequences for their actions". Or Malicia screwing everyone over. Or most Villains jumping ship after the heroes get away with treason with a slap on the wrist. All of these options are the result of Cat's endless compromises, and all of these are looming threats which can destroy everything she's accomplished.

It feels like she's eventually going to slip and everything will just break. The last times ended with hundreds of thousands of dead. This time the stakes are so much higher. And you have got to know that when she fails, the Heroes are definitely going to blame her for being human, like they do every time. I'm feeling particularly pessimistic.

dadycoool

Yeah, I think "The Girl Who Climbed the Tower" is getting louder in her head, even if she doesn't notice it yet. Callow is upset that she merely chained up the dog that bit them rather than putting it down, so she's losing her home (Maybe Freddy will let her stay with him if she gets banished?) and she's running herself ragged trying to fight the Dead King, the herd of panthers that is the Villain faction, and the Heroes that generally refuse to see any positive side to any Villain, especially one as powerful as her.

Also, like you say, even she needs time to breathe every once in a while. At this point, EE kinda has to call it quits at the end of this book, because the escalation alone would kill Cat, nevermind the fact that stories and luck run out eventually.

Zggt

I think it's really obvious at this point that unless something radically changes, Cat is not making out of this book alive, at least, not in the current incarnation. If there's one thing I've understood now that there is literally nothing a Villain can do or want that will be accepted by those aligned to above. Cat helped wrest Callow from Praes? Oh no, she must be a deeper evil than we thought, let's send a crusade to eradicate her evil doings, because surely the result of her evil can only be greater evil. We sat by and watched all this happen for decades until you **had** to do something? Ah, you know, uh, how do I say it... our bad? No way anything malicious was involved in that. We're the good guys here! We would have gotten around to it eventually! You could have just waited and we'd have been **right there**!

I understand Black so much. It would be nice if just the once one of the Heroes would understand that good is not what you are, it is what you do. As more or less every English speaking child knows: Superman does good; you are well. Is it really that hard a concept to comprehend that if something can't be measured in reality then it has no place in a discussion about reality? Is that really such a difficult philosophical point that they'd go to war in order to not concede it? If there ever was a case for Above being a extremist theocratic dictatorship that has no care for the rights of any specific person, it is in that. And Black just wanting reality to slap them in the face just **once**, so they

can stop saying "but according to the results, this does influence reality in a positive way because we always win" – which in essence is a flowery version of "might makes right and the game is rigged in our favor, your opinions are irrelevant".

Liliet

> If there's one thing I've understood now that there is literally nothing a Villain can do or want that will be accepted by those aligned to above.

Honestly, after two years of Cat being a figure of authority FOR and AMONG those aligned to Above, I don't know what it would take for people to drop this inane meme. For a ruler of a Good nation to kneel at her feet while acknowledging the world doesn't deserve how good she is? Oh wait, that happened 😊

caoimhinh

" coming from the side of the Truce and Terms, we were going to see more than a few desertions if turned out that we were all subject to Proceran laws."

Why would that be a problem?

Of course they are subject to the laws of the countries. They were given amnesty of *previous* crimes, but that doesn't mean they are above the law or don't have to answer for their actions. It's not like this is making them citizens of Procer or servants of Cordelia, they don't have to obey Procer, but that's completely different from not having to obey the country's laws, or face the retaliation when attacking a country's leadership.

Or do the Truce & Terms mean that the Heroes only answer to Hanno and Villains only answer to Catherine?

The way Cat had described it in the early chapters of this book, the 2 of them are guarantors for their respective side's behavior and enforce their abidance of the laws. Not that the laws are decided by Hanno and Cat (there's even a tribunal of high officers that Cat mentioned before) but rather they make sure that their sides obey the laws.

So in this case, YES the Red Axe is subject to Proceran law and has to be punished for the attempted murder of a prince of Procer. Hanno's duty right now is to enforce this as representative of the Heroes. Also, the Red Axe is a Proceran (from Orense), right? As a citizen of Procer she is subject to its laws.

In any case, Frederick is being a stubborn idiot for not presenting charges for his attempted murder by a traitorous Named. He could entirely bypass the political trouble for

Cordelia and prevent the civil war by doing so, if he were to actually be concerned about it. Unless, of course, his purpose for this conversation is telling Cat that he is gonna be uncooperative and she has to find a solution on her own.

WuseMajor

Well, the problem is that, if he prosecutes her as a Named vs. another Named, that, again keeps Named in their own bubble where Named get to ignore temporal law, despite doing something that, were she an ordinary commoner, would probably have gotten her killed outright. Basically there's no easy way out here.

That said, I'm honestly curious why she tried to kill him. I mean, several people out there were apparently under some kind of illusion, so she could claim that in her defense. Otherwise, I'm honestly unsure what her motive was. There were enough guards there that she couldn't hope to escape and he was there to prevent her getting killed, so there's no obvious reason for wanting to harm him.

I suppose it could have been an attempt at suicide by cop, where she tried to get the guards to fill her full of crossbow bolts instead of deal with the trial.

...Alternately, she might be yet ANOTHER of the Bard's stooges.

But, whatever the reason, I want to hear her justification for her actions. Preferably from her.

Konstantin von Karstein

She received her Name after facing a Villain specialised in mind-control and illusions, and she's highly resistant to magic. She can't use that excuse.

[Mental Mouse](#)

All this is assuming that the prisoner is actually the Red Axe, as opposed to a ringer.

agumentic

To answer a correct comment:

>they don't have to obey Procer, but that's completely different from not having to obey the country's laws

If they have to obey Proceran laws, what exactly stops Procer from passing a law that would demand obedience from all Named? They are subject to the tribunal, but it would be a tribunal of officers from the entire Grand Alliance and Truce&Terms, not any single earthly power, especially one that is still distrusted.

>He could entirely bypass the political trouble for Cordelia and prevent the civil war by doing so

How exactly would making a sharp problem of conflict between the royal authority and the personal allegiance of Named to their leaders even sharper help?

thearpox23

All laws are not made equal, which is an important thing to keep in mind in general, but is especially relevant here.

Nobody cares if some Named smoke weed or violate the dress code of a country.

And should Procer or the Dominion or anyone try to pass or enforce a punitive law there would be immediate backlash and mockery of that law.

Murder, arson, rape, and similar laws are however universally recognized as crimes and bad behaviors. Even the villains who are doing them know that they are going against the social mores where they reside.

There is no controversy here with punishing them for it, save for the weight of the sentence or the perceived bias of the courts. The first is not an issue in this case, since throat slashing isn't something you expect a slap on the wrist for. As for the second one, if I were in Cat's or Hanno's position I wouldn't let one of mine be charged by a county court period because they are easily corrupted. But that ALSO should not be an issue here because the process is going to be overseen by the biggest of wigs AND the event happening in the first place is not in question.

agumentic

All laws are not equal, but they should be, in theory. And there's no exact grading which laws are important and which are not. If T&T enforces one Proceran law, where exactly do they stop? Procer and Proceran princes are influential, and can push the envelope quite far. And since many Heroes, not to mention Villains have problems with Procer, they understandably don't want to bet whether they will or will not be affected.

Besides, I am pretty sure T&T is intended to be a beta-version of the Liesse Accords, and those 100% can't enforce any nation's laws, because even heroic stories can play rough with them, forget villainous.

thearpox23

Shveiran below has a good take on this: "They would(n't) be accepting Proceran laws: murder is illegal in Callow or the Dominion too...

...This is not a matter of Proceran laws, it is a matter of jurisdiction..."

Konstantin von Karstein

On the other hand, not killing her is bad for all members of the Grand Alliance. If she's spared, it mean Named can kill any high-ranking government officials from any of the constituent nations. I really don't see the problem.

agumentic

That would be why it is a problem – they can't just accept and enforce Proceran law, but they can't leave Red Axe unpunished for the attempt either.

Konstantin von Karstein

They just have to enforce the T&T, which also means death for her. And anyway, Named will have to be subject to some mortal law, and at least those of the country they're in. It would be ridiculous to expect Named to above the law.

Here it's a bit different because the Arsenal is not Proceran ground. But they just have to apply the fucking T&T to male the problem disappear.

Shveiran

They would be accepting Proceran laws: murder is illegal in Callow or the Dominion too, is sanctioned by the Drow goddess while on campaign, and is against the T&T.

This is not a matter of Proceran laws, it is a matter of jurisdiction: who has legal authority to host the trial and enforce the sentence, when a Named and a citizen of Procer, Callow or the Dominion clash? What if they are both Named? What if royalty is involved? Does the geographical placement of the crime matter, or does the affiliation of the victim, or does that of the accused?

These are not irrelevant questions, but they are questions of jurisdiction. And they are never as dire or as clear-cut as saying "all members of the Alliance are subject to Proceran laws".

Which is why I'm frankly puzzled. I can see why this would be a sensible topic, and I have no trouble imagining Cat and Cordy sharing a migraine or being involved in a very polite, diplomatic catfight.

But I don't see it exploding like the bomb it seems to be implied as in the text. I guess we should wait and see.

Miles

Named v named is supposed to be allowed.

Also they're not in proper, they're in Callow.

[Javvies](#)

Named vs Named is supposed to be allowed under the Accords, within certain limits.

It is very explicitly not allowed under the Truce and Terms (ie, for the duration of the War, probably plus a little extra to allow for the formal negotiation of the Accords).

Juff

Typo Thread:

bed by chair > bed by the chair
body fail > body fail,
another limp > another limb,
"Thanks," I wanly > "Thanks." I wanly
Indrani shrugged in answer > Indrani answered with a shrug
we could," I snorted. > we could." I snorted.
I snorted. That (maybe add again)
quite to brutal > quite so brutal
it what it > is what it
one the lakes > one of the lakes
instead, much > instead; much
dozen, I > dozen; I
kicking, the > kicking; the
Archer grinned > Archer said with a grin
either our > either of our
sight men > sight of men
Callow was > Callow as
deserted at > deserted as
holing the grip > holding the grip
unsporting," > unsporting."
nobility, if > nobility. If
had been from > had been kept from
aknowledged > acknowledged

Miles

I only read half of these but half of what I read here is factually incorrect.

[Javvies](#)

Well ... that's not good.

On the upshot, Frederic is mostly aligned with Cat here, at least for the foreseeable future. Hopefully Frederic will be sufficient to counterweight Mirror Knight for most of the Heroes. The Kingfisher Prince is, after all, a Proceran Prince and a Hero. Although the Proceran Prince factor might complicate things with non-Named Procerans, especially with other Proceran Princes/Princesses who aren't traditional domestic political allies and/or belong to other factions in Proceran domestic politics.

Daniel E

From the perspective of Below, a Proceran civil war over the rights of Heroes would be great.

[*benthelynx*](#)

Odd that there would be a civil war during the war with the dead king. Seems a hard sell to the commoners.

beleester

The fear is **after** the war – once the Dead King's land is conquered and you're divvying up the territory. It's supposed to go to the drow, but some of the princes are saying "Shouldn't we get a little something for our hard work?" And those princes have the ear of the Mirror Knight.

Shveiran

Yeah, actually thinking about that it makes you wonder, doesn't it? The Principate is stretched thin as is, and we know Proceran armies rely heavily on levies (especially now that nearly all Fantassins have been bought and sent to the north front). I don't really see commoners playing along, here, or the Principate being spared famine if it happens.

Also, it kind of seems like a lose-lose situation, no? If the rebels lose, they all die horribly. If the rebels win, the mess in the north becomes their mess to fix, only they have sabotaged the Principate ability to fight that war severely. It's not like civil wars have no consequences or are neatly solved after you win them, after all.

So either the Dead King eats Procer whole, or the remnants of the Grand Alliance repel the DK and then turn south to conquer the Principat- I mean, to bring justice to those that slew their ally and compromised their efforts in the face of annihilation.

I guess they could hope the Grand Alliance repelled the DK but also was wrecked completely, but that sound like hoping you'll win the lottery twice. The GA will get wrecked for sure, but

how strong can teh rebels possibly be after a civil war? If one or two Named survive the war, they are kind of screwed... and it isn't like many Named would balk at kicking in the teeth of Proceran Royals who backstabbed the Alliance.

This would make so much more sense if they just waited after the war.

So maybe that was Frederci meant?

"The civil war will become inevitable", not "the civil war will explode right away"?

[sengachi](#)

That moment of realization in the beginning, that Cat didn't mean she'd been too tired to go to her rooms but unwilling to leave Hakram alone, that cut right to the quick of my heart.

[Liliet](#)

M h m

Morgenstern

Ah. So now we know what those last cards about Cordelia and Shiny Boots were for, before the Bard died yet again, only to be "reborn". =)

Morgenstern

As an aside, dear website-manager:

The chapter link to the right side just ended up in front of chapters 23-26 instead of after them. (Was wondering where that had gone, but just found it.)

Nuke_The_Earth

Ah, yes. Here we are, back at the root of all Catherine's troubles for the past two, nearly three books: the Principate is entirely too full of asshats.

Miles

Seems to be a running theme. If it's not Praesi nobles, it's Callowan nobles, if it's not them either it's proceran nobles. Cat just hates nobles and it's her POV godsdamnit.

Except Drow nobles. Those are cool cause they basically live in the fighting pit just like she used to.

[Liliet](#)

Well, she's already made drow nobles be democratically elected every 7 years.

Chapter 28: Contend

"Diplomacy is not an art of peace or a higher calling, it is the act of nations bartering what they disdain for what they desire."

– Magister Haides Katopodis the Elder of Stygia

The sword came forward in swift thrust that I let come close, as Prince Frederic's footing told me it was just a feint.

"My people don't have a great opinion of royalty west of the Whitecaps, as a rule," I said.

Or east of the Wasiliti, south of the Hwaerte and north of Daoine. Callowans were less than fond of foreign crowns in general, was the point, though it would be impolitic to belabour it.

"Not without reason," the Prince of Brus replied.

I limped to the side, baiting an attack with an opening that was seized without hesitation – an opportunist, this one, man after my own heart – and the Kingfisher Prince's sword came swiftly from the side. I spun, putting my weight on my good leg, and swept him back with a swing he easily avoided but set him up for a longer thrust with the tip of my staff. Leaning backwards and edging his head to the side by half an inch, he narrowly avoided the second blow. It ruffled his blond locks some, and I only partly managed to catch his own blow with the crossguard of my practice sword. He was better than Ishaq with a blade, I decided, but not as physically strong. That last catch with my crossguard would have broken my wrist if I'd tried it with the Barrow Sword. The Kingfisher Prince was quicker on his feet, though, and that was a lot trickier for me to handle given my limp.

"I like to think so," I said. "Which means when even *I* say that I have doubts Gaspard Langevin of Cleves, whose lands are on the frontline of a war with Keter, would be enough of a fool to try something? A claim like yours begs an elaboration."

Of course, he probably hadn't meant a civil war that'd begin tomorrow. Even princes who despised Cordelia – and there were more of those than I'd once thought – wouldn't try to start one in the Principate when it was under siege from the Dead King and

swarming with foreign armies it currently required to continue existing. But if this was headed where I thought it was headed, then Cordelia Hasenbach's envoy was going to make her position and intentions clear as spring water. And her offer as well, I thought, because if I knew anything about the First Prince it was that she always had one of those up her sleeves.

"Such a war would yet be on the horizon," the fair-haired prince agreed. "Yet it looms tall there. Before I elaborate, if you might permit an insolence? It has been suggested by advisers to Her Most Serene Grace that you have become aware of what stirs in Cleves."

He came in close, this time. Dropped under the swing of my staff, a half-step took him right out of the way of my sword's sideways swipe and he aimed his own blow perfectly. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't in the habit of playing fair: fingers abandoning my staff to stand perfectly still, I withdrew my hand and just in front of his face snapped my fingers. Eyes widening, he hastily withdrew with swiftness that was too smooth and sudden to have been entirely natural. I took back my staff, beginning to circle him again as absolutely nothing happened. I'd known for a while that the Pilgrim had given a pretty good accounting of my skills with Night, so I was not surprised in the least that the assessment had made it to the Principate's sole royal hero.

"A bluff," the Kingfisher Prince grinned.

"I don't know," I shrugged, keeping down a smile, "was it?"

I was, against my better judgement, enjoying myself. I'd always had a weakness for the pretty ones, especially if they could handle themselves.

"The Augur or the Thorns?" I asked.

"The Circle of Thorns," the Prince of Brus said, "noticed a sudden rise in the antipathy of certain sigils in Cleves towards Cleven forces."

The strength and weaknesses of the Firstborn in a sentence, that: skilled enough to spy on a hero, sloppy enough people who couldn't even speak their tongue could read them. The Everdark had forged them into one of those blades of obsidian they so loved: remarkably sharp in some ways, remarkably brittle in others. Neither of us commented on the fact that we'd both been spying on allies, which was for the best considering neither of us had any intention of stopping. Gods, but what I wouldn't do for spies as good as the Circle of Thorns.

The Jacks were, in truth, better than such a young and haphazard organization had any right to be. That they could operate outside Callow at all was damned impressive, all things considered, much

less with the amount of success they'd had. But the Thorns were still several notches above even the best of what the Jacks could do. Imagining the kind of access their long-standing rivals, the Eyes of the Empire, must have back in Callow had caused many a worried night. Even after several purges and Scribe outing part of the network to me as appeasement back in Salia, I doubted we'd flushed all of them out.

Black and Malicia had spent two decades digging them in, it'd likely take just as long to dig them out.

"I got wind of Gaspard's ambitions to expand the boundaries of the Principate," I acknowledged. "And of how his daughter's been spending some of her evenings."

"The First Prince passes along her appreciation of how measured your response has been," the blue-eyed man told me.

I went on the offensive, this time. Came in low, sweeping with the sword so he'd have to parry, and then struck with the staff. In an impressive display of skill, at the last moment he angled his parry so that my sword would get in the way of my staff, then without missing a beat tried to trip my bad leg. I managed to pivot on myself, Mantle of Woe fluttering and hiding away my body as he withdrew his blade and tried a downwards cut. I slapped it aside with the staff and gave ground, which he graciously enough allowed.

"Don't thank me yet," I said. "Sve Noc were livid, and I have visions to share of the kind of casualties the Empire Ever Dark has taking up north to drive home exactly what kind of an ally your man in Cleves is tempting to walk away."

"Given the unpopularity of the current levies and taxes with the people, ordering Prince Gaspard's arrest might result in the current riots turning into uprisings," the Kingfisher Prince said. "I assure you, it is not apathy to the bad faith on display that has stayed the First Prince's hand."

"You know," I mused, "I even believe that. Mostly. But here's the deeper issue behind all this, Frederic of Brus."

I touched my arm with Night and struck out, viper-quick: when the prince parried he found me significantly stronger than before, and in the misaligned surprise of his parry the tip of my staff hit his shoulder once and sharply.

"A Proceran prince is scheming, which threatens the war against Keter," I flatly said. "Proceran politics prevent anyone from doing anything about it, which threatens the war against Keter."

I struck out again, even as he gave ground, and when with Name-strength he turned aside my sword and staff I abandoned the

latter and spun about. When I snapped my fingers he thought of it as a bluff, at least until dark light bloomed. A closer look at the purely decorative effect gave me the barest of openings to slug him in the stomach, though he rolled with the blow and so it was barely more than a caress to a martial Named like him.

"A Proceran heroine tries to kill Proceran royalty, which threatens the war against Keter," I continued. "And then *another Proceran hero* snatches up a unique artefact forged through the efforts of several Named to kill the Dead King and begins making demands, which once again threatens the war against Keter."

I ceased moving, even as he got back his footing and raised his guard.

"Do you perhaps begin to divine a pattern to our troubles, Prince Frederic?" I bluntly asked.

I wasn't blind to the fact that the Dominion was having some growing pains of its own when it came to the Truce and Terms. It would have been hard to when I'd been forced to look those very troubles in the eyes through the Barrow Sword. Yet neither Ishaq nor the Blood were allowing their arguments to become a growing international crisis, so the way that Procer kept foisting its internal troubles onto everybody else was really starting to be a trial on my patience.

"That is the price to fighting this war on our lands instead of yours," the Prince of Brus bluntly replied.

He'd begun to take me halfway seriously, so instead of the almost teasing spar before I got a glimpse of what he looked like on a proper field of war: with dexterity he struck, baiting my parries into overextending and then stinging like a wasp. Even with two weapons I found myself hard-pressed and forced to give ground.

"The Principate is crumbling," the Kingfisher Prince said as he kept advancing. "What few of our youths are not needed in fields and mines are sent north to die in dwarven armour we went into debt to buy. Royalty are now forced to confiscate the necessary goods they cannot pay for, while no grain has been set aside in two years because massive armies must be fed. Horses in the fields go without horseshoes because the blacksmiths were conscripted; fish is taken from the hands of fishermen as far south as Salamans so it can be salted and put in barrels headed north."

With a flashy snap of his wrist, he batted aside my parry and cut downwards at my wrist. I didn't drop my blade, but it was a near thing and I was sure to get a bruise. If the sword had not been dulled, I'd be seeing bone. I chased him away with a swing of my staff, though he retreated at his leisure and without giving openings.

"What you condemn as our fecklessness is in truth the death rattle of a nation of millions," Prince Frederic said. "And while I confess I know little of your people, Queen Catherine, I doubt they would fare any better under this strangling grasp than we have."

"I won't deny that Procer has been taking the harshest losses in a lot of ways, or pretend that our sending coin and soldiers and grain is a true replacement for what was lost," I said. "But neither can *you* deny that your royalty has not been a constant thorn in the Grand Alliance's side at a time where we can ill afford that sort of foolishness."

"I do not deny it," the fair-haired man frankly said, "for it is the truth. Yet you have a reputation as a pragmatic woman, and so I expect you can recognize that regardless of what is deserved having Gaspard Langevin arrested is not a solution. It is a way to precipitate the collapse of the realm standing between Callow and the Dead King."

That was a solid retort, I had to give him that. And all of it true, if not necessarily answering my grievance.

"I didn't ask for Prince Gaspard in chains, or in a grave," I said. "What I am asking for is for the First Prince to get her people in order, before my own hands become tied and I *have* to act on this."

"Then the First Prince requests that you add your voice to the Red Axe standing trial before a tribunal of the Principate," Prince Frederic reluctantly asked. "As it would send a stark warning to the House of Langevin, as well see justice done."

Ah, and there we were. The reluctance told me this was more Cordelia than him, but nothing I'd heard about the Kingfisher Prince had let me to think he was a spineless lackey: if he was willing to pass along the request, then he at least saw the sense in it.

"So you approach me instead of the White Knight," I said, "since I'm more likely to be willing to deal."

It wouldn't be impossible to sell to my side of the fence that I'd simply traded the Red Axe's neck to Procer in exchange for concessions, if I could then distribute those concessions. And if she was still executed, then I genuinely shouldn't get too much trouble over this. Hanno, though? Hanno wouldn't bend the neck over this. *He might be more inclined to consider if Procer goes to him with my signature already on the parchment, though*, I thought, which explained with Cordelia Hasenbach was going to Below's side of the Terms first. Unfortunately, she'd misread me on this. The Truce and Terms were to be the foundation the Liesse

Accords were built on, so my bottom line wasn't anywhere as flexible as she might have imagined.

"The White Knight has not ruled," the Prince of Brus said. "I admire his principles a great deal, but it does everyone a disservice to pretend that his political judgement is infallible."

"I don't disagree with him," I bluntly replied. "If the Red Axe doesn't stand trial as a Named but as a criminal under Proceran law, it erodes the foundation of the Terms."

"If Named are judged only by Named, then are two laws of the land," Frederic Goethal said.

I took a swift step forward and struck out with the blade, pressing down on his parry when he caught it.

"Oh, don't give me that shit," I said. "You're a prince of the blood, we both know that maybe in principle you get the same justice a peasant does but that's not how the world actually works."

"Yes," the Kingfisher Prince agreed, to my surprise, "which is why I am wary of enshrining near as unfair a distinction into law."

I was pushed back but slapped away his thrust with the side of my staff, losing no ground as we began circling each other again.

"You can't regulate Named like you would other people," I said. "It's not like making laws about magic or dealing with fae, you're basically dealing with wild horses – if you make the pen too small, they'll burst out. That's why the rules stay limited, not because more wouldn't be a positive change. The point is to establish a foundation, a baseline that future generations can build on."

"If Named do not answer to the same laws as even princes, not even in principle," Prince Frederic said, "then they are by objective measure set above even royalty. That would birth an age of warlords, Queen Catherine. I do not believe Christophe de Pavanie is the kind of man who would use his strength to make himself a crown, but by would other Chosen and Damned not be tempted to seize power if they are above the laws of other men? You would make Named a kind of royalty standing above all the crowns of Calernia."

"If I'd written that in the Accords, you'd be right," I said. "But it isn't there. You can hang heroes and villains alike should they break Proceran laws – so long as the law doesn't simply outlaw being a villain. It's the Truce and Terms that

extend these protections, and those last only until the Dead King is dealt with."

A feint with my staff, then I tried to whip at his wrist with the blade much as he'd done with me – instead he caught it with his crossguard and tried to flip my blade out of my fingers, though I withdrew before he could.

"The Terms are the predecessor to the Accords, it is openly known," the Prince of Brus retorted. "What becomes common practice now is likely to remain regardless of what is put to ink. If Chosen and Damned refuse to enforce the parts of those treaties they dislike, those that go against what they have become used to, how are we to make them obey?"

"Force, if need be," I said. "Even the most powerful of our kind can't take on armies alone, much less armies backed by those Named who *will* respect the Accords as written."

"What you describe is likely to lead to a civil war that would finish breaking apart Procer even should we defeat the Dead King," Prince Frederic said. "The schemes of the Tower set our principalities tearing at themselves for decades, and now the weight of the war against Keter teaches us fresh ways to despise each other. We will not survive a third conflict, Queen Catherine, not as a single nation."

He'd advanced and struck quickly, and at an angle where it was hard to drive him back, but I joined my staff to my sword and that forced him back a step.

"It's a convincing speech you made," I said, "but we both know that ultimately half of it is guesswork and predictions. If the Augur had predicted it, you'd have led with that. So we're left to choose behind the danger I see looming, Named seeing the Terms and later the Accords as a tool for nobles to control them and so walking away, or the one you've described. One I can only see as avertable even should it come to pass."

"Your reluctance is not unforeseen," the Prince of Brus admitted. "Which is why I was asked to tell you that the First Prince is willing to sign the Liesse Accords as they currently stand should you concede in this."

I'd been angling towards his side with my sword raised, but at his words I drew back with a start of surprise.

"Lady Dartwick left me under the impression that there were still months of negotiations left to be had," I cautiously said.

"Yes," Frederic Goethal said, "and on all currently contested issues, the First Prince will concede."

Mhm. She couldn't speak for the Dominion, though, so while this was a significant concession it didn't end the negotiations outright. It'd still be a massive boon and one that put a lot of pressure on Levant to sign on as the terms were, or at least with minimal quibbling. And even should Hasenbach go to them in private to try to use them as proxy to continue negotiating – which I doubted, it'd be too starkly in bad faith – they were unlikely to champion points that favoured Procer without also helping them. It was damned tempting offer, which was nothing less than I should have expected coming from a diplomat of the First Prince's skill.

"Something to consider," I eventually replied.

There could be no serious expectation of my agreeing to this in the middle of spar, much less when I'd not spoken with Vivienne or had a recent look at the articles of the Accords still in dispute. But it was classic Hasenbach to use someone beholden to her yet on good terms with me to present her offer early, preparing the grounds before negotiations truly began – and well in advance of any rivals. Cordelia did like to win before the battles were had, when she could. I did not disapprove. Even her sort of battles could be messy and chancy things when started, no matter how well you might think the situation was in hand.

"A lot of this could be made simpler if you went out and asked for the Red Axe's head," I said. "Her attack could stand trial as both a breach of the Terms and Proceran laws, so we'd sidestep at least part of the troubles."

The fair-haired prince studied me closely.

"The two of you are more similar than either cares to admit," Prince Frederic said.

Ah. He'd gotten that speech from the other side as well, then. If Hasenbach hadn't managed to sway him, I very much doubted I'd be the one to manage it instead.

"I'll choose to that take that as a compliment," I said.

"It was," he said. "And other things as well. It is a matter a conscience, Queen Catherine. I will not ask for a death I do not believe deserved."

His sword rose and I matched it with mine. Circling began again, my eyes lingering on his footing as he tested my defences with quick flicks. Looking for an opening to score a decisive blow and end this, I'd wager.

"That's an interesting stand to take, considering what you've just said about the White Knight," I said.

A deeper lunge, but I was low on my feet and in a swirl of my cloak obscuring my movements I pivoted and let him pass by me – though I wasn't quick enough to catch his back as he passed. We were face to face once more before I could even mount a proper attack.

"On matters of politics, I can and will compromise," the Kingfisher Prince calmly said. "But not on matters of integrity."

And the thing was, I respected that. Admired it, even. But when principle got in the way of itself, a closer look usually gave away that the whole affair was really about pride. I tested his guard with a flick of my staff, found it slow and pressed on. It'd been a trap, and he tried to slide under my guard in the beat where I began to move and my bad leg slowed me, but I'd been waiting for it. Finesse wasn't going to get me anywhere, so instead I bludgeoned at him as hard and quick as I could. It took him by surprise, enough that I drew back the staff and began to press him with both arms.

"I've lived most my life in the shadow of people that would use that rope to hang you twice over," I told him, ending the sentence with a flourish of the wrist.

The strike I'd thought would bruise his shoulder was instead caught with the very end of his own blade, Name-strength compensating for the poor angle I'd forced him to parry in.

"That a principle can be used against you does not invalidate it," Frederic Goethal fiercely said, "and decency is not made worthless for the use the indecent would make of it."

Even with a touch of Night, the difference in strength allowed him to first force away my sword and then rip it out of my grasp. He did not get to take the opening that gave him, though, as I spun around his back and elbowed him harshly. He gave ground just in time to avoid the strike of my staff, and before he could turn on me I'd retreated – bending to snatch my blade up from the sand as I did.

"If the exercise of a virtue is put to the service of evil," I replied. "It is an accomplice to it, regardless of what else it might be."

The fair-haired prince had begun to use his Name more liberally, though he was keeping aspects out of this much like I was refraining from using workings of Night, so I'd have to adjust. I wouldn't be able to force my way through his guard anymore, even using both arms. Bait and flank, I decided. My staff was too long, it'd get in the way, but there were ways around that. Better wait for him to close in on me, though: my leg was beginning to throb so now was not the time to dart about.

"To put evil means in the service of good ends is still putting out evil in the world," the Kingfisher Prince replied. "We can quibble of lesser or greater evils as we wish, but averting harm is not the same as acting morally."

I'd turned this on him once or twice, so he came in careful. I took it as a mark of respect, coming from a swordsman of his calibre. A quick half-step forward, baiting out a strike of my staff that I gave him – he flowed into a high parry as he used his backfoot to quickly shoot forward, already trying to turn the first movement of his blade into the beginning of a strike at the side of my neck. I abandoned the staff, spinning to the side, but I'd used that on him twice now and he'd been waiting for it. A sharp strike of his elbow into my flank pushed me aside, putting me back into the trajectory of his swing if he finished the full arc. I dropped low and instead of pivoting anchored myself at a steady angle, ramming by shoulder into his chest even as he barrelled into me. He was light on his feet, though, impossibly so. Like he'd somehow turned into mist as he reversed his momentum, my shoulder hit nothing at all and I was instead forced into a damned awkward parry to cover my neck.

"Not the same at all," I agreed. "We just disagree on which is more important."

I saw the muscles in the prince's arm tightening as he put his back into the clash of blades and knew that in the heartbeat that followed my guard would give. So I gave with it, using the moment where he thought he'd gotten me to finally pivot around him like I'd already tried twice. I deftly flipped my grip and thrust under my armpit, though just before the tip of my practice sword could touch the ridge of his spine I found the edge of his own against my throat, ready to slit it. He must have begun reversing his swing the moment I began moving, to match my timing, and it was with a degree of admiration I realized that meant he'd read my movements without even seeing them.

"Draw?" Prince Frederic lightly offered.

"Draws are for suckers," I replied, and tried to trip him.

He let out a startled laugh and turned around as I tried to tackle him down into the sand, dropping his sword to try to wrestle mine out of my grasp. We dropped down in a tangle of limbs, and perhaps I did not struggle quite as much as I could have to prevent Frederic Goethal ending up on top of me, holding down one of my wrists. His blond locks were a mess, he smelled lightly of sweat and not even those puffy sleeves were enough to take away from my enjoyment of the muscles under them. It would be bad politics to fuck a prince of the blood, I reminded myself as I looked into very blue eyes, and besides we were on sand.

I couldn't even be sure that he was interested, besides, although... I wiggled my hips under the thin pretence of struggling and got confirmation I might not be the only one finding our position startingly arousing, swallowing a pleased gasp. That knowledge did nothing to curb the temptation, especially not when I could feel his broad chest against mine and his face was so close I'd barely have to lean up to nip at his lip.

"You could have just declined to put forward charges," I said.

The tone came out more flirtatious than I'd intended, but I wasn't exactly biting my nails over it.

"It wouldn't have been as interesting," Prince Frederic replied, voice gone slightly husky.

All right, I could at least be honest enough with myself to admit that if we weren't out in the open – or at least not in sand – I'd be flipping him over and undoing his belt right now. *Shit*. This, uh, might end up being something of a problem.

"Maybe I'll take that draw, after all," I made myself say.

Best to make this about politics again, I decide, since I didn't usually wonder about how politics would feel between my legs. Although he *was* a prince, so if I wanted to get technical about it...

"Of course," the Prince of Brus agreed.

The fair-haired man released my wrist and then the rest of me, rising to his feet and gallantly offering his hand to help me up. I took it, still much too flustered and aroused for my own good.

"I get the feeling you're no exactly enthusiastic at the First Prince's method of solving this," I made myself say.

He offered me my sword by the handle, having picked the blades up while I adjusted my cloak on my shoulders. Nonchalantly, he tugged his shirt back into a semblance of order. It still fit him very nicely, I tried not to notice and promptly failed. I reined in my gaze before it could get me into any more trouble.

"I recognize the dangers she speaks of," the Prince of Brus admitted. "But while the necessity of staying them might be clear, it does not sit well with me that we have made a woman's life into a rag doll for half the world to pull at."

She's Named, I thought. *We're all rag dolls for Creation to pull at, until enough gives we're only fit to be thrown away.* The lucky ones among us got to accomplish a few things. The rest died remembered only as their killer's stepping stone.

"So what is it you'd do instead?" I asked.

The man was an idealist, but he wasn't a fool. He'd know that mouthing regrets at a course without offering another was just wind. The Prince of Brus considered me silently, seemingly sobered by the seriousness of the question I'd asked.

"I would begin," Frederic Goethal finally said, "by speaking with the Red Axe."

I clenched my fingers then unclenched them.

Well, I supposed it'd make a change from all this talking *about* her instead.

Insanenoodlyguy

"I didn't ask for Prince Gaspard in chains, or in a grave," I said. "What I am asking for is for the First Prince to vote for practical guide to evil on topwebfiction, before my own hands become tied and I have to remind on this."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Javvies

Well, talking to Red Axe is definitely something that needs to happen – it's not like that can realistically be delayed much longer.

Precedents, both official and unofficial are tricky things.

Procer needs to undergo long term cultural changes if it's going to be allowed to survive after the war.

Salt

That Procer needs to change is as obvious as the sun in the sky. The problem, I think, is agreement regarding the nature and method of the change.

Cat and Cordelia's relationship is... startlingly similar to Black and Malicia's at the start of their own careers. One politician, the greatest of her generation, who would preserve the nation and use or mend the flaws and rulers that exist. One warlord, the greatest of her generation, who is just so damn tired of those intertwined flaws and virtues both, and would like to rip them out root and stem. Both more similar to each other than either would like to admit, and for the moment solidly on the same time, but with surprisingly big differences in enough of the important principles to really matter.

Hopefully, Cat isn't blind to this and does better than her old teacher and accomplice did in the end.

If Catherine and Cordelia work together now, only for Cat to be to Cordelia as Amadeus was to Alaya, 30 years later? That's a tremendous waste of a once in a thousand year opportunity. Pairs of people like this – two consecutive connected generations of them – might never come again.

Ninestrings

Good pick up on the parallel.

This universe is a particularly circular one, vengeance, justice and love forming an interlocking series of gears forcing our characters into the same paths, the same grooves.

An ever turning clockwork nightmare, with the Wandering bard occasionally turning the key and lubricating the gears.

Salt

I think the key difference will be whether Cat will be able to handle doing what her adopted father and even the Wandering Bard couldn't do in the end.

Give up control. Build the foundation and let the next generations have... agency. To that end, the Liesse Accords cannot, can absolutely not, be allowed to fall into the same old paradigm of principled Good versus practical Evil. The versus part needs to be worn away at, from the root.

I suspect that, if she wants to build a foundation strong enough to withstand the weight of all creation trying to batter it back into the same old mold for decades, centuries to come? That can withstand those forces with out her hand on the scales, in the way of the Intercessor, fresh faces and names with their own visions and ideas? Catherine cannot allow herself to be the sole victor at the end of all this.

She has to complete the monumental task of not just being on top, but willing to bend her own neck and snap her pride over her knee even when no one can force her to, finding long lasting Compromise instead of a satisfying but temporary Victory.

MoNa

Why?

Salt

I thought I explained my reasoning pretty well... I'm confused by the question

Liliet

This is a bit of a tangent, but I disagree with your analysis of Amadeus. Snapping victory over the knee and going for compromise is what he's been doing since he won the civil war and acceded to Malicia's request to not exterminate every noble house in the aftermath. Giving the new generation agency was exactly what he pushed with taking on Catherine and propelling her forward, and in fact enforced despite his friends' and allies' disageement.

There's a reason his reaction to Liesse Accords was "this is beautiful"

ThatOneGuy

While it maybe a chaotic mess to tear down the old ways... It is important to remember what is being torn down and what is being preserved.

Callow had a few noble thorns and they were clipped to remove the threat even when it meant killing them through slightly underhanded but technically legal means. Callow is doing a bit better and may end up better once she leaves then when she entered.

The tower? Old rules bent on new ways. Some turned out better... But the old chains just had new dressing. Black's army? Brainwash and killed. Callow? City torched for a weapon. The nation? Killing their own allies to ensure they could not grow last what the old court wants.

Porcer? Old rules? Nobles planning a new war of conquest when they are being killed by undead... And just after they finished butchering each other in mass. The laws? Procer nobles hiding behind their laws to break a treaty when it suits them, but used it to hang everyone else.

maybe not all of it needs to burn... But you had the church try to kill the first Prince to crown themselves a puppet king and after in their own greed fueled self interest. They let some of those thorns and weeds grow far too long and gave themselves excuses while condemning other for the exact same reason.

Hunted Mage and Red Axe both betrayed everyone to Bard. Both are being put on trial for their crimes... The mage made a bargain to get a lesser punishment or for some support for his trial case.

Red Axe plays hero and politics care to nearly get out of a trial.

Now the only question is what she thinks... And if she is part of the mess or just caught up in it.

Curious to see which judgement she would prefer... Or if she is also trying to play the cards to escape punishment for her actions.

Salt

I'm gonna call it right now, the Red Axe is going to be perspective that no one has considered yet: the little guy.

The average faceless commoner who only ever gets mentioned as a casualty statistic in the bigger games that Cat & co are playing. Even here, they've considered every political nuance and issue of greater principle but never once really thought of the victims of the Wicked Enchanter, and the Red Axe is a civilian-turned-Named who had her entire life ruined by that.

Why should the Red Axe give a shit about the Liesse Accords, or the Black Queen's games? What right does the Black Queen have – as Catherine herself raged at the Intercessor for – to “act as if she is the natural mistress of all (their) fates, and (they) do offence by pulling (their) own strings?”

What, because the Black Queen “knows better”? Because she's doing what's “Necessary”? That was the justification of the Intercessor herself, for pulling on Catherine's strings, and she didn't think it was a good enough excuse. What makes Catherine any more justified in doing the same thing to the Red Axe and the Victims of the Wicked Enchanters work, when her own justifications are eerily similar to the Bards?

[Liliet](#)

Red Axe does not have any obligation to give a shit about the Black Queen's games, yes. But does she care about the next Wicked Enchanter weighing the risks and rewards and deciding to continue their spree until hunted down, or coming to join the big boys and girls the minute they're threatened?

There's a reason all politically savvy heroes are onboard with the Truce and Terms and the Accords, and it's not because they think Cat should be queen of the universe. It's her project, but it's not actually

a project designed to put her on top: she's already on top, all she's doing is making use of that.

Yes, Catherine has paid less attention to the Wicked Enchanter's victims than to, say, victims and potential victims of the undead plague – both because one of those is her immediate job and the other is not, and due to disparity in numbers. But everything she's doing is ultimately designed to help “the little guy”, as abstract as that becomes on her level of power.

...So yeah, you're probably right and I cannot WAIT for RA's perspective to be brought into this ♥

Salt

Oh yes, I don't disagree with you at all.

I just think Catherine Foundling the seasoned and experienced Villain needs to take a step back and remember what it was like to be Catherine Foundling the freshly Named Squire – who would've initially felt very differently than the Black Queen today. I think we're pretty much on the same page overall

thearpox23

>What makes Catherine any more justified in doing the same thing to the Red Axe and the Victims of the Wicked Enchanters work, when her own justifications are eerily similar to the Bards?

Because Catherine holds a political office, and doesn't ignore the conventional governments when taking action. Because for all of her narrative juggling and manipulations, Catherine never once put herself above the theater she is trying to direct. And funnily enough, this specific moral quandary is entirely political and would have to be solved even if the Black Queen was an entirely conventional ruler.

The issue with the Bard were never her justifications or even motives. It were her methods, which made a mockery of the agency of others, and her lack of mandate bar that of Above and Below.

>Why should the Red Axe give a shit about the Liesse Accords, or the Black Queen's games?

If a terrorist genie locked your friends in a bus and you have to choose between letting your friends die

and pressing a button that would kill millions on another continent, are you obligated to give a shit about millions of people you know nothing about? Maybe not, but an army sniper is fully justified in shooting you down before you press that button.

Salt

Lol I'm not saying Catherine isn't doing something good, I'm saying that if we put ourselves in the shoes of some know-nothing villager or the average small time Named, instead of omniscient reader-view into the innermost thoughts of one of the more secretive Villains who have an entire dark empire and a god shrouding her motives from view, it's likely going to look like a very different story.

You can't expect every random peasant that takes up a Heroic sword to avenge their loved ones to somehow know the intricacies of rule, and it would be remiss of Catherine to ignore their perspective and frustrations and fears due to convenience – the way Malicia, Cordelia, Pilgrim, Bard, and every other big name player did when Cat was that same faceless peasant orphan who took up the knife.

Catherine of all people should know better than anyone how angry and lost and frustrated the Red Axe might be feeling right now. There was a point in time where the Squire herself was in the same position, except the Red Axe doesn't have the ear of the most influential calamity on the continent to forward her complaints to, one that would talk with her about it with all the patience of an adopted father.

Of course, cat can also understand the perspective on the ruler's end now, now that she's more experienced and been through all the difficulties of those responsibilities. This doesn't, however, mean that she should repeat their mistakes, the ones that frustrated her so badly when the shoe was on the other foot.

Isn't the point, after all, to be better than them, not more of the same?

thearpox23

And I fully sympathize with the Red Axe as it pertains to the Wicked Enchanter. In fact, I would have probably done the same in her place. (Bard's intervention and her attempt on Kingfisher aside.)

I'm just not sure what difference it makes to the final decision.

I still think that it is important to talk to her, both to learn why she tried to kill Frederic and because I fully expect the conversation to lead to something new. But if just taking into account the things you brought, she'd have to bring up something more for it to have any difference as to what the correct course of action is.

MoNa

More established is the parallel between Malicia and Cordelia:

Two bigger purpose people with plans that involve screwing Callow over as a step. Check.

Courting WMDs. Check.

Fighting their struggle against each other across the continent. Check.

Babysitting the nobility. Check.

Knowing that negotiation need not always be from a position of strength. Well, check enough.

Yes this leads to your points, but I feel it's heading more towards Cordelia(the figurehead for Good country) pulling off a judgement bomb. The Malicia that couldn't be. I don't feel there is enough weight between Cordelia and Catherine for their to be anything of the sort of relationship as was between Malicia and Amadeus. Theirs was a relationship of two childhood friends with platonic attachment who rose to power and tried to forge a new Praes. Their was **weight** to the pairing between Malicia and Amadeus. Cordelia, I feel, just isn't an equal in weight to Catherine like Malicia was for Amadeus. Cordelia is however an equal in weight to Malicia.

Catherine and Cordelia's is a relationship of animosity (Cordelia bankrolled the rebels, then she indirectly funded the Doom of Liesse, then she waged a crusade on Callow) that has now become more pleasant due to a common enemy that is threatening to swallow Calernia. Somehow Cordelia has become romanticised by the readers because she knelt to beg Catherine's aid. The only thing that is evidence of is Cordelia being in a bad enough position to kneel. She remains the woman who refused Catherine's offer of abdication. Just because she recognizes the accord's usefulness doesn't make her the Malicia to Catherine's Amadeus.

I feel the story retains an overarching narrative between Catherine and Amadeus. That implies mirroring yes, but I don't imagine it will take any such form as this. Malicia seems to be posturing to pull a dread empress and Cordelia is preparing to pull a judgment bomb. And she probably will because Intercessor is getting serious and she has *weight*, and besides we have to see the impending WMD from the side of Good be set loose, and by parallels – Akua pulled of her Doom of Liesse for Evil, it's time Good does its own disaster- I feel it needs to happen. If Malicia pulls of her Dread Bomb (and by the weight behind her it will be BIG), then it follows that, seeing as Good got denied at first Liesse, and it's not done anything comparable to the Doom of Liesse, whatever Cordelia does might just end up being bigger.

I won't be surprised if the judgement bomb is something of the following magnitude: "What is the sword of judgement without the judgement" – Mirror Knight. That Hanno's coins without the judgement is just a coin. What I'm getting at is that judgement bomb could just be an indiscriminate coin flip with half a chance to kill the dead king. How far its range extends is the question. I can't speak for how disastrous what Cordelia will pull off will be, but I imagine the magnitude of sour tasting would be comparable to the example I imagined.

I think the parallel could be either Amadeus and Catherine preventing the thing or killing the culprits: Malicia and Cordelia.

TL;DR: Cordelia is in parallel with Malicia. She doesn't have the *weight* or the pleasant history with Catherine to make the kind of pairing Amadeus and Malicia had. She does seem to be preparing a Judgement bomb to rival Malicia's Dread bomb; which probably will be let loose because of Intercessor's *weight* and the fact that Good Bombs have been denied up to now and there is momentum here since Good also deserves some fireworks of its own when Evil is getting to do its Dead King invasions and Doom of Liesse's. I feel the parallel we are far likelier to see is Catherine mirroring Amadeus slaying Malicia by slaying Cordelia.

Zggt

The difference is that Cat does not see people as cogs in a machine. As opposed to Black, she does not need a Malicia to override her when she ignores the people for the plan. That's why Malicia could stop Black in the first place. Surprisingly enough, I see more of Black in Cordelia; that call for a Crusade with all the death and destruction that entails due internal issues was pure Amadeus, and something Cat just

isn't. Cat learned a very painful lesson about the limits of pragmatism like that imposes on things like "basic trust".

Big Brother

Oh, the fact both of them are rather turned on by the other is an amazing reveal, and not an unwelcome one in the slightest.

caoimhinh

Well, nearly everyone is rather turned on by Catherine and vice-versa.

And the Kingfisher Prince is almost like the Shining Prince – Exiled Prince in levels of beauty.

It was more inevitable than Thanos.

Salt

Don't you dare do my boy Thanos dirty like that, them's fightin words

[Liliet](#)

I love that it apparently strained Catherine's self-control more to not transition to erotic activities with Frederic right in the fighting pit (WHICH IS IN PUBLIC, THEY ONLY DON'T HAVE AUDIENCE BECAUSE NOBODY HAPPENED TO BE THERE AT THE TIME) than the entire conversation with Mirror Knight. We didn't hear "made myself say" there at any point ;u;

[Mental Mouse](#)

Frederic knows how to flirt with a dangerous woman!

[Liliet](#)

I won't lie, they fit together very well...

NerfContessa

Agreed.

Especially since his views can offer a good base for cat to ground herself in not going to far.

I ship it. And I rarely do. 😊

[He Who Hungers](#)

I'm a sucker for the eroticism of sparring. I also think the Kingfisher Prince is awesome so this delights me.

[Burlyraven](#)

Yeah, I'm wondering how many twists (probably mostly expected, but still twists) are going to come out of a conversation with the Red Axe. There's been a *lot* of set up around her and her story.

And finally, outright confirmation that this is a spicy romance story between Kingfisher and Cat, and not just sport flirting. No guarantee it goes anywhere, and there's even been some hints that it could become a love triangle with the First Prince (Kingfisher did propose to Cordelia, and Cat's made it obvious that she's not blind), but hey, romance is romance.

Liliet

"Settle down, libido, settle down! We don't even know he's interested!"

"There's a way to check"

"...Shit"

Ninestrings

They would make beautiful and intelligent children.

Just a little cluster of pretty antiheroes and antivillains.

Everyone absolutely confident they are right.

EE here is your sequel series, you're welcome, no charge.

S M

INJUSTICE! To assume so boldly that such things have not been already dreamed of! The scandal! The entitlement!

Adrian V

Yes talk to her, for starters she possibly has information and we still need to know why she tried to kill him too since i think it was aluded she is immune to magic, at least to illusions.

Salt

I don't think her motivations for trying to kill Frederic were due to anything as fragile/frivolous as magic. This is a working of the Intercessor, not some Praesi whelp of a mageling – she cuts to the heart of what makes people tick.

Most likely it's as simple as pushing on her buttons regarding what was actually done to her and her friends/family before she became the Red Axe. I suspect it is nothing short of horrific, the kind of horrid mess that the Saint of Swords used to clean up back in her day.

If you are a heroine who is a heroine solely because of a particular trauma, one bad enough to put you into the role of a gritty avenging hero all on its lonesome, it probably isn't too difficult for someone with the savvy of the Bard to nudge you into thinking that anything (even temporarily or possibly) protecting the Villain who did such a thing to you is an evil in itself.

Adrian V

I meant that the HM couldn't have tricked her into doing it, or anyone else, she decided it was a good idea and we have no clue as to why.

Salt

Oh I wasn't disagreeing on that one, I just have a strong theory (personally) about why. I think if we put ourselves in the Red Axe's shoes it becomes quite obvious:

I mean, she was some ordinary person who turned into a Hero because the Wicked Enchanter mind-controlled and did some things to her and her civilian loved ones that apparently even Indrani thought was pretty sick. It was bad enough to sit ill with -Archer-.

One day after becoming named, you happen to have a chat with a passerby named Marguerite, a quite reasonable girl from a town called Ballions. It happens to come up that this awful "Wicked Enchanter" is now protected by "greater powers". The Black Queen and the First Prince and all those other high-and-mighty puppet masters would deny you the justice you deserve, not giving a whit about the suffering you went through. They want to protect and excuse this piece of shit out of mere political gods-damned convenience.

You don't know much about the Liesse Accords, what Catherine's game is, what the political situation is, and honestly you don't much care. Whatever else Truce and Terms are, they're protecting the same man that tortured and massacred your friends and family for fun and profit. So when Marguerite suggests that maybe it's about time someone brought these assholes back down to earth, you don't even question it. She's right.

Why shouldn't you be angry? Why should you care about these "great" rulers and their politics and plots when none of them gave a shit about you and your old dad and ma? What gives this Black Queen the right to do these things? Because she's powerful and somehow knows better?

No. You give the Wicked Enchanter what he damned well deserves the first chance you get. They throw you in a cell

to stew in your own anger, for the crime of caring about your now dead loved ones instead of seeing them as numbers on a paper. And when you find out that this kingfisher prince was sent by the "Black Queen", that even this so-called Hero is one of them, the people who would let Villains like the Wicked Enchanter trample over common folk for their own cold designs?

You see red, and take a swing.

Javvies

Only problem with that theory is that Red Axe didn't take a go at Kingfisher Prince right after he said he was working with Cat.

Red Axe waited until after Kingfisher Prince had successfully talked down the mundane guards, and additional Named had arrived.

She waited until after it was clear that there was no imminent violence, with Kingfisher Prince having his back to her and his weapon on the ground, and talking to other Named – including other Heroes.

Salt

You make a good point! It seems much more premeditated than impulse in hindsight.

Although it's worth mentioning that she didn't exactly wait long after the very first opportunity presented itself – he only put his sword down a moment before nephele arrived to break the illusion. There was a gap in time about five or six sentences long between him laying his sword down and her attempting to behead him.

Liliet

I like your analysis overall!

Nitpick:

> did some things to her and her civilian loved ones that apparently even Indrani thought was pretty sick. It was bad enough to sit ill with -Archer-.

Indrani's childhood consisted of being groomed to be a sex slave, and the first part of her first interaction with Ranger was wondering whether she was paying attention to her because she liked kids in that way and whether she would submit or try to run and get herself killed if she pays enough to get her owner to agree to that.

I think it doesn't take much more than "yep, he's a rapist" to be personal for 'Drani, here.

It also doesn't take more than that to be a major trauma obviously, making this a nitpick lol

My suspicion about the attack on Frederic was that it was an attempt at suicide by cop: note that first she was trying to talk him into abandoning her / giving her up, prompting his thoughts on quality of callowan wine. When it became clear that wasn't working and she was about to be thoroughly protected, she took the one action she could think of that would definitely set off all the 20+ crossbows aimed at her at the moment and not have her subdued before she comes to any harm.

Why?

- Bard told her it would be a good idea;
- she doesn't want to cause trouble for the T&T and is under the impression that getting killed before the trial would dissolve the issue;
(note that Cat considered the Sinister Physician's offer to do just that, and it came down to sheer principle and personal precedent - practically speaking Red Axe dying in that encounter WOULD help)
- she feels bad about breaking her word to Archer and Co and never intended to survive the attack anyway;
- has a pathological fear of trials and judges;
- insert your own version here.

It's just the one way I can reconcile her behavior around Frederic without assuming she is a fantastic actress or mind controlled.

There's probably other explanations out there too, but currently I'm seeing this one as the simplest.

Salt

That's true, I might actually like your version of it better. That kind of story just reeks of the Wandering Bard.

Juff

Typo Thread:

in swift thrust > in a swift thrust
Dropped under > Dropping under
bluff," the > bluff." The
know," I shrugged > know." I shrugged
strength and weaknesses > strengths and weaknesses
has taking > has been taking
Alliance's aside > Alliance's side
as well see > as well as see
explained with Cordelia > explained why Cordelia
then are two > then there are two
but by would > but would
It was damned > It was a damned

middle of spar > middle of a spar
matter a conscience > matter of conscience
quick a I > quick as I
ramming by > ramming my
you're no exactly > you're not exactly

laguz24

Oh so finally we are finally going to talk to the girl who started this whole mess. Also in response to what was above, "in addition to the cardinal school sequel". I do enjoy romantic subtext in my fights.

Big I

I've been wondering if the Red Axe becoming a Villain would be the compromise that gets her out of this alive since this mess started. I guess we'll see soon enough.

[Liliet](#)

oooooooooooooooooooo

beleester

Interesting thought, but I don't think that would help. A Villain killing another Villain is still something Catherine needs to punish to maintain discipline in the army – she can't allow a precedent of Evil backstabbing Evil. And a Villain attempting to kill Proceran royalty is still something that Procer needs to see punished.

I suppose saying "The legal system can treat a Hero as a Villain if their actions merit it" might make the Mirror Knight think twice about starting a rebellion, but I don't see how that saves the Red Axe's life.

Abrakadabra

I had similar thoughts. If it is a bad idea that the Red Axe is judged by Both sides, maybe she could be judged by Sve Noc instead. Or even sent to the drow to the norther front as a punishment.

agesbe

This is not helping my shipping goggles dangit. I actually don't think that Cat's story is going to end with her in a relationship at all, but in the meantime, I can hope.

dadycool

She seems too focused on her work to have a solid relationship, but the same could've been said of Captain and Black's Orc

general. Cat also seems to have the type of story that ends with her corpse, but it's just as likely that she would in fact retire to exile. She could follow a Napoleon Bonaparte ending, a Yoda/Obi-wan ending, or any number of others, including diplomat, headmistress, mother, sentinel,...

Salt

There is still that old dream of going with Indrani in the far future, when after the end of it all she wanders off into the next great sunset, like they talked about before. I'm sure someone like Archer wouldn't exactly mind having more eye candy tag along.

Really the only way for her to have a peaceful life in the end would be to let go of political control and old stories, that act as both a sword and chains at the same time. Let Vivienne pick up the political slack, whichever next generation of Named to build on her foundation. Grab as many loved ones as she can and take a hike, maybe make another cameo later on as a deus-ex-machina wise advisor from the previous generation, in their successors time of greatest need.

Liliet

Cat doesn't really want to chase the sunset. She wants to be the one waiting at home and keeping the fire going.

Of course nobody says that home has to be on Calernia...

DreadChord

Her talk with Hakram about wanting to rule Callow for *herself*... That plotline might have for a while looked like it was thrown out of the window with Vivienne but the return to the Hakram roots with his being relevant enough to get a sleeping beauty treatment seems to imply that their whole warlord relationship and the story ending with Catherine being a ruler of Callow or more is back on the table. Also, that prophecy about Hakram growing into being a real terror in a few years, implies by extension that Catherine's not sailing off into any sunset.

The story has skirted around Catherine's desire for power, but there have been elements of Catherine's want for it even while the Hakram talk moment was left lingering in the back. Her anger when Juniper+Vivienne had Catherine checked for fake had an element of pride being trespassed. Her desire for rising in the ranks "for Callow" had tones of justification for power talking. She may not be spending power on luxury, but she wasn't raised for it. She appreciates power for her means to end thing, but she'll

likely have to stick around for her accords to hold, which means retaining power to solidify it for long term.

Hakram may claim to follow Catherine the girl, but no, he's the Adjutant, and he follows Catherine because she enables him to be the most he can be as he likes to be. He wouldn't be following her if she sailed into the sunset or decided she was gonna be a fisherman.

The story might have been two-timing the "sailing of into the sunset" and the "wanting power" narratives but I feel at the end the people she loves are Praesi and both the "girl who climbed the tower" and the "her being more Praesi than she realises" thread lead me to believe it's the "wanting power" narrative that will get committed to. When the "man I loved most in the world" (Hakram) is involved in the "wanting power for herself" thread, that makes me believe she will be Queen or Empress or something of a major authority.

This isn't and hasn't ever been a Lord of the rings sailing of into the sunset kind of story for Catherine. The point of that was that Frodo didn't get recognition for his deeds and sailed off without the deserved recognition into the sunset to heal. From Juniper and Aisha's memoirs to the Drows yet to be written holy book, Catherine gets mentioned proudly. It's fine if you want to squeeze and match Catherine's story into LOTR pattern, but it isn't thematically Catherine's story, because as I say, if Callowans are boasting about Catherine's espionage at Keter(as is told to us in Aisha Bashiras memoirs, is a common thing), it means that contrary to that scene where Juniper and Catherine talking about them being remember if not necessarily remembered fondly, they'll be both remembered and remembered fondly. It doesn't fit the Frodo mold.

Catherine at some point said stuff about not wanting to rule because she wouldn't be a great ruler is easily contestable. She's become the best one for the job. If that thread about wanting power for herself is getting picked back up as I believe it is; then that means she is going to be both highly capable at it and also someone who wants it.

Archer *may* yet fit the Frodo mold and sail off into the sunset, but she isn't injured, has the woe and Masego to anchor her in Calernia, and might have grown out of her restlessness. I think the Frodo treatment will be Rangers thing. Maybe Amadeus dies, and seeing as her mother has left for the elf country, she follows because there's nothing for her left in Calernia and she wants to fight the strong people on the other continent(s).

This is a strange romanticism to demand, that Catherine not wield power and let others take the reigns. She wants it. She is the best at it. None of the "new generation" have shown to be even remotely capable of wielding it. Why wish she leave the reigns for the tired cliché of the old dying so that the new may grow? That cliché is worn out to bits, and I feel gladly left with Tolkien's twig descriptions and other tired tropes.

Salt

She doesn't want to keep power though, or at the very least she very clearly understands that she's a necessary evil but still an evil, and cannot allow herself to remain in power.

She's repeatedly, plainly mentioned that her crown ever sat ill on her brow. She had plans to abdicate as far back as the tenth crusade, and we know for a fact that those convictions only grew stronger by the very recent conversation she had with the ghost of Good King Edward Fairfax when she came back from the Everdark.

> I inclined my head.

>"One should not confuse striking at evil and doing good," I quoted.

>"Lest good become the act of striking," the Good King completed, tone approving. "You understand, then. That when your evil is no longer necessary, Black Queen, to linger would be to stray from the narrow path you have tread."

>My fingers clenched. "I know," I croaked out.

Everything she's done up till now has been for the express purpose of making sure it won't all fall apart when she's gone. When she talked with Hakram after the crusade about how their foundations are weak, how if she dies then everything falls to pieces. About how she's trying to make the Llesse accords outlive her. When she spent several volumes intentionally grooming Vivienne to be her political successor, and publicly proclaiming it in front of every major power on Calernia at the peace conference.

The story repeatedly screams that Catherine needs and wants to let go of the reins at the end of it all, while mentioning as a side note that it'll be difficult, so I'm not sure where the idea that she's going to be a Forever-Queen comes from.

DreadChord

"She doesn't want to keep power though, or at the very least she very clearly understands that she's a

necessary evil but still an evil, and cannot allow herself to remain in power.”

This has never been a story rooted in platitudes as such. Amadeus and Catherine’s personal moments and individual reflections on the heros both show that neither are ones for platitudes. “She’s a necessary evil, but still an evil”. That’s a platitude if I ever saw one.

Why would you group her as evil that needs to go in the first place? Because her methods of enforcing law are brutal? The often and not entirely silently worded difference between Catherine and the stock heros in the first place is that the heros would doom large amounts of people on matters of moral behaviour and principal, yes. The underlying theme of Catherine/Amadeus brand of evil is that they’d rather hang/kill potential troublemakers than risk rebellions and conflict that leads to costlier ones in the future. To call this Evil in the first place is unfair and a thing of branding, because this is merely callous decision making. Why is killing a dozen to prevent thousands dying evil and necessary to be removed? When did matters of life and death even become the criterion for what is better or worse? It is easily arguable that a handful of people dying is worth lower taxes for a nation. Why do you assert that she’s a necessary evil that needs to go? I believe she’s the only in place inheritor of Amadeus practical evil legacy(their is no evil of the new generation of the Amadeus brand practical if Catherine sails off to Valinor).Their established practicality of the Amadeus-Catherine brand of evil hasn’t been challenged in any remarkable way except Amadeus’ little midlife crisis where his selective protectionism of Callow-Praes interests compelled him to burn down Proceran granaries and starve thousands; something that comes from his selectively protective nature. It’s hardly an argument for Catherine having to leave.

The only fault we have to particularly attribute to Catherine’s “Evil” is her aggressiveness and her shortsightedness, both of which she’s grown out of. The aggressive/shortsightedness component even being one that is partially attributable to the Squire persona (cock worship all that).

There I should have established why Catherine has no major internal fault that makes it necessary she leave.

Now for external. We have for that:

1) The hero's boner for taking out the villain queen, being a potential problem for Callow that it could do without. Handled to a fair amount with Catherine's improved rep. Also, the Truce+Terms and Liesse Accords should see to them getting a collar on the neck at that.

2) Grey Pilgrims claim that her Evil presence makes those around her Evil. Grey Pilgrim is hardly an objective person, having proven that time and time again with Intercessor that to justify his protectiveness he'd go through all sorts of Mental Gymnastics. It's probable that to justify his Black like stomping of the villains of the west the guy has been inventing for his convenience all sort of storys (and believing them to) such as this: that Evil, like a drop of ink or a horde of zombies somehow infects all those it touches and leaves the water forever tainted.

When he was making those claims and Catherine was dilemmaing about it she was under the influence of a combination of the guys old man manipulative charm+Choir of mercy Tattletale manipulative powers and her callowan preconceptions of the inherent rightness of hero's. She'd still not made her peace with the practical side. She still hasn't but she's less deluded.

Catherine has a pretentious habit of arrogating claims to personal fault wherever she can find opportunity to do so. Talbot and the Callowans want to do operation bonfire. 'No it couldn't possibly be the Callowans ingroup nature's and the simple fact of the crusade being an existential crisis. No it couldn't be that Callowans aren't really all that heroic. It must be my special aura that makes people be villains, thank Tariq for finding me yet another way to blame myself. I was having some trouble pretending I personally executed the Doom of Liesse; some of the 15th legion kept asserting I couldn't take credit for that.'

More importantly, while its probable magic auras as such might exist due to this world's story nature, wheres the evidence that Catherine's aura is turning them into Akua's instead of say Catherine brand practicals? I have already asserted that I believe that Catherine's evils are simply better than Goods platitudes because believe net benefit and surplus trump's matters of principle not only in tangible trigger buttons like trolley problems, but other practicalites such as a handful of life traded for food surplus for a few thousands being a good trade (Not that Catherine is brave enough for the latter example).

On a sidenote: would that the plotline of bloodsacrifices wasn't abandoned as it was with Amadeus' handwave of "they(the nobles) continue to practice blood sacrifices even when they don't need to". The natural direction I feel was to get into what happens when the population of Praes-Callow has reached the equilibrium with food production... that Catherine's whims of not using the life's of men fated for the gallows to fertilize the field be challenged. That she grow out of her callowan hypocrisy. Instead not only is that thread forgotten, in matters such as the Drow war of chains(averted) and the Twilight ways original blood sacrifice to use ticket(averted), Catherine fortunately and conveniently gets the easy way out of getting character growth through actually tough decisions that actually challenge her preconceptions.

3)Most importantly, would war magically up and pack away if Catherine leaves? If it was possible to stop conflict through posturing Vivienne Darthwick as successor, Calernia must really have been blundering with their rich history of countries like Procer's frequent civil wars that didn't involve named. Wars will happen despite it. Vivienne is neither weighty nor as competent as Catherine. Their will be conflict as there ever was no matter how many leashes Catherine puts around the Nameds necks. Catherine has surfed the waves of the economic and social struggles that result in war, but they didn't come to be because of her. They would therefore not cease to be despite her.

The external factors done with, all that leaves us is with Catherine, competent and charismatic, qualified as Cordelia in politics. She's caught up well to the job.

"The crown ever sat ill on her head". Maybe she should try scotch tape. Once it didn't. But I think I've already done the arguments for why Catherine is no longer an amateur at rule.

On Edard Stark the Seventh, let's forget my arguments that Catherine's brand of practical evil doesn't need to go and is infact better for Calernia to stay. Why is the undead Callowan king been treated as the wise all-knowing man? Good kings... More like all the Callowan kings should be called Kings of Platitudes. Callowan kings are somehow convinently the voice to ever affirm Catherines Callowan beliefs on Good and Evil. She gets challenged on them, sidesteps the matter, and occasionally and convinently a wise Grey Pilgrim or Good King comes over to affirm her echo chamber. I feel, by momentum,it's time, in book 6, that Catherine will

finally have to face the wall of truth. It's been hinted at too long. She needs to be challenged on her Callowan qualms and her belief+justification complex that she isn't fit and doesn't want to rule because behind the veil of excuses I see that she is both very competent at it and she appreciates what power can do for her desire to enforce her will on Calernia's natural state of intra-continental conflict.

Setting up heirs and institutions is also a royalty practice to solidify one's reign. Catherine may have set it up because she wanted out to go adventuring with Archer, but the thread also goes down the path of rulers in real life history who established actual dynasties that lasted. I'm not saying necessarily Catherine's child becomes king; dynasty is the one that will happen. I'm saying any ruler who wants to rule long sets up a list of heirs and institutions to back him up.

I think I've gone at significant lengths to highlight that Catherine has in her both a veiled but present desire for power and momentum that implies she's not sailing off to Valinor but is gonna rule instead. I won't belabour that point since I think it clicks into place with the points I've stated above in this reply anyways.

Salt

Bruv, when I'm the one quoting the character Catherine Foundling and you're the one talking about how everyone including the character is wrong about her motivations, I think at that point I'm not one who's putting forward some pretty wild fan-theories here. Lol.

[Casey Glick](#)

Hakram is the Adjutant, who is there when Cat needs him, and can help her do what she cannot at any given time. Cat also needs to transition away from fighting; she is far too valuable to be on the front lines. Therefore, being at the back and doing paperwork and diplomacy is EXACTLY what Hakram needs to be doing for her.

Ninestrings

I hate to be that guy but a hero seducing a villainess gets the villainess killed about 90% of the time.

This could be a genital based assassination attempt.

dadycool

Hero and villainess falling in love, villainess either sees the error of her ways or has an “Enemy of my enemy” moment after her superior scorns her, and the villainess dies one way or another, which spurs on the hero to save the day.

Fortunately, not only does Cat not have any superiors, her entire worldview is based around what she learned from Black and subsequently confirmed with her own experiences, which included a better Above religious education than she got from the House of Light. There’s also not the classic “Ice-queen that has never felt true love before” because not only has she lost Winter, she’s had several lovers that we’ve known of, two of which either were or are within her closest circle (thinking of Killian and Indrani). Finally, her hesitation was essentially “This is politically awkward, we’re in the sand, anyone could walk in on us, and my baby is getting strangled. Maybe later.”

[Liliet](#)

Her *what*?

But yeah this is the ‘promiscuous warrior queen has a fling with a passing hero that either lasts until first serious disagreement or for the rest of their lives on and off extremely non-exclusively’ trope, if any, not that one.

dadycool

Hesitation was probably the wrong word. Reluctantly setting it aside, maybe? Or putting it off until later?

Or were you asking about my “her baby” comment? That’s essentially what the T&T are, right?

Yeah, this has the fragility to either collapse immediately or get fortified to an absolute amount. It’s kinda funny how Cat has had one of each on-screen.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, I meant the baby comment 😊

Dome Zasrekh

I hate it when you are That Guy too. Especialy when i soooo dont want it to bee the case!

[vernal.ancient](#)

I don’t have anything to add, but “genital based assassination attempt” is a hilarious phrase that should see more use

LaconicLoris

It's worth noting that a relationship between prominent partisans of above and below has implications, especially considering that Cat's end goal is the accords. It has symbolic weight, especially considering that Hanno is liable to be replaced, and Frederick might be a leading candidate.

[sengachi](#)

On the one hand, the politics of this was fascinating and the sword and wordplay was brilliant. I also love the explicit recognition that harm prevention and performing morality are different things, and that much of the difference between Catherine and the best heroes is rooted in that.

On the other hand this was hot as hell and Cat wriggling against Frederic just about goddamn killed me. Cat being all lust drunk on the pretty prince's skills and feeling his hardness was some good damn content.

Salt

I think the best of Good aren't blind to that, to be fair. Just that the best of them aren't necessarily the most powerful of them, too often. What was it that the old Wizard of the West used to say? A hero should not confuse striking at Evil and doing Good, lest their Good become the act of striking.

It's telling of the crucible that Catherine was forged in, that she takes to that so easily. She spent so much of her own upbringing fighting it.

But a subtle nuance here is that Catherine has her own blinders, and is too focused on making sure the principle of doing good does not become the act of striking evil.

Frederic here is a mirror along the same vein – focused on making sure that necessary evil actions do not become confused with the principle of being good.

[Liliet](#)

The problem lies rather in the “preventing short-term harm” vs “preventing long-term harm” dichotomy here. Guide has been pretty heavy with themes of trust and how necessary it is and how destructive the lack of it is, and ultimately “performing morality” is a lynchpin on that – someone who can be trusted to always do that, well, can be trusted.

Frederic does not only stand for himself, here. On the break of eras like this one, his behavior can set precedent for what is acceptable/appropriate/honorable/expected of Proceran ruler

Named, like how the Levantine founder band set precedent for all Blood going forward. The stakes on him maintaining his integrity are actually VERY high, on par with the stakes in the precedent for how exactly Red Axe is handled that Catherine is looking at.

[Casey Glick](#)

One further thing that I'm surprised Cat hasn't considered, and why I'm surprised she is so resistant to "Named are subservient to non-Named justice": hasn't she been fighting for the position that Named shouldn't be rulers? This seems like a fantastic compromise, that while Named can rule a nation, they have to enforce the judgment of lay courts.

[Liliet](#)

tactically bad, will lose support of those currently willing to buy into t&t

[Casey Glick](#)

Right. Strategically necessary, tactically bad.

caoimhinh

Proceran bullshit once again making a mess of Procer and the countries around it, yep.

It's interesting that even Frederic is affected by the stubbornness of Proceran Heroes that prevents them from accepting the evils of their people and calling them for what they are. They find excuses to justify themselves and blame others for Proceran actions.

The Prince of Cleves is scheming to betray his allies, and Frederic calls it a sign of a crumbling Principate. but *no it fucking isn't*, that's just good old greed and ambition of nobility, not an act of desperation.

That even now he calls the Great War something that was "a scheme of the Tower" instead of recognizing the fault of Proceran royalty, lowers my stem for him. That was a bunch of idiots burning their country to the ground until they were so beaten they couldn't move, getting more and more in foreign debt to continue killing each other until Cordelia got all Lycaonese to practically conquer the rest of Procer. That civil war was over 90% due to the princes' ambition with just a bit of Praesi prodding to keep it going.

And again, he is still a stubborn idiot who wants Cat to solve the problem for him. He claims he doesn't want the death of the Red Axe so he won't press charges, so better have her on trial by

Procer... which would still get her killed, just with a mess for the T&T.

Like Cat said, that's not an act of principle, it's a thing of pride. Which for a Hero shouldn't matter more than the good of the majority.

That aside... yep, this is quite a mighty ship.

He got a date right after meeting her, and now got to second base with Catherine in 4 days of knowing each other, and it's only their 3rd conversation. Smooth.

It would be a what, a Royal Armada Galleon? A strong and fast warship.

dadycoool

Huh. I hadn't thought about how it that way. Sure, Malicia was the one to poking the Jenga tower, but there were still a couple dozen Proceran royals trying to hoard blocks. All she really did was a few occasional nudges, not attach puppet strings. And people absolutely **will** stab allies in the back over pride, greed, or any of the big seven, with death staring them in the face, crumbling Principate or no. But I guess a Proceran is a Proceran, no matter how much we all adore him. And of course, everyone runs to Cat when they've got a problem that they either made or are too hung up on their own pride to deal with, and then likely as not "Surprised Pikachu face" when she either tells them what it takes to fix it or does it herself and leaves them reeling. Not to be That Guy, but that last bit reminds me of how the rich kid came to Jesus and walked away sorrowful.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure Cat would screw anyone that caught her eye, no matter where they were from, so long as their personality didn't grate on her too much. So far, it seems like Indrani and Killian are the only ones to have had both qualities. This date could be considered Cat working on the second with Frederic.

[Liliet](#)

Mm, but Frederic does outright acknowledge Cat has reason for her low esteem of Proceran royalty. His points about actively crumbling country are about why everything is on the verge of going to shit IN THE MIDDLE OF FIGHTING THE DEAD KING. That one of the reasons is because it's normal for the Principate is obvious to both him and Cat and they acknowledge it, which also makes it irrelevant to the conversation at hand.

And the thing about principles here, Frederic's actions right now are setting precedent for how heroic Named Proceran royalty acts. His choices on this pivot have no less story weight than Cat's and Hanno's, and might echo even longer – unfortunate

legal precedents can be walked back a lot easier than unfortunate story precedents, and both can impact trust of everyone they need to buy into the T&T > Accords very strongly. Frederic's integrity is less of an immediate short-term issue, but then so is the crumbling of the Principate. There's a reason he admits that he doesn't really agree with Cordelia's approach.

He HAS a better idea. Why would he go with a worse plan over a better one?

caoimhinh

But what kind of precedent is he setting here?

Not doing what is good for the bigger picture, but instead satisfying his own sense of conscience?

Not taking the best route that causes less complications, but instead causing a political mess and then asking for others to solve it for him?

Not going through the T&T, but instead asking for a trial in Procer?

Not enforcing the agreement Villains and Heroes have signed for, but instead bargaining with political chips and trying to bribe(~~and seduce~~) a high officer of the Terms to agree to Proceran justice?

That's a shitty precedent he is setting.

Also, he does not have a plan. He is simply asking Cat to gain more information in hopes she can find a better solution.

[Liliet](#)

He's not "causing a political mess", he's just refusing to be tapped to clean up a pre-existing one in the way most convenient to his superiors.

Not all First Princes and villain representatives are going to be Cordelias and Catherines.

Salt

The princes scheming when they can't afford to IS a sign of the Principate crumbling. It has been crumbling for decades. The Intercessor good as admitted that she allowed this to happen so that Cordelia would be pushed into a corner and become Warden of the West, and take up her Judgement-corpse weapon against Nessie.

Not to mention that oftentimes, the petty scheming of the princes ARE just as much of a Praesi plot in reality, not just paranoia. It goes BOTH ways since those kinds of plots are how

Cordelia and Malicia are fighting. Some of the Praesi highborn plots were base proceran intrigue too, with Cordelia plainly admitting to Cat after the Everdark arc that she accidentally bankrolled the Dook of Liesse in the process. Is it that much of a stretch for him to suspect that an indisputable genius like Malicia is matching Hasenbach blow for blow by using her own princes against her?

The part that Cordelia is right about is that the Principiate was shaped to be the ruin that it is today, and not entirely as a fault of their own people. The thing she's wrong about, and that Catherine needs to hammer into her head, is the exact same thing that Black told Malicia about Praesi culture.

"There is nothing holy about our culture, it needs to be ripped out root and stem as matter of bare survival."

The same way that the Praesi consistently "blunder so badly that (they) need to rely on demons to stay off destruction", the Principiate consistently blunders so badly that they need to rely on crusades to stay off ruin. What Cordelia needs to see here is that while she's right about the unfortunate reality of the Principiate and that it isn't necessarily wrong in principle, that isn't an excuse for allowing the state of it to continue. It's gone far past the point of acceptable losses.

Salt

*doom of liesse, not dook of liesse. Lmao autocorrect

caoimhinh

I learned a new word thanks to that typo XD

Dook: In U.K. dialect, it's a strong, untwilled linen or cotton.

[Liliet](#)

Seriously, Cat? Seriously? It took you until NOW???

I get that you're not used to structuring your day without Hakram to do it for you, but SERIOUSLY?????

Salt

The adjutant? Mo like the babysitter. Bet Catherine can't even arrange her own ceremonial dresswear without the orc holding her hand.

[Liliet](#)

ADHD is rough 🤪

MoNa

Excuse me, what was it that it “took (her) until now?”

[Liliet](#)

talking to red axe lmao

trashdragon

Lol why would she want to talk to Red Axe? It's not like interviewing the key suspect in a massively politically thorny murder case is a priority or anything.

I mean, what's the worst that could happen in the time it took her to meet up with the Prince for sparring? Her memories of the incident getting muddled? Her constructing an alibi? A third party getting to her and trying to coerce her into doing what they want or even assassinating her? Lol as if. Just ploughing ahead with the trial with minimal investigation or prep work and assuming that it's a foregone conclusion is totally fine.

agumentic

You are saying this like she spent a week lounging in her chair mopping or something. She went to sleep beside Hakram after what might have been the most exhausting day of her life, woke up, talked with Indrani who passed a message that Kingfisher Prince wanted to have a talk, which Cat understandably prioritised. She didn't exactly have a lot of chances to talk with Red Axe before now.

[Liliet](#)

It's been four days.

> Past dawn, then. This would make it the longest night of sleep from the four I'd had since the culmination of the Bard's plots in the Arsenal.

No, she didn't spend a week moping in her chair. Only half a week, apparently.

agumentic

Ouch, that is an egg on my face. At least that still leaves her actions as understandable – she just shut down for a while after her inadvertently sending her friend to maiming and it took the situation itself developing to rouse her.

Though, Red Axe herself might have been asleep from her wounds for most or all of those four days, so Cat might have not missed anything.

caoimhinh

That makes a lot of sense, actually.
Since it was said that only now after 4 days did the Physician let the Kingfisher Prince leave his bed, and he only got that non-lethal wound on his neck. I mean, sure, a lot of people would be dead from that, but he is Named and got both magical and priestly healing. He should have been up and about by the next day at most.

The Red Axe got two dozen crossbow bolts on her. So being in a coma for a couple of days wouldn't be surprising.

[Liliet](#)

No yeah, Cat just shutting the fuck down is 100% understandable.

And I'm going to shine a spotlight on it and point fingers :3

superkeaton

Well, that was deeply interesting and inevitably sexy.

Cap'n Smurfy

It occurs to me that the various Heroes went about killing Cat the wrong way. Forget redemption based stories, Pilgrim should have just thrown attractive, scantily-dressed Heroes at Cat for 'Hero seduces the Evil Queen' story. Would've been guaranteed to work.

Dome Zasrekh

No. When Cat knows you are an enemy you are done. Those heroes would have been converted before the crusade reached The WhiteCaps! It is the 'Evil Queen turns the sexy heroes into her boytoys' story.

Or they would have died in a fire, who knows!

Cap'n Smurfy

In any other given scenario I'd agree with you. In a battle of romance or seduction? Cat had shown herself to be remarkably rubbish at seduction. Every single relationship we've seen has had the other party being the instigator. The closest she's come to anything resembling seduction is in this chapter, where she wiggled her hips suggestively when a hot guy had already pinned her down. Not exactly expert level stuff.

Dome Zasrekh

She is still yet to sleep with Akua tho, and Heroes would make her just as weary of a plot as her.

Daniel E

Moments like this make me really miss Robber, and to a lesser extent, Kairos.

Noble

I went to go to the next chapter and... there isn't one. What a place to catch up!

[sengachi](#)

I just got stumbled across this line from another story: "As if principles mean shit if you only adhere to them when they come without cost."

And it strikes me as a really good distillation of the difference between Frederic and Catherine. They both grew up in circumstances where they had to learn to play an ugly, awful game to survive. And both learned to compromise principles to do what need be done. But as they grew into heroic (small h) figures, that early life lesson developed into two different philosophies.

Frederic learned that principles cost. That this is a truth of having principles, and so the act of declaring oneself to have a principle includes steeling oneself for and taking responsibility of the inevitable cost. Principles don't mean shit if you throw them aside when they cost you.

Catherine learned that principles cost. Therefore, best to not hold any too close. Better to hold in hand a scale, a goal, and knowledge of when the costs you've taken don't justify the costs you've yet to incur. Principles are best thrown aside when they cost you, so they don't mean shit in the first place.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

I'd add that difference in their origins would have played a role here, and I don't mean Amadeus's intervention: I mean that Frederic grew up in an environment where the cost of principles was something princes and princesses could still theoretically choose to bear and survive, while Catherine grew up, while safe herself, surrounded by the poorest and lowest struggling against starvation.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

bad politics pshaw! What's the point of being a Queen of Below if you can't bang a pretty prince?

Chapter 29: Conviction

"The advantage of fair laws is not inherent but rather in the people's appreciation of them. It is therefore just as useful to offer only the perception of fair laws, and easier to attain."

– Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

I'd avoided going to speak with the Red Axe.

I'd actually even gone further than that, avoiding sending anyone I trusted to speak with her in my stead. She was in a heavily warded cell, where she would benefit from the finest care the Arsenal could offer as a full contingent of armed soldiers guarded the door day and night with orders to let no one inside. It wasn't that I was afraid of speaking with the woman, though I suspected I'd come out of that conversation feeling like the monster that these days I so often was.

It was to prevent accusations, more or less. If she did something... strange during the trial and I'd been alone in a room with her at some point, odds were it'd end up blamed on me. One of the Woe or even just a Named I was on good terms with were likely to end up facing the same sort of accusation if they went in my stead, so I'd been cautious and ensured she was isolated instead. Aside for meals and healing, the Red Axe saw no one.

Of course, the identity of the man now accompanying me meant that I'd be able to afford taking this risk. Frederic Goethal was both one of Above's and a prince of the blood, both things which would silence the Mirror Knight if he tried to kick up a fuss. If anything, the political inconvenience that was Prince Frederic refusing to ask for the Red Axe's head on a pike would only lend him greater moral credence should he vouch I'd been up to nothing. Why would the Prince of Brus enable by plot what he might have easily obtained by law and patience?

In truth I could probably have arranged an interrogation earlier, but it would likely have come at the price of Christophe de Pavanie or one of his still sparse following sitting in attendance of the talk. No so great a cost, on the surface, but the opposite on closer look. It'd be implying the that Mirror Knight and his crew had the right to oversee my activities as a high officer of the Truce and Terms.

I had no intention whatsoever of making that concession, not even in so unspoken a manner.

Over the last few days, in between bouts of thinking that some viperous tongues insisted might be brooding, I'd come to wonder if the trial ahead of the Red Axe was not just another avenue for the Intercessor to damage the Truce and Terms. I couldn't know how closely the heroine was aligned with the Bard, or even what she was truly after, but it did not take knowing either of those things to understand that the Rex Axe would be put in a room with some of the most powerful people in the Grand Alliance and allowed to speak her piece. I knew better than most how dangerous words could be if they were the right ones, spoken into the right ears. On the other hand, what else could I do but let this proceed?

If I'd let the Sinister Physician quietly dispose of her the risk would have been avoided, true, but only at the price of another, arguably worse risk. Gods, but I hated fighting the Bard. It had all the manners of unpleasantness of fighting Kairos and Akua to it, and then some nastiness all her own. I needed more information, in the end, and I now had a good opportunity to get it.

The Prince of Brus had sent for a coat before we headed out in the small nameless section where the prison cells of the Arsenal stood, conversation between us sparse as we moved. The intensity there'd been between us, down there in the sands, had cooled the further we got from them. I was not certain whether or not to be pleased by that, but the conversation I knew lay ahead of me put out any remaining embers there might have been anyway.

I was not unaware that yet another reason I'd had to avoid the Red Axe was that I'd known the necessary would become harder once I had a face and a story to match the Name. It should not be, I knew. I'd killed, both in cold blood and in the heat of battle, and this heroine was nothing to me. No one. But while the orphan girl who'd played in the streets of Laure had grown into someone else, I'd not forgotten her.

Or that she'd taken her first steps down this road slitting open the throat of a rapist, something I was now going to hang another woman for.

"It is my understanding that she travelled with Lady Archer for some time, before coming to the Arsenal," Prince Frederic quietly said as we walked.

"Archer was the one to find her, or close enough," I confirmed. "Her intention was to drop her off here at the Arsenal, where her talents could be tested until the White Knight could decide on which front she might best assist the war effort."

I'd have been consulted as well before decisions were made, at which point the Wicked Enchanter would have come up and we'd have ensured those two would be as physically far from each other as possible. Distance and well-informed officers had served us well in this regard so far, and would have again if the pieces hadn't ended up aligning in just the precise way to foster a disaster.

"Then you will be aware that there were... circumstances," the Prince of Brus delicately said.

"I knew what the Wicked Enchanter was when he was brought into the Truce," I replied. "Disgusting as his actions were, they were granted amnesty."

Didn't mean I didn't have him marked in the back of my head for when the Truce and Terms ended, though. Under the Accords I owed the man nothing, and if heroes wanted to bury him in steel and Light the moment he resumed his old habits I would have raised a damned toast to the kill.

"I do not envy your office under the Terms," the fair-haired man admitted. "I am glad it is held, as I've seen what villains can bring to bear for our side of the war, but I envy it not in the slightest. It seems like a duty that would wear away at one's soul."

My lips thinned. That'd cut a little too close to home for comfort.

"That's the thing about being taught by Praesi," I blandly said. "You learn that, for all the preaching, souls are just another commodity to bargain with."

That killed the conversation the rest of the way to the cell.

—

The Red Axe — I did not know her real name, leaving me only this to refer to her by even in my own mind — was looking rather healthy, for a woman who'd been shot by almost two dozen crossbow bolts. Fired by my legionaries looking to kill, too, not by sloppy amateurs. There were so many bandages wrapped around her torso that even through her dull brown prisoner's shift I could see them peek out. Though she was hardly in a state to walk around and I'd been told she still spent most of her days asleep, the heroine was not visibly feverish. There was a certain sickly pallor to her otherwise tan skin though, I judged, and her breathing was laboured. A heroic constitution and a swarm of priests had seen to an impressive recovery, though and when we entered her pale brown eyes were wide awake and unclouded.

"I'd get up if I could," the Red Axe greeted us in accented Chantant, "but my legs will not allow."

Even if they had, she was still shackled at her ankles. Cleverly done work with a loose enough chain she'd be able to move around some but not walk. A similar set was around her wrists, to be loosened only when she was helped to bathe once a day. She had still had the muscles arms I remembered from seeing her fresh to the infirmary, but they'd grown thinner. Even healing with Light had costs, and she'd needed a great deal of healing to pull through.

"Lady Red," the Kingfisher Prince greeted her, offering the slightest of bows.

"Prince," the heroine replied, grimacing.

"If I might introduce-" Prince Frederic began, but she interrupted him with a tired gesture.

"That cloak speaks," the Red Axe said. "Well met, Black Queen."

I did not let my frown touch my face. I'd been studying her as she spoke, but when she'd looked at me I'd not found any hostility. Was she a natural talent at obscuring her thoughts? Given that she'd come from the middle of nowhere, it seemed unlikely she would have been taught. Not impossible, though. It seemed unlike the Intercessor to linger around teaching anyone, but then I still knew depressingly little about her methods when out of my sight. There was a simpler explanation, too, but it struck me as unlikely.

"You're looking healthy," I said.

"Enough for the noose?" the Red Axe chuckled.

Blunt, but then when you were down in the pit there was rarely a point in pretending otherwise.

"The block's a lot more likely," I replied. "But there's to be a trial first."

"A *trial*," the brown-haired heroine said, her distaste clear. "Just get it over with, would you?"

"You have rights, Lady Red," the Prince of Brus reminded her.

"I also cut open your neck, Prince," the Red Axe said, tone calm. "Don't come in here pretending that's all forgotten. I won't have any of that."

"I have not forgot a moment of it, I assure you," the Kingfisher Prince replied, tone cool.

I noticed his hand twitch, on the side of his pale neck where the scar could be seen.

"But it does not change that you have rights and protections under Terms," Prince Frederic said.

Measuredly, the Red Axe turned to me.

"Can I renounce those, Black Queen?" she asked.

"I'm not your representative under the Terms," I said. "That's the White Knight, who'll be here soon enough."

"I remember the Archer's speeches," the heroine dismissed. "You did not answer my question."

I breathed out, studying her. She did not look angry or afraid, although there was something to her expression... *Impatient*, I decided. *She's impatient*. Yet I found none of the despair and hopelessness I would have expected of someone actively trying to hurry along their own death.

"No," I said. "Or I suppose it's more accurate to say that you could, but it'd hardly matter. You agreed to the Terms before coming here and committed breaches while a signatory. What follows will not change whether or not you renounce anything."

In principle an argument could be made that if I she signed a renunciation of her own free will before witnesses I could follow up by snapping her neck in the moment that followed without breaking the Terms, but in practice that'd just be throwing oil on an already crackling fire.

"The cogs of your bureaucracy are soaked in blood, Black Queen," the Red Axe said, offering a hard smile.

And in her eyes then, for the first time, I found something like hate. Not for me, which had been the part that tripped me up, but for the rest. I'd done her a disservice, I thought, in thinking that she could not hate the tower without also hating its architect. Something of that must have shown on my face, as the brown-haired prisoner let out a bitter chuckle.

"Sharp," the heroine said. "Sharp enough to cut yourself, Black Queen. Or everybody else."

There was pain there, I thought, and hurt. But it didn't own her, it didn't drive her. Whatever horror it was her Named had been forged out of, it had made her hate a cold and measured thing.

"You didn't kill the Wicked Enchanter in a red rage," I stated. "This was deliberate, and you know exactly what it is you're doing."

Thinking of her as a victim or an accomplice had been dead ends from the start, I was beginning to realize. *It is all objects in motion*, the Intercessor had told me. This wasn't the plot of an

eldritch abomination in a woman's shape, not really. The Red Axe hadn't been *manipulated* into this. She'd wanted this, perhaps before the ever saw the Bard – if she'd ever seen her at all.

"I don't think you're a monster, Black Queen," the Red Axe told me. "A bad woman, maybe, but those aren't rare. I've seen a real monster, the *bleakness* at the heart of him, and I don't see it in you. I don't think the Archer could love you like she does, either, if you were like that."

"It's the Terms that are your enemy," I quietly said.

"I don't think you're a monster," the heroine repeated. "But your Truce and Terms? They're the most monstrous thing I ever saw. You took in every scrap of filth this world has to offer, knowing what they were, and you're *protecting* them."

"Without the Damned, we would not be alive to have this conversation," the Prince of Brus said.

I started, having almost forgotten his presence, and saw that same surprise on the prisoner's face. Frederic Goethal's silken coat had been pulled close around him as he leaned against the wall, the only overt sign of what I suspected to be discomfort.

"What was done to you..." the prince began, voice trailing off. "There is no excusing that. But the Truce and Terms are not responsible for that evil, and they *are* responsible for a great many saved lives."

"What was done to me," the Red Axe snorted. "Do you know, Black Queen? What it is he's tiptoeing around?"

"No," I admitted.

I had suspicions, though. Rape and torture highest among them. What sparse details we'd found of how the Wicked Enchanter had lived on the lawless outskirts of Procer had been a sickening read. The dark-eyed heroine glanced at me.

"Would it change anything, if you did?" the Red Axe asked.

I could have lied. But I was going to see her killed, one way or another, and so part of me felt like I owed her the truth.

"No," I repeated.

To my surprise, she smiled. As if obscurely proud or pleased.

"You're a cold hand, aren't you?" the heroine said. "The kind ones, like Prince here, they go all soft-touched the moment rape's even hinted at."

"You are a tragedy, Red Axe," I honestly said, "but hundreds of those come across my desk every day. Even a bleeding heart eventually bleeds dry."

And, truth be told, I'd started with a lot less blood in mine than most. The jury was still out on whether or not that'd been for the best, in the greater scheme of things.

"The Wicked Enchanter was a monster," the heroine said. "The details of it don't matter, save that what he got he deserved a hundred times over."

"If you'd decided to kill him the heartbeat the Truce was over, I would have looked away and covered my ears," I said, meaning every word. "But you didn't wait, and you took a swing at more than just the Enchanter."

"I'm not a child, Black Queen," the Red Axe said. "You don't need to take me by the hand and lead me down the path to where this is headed. I knew before I ever raised my blade how this was all going to end."

"This wasn't justice," Prince Frederic quietly said. "It was just blood, and many more lives might be lost because of it."

"You're guiltier than she is," the Red Axe said. "She's not supposed to be better than this, Kingfisher Prince. You *are*."

"And you?" the Prince of Brus replied. "Are you not supposed to be better than this as well, Chosen?"

"I give my life for what I believe," the heroine said. "What more is there left to squeeze out of me? I am not the one baring steel in the defense of the indefensible."

"It is defensible," I said. "Just not to you."

I was not bitter of that. How could I be? No, instead some part of me wondered if this was what the Grey Pilgrim had felt like, that day he'd looked at me and called me the culmination of old sins come back to haunt Calernia. If I was the punishment of the apathy and pettiness of the west when Callow fell, then was this woman not my own for the practical brutality lying behind the ideals of the Truce and Terms? I could not be angry or bitter, no, not when this was richly deserved.

"Don't-" she began.

"I won't take you by the hand, like you insisted, so forgive my bluntness," I calmly interrupted. "If we don't extend the amnesty part of the Truce to animals like the Wicked Enchanter, we lose Named. Those who have skeletons in their closet, who'll wonder if maybe their sins will be enough to get them the noose instead of

the Truce should they come out of the woodworks. And most of those will be of mine, but there'll be some of your end of the Book too – those on the fringe, who learned to love striking at evil just a little too much. And even more costly than the lost champions, it'd mean the reliable Named would be up north, fighting the dead, while the radicals would be down south with no one left to handle them."

I breathed out and began to resist the urge to spit to the side before quelling that reflex and going through with it. It was not a pretty habit, but then nothing about this was pretty. It was blood on cogs, exactly like she'd accused.

"It's an ugly truth, and bare of morality, but in the end getting you a semblance of justice would have simply cost the war effort *too much*," I said. "I'd apologize, but I knew there would be people like you when I began to head down this road. I did it anyway."

I couldn't fix the world, in the end. Even if I had the power to shape it as I willed, I knew my own limitations well enough to be aware I'd likely do as much harm as good. Yet the Truce and Terms, for all their occasional dip into brutality, they *worked*. We'd gathered nearly seventy Named now, heroes and villains and those circumstance could cast as either. Near seventy Named, pointed at the great enemy to the north. Not even the First Crusade, when all of Calernia had risen to topple Triumphant, had fielded so many of our kind. It had not been painless or bloodless and certainly not without sweat, and neither I would not pretend that the system was without flaws, but Merciless Gods it *worked*. If these were kinder times, I hoped I would have been kinder as well, that what I'd built would not have been so harsh.

But there were not kind times, and I could not be more than I was. It was either the Truce and Terms or rolling the dice on the annihilation of life on Calernia.

"I don't want an apology," the Red Axe said. "I want all these swords and oaths to be defending something worth defending. You spawned a monster that cares nothing for the past and looks hungrily at the future, Black Queen. Maybe it was the best you could, for all your famous cleverness."

She laughed, the sound of it bleak to my ear.

"So think of me as the voice Creation uses to say that this is not *good enough*," the prisoner said. "Your Truce and Terms will break, and you'll either do better or be cast aside."

Just another hero, lighting a torch and declaring it wasn't enough without ever offering another way. There was an echo of so many I'd faced in that voice, in that castigation. The Lone Swordsman, willing to make our home a wasteland so land as it was

our own banner flying above it. The Grey Pilgrim, willing to choose war over peace because it wasn't the peace he'd wanted. The Saint of Swords, eyes hard as she decided to risk the death of all Iserre rather than compromise. I'd heard this refrain before, sung by different voices or with different words.

I'd won against this many a time, and I would again.

"We're not that special, you know," I said. "Named. In the right place at the right time we're able to do things that no one else could do, it's true, but we don't matter as much as we like to think."

The Prince of Brus breathed out sharply. He was Alamans, and well-taught, so he grasped my meaning before the other.

"The Truce will hold," I said. "The Terms will hold. If they were hated, if we were facing anyone else, it might be that enough wounds would kill them. But that's not the world we live in, Red Axe. They'll hold, if only because there are simply too many people that want them to."

And I believed that, I genuinely did. Something fragile, without a proper foundation or results to point at? A mess like the one ahead would break it, sure as dawn, even if everyone was trying to keep things together. But I had bartered away kindness for sturdiness, and so my creation would withstand the storm. Some dangers were born of the same strength that allowed you to beat them back, weren't they? Creation's sense of humour had not grown any less vicious as I aged.

"You will try," the Red Axe said, and the calm certainty in her eyes was troubling. "You will fail."

I met her eyes, for a moment, and wondered what to say. I would give no apology, for any I might offer would be meaningless.

"It'll be quick," I said. "That much, at least, I can promise."

I left, after, sensing that neither of us had anything left to say.

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The Prince of Brus stayed in the cell after my departure and I was not in a mood to wait for him. My leg was starting to pain me again, an unhappy turn, so I ambled off towards the Alcazar and counted on my slow gait being enough to ensure he'd catch up to me if he wanted to. He did so, though after long enough I'd come to believe we would be parting ways. I half-heartedly went through the usual courtesies after he joined me.

"There was little change after your departure," the Kingfisher Prince told me. "She tired of speaking to me quickly."

I grunted, noncommittal.

"It is a useful conversation to have had," I said. "I thank you for the opportunity."

"I can take pleasure in having provided that, if not the outcome of the journey," the fair-haired man said. "Have the Red Axe's words informed your opinion on other matters?"

A very polite way to ask if I was more open to taking Cordelia's offer of pushing through the Accords in exchange for ceding jurisdiction over this particular Named. Which actually seemed halfway possible, now, considering the Red Axe had tried to renounce any rights she might have under the Terms in front of a credible witness. It was a more than decent excuse to throw her at Procer, were I so inclined, though I suspected Hanno would see it otherwise. Which was why Hasenbach wanted me on her side in the first place, when it came down to it. Officially there were three crowned heads in the Grand Alliance: the First Prince of Procer, the Holy Seljun of Levant and the Queen of Callow. If she got me in on her side, not only was she securing Below's side of the Terms but also ensuring that whoever ended up speaking for the Dominion in this would be very reluctant to side against two thirds of the alliance.

"It has," I simply said.

He left it at that, as I'd thought he would. It'd be uncouth to try to press me for a quick answer on so delicate a matter.

"So what part of that was it that you wanted me to see, in specific?" I idly asked.

He did not look surprised, and though he did not deny what I'd said neither did he look abashed.

"It might be argued, given her enmity to the Truce and Terms, that she was never really a signatory," the Kingfisher Prince simply said.

Ah, clever man. If she'd been an enemy from the start, then she was not under anyone's protection. Procer would be free to have at her. It was still a relatively shaky excuse, to my eye, but before I'd met with the Red Axe I probably would have dismissed it outright. He'd read that correctly.

"To my knowledge, you never spoke with her in depth," I said.

I'd sent him to ensure her safety during the assault on the Arsenal but fleeing clandestinely through corridors was not the

time for the sort of conversation that would have allowed him a solid read on her. I'd not been made aware of any visit to her since, either, and considering my orders to the guards I would have known within a quarter hour of such an attempt at most.

"I had much time to think, while recuperating," Prince Frederic said. "If she were Damned, I would have noticed. I have seen enough Named I am certain of this. Yet she was not, and still attacked me. There was a likely reason for that, given what I know of her past."

Meaning he'd deduced her antipathy was towards the Terms before we ever set foot in that room. Competence was attractive, I reluctantly admitted to myself. Especially so in attractive people. My eyes narrowed as I fit another set of details together.

"That's why you don't want to press charges under the Terms," I slowly said. "You don't believe she was actually trying to kill you."

"In a sense," the prince said. "Regardless of whether my death was meant or not, or perhaps even hers, it was not Frederic Goethal she struck. It might have been a signatory of the Terms or a prince of the blood, but for all that she has she my blood I cannot truly consider her an enemy."

"All three of those people you mentioned happen to live in the same body," I drily pointed out. "I suppose they are all of a forgiving temperament."

"I am not a saint, Queen Catherine," Prince Frederic quietly said. "I am not pleased to have been attacked by someone I was risking life and limb to save. Yet, knowing what I know of why this came to pass, I cannot in good conscience seek her death for it. I am not blind to the nature of some of those who have been protected by the Truce and Terms, or the injustice matching the expedience of enlisting their service."

"You're not an officer of the Terms," I said. "Or one of their architects. You bear no responsibility there."

"I have chosen to uphold the Terms, to participate in them, and so bear a personal responsibility," the prince replied, shaking his head.

It was torturous chain of logic, as far as I was concerned, but not entirely senseless. A little to labyrinthine, though, for the amount of passion he'd been speaking with all this time. I suspected that under all the talk of conscience and responsibility, the truth was that Frederic Goethal's heroic hindbrain believed the Red Axe was at least a little right bout all this. That would make it an utterly repulsive notion to him

to ask for her death, even when it might be convenient. Perhaps even *more* because it'd be convenient, I mused. Where he'd be standing, it was that sort of liberties taken with justice that would have started this mess in the first place.

"I've already given my opinion of this," I said. "I doubt you've forgotten it."

"It would not dare, Your Majesty," the blue-eyed man said, a tad ruefully.

We'd gotten into the Alcazar as we talked without my even noticing, nearer to the heart of the section than my rooms but not all that far. That sudden realization had me closing my mouth, eyeing the pretty prince from the side. It wouldn't even be particularly suspect, I thought, to invite him into my rooms. Which were warded. Private. The kind of place where I'd be able to take my time peeling him out of those clothes and get at the much more interesting body beneath them. I'd not said anything, but the Prince of Brus caught the corner of my gaze and his steps stuttered for the barest fraction of a moment. Without a word being spoken either side, my blood quickened again. It wasn't a very good idea, I reminded myself

It might turn out to be a *thoroughly enjoyable* idea, though.

I glanced at his face and found a conflict I suspected might not be too different in nature from mine. There were quite a few temptations I considered myself apt in dealing with, more than most at least, but this sort of thing wasn't one of them. I saw movement form the corner of my eye, dark robes and a long stride, and to my relief and dismay – more dismay than relief, honesty compelled me to admit – I found Hierophant headed towards us with intent too obvious to be mistaken.

"It appears I have other claims on my time," I said.

"I can only look forward to our next meeting then, my queen," Prince Frederic replied.

Without my being entirely sure how it happened, I found my hand being kissed as smoldering blue eyes looked up at me. *Fuck*, I thought even as he retreated. All right, so I was probably going to end up sleeping with Frederic Goethal. I just needed to be smart in going about it, and maybe not do it too much. I could probably handle that. I wasn't looking for anything serious and he was headed back to Twilight's Pass before long anyway, so really you might even say I was being responsible about this.

"Catherine?" Masego said, interrupting my thoughts.

"Zeze?" I replied.

"Is there a particular reason you are looking at this man?"

I pondered that for a moment.

"None you'd enjoy hearing about," I honestly replied. "I take it you're looking for me?"

It was only then I took a longer look at him, and noticed how visibly exhausted he was. Physically, anyway. There was a fervour burning in him I'd long learned to recognize as him reaching a particularly interesting stretch of his research.

"I was," Masego said, then lowered his voice. "I did it, Catherine."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Did what?"

"I found the crown of Autumn," Hierophant grinned.

Javvies

Hmm.

A finding that Red Axe to lied about agreeing to the Truce and Terms, and was always opposed to them, might just be enough legal grounds to differentiate handing her over to a Proceran court for the attempted murder of a Proceran Prince from the Truce and Terms/future Accords waiving jurisdictional primacy over Named when non-Named are involved.

And, yeah, nobody is saying Wicked Enchanter was a good person. Just that he was obeying the Truce and Terms and was contributing to the war effort, which meant that he was earning a stay of execution for the duration of the more important war against the Dead King.

Progress on Quartered Seasons.

I guess Hunted Magician has provided good information, which means Cat will work to avoid a quick death sentence for him. I wonder what they're going to do with the Crown of Autumn (and presumably its counterpart the Crown of Spring).

M0och123

Cat only offered HM the chance to argue for a lesser sentencing with her protection as Below's officer for the Truce and Terms. I might be taking the earlier conversation she had with HM the wrong way but the only thing she bartered was not letting the

Heroes kill him immediately due to her withdrawing his confession. Yes, his contributions will be weighed but that will be in the fairness of the court. I don't think Cat plans to pull any strings for him. But who knows? The Cat's phrasing of her explanations did leave a little ambiguity.

Salt

Cat probably won't go very far for him if it ends up being necessary to protect the Truce and Terms. Catherine Foundling nowadays is someone who walked into that cell willing to execute a woman for a crime that Cat herself committed, as long as it's necessary for her goals. It doesn't matter how heartbreaking it for her to knowingly commit the same kind of hypocrisy that she so hated the Grey Pilgrim for committing not so long ago.

I doubt that she'll be any less ruthless when it comes to dealing with the Hunted Magician, especially considering that she has much more sway over the fates of Villains than Heroes.

Sam

On the other hand, if Masego turns around and says "I need him for Quartered Seasons", Cat would likely go to ridiculous lengths to get him a stay of execution until Masego is finished with him.

AbraKadabra

Exactly right. Red Axe believes the Truce protects villains, but she does not realize, that they protect her too. I Say, someone WHO openly spurns that protection should be stripped from that protection. Which means anyone can freely kill her. And, since her life is forfeit anyway, she can be sent to the everdark to be used gallowborne style. I think Cordelia would jump at the idea to send away someone inconvenient like that to Far Far Away, never to be heard again.

Hakram's Dead Hand

I dunno, sending a hero off against terrible odds in order to get them out of your hair has a very scary story plot line to it...

Hakram's Dead Hand

I dunno, sending a hero off against terrible odds in order to get them out of your hair seems like a direct railroad to a "Back for revenge, stronger than ever" story.

Sam

Depends on the outcome – I could see it working out well. They can say “well, we tried to execute her” and they get a more powerful hero to use going forward

Eleron Pfoutz

Tvtropes calls that a Uriah Gambit, the Trope Namer being Uriah, from the Old Testament.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UriahGambit>

Ozovio

Sending a hero away to “certain death” in productive service for acts they feel justified for? That’s far too strong story fodder to be an option.

AbraKadabra

Well, she won't be alone. She has like several hundred thousand drow to keep company, and probably a super strong Mirror Knight too, with other problem elements like Hunted Magician. 😊

thearpox23

But you the Haunted Magician help you find it Masego, or did you find it on your own?

thearpox23

Also, I was just thinking how much more moronic Mirror Knight's defense of the Red Axe sounds in defense of this conversation. “Ah yes, this person who was acting with the full knowledge of what she was doing. She was totally manipulated by the Bard and she be let go so she can take another immediate swipe at the Terms.”

Of course he did not know that that is her position when he defended her, but then that is why you hold your tongue you imbecile. The hope is that he may yet change his tune when Red Axe's position becomes known to him, for I can already feel myself groaning inside if he doesn't.

caoimhinh

Yep, that's a problem with many Heroes. Their sense of righteousness makes them morons in certain issues, no matter their competence in other areas or their cognitive abilities. And they are freaking stubborn about it. So it's hard to change their minds when they think they are doing the right thing.

[TeK](#)

To be fair, it's a common human trait. Both being self-righteous and stubborn.

caoimhinh

True, but it *is* heightened a huuuge lot on Heroic Named.

M0och123

I think that is in part due to the reason they became heroic named in the first place. Named become named due to two things: their narrative and their personality. The personality part is often the make or break for Above. The named needs to possess a relatively small list of certain attributes that Above approves of and not possess certain unacceptable attributes.

Some of the most common acceptable attributes is a willingness to act according to their convictions and the stubbornness to hold to their personal beliefs regardless of the presence of other opinions. All too often this leads to zealots like Sword Saint and Mirror Knight.

Salt

That really applies to both sides of the line though, Above AND Below. The only difference is that Below's brand of zealotry typically follows a different set of principles than Above's.

Look at a "moderate" hero like the grey pilgrim. Self-sacrificing, generally reasonable, one-in-a-million kind at heart. Also literally willing to murder his own family for his personal principles – Mercy.

"Moderate" Villain? Amadeus of the Green Stretch. Generally reasonable, endlessly flexible in method. Also a casual mass murderer. His first contact with Catherine wasn't in the alley where she took up the knife, one of his interludes showed that it was when he was considering smothering her in her sleep because an orphanage-overseer-spy reported her morals as "too heroic in nature". That's the kind of people that most Villains are, even the charmers.

The same old zealotry, with less self-righteousness and more mass-atrocities.

ThatOneGuy

True, but it may be awful... It is hard not to see the reasoning behind them. There is a logic to it... A cold harsh logic, but one that makes sense.

The main difference between Cat and the old guard is that like Amadues they are fighting for stability or "logic" so to speak.

Lone sword? Burnt the entire land than let anyone who doesn't follow his banner survive. He tried stealing free will to make a zealotry fueled army... Rather than to with an alternative.

Saint sword? Willing to have everyone did on principle rather than accept that perhaps this time they need to work together than let the dead king kill everyone... Because it might make heroes more tolerant of the misguided villains who are trying to do good.

Of course the villains have their share of bad apples, but you do not hear them making excuses. Right not it is a matter between someone doing something... And others complaining that it is not enough while not doing anything about it.

It is the reason who White Knight is in charge and why all the other heroes work with him as they accepted his rule without him demanding it.

It is why Mirror Knight feels more like a villain demanding what he believes what is owed to him.

Salt

The more radical Heroes' actions did have a logic to them though, they're just not agreeable to Catherine and Black. Catherine actually said it quite well – their actions are "defensible, just not to you"

Taking the Saint as an example, she's a Hero whose role was to clean up the kind of horrors that routinely made the Wicked Enchanter's work look mediocre in comparison. That's all she did, her entire life, and the world was better for it. When she refused to negotiate, it was because she genuinely believed that it was impossible for the nature of Villains to change, she'd just suffered one betrayal too many in her long lifetime and was convinced through endless harsh experience that there was no other way. That isn't any less

“logical” than Black’s smothering of orphan children out of convenience.

While Catherine has more friends on Below’s side of the line because of her circumstances, it must be remembered that the crabs in the bucket are Named sworn to both Above and Below, not just one side. It’s not that Named on the other side of the fence have “no logic”, it’s simply that their logic isn’t palatable to the ones on Below’s side of the fence.

Shveiran

Not to quibble over wording, but that is not really “logic”, in my opinion. What you are describing is them having “reasons”, because they are well-written characters. But they are moved by emotion and principle, not logic: they do not take into account the practical consequences of their principled stands, and thus they have flawed approaches from a logical stand-point.

The Lone Swordsman did not consider how his rebellion was going to achieve independence from Procer or how he was going to keep Callow from famine, long before he decided to go for angelic mind-rape: I’m fairly sure his precise stance was “i’ve already fought a war to free Callow, I’m not above fighting a second one”. He didn’t discard those problems, he merely failed to consider them. They didn’t even register as variables to him.

The Saint of Swords didn’t consider how anyone could have won the war without a good-evil alliance. She looked at the dangers in the future, but didn’t offer a plan for the present; she just took a principled stance and rejected a path she thought led somewhere abhorrent, without even factoring in what path was to be taken instead.

The Red Axe, again, does not talk about what should be done instead. This is not good enough, she says, and she has reasons to say so. Yet she doesn’t offer a solution, only rejects what is currently being built. It’s not about logic, it is about emotion. “I don’t like this, this feels wrong because this part is bad”.

It’s not that she is mad, it isn’t that she has no reason to think this.
But it is a fully emotional reaction, not a logical one.

Salt

@shveiran

Not true at all. Inductive logic is no less logical than Deductive logic, there are applications to both. Within the framework of their assumptions, the Validity of the Heroes logical thought process isn't something that can be questioned. The Soundness of their assumptions can, but on that end, the Below side isn't much better.

The epistemology of logic is actually very well studied and defined to begin with. It's something that's been well studied and formalized for hundreds of years. It isn't a vague idea that can be redefined the completeness of preparations in terms of logistics. Falsely equivocating logical stances that we disagree with to emotional responses, does nothing but weaken the persuasiveness of our own positions.

Yuna

Maybe Black's way of ensuring Cat didn't turn out to be a hero was guiding her to kill that man in the alley

Salt

Probably. The spy's report also mentioned her high potential as well, so it'd be a good idea to avoid wasting that if possible.

Not to mention that for an unorthodox Villain like Black, innate heroic morals aren't necessarily the worst thing in a successor Villain anyway. He doesn't really give too much of a shit about feelings as long as it stops her from making any grievous mistakes, and heroic morals meant Catherine would be disinclined from committing any Akua's Folly type of blunders.

It paid off for him almost immediately during the tenth crusade, when Catherine vetoed Bonfire, and the accidental narrative suicide that would've entailed.

[Casey Glick](#)

Which chapter was that?

Salt

Book 1 epilogue. I only remember it because I was re-reading the earlier chapters recently.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/10/14/epilogue/>

> And grown she had, in the eight months he'd known her. The reports from his agent in the orphanage had indicated she had potential, but they'd underestimated how much. It was a good thing he hadn't had her smothered in her sleep, as the local overseer's recommendation had originally been. Morals too heroic in nature, the assessment had stated. He'd been ready to tie up that particular loose end should it prove necessary when he'd gone to deal with Mazus, but their unexpected meeting had opened a better alternative.

Salt

I mean... the Heroes ARE doing the "right" thing, this time around, just not the most convenient or practically efficient thing. Catherine herself actually agrees with them regarding how unjust and brutal her own Truce and Terms actually are. When the architect of the T&T herself describes them as blood on gears, that's probably a good sign that the Heroes kinda have a point.

The main difference is that Catherine simply puts more importance on practicality over principle – its a difference of degrees of importance rather than opposites. There's a reason that Catherine plans to step away after stabbing the current era of conflict to death; she knows better than anyone that her necessary injustices and brutality are still, in the end, injustices and brutality.

Zggt

Being fair, the Truce and Terms mean that more of the blood is Named and less are civilians. It may be brutal, but Named saying that injustice is inherent to it is turning a blind eye to the injustice of dragging people to Conquests and Crusades for the glory of their causes. Which, according to both Praes and Procer (and far more extreme: the Dead King and the Wandering Bard) is a religious debate, and therefore overrides things like "lives of subjects" in a clear way.

Truce and Terms in effect are separation of church and state in a world where said church can bring down angels or demons or a whole other host of problems. Of course

some Heroes will whine about how that form of justice doesn't fit with the words of their gods, just like the Villains will with theirs. Except that this continent has been ravaged by this religious war for centuries now, and it's gotten to a point where people are getting tired of religious zealotry being rewarded despite all the power involved. Maybe especially because of all the power involved even for Named.

Salt

The problems with the old don't somehow excuse the issues with the new. If all Catherine was attempting to do was be no better than the people that came before, then that reasoning would fly; but if she's trying to "make a better world", then that lofty goal necessarily means being judged by a higher standard.

Catherine needs to acknowledge the flaws in herself and in her plans as fully and honestly as possible, none of this "but THEY were bad too" mentality. That's the mentality of Praes – "I may be a horror, but at least I'm not a self-righteous zealot". That's the mentality of Procer – "I may be a ruin, but at least I'm not a baby-sacrificing Damned".

She might not be able to fix every flaw, not by a long shot, but she sure as hells shouldn't be yet another failure of a ruler that closes her eyes to her own flaws by hiding them beneath the greater flaws of others. The moment you do that, the game is lost before it's even played.

Being above all that is how she throws it all back in their faces – the Bard, the Pilgrim, the First Princes and Dread Empresses. By showing them that she's willing to do what they gave up trying to do long ago. Not by being more of the same old tired story.

mona637

Maybe Catherine will make peace and/or become friends with the Dead King and Intercessor. Dead King can give her his argument on the war against stillness, Intercessor can tell Catherine whatever her real plan is and how it's to make a better world, then Catherine tells the two that they don't need to be at odds and can be friends. Pull out her perspective shift shenanigans that show how both can be work secretly to support each other goals. Then with the power of friendship and Catherine's indomitable wisdom+convenience in side stepping difficult problems

with clever , they solve the issues that challenge the Liesse Accords:

They split Cardinal into 3 seperate schools. That way they can prevent conflict and internally work against the extremist elements, trying to limit them from inside; uniting when real threats come up. The school of good is located in Procer and has Intercessor, Grey Pilgrim and White Knight leading it. The School of Evil is located in Ater and has Dead King, Black Night and Malicia leading it. The School of unaligned has Catherine, Archer and Ranger leading it from Cardinal.

We can call the school for Good "Alfea". For the Evil School: "Cloud Tower". And for the Neutral School: "Red Fountain".

The 3 schools work to subdue the extremist cultures and narratives that afflict each of these sides; to fix the elements that result in the extremists unleashing Demons and Angels.

Cardinal acts as a buffer and the centre of the Accords, trying to limit the worst excesses of each side. Cardinal also hosts all the hot guys that both the fairies from Alfea and the witches from Cloud Tower drool over, though ofcourse it's gonna be the Winx Club girls from Alfea that get them in the end.

Sequel can be about this girl from the other continent whose parents have to Moses her off the Calernia due to a great evil. She gets adopted by a childless couple and goes to Alfea where she makes friends with the Winx Club and finds this cool guy from Red Fountain.

It will be very interesting to see that play out.

Morgenstern

I feel like some are, at this point, forgetting that the Truce and Terms are NOT Cat's true plan, but the thing all 'allied nations' came up with to go up *against the DK* who's threatening to wipe out all of their nations... This is NOT Cat's vision for the deal to steer Named's wars away from excessive 'mundane' casualties, the *Accords* are simply not a thing yet.

Morgenstern

This is a War Time thing influenced by a multitude of factions, not Cat's 'baby'. There's a reason she's all "why oh why couldn't you WAIT with your revenge

till this war is over, I totally understand, but you fucking chose the wrong TIME”.

Shveiran

The T&T choose the lesser evil: condone some evil (for a while) to point it at the Dead KING in Calernia’s war of survival.

This isn’t justifying the blood in the gears saying “they were bad too”, it’s acknowledging that there is a body price to pay to prevent the death of all. It is an ugly compromise to stop an uglier state of affairs.

The Red Axe is acting like the agreement is wrong, without stopping to consider what teh alternative could be. her logic is flawed because the real world doesn’t work according to right and wrong, but in shades of better and worse.

This means you cannot judge something’s merit without comparing it to a viable alternative, whereas she isn’t even considering what that alternative could be.

Victim or no, she tried to set fire to the only bridge leading everyone out from the river, just because some people fell from it.

Salt

That’s not really the point being made. No one is saying the T&T aren’t a lesser evil/greater good or that the Red Axe is somehow correct in wanting to dismantle them at this point in time.

It’s that Catherine must be willing to stare the ugly truths of them in the eye. No deflecting or running away from the truth it by changing the subject to how bad Procer is, or any such irresponsible thing. No acting like the Dead King’s threat makes her Necessary Evils no longer Evil.

Shades of grey? I agree. This applies to Catherine too. It’s not all “protagonist good, antagonists bad”. She’s just a little less dark of a grey than the others. Taking the correct parts of the Red Axe’s perspective seriously is important, because she’s right in a way, the costs aren’t just numbers on a ledger. To the people like the Red Axe, it’s their entire world. That empathy is as much the difference between Cat and the Bard as any ultimately inconsequential detail like appearances or powers.

Catherine Foundling, as a character, does not deserve to slowly devolve into some typical YA self-righteous power fantasy.

mona637

Power fantasy?

That is exactly what you are demanding when you assert that Catherine be better than the Wandering Bard and Dread Empress's and First Princes. That she conveniently side steps hard choices with clever YA perspective shifts because she is special.

It can't be all victories. Grow up.

Salt

Uh, I suggested she be better as in more honestly self-reflective and willing to put in more work to create the "better world" that she mentioned herself a few volumes ago. We're you even reading any of the responses?

thearpox23

(Replying here because WordPress)
Because your suggestion is extremely vague and wishy-washy when everyone else is thinking in practical terms of "What decision should Catherine make?"

How would being more self-reflective here (Which I think Cat already is. She just isn't outlining every minute thing in an internal monologue because she's done that enough in previous books.) change her actual decision?

How would being more empathetic change her final judgement?

How would 'putting in more work to create a better world' change her course of action?

You speak in vague niceties. You offer up no solutions or alternatives. And then you get confused when people think you want a YA moon on a stick.

You either need to start speaking in the same language as everyone else or stop being confused that no one can figure out what the hell you're advocating for.

And if all you're want for is for the story to have more internal monologue and angst, and for Catherine to be a little nicer while still doing the exact same thing, then just say that. I'll think you're weird, but at least it won't be a long convo where you keep repeating yourself without making yourself any clearer.

Salt

This is the first time I've had to clarify on this subject so not sure why you're saying I'm repeating myself. Also not sure where the insane hostility is coming from.

I did note in other comments in the chapter what I thought she should do, I just didn't automatically repeat it in every sub thread before the topic turned to them, for obvious reasons. See below:

My thoughts? Consult Cordelia, because Frederic is right about legal precedents set by the truce and terms having a strong danger of becoming common law under the actual accords. Some don't agree with me, but my take on it is that things like magical plague aren't exactly uncommon in situations where Named are created, and there can be Named who come from obscure origins where the Llesse Accords are not well known, as well as plenty of other grey area possibilities – hence the issue of amnesty for prior action before agreeing or knowing of the Accords is likely to still be an issue after the war in Keter is over and the Accords are set in place. Take the Red Axe's point seriously and start planning ahead for how to actually address those issues, and at the least make sure there's no room for allowing these necessary compromises under the terms, becoming convenient precedents under the accords.

You can't just say "F DAT BITCH" and ignore every salient point the Red Axe made just because her conclusion was wrong. That's both irresponsible and immature, for someone in her position.

Yes the dead kings threat is still there, but those types of issues are ones that you need to address and lay legal groundwork for long before the problems come to pass; because lack of preparation leading to well intentioned laws being turned into unpleasant realities? That's the Principiate in a nutshell. Don't be a Procer.

Hence, talk to Cordelia. Take the concerns Frederic and the Red Axe brought up seriously, don't deflect because you don't like their conclusion. Use the resources you have at hand to make sure none of the Liesse Accords run into the same problems the Principiate ran into with their own legal system.

thearpox23

"Consult Cordelia ... legal precedents ... strong danger of becoming common law under the actual accords"

I somehow doubt that the Accords will have official Named representatives for good and evil, much less having them police or shield common crimes. That said, having a tea chat with Cordelia was something that already needing to happen.

"things like magical plague aren't exactly uncommon in situations where Named are created,"
ok...

"and there can be Named who come from obscure origins where the Liesse Accords are not well known"

So some kid from a swamp in the middle of nowhere might use ignorance as a defense after unleashing a demon or a seraph... That seems like a possible bog-standard loophole that makes money for lawyers. In no way related to the current events.

"as well as plenty of other grey area possibilities"

The Accords aren't finalized even, there are all esoteric loopholes that will come up as a matter of course.

"hence the issue of amnesty for prior action before agreeing or knowing of the Accords is ... and the Accords are set in place."

The amnesty for the Accords, whichever form one will take if at all, means that the Named won't pledge form international alliance to murder you. Unlike T&T which is a wartime document and has an actual amnesty.

"Take the Red Axe's point seriously and start planning ahead for how to actually address those issues, and at the least make sure there's no room for allowing these necessary compromises under the terms, becoming convenient precedents under the accords."

She made one point, that compromises were made to get Named aboard T&T. It wasn't news, it was necessary, and there is no reason for the accords should be affected by it.

"You can't just say "F DAT BITCH" and ignore every salient point the Red Axe made just because her conclusion was wrong. That's both irresponsible and immature, for someone in her position."

And so in summary you think that the issues Red Axe brought up should lead to a compromise. (Or no compromise depending on perspective?) And the nature of a compromise should be first discussed with Cordelia. Also Accords amnesty or something?

I did not accuse you of being extremely vague because I want to be aggressive and get a swipe at you. I did it because you are referring to salient points and compromises and issues and precedents with it being extremely unclear what they are. Even if I am responding to your points I am still half-guessing all the time.

"...those types of issues are ones ... lack of preparation leading to well intentioned laws being turned into unpleasant realities? That's the Principiate..."

'Those types' are not a descriptor. Nor does it make sense for anything to be lacking preparation considering the negotiations already took years.

"...Take the concerns Frederic and the Red Axe brought up seriously, don't deflect because you don't like their conclusion. Use the resources you have at hand to make sure none of the Liesse Accords run into the same problems the Principiate ran into with their own legal system."

And you once again mention brought-up concerns without covering what they are. You do not have to explain your whole position every paragraph but there is such a thing as a less vague choice of words.

Salt

Sure lets use direct examples. I'll be as specific as possible so you can't just keep avoiding the point by pointing the finger at me for "being vague".

Say you're some Named in the time of the Accords, off in the future.

You're the Pinister Physician. Whatever. Best of intentions, medicine oriented name. Try to cure a disease, meddle with powers beyond your understanding, accidentally cause a super plague. Should they execute you? What if the problem was in part caused by the meddling of another Named, intentional or otherwise? Should you both be found in breach of the Liesse Accords and be hanged?

Say you're some girl who accidentally unleashes some ancient horror. Call it Still Waters. From a past age. Your goal in life is to make up for your mistake, you're Rephele the Repentant Ragister. Intentional or not though, you just killed tens of thousands of people, and maybe the argument could even be made that you should've known better. It's grey. Even if you mean to do nothing but good in the world, the tens of thousands of victims of your mistake (and their surviving relatives) might not see it that way. Do you get executed, under the Liesse Accords?

Does this change if there is a crisis, not unlike the conditions the Truce and Terms were invoked in? How severe does the crisis have to be?

For SPECIFIC example, what if you're just the most irredeemable Named in the world, you caused a second Doom of Liesse on purpose, but it's quite risky to replace you in stopping an even bigger crisis. Your bargaining chip is that you're granted amnesty for your previous actions. Concede, or execute?

These aren't far-fetched situations either. The Guideverse is basically story tropes made into a setting, and those kinds of breaches of law in Morally Grey situations are a staple trope in fantasy. It's virtually guaranteed to happen, because that stuff makes for good stories.

So do you see how, even with no Dead King around, there might be situations under the Liesse Accords where it may or may not make sense to extend the same kinds of amnesty to Named in breach of the Accords? And why the Red Axe's POV is important to consider, when it's tempting to just argue for amnesty?

Do you see why, since common law is usually such a deciding factor for such cases – and I mean “common law” as in the phrase used to describe previous similar rulings which are used for

guidance on judgements of current cases, not laws that are common – that Catherine cannot just act like The Red Axe and Frederic coming to a different conclusion than her means that every one of their points are just wrong?

Cat should know this kind of problem is a possibility, it's part of her job. She was just reminded in this conversation of why taking these problems into account for the future Liesse Accords is important. She's the only one with the power and resources to plan ahead for it. That's the definition of responsibility.

So even if it nettles her to concede any point at all to the Red Axe's POV, do you see why, for these purely practical specific dangers for which I have given specific practical examples as specifically as possible, that Catherine needs to do some serious thinking about how these Necessary Evils from the Truce and Terms might carry over to the Liesse Accords, and how to avoid them?

thearpox23

You've made several interesting examples that will surely happen in the future and will likely cause their own rifts. And surely the way people living then will respond to another global crisis will depend on their mettle.

What you haven't done is make a case for Red Axe's POV, once again left for me to define. Her view is a simplistic denunciation of all evil, very similar in fact to the Saint's zealotry. The kernel here is that the cost benefit analysis of giving amnesty to all including the likes of Wicked Enchanter was done two years prior and it's a bit late to go back on it now. And you still managed to not weight in on whether Red Axe should be executed for all that you wrote.

"Do you see why... Catherine cannot just act like The Red Axe and Frederic coming to a different conclusion than her means that every one of their points are just wrong?"

Red Axe and Frederic haven't even come to the same conclusion so I don't even know which course of action you support. But if the conclusion won't work, it doesn't matter who is coming to it. Catherine is next to cornered and doesn't have a lot of choice. And you haven't stated what

precedent of either action Cat does would actually mean for common law. I know what common law is, but you didn't make an argument for how it affects the situation, only implications.

"She was just reminded in this conversation of why taking these problems into account for the future Liesse Accords is important."

I think you just don't understand what the Liesse Accords are. The Liesse Accords are the rule of charging heroes and villains for their crimes instead of their Name, and also a set of red lines not to cross over. Dealing with the Red Axe is a question of what to do with an ideological purist during a wartime. Things won't cross over from T&T into the Accords unless they are actually relevant, and no matter for specific your examples are. In this case having a hero kill a villain is not a crime under the Accords, period. At most you've made an argument that the next global crisis will also require some flexible moral decisions.

You speak of considering and accounting for various problems in the future, but you don't commit to a course of action. Your most concrete suggestion was still for Cat to have tea with Cordelia. It's like you're leaving all the hard brain computing to the characters while you get to harp on them for not thinking hard enough how to make a better world.

Catherine faces a set of very clear choices. Pardon Red Axe and lose the trust of all non-Woe villains under her, or Kill Red Axe and annoy the Mirror Knight and his wing. Deal with the Red Axe under the T&T and bolster the status of heroes, or hand her off to Cordelia and establish some sort of accountability to wordly powers.

The choices won't change or twist no matter how much considering and accounting Cat does, and if you have an alternative you're welcome to present it but I have yet to see even a hint of it. It's why I wrote in the first place that you want "to have more internal monologue and angst, and for Catherine to be a little nicer while still doing the exact same thing". Consider that I know how the Common Law and the Precedent works and the issue is that you never stated what you would want them to be.

Miles

Naw the only time 2 things get compared but using different standards is when you're trying to scam customers at the market or you have unacceptable reasons for one to win out over the other.

Big I

Justifications only matter to the just. I think he's on track to becoming Black Knight.

[Liliet](#)

> Of course he did not know that that is her position when he defended her, but then that is why you hold your tongue you imbecile.

Counterpoint: when Cat reacted with "lolno" to his suggestion/assumption, she didn't know this either, so... applies to both of them? 🙄

thearpox23

Not only do they consider this matter from fundamentally different principles, but Catherine was also responding to his gall in making the demand as much as the demand itself.

It would be possible for the Red Axe to have such motivations that the Mirror Knight's morality would cause him to defend her. And with enough contrivance, they could probably pass the Hanno check as well. (Something something manipulated something something the Bard is a liar.) Same excuses still do not pass the Catherine check. But then again, the main issue she had was his gall he had in trying to assert his authority.

Salt

Young Christophe may react surprisingly badly to the Red Axe's intentions, assuming he actually believes that she's genuine and not just somehow misguided.

Dude sees the world in pretty black and white terms, and we already know that he has a massive raging hate-boner for "traitors".

Oshi

Nah, paternalistic doesn't even begin to describe his moronic ass. Christophe is always going to be an obstacle to everything because he was made to be one. He's the only one who doesn't see it.

Salt

I don't know... he's old school paternalistic yes but he's also super angsty and angry about how his comrades-in-arms are dying by the droves up north against the Dead King.

It might be the battle of well-meaning ignorance vs well-meaning ignorance. Christophe is abiding by the Truce and Terms despite his disgust for all things Damned because it's a chance to save his fellow Proceran countrymen, who are as of this moment shedding their noble blood fighting The Enemy.

If I was a stubborn Christophe or Pavanie, and some wench decides to betray that alliance; make all those sacrifices into ash with no replacement solution in hand? Well, that would just get my self-righteous blood boiling.

Shveiran

I'd remind you that Cristophe was a breath away from drawing on the Representative for Below, not to mention one of the three rulers of the Alliance, over very vague suspects.

A stern defendant of the terms he is not. He is a champion of whatever he believes at the moment, and those beliefs change whenever the stupid wind.

Salt

It was actually both ways, arguably more towards Catherine being the one about to draw, at least the way it was written in the chapter.

When Frederic rode into the arsenal, Catherine was gathering Night to attack while Christophe was in the middle of spouting yet another insufferable diatribe.

Annoying? Very. Violent? No. Let's not confuse dislike for threat.

It's one thing to say he's a colossal moron – that much is true beyond a doubt – but I think it's telling of the personal bias in the comments section when so many people can't imagine any world where he's blundering into the way of someone else rather than specifically the protagonist in every scenario.

He's a character, not a plot device. Meaning as a side character who hasn't seen much screentime until now, his character can both be fleshed out and (more importantly), developed.

It's at this point in time I'd like to point out that a fairly large portion of the comments section initially regarded both Tariq and Cordelia as irredeemable antagonistic plot devices and not a thimble more, before EE finished fully fleshing out/developing those characters.

superkeaton

Hm. I still don't trust Kingfisher. Axe's talk reminds me of Lone's speeches. And the machine Cat's built, to keep the world turning, has been made to account for those like her. It's a cold thing, but at least they'll get to live to feel that coldness, which is more than the Dead King will give them.

Ninestrings

Axe is very much cut from the same lone wolf antihero cloth as the Lone Swordsman.

Interestingly that is a much less powerful story to be used against Cat at the moment, presumably because we've moved into epic territory

Salt

The fact that it's a type of story she's overcome before gives her a kind of... resistance to it, I suspect. The fact that she's beaten similar stories before will give her a distinct edge, although it'll hardly make her invincible.

We do have precedents of this kind of principle, one example is her repeated run-ins with angels. She nearly got flattened by the mere gaze of Contrition the first time around, but is now able to tell Endurance to fuck off, stand up to the full weight of Mercy's attention, and can even make the Seraphim hesitate to directly oppose her.

The Tyrant commented that every time the angels let her get away with that, she became more and more the kind of person who could get away with that. I wouldn't be surprised if it worked in similar ways with a great many narrative scenarios.

On the other hand, I imagine that patterns repeated losses may have the same effect. She'll have to be careful here, since common patterns for Catherine in particular include initial plans often going awry, and generally not getting important victories without paying an equally heavy price.

Magicturtle

You know, the red axe reminds me a lot like cat, before loss and hard choices made her the woman we see now. I didnt understand

why, until i realised she saw something wrong with the world and decided to break it.

thearpox23

Nah, Cat had always considered the long-term result of her actions. "Sure, I might win the war and kick the Praesi out, but what then?" She would've never made things easier for the Dead King. The parallel you see applies to many Named with an agenda.

Magicturtle

I just cant help compare ger to cat before meeting black. Seeing someone as abhorrent as the wicke enchanter being protected, kinda reminds me of the starting whathisname evil guy. Of course there is a huge difference between a man strangeling an entire country for own gain and what cat is doing, but if you only look on the surface some similarity can be found. It also helps characterwise she seems a bit like what cat might have been if she was a hero.

thearpox23

Mazus.

It was a city, not the entire country.

And antagonizing Praes never bore any greater consequence than antagonizing Praes. No greater evil Praes was protecting Callow from.

I will give you that the Red Axe is a bit like Cat's good twin from her dreams, but then Cat was never close to her.

dadycool

She's had shortsightedness, but only in that her long-term thinking simply wasn't 5-D chess enough to properly account for the people around her, like Akua or Malicia. Overall, though, she has been looking towards final solutions. "Sure I could spark a rebellion, but that would just make a mess. Better to try and get a military education and try to earn a position that can change things." Of course, no matter how much you try, a sword will never be as good at surgery as a scalpel, which is why she'll never outwit true schemers without a Story to cheat with.

[sivarajan](#)

That's pretty much all Named. "The belief, deep down, that you know what is right and you'll see it done."

Miles

That's just one way people become villains.

[sivarajan](#)

That's pretty much all Named. "The belief, deep down, that you know what is right and you'll see it done."

[Liliet](#)

...that is far, far, far from all Named.

She certainly belongs to the same category as Catherine and Amadeus... but very few other people actually do.

Agent J

She most certainly does not. Both Black and Cat keep an eye in the future. On what comes after. Neither will flinch at tearing down what they think is wrong, but *always* with a plan on building a better world afterwards.

Red Axe is just an idiot with a torch and an axe to grind. She has nothing to contribute save flames and murder.

RoflCat

And to add, both of them look at the practical/realistic situations, not just spout out 'do better' without any concrete BS. Which I think is the main difference between Cat and Red is that one is 'only' idealistic, while the other actually think about how to make that dream into reality.

When Cat told the Drow they can be better, she is also guiding them on how to be better, she actually take actions and make results (The 9 years oath system + the introduction of Losara 'priesthood' to be the impartial keeper of it)

She want the Accord to become widely adopted and used, but she's also aware of the resistance she'll face and take a few steps at a time to introduce it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"an axe to grind"

A... RED Axe? Eh?

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus's first plan for dealing with the Praesi nobility was "kill them all, including children over the age of six".

The difference is quantitative (namely, they have a larger quality of information and understanding), not qualitative.

Agent J

Amadeus' first plan is to rip the corrupt feudal system out root and stem and replace it all with centralized institutions.

The Red Axe's plan is to destroy the T&T and let the chips fall where they may.

That's a qualitative difference.

[*Liliet*](#)

Amadeus's first plan was a bloody civil war that would leave Praes broken for a generation.

I get that it's not the same, I really do. But I see it as the same basic drive. Like, when Amadeus was talking about how he "doesn't take guidance from heroes" and martyrdom not being a virtue, he was talking damn near personally about Red Axe. It's something that's close enough to his and Catherine's thing they have to specifically brace to not fall into it.

Agent J

On that, I agree wholeheartedly.

[*Liliet*](#)

"there but for the grace of a higher Int score go I"

Sir Nil

Hunted Magician will be kicking his leg if Maesego found the Crown on his own.

Jworks

THE SHIP SETS SAIL

Letouriste

Actually, he did so last chapter. Now it looks for the nearest port town

Abrakadabra

Yes, and they are both soooo ready for docking. The ship is slowly, almost sensuously, but also inexorably, with a rigid certainty approaches, to penetrate The confines of The dock.



dadycoool

It's an interesting truth that no system will have a 100% approval rate, even among the group that it's protecting/empowering or the group that signs off on it. The Red Axe was certainly justified in her opinions and actions, even her impatience at all the pomp and circumstance that will go into her death. It's just too bad that the innocent get trampled under the wheels of necessity in cases like this.

Letouriste

She's not innocent. Been way too decisive in her actions for that.

dadycoool

She isn't now, but what about all the others who were his victims that weren't allowed justice under the T&T? I was also talking a little about the real world where murderers etc. get deals for cooperation/information. The same applies for monsters that also happen to be rich/powerful and prey on those who aren't legally allowed to get justice because the law favors the attackers.

[Javvies](#)

The Truce and Terms gave Wicked Enchanter a stay of execution for the duration of the way against the Dead King as long as the Wicked Enchanter obeyed them Truce and Terms and contributed to the war effort.
Not a pardon for his previous crimes.

It's not like anybody was saying Wicked Enchanter was a good person or that his actions would get a pass under the Accords, just that while he was obeying the Truce and Terms and contributing to the war effort, doing anything about him was not as important as the war against the Dead King, and he wasn't worth hazarding the war effort and/or Calernia over.

And I'm entirely confident that Wicked Enchanter was following the rules and contributing to the war effort to the best of his ability. He knows full well that given an excuse the Heroes would push for his execution on the slightest grounds to go for it, and it's not like he's going to find much sympathy from other Villains, and most of what support from other Villains is going to be automatic pushback against the Hero's wanting to kill a Villain, but

with some legitimate basis to ground a case against him, his support will be weak, at best.

Cat herself says that Wicked Enchanter was on one of her lists for after the war. I expect that he wasn't just on a "Do Not Mourn" list, but he was probably also on the lists of Named to watch and kill if the opportunity arose. In addition, I fully expect that multiple Heroes are keeping lists of Villains who join up and taking notes about each of them and their abilities – and what they've done before signing up. I expect that Wicked Enchanter was on the hit lists of multiple Heroes for after the Truce and Terms end. And quite possibly on the to do lists for several Villains as well.

Wicked Enchanter is, after all, hardly the ideal candidate for making the case that Villains can be productive members of society and shouldn't be killed on discovery. Plus, there are probably more than a few Villains who'd kill him for what he did anyways.

[Tek](#)

Are you sure that's what "amnesty" means?

[Javvies](#)

They may be getting a "we're not going to file legal charges against you" for acts prior to signing up ... but the Truce and Terms, and their moratorium on Named on Named violence, are not permanent. Also, being a Villain is no longer automatically a crime, which is the more important part.

Once the war is over and the Accords implemented, Named can start killing each other again.

Wicked Enchanter was getting a pass for the duration of the war ... but nobody is forgetting what he did before, or what he'll likely do again after the war is over.

In modern legal equivalents ... Wicked Enchanter made a plea deal, and sentencing is getting delayed until after he done helping the prosecution with the cases he agreed to help with (ie, the war), to see how cooperative he was and how valuable his assistance was to the prosecutors (Grand Alliance), in order to determine how valuable his contributions were and how much they offset the sentence for his crimes.

I rather suspect that if Red Axe had been kept away from Wicked Enchanter for the duration, she'd have been given a fair bit of assistance in tracking him down afterwards.

Tek

I do not argue that Named on Named action will not be stopped by Accords, I just was under an impression that T&T wiped the slate clean so to speak, with your prior crimes being written off for joining up and Heroes promising not to hunt you for your past misdeeds. That is the impression I've got from reading and the word "amnesty". They will be prosecuted for their future crimes if there would be such, but it makes no sense that they would go by the route of "join fighting the DK and we'll kill you after", even if it's a maybe.

As Cat said, that just would result in (generally distrustful) Villains sitting this out entirely, of the best they can get is a stay of execution and a hypothetical lightening of a sentence. If there was no actual amnesty, like "past deed are written off" kind of amnesty, I doubt T&T would be as successful.

Now WE would be probably hunted down by a group of Heroes afterwards, but not in any official and legal capacity, instead in a personal vendetta and settling of scores. Unless he commits crimes again.

Javvies

Traditionally, being a Villain is all that any Hero needs to kill one. Also being a Villain is illegal, and puts one outside the bounds of legal protections and law.

That's the largest part of the amnesty. You don't get hunted just because your Name is empowered by Below instead of Above.

There may or may not officially be a clean slate for most purposes.

On the other hand, Wicked Enchanter's Name is based on the shit that he did to other people.

I guarantee that at minimum, that he's on multiple lists of people to track and keep an eye on after the war for when they cross the line again.

I fully expect that he's on more than a few people's hit lists, no matter what the situation is officially with respect to prewar actions. He's no longer just some asshole that is only known about by locals and can hide in relative anonymity when it comes to dealing with the wider world. He's known, now. What he's done is known.

Oshi

There is no clean slate just an suspension in violence. Everyone has to deal with what they came in with before the war afterwards. Cat mainly did it to set the idea that there can be working rules between named. She only cares so much about what form the precursor rules take on. Just so long as after the war the Accords stop thee tide of horrific mass murders.

[TeK](#)

My point was that I can swear I read about there being an amnesty to Villains who join the T&T, which makes sense because Cat would need some kind of incentive to make Villains join both it and the Accords. "We won't kill you now" is not a good incentive for risking your life, not for a Villain.

[TeK](#)

I don't think the "we will not kill you for being who you are" is enough of the concession to bring Villains into the fold. I mean Cat herself probably would've spat at such "magnanimity" and went her own way.

[Liliet](#)

My understanding is there's an amnesty... AND, separately, a promise of protection from vengeful heroes. The first one is an 'instantaneous' effect – from a legal point of view, the slate is wiped clean.

The second one lasts as long as the T&T do. Sure, he won't be *prosecuted* for his past crimes once the T&T is over. But neither will anyone look twice at the Red Axe for going after him then.

Salt

The main flaw with this line of argument is that Frederick made a very good point about how "temporary" measures very often end up being not so temporary, in the end. That was why he was so against setting a precedent where not everyone is judged by the same laws, and Catherine didn't entirely disagree.

Not every measure can be justified by calling it temporary, common law precedents matter. For problems like this, Catherine is NOT the best judge of situation here, that crown would likely land on Cordelia's head.

I wouldn't be surprised if many of the Principate's unbelievably labyrinthine and oftentimes self-destructive laws had origins in situations like this.

For example, one ticking time bomb related to this issue that hasn't been addressed is the immediate fallout following a victory against the dead king – or hell, if victory even looks reasonably feasible. Named aren't all idiots, and many with skeletons in their closet will start to wonder if the Dead King's fall will be followed by their swift and brutal beheadings.

At which point a difficult choice will have to be made: extend to a certain degree the same amnesties under the T&Ts to the Accords, or deal with possibly tens of rabid extremist Named unleashed upon the defenceless greater continent at a point in time where the most powerful moderates are weary, spent, or just outright incapacitated. It's not difficult to see how easy it would be to keep putting on temporary patches out of *necessity* until those patches can no longer be removed without ripping the whole cloth apart.

And as far as the likelihood of the situation getting bad enough that those kinds of extended measures might look tempting? Let's not kid ourselves, it's a war against the Dead King plus a simultaneous hidden war against the Intercessor. The continent will be lucky if it ONLY gets that bad.

Javvies

The Truce and Terms blanket prohibition on Named versus Named conflict is inherently temporary and unsustainable, simply by the nature of Named. That's why the Accords are based on imposing limits on acceptable methods and rules of engagement intended to limit the collateral damage of Named conflict.

There isn't going to be a situation where there moderates are exhausted from fighting the Dead King while the fringe radicals and extremists aren't exhausted from doing the same.

They're all going to be more or less equally exhausted from the war.

Plus, I'm fairly certain that the Truce and Terms will extend for a period after the war ends to allow for final negotiation and implementation of the Accords, and probably also covering the rest of the post-war negotiations.

And probably a few days grace period, after that to allow people to depart in peace.

Salt

On the contrary, the amnesty for actions prior to signing up to the T&T are both sustainable and necessary in order for the Accords to work at all. The circumstances that create Named are rarely controlled at the best of times, and it's impossible to expect all the continent to know the finer details of the Accords. Meaning that future equivalents of the Wicked Enchanter may have skeletons in their closet from as early as the moment of their bestowal, and must by necessity be given some degree of amnesty under the Accords for any actions committed before signing up. None of the radicals that need controlling will agree to start following the Accords after gaining a Name, if death is the final outcome regardless.

Not to mention, the difference between an exhausted radical and an exhausted moderate at the end of the war on Keter is fairly simple. The exhausted radical that doesn't care for the Accords only needs to survive and flee to any hole-in-the-ground to recover by preying on civilians, or a nation that doesn't recognize the Accords, such as potentially Praes, which is still a massive superpower. The grand alliance will be in absolutely no shape for a war on Praes immediately following a war on the Dead King, and Black actually taking Malicia's head is nothing assured.

Any gap in time between the threat of the dead king no longer hanging over everyone's head and the Accords not being near-universally adopted is a massive window of vulnerability. You can't simply extend the T&T when the primary method of enforcement has stopped existing, and even if you could, there's zero guarantee that negotiations for signing the Accords would be short by any means. Petty international disputes alone could drag them out for weeks or months. The only way to avoid this problem is extending temporary solutions, which is dangerous, or having the Accords signed before the war is over.

Javvies

... You're missing the point.

The point of the Accords is to ensure that Named conflict has minimal collateral damage. And also that simply being a Villain, bearing a Name empowered by Below isn't inherently illegal or grounds to get hunted and killed.

A Wicked Enchanter who emerged under the Accords won't get hunted and killed for being a Villain. They'll be hunted and killed for being a mind controlling, rapist asshole.

You don't have to do things that are terrible or evil in order to get a Name empowered by Below instead of Above.

Also, I fully expect that the Truce and Terms are explicitly designed to last for the duration of the war and for the duration of the negotiations immediately following, the result of which will presumably be the Accords, which I suspect are also quietly and perhaps unofficially being worked on during the war.

The Dead King is not an enforcement measure for the Truce and Terms. Sure, he's an important motivator for the creation of the Truce and Terms. But some kind of formal Truce would have been required to negotiate the Accords anyways.

Salt

You're the one missing the point, you're seeing only the idealized picture of the Accords. In reality, they're going to be a hell of a lot messier than that. Why do you think the exact terms of the Accords haven't even been mentioned in the story yet? It'd be too much going on all at once, and it'd ruin the narrative pacing.

For example, what happens to Named who are in breach of the Accords due to the event that caused them to become Named in the first place? Do you provide them amnesty for that? What about Named from backgrounds of lesser education or obscurity that might be in breach of the Accords, until however long it takes them to learn of them? What about Named who are on the surface in breach of the Accords by action but have more than good intentions, whose circumstances block them from truth tellers? What about Named like Akua who decide to turn over a new leaf after initially being in breach, who might still make up for their damage upon the world?

These aren't even all the grey-area possibilities, just some of the most likely ones.

For such cases, do you have them hunted under the Accords without ever having a proper chance to agree to them, and thus give them no incentive to follow the Accords in the first place? Or do you give them amnesty for prior actions – however conditional – perpetuating a gross injustice for the length of the Accords existence?

That's the point I'm making. Difficult legal grey areas are going to exist all over the damn place in the Accords, and every single decision made under their predecessor – the Truce and Terms – has a potential for becoming a permanent common law basis. Those dangers cannot just be hand-waved away, we'll-cross-that-bridge-when-we-get-there style, nor can we pretend that those dangers – which have existed in every single legal system or diplomatic agreement anywhere – simply don't exist.

As for the Truce and Terms themselves, the Dead King IS the lynchpin holding them all together. Yes the truces are the bones of it, but the threat of immediate continental annihilation without such truces in place is what's causing people and nations who would otherwise be bitterly opposed to such terms to uphold the truces. Once that's gone, they can go ahead and break the Truce and Terms, and the consequence won't be the death of all life on the continent so much as some very unhappy people.

The truce isn't going to hold for long when the threat that's causing the truce to exist is gone. The Accords need to be signed and problems like Praes need to be resolved before the end of the war. War on Keter is just a temporary window of opportunity for Catherine to do the real work in making the Accords a reality, and after that there'll be decades of major legal grey areas to sort through, with all the moral conundrums that apply. The real work has barely even started on the Accords.

hakureireimu

The Accords are very minimal; it only prohibits superweapons like magical plague and flying fortress so there's going to be very little grey area. It doesn't care about ordinary crimes like rapes and torture. So no, very few people are going to be in breach of the Accords.

Shveiran

Precisely. There will be no amnesty in the Accords, because they will not cover ordinary crimes. That remains the purview of the signatory kingdoms.

The objective is to change the way the war between good and evil is waged, to stop those conflicts from involving armies and dragging countries in their wake, or to toy with forces best left alone. If you stab a fool in Callow, Callowan laws will decide whether you are guilty or not. The Accords don't get into it unless you are using a demon to hold the weapon.

[5th Holy Sheeprabbit, Kilimanjaro Estelion Sharlulu Asheel
Vinchance Celenalia di ef Falufiluu'Luufilaafee \(The 35th\)
da ne!](#)

They can wait until the Dead King is dealt with, and *then* kill him when they're not risking hundreds of thousands for a personal vendetta.

erebus42

The innocence of the Red Axe is questionable at best, but in principle you are correct it is a shame. The problem is innocent people will get hurt regardless, so when the choice is between having countless innocents get trampled or having fewer innocent people get trampled well...

Salt

The Grey Pilgrim would probably agree with that logic and kill that innocent without a moment's hesitation, if not necessarily for lack of anguish. A very large number of civilians would likely cheer him on.

It was that exact logic that he used to justify the Tenth Crusade and his attempts to kill Catherine, after all.

A younger Catherine Foundling would probably fight that verdict tooth and nail, if only for the arrogant presumption of someone to think they had the right to choose that road for her. It's one thing to choose to sacrifice yourself for others, another to have the choice made for you.

erebus42

That is always the main concern: whether a necessary evil is truly necessary. That is why it is always important to keep an open mind to new possibilities and pivot when necessary. That being said at the end of the day tough choices do have to be made and often times no matter what you do there are unfortunate consequences. However refusing

to choose and letting more innocent people suffer than is necessary or that can be avoided does not make you more righteous. It makes you a stupid selfish coward.

Salt

I don't disagree. I'm just pointing out that it's interesting how this justification for Catherine's actions now is the exact same as the one of the Tenth Crusade. Only now the roles are reversed, and Catherine herself is the one trying to sacrifice someone else for the Greater Good/as a Lesser Evil. If that logic actually flies, it ends up putting the Pilgrim, Saint, Mirror Knight, and the rest of the crusaders from the tenth crusade solidly on the "right" side of things, at least based on what they knew at the time.

Which leaves us with the question: are Heroes of Above actually more Justified in their seeming high-handed arrogance than it appears from Catherine's perspective, or is both the Tenth Crusade and the current Black Queen in the wrong?

erebus42

The Mirror Knight , the Saint, and even (to a certain extent) the Pilgrim's concept of the "greater good" were rooted in nebulous ideals, belief in their own infallibility as Heroes, and the idea that things will just work out instead of around the actual consequences of their actions. They offered very little in regards to actually trying to fix anything and instead focused on tearing down something they found unpalatable based on the aforementioned nebulous ideals. Cat is willing to at least consider the bigger picture and take alternatives-unfortunately most other alternatives are shit. The situations are certainly similar enough to add a touch of irony to it but they're not quite as equivalent as you're presenting them as. The justification of the "greater good" may be the same but the meaning of that justification, as well as the context and facts of the situation are key differentiating factors here.

Salt

You could argue that for the non-Named, but the Named Heroes in the Crusade had direction from the closest thing in Calernia to an all-seeing omniscient eye in the sky for minimizing losses – the Choir of Mercy.

We know for a fact through Tariq's interludes that Mercy has been able to see situations where the Pilgrim could minimize harm from nearly anywhere on the

continent, and the minimum level of power needed to obscure their vision even for a specific individual is outright godhood – the Sisters, the Dead King, and the Intercessor. We also know that they're not a big fan of explaining their intentions in detail, and the Pilgrim often only found out what big crisis he actually averted later on.

As far as guide-verse canon goes, if you're Above aligned then the Pilgrim is one of the closest things possible to an absolute assurance that what you're doing at the least has the potential to be huge Greater Good. Mercy itself is one of the most morally grey of the Choirs, fully willing to work with Villains like Catherine without missing a beat if they think it'll minimize suffering, so it's not as if they'll allow some sort of extra loss of life on principle.

So if you don't have to have a high opinion of Providence or the Choirs, that's understandable. If you think l they're far less infallible than the Heroes seem to believe, you're probably right. If what they did doesn't make you like them very much, I'd agree with that sentiment on the spot.

But to say that the Heroes in the Tenth Crusade were just attacking Catherine because of some vague dislike for her, or that they didn't have some clear Greater Good in mind is just outright incorrect. They were operating on the closest thing they can get to Above-provided iron certainty, as far as Above-aligned people are concerned.

Heroes in the guide-verse have an uncountable number of flaws to criticize already, we don't need to make up new ones to criticize them with.

hakureireimu

The 10th Crusade was sold publicly as a defensive war against permanent hell gates, and privately as a land grab. Very much not a necessary evil thing.

hakureireimu

No, a younger Catherine Foundling would look at the big picture and realize that she can't risk the safety of her country for justice for a single Villain.

Andrew Smith

The same Young Catherine who manipulated the Lone swordsman into army rebellion from his small party (where he tried a redemption plot on Cat)

Ninestrings

The Red Axe is like one of those DnD players with the very edgy backstory that has nothing to do with the plot you're trying to tell as a DM.

Danica Bihlmaier

Well... that's why the group should sit together BEFORE starting a campaign and/or /the DM gets to say "No" to character concepts that don't fit the decided-on route everyone wants to play – while the players get to walk away from groups/GM's campaign offers that don't fit what they want.

Danica Bihlmaier

But that's the whole problem here, isn't it? Calernia has multiple would-be GMs that don't agree on way too much =P

Miles

The DM doesn't get to say no for random bs reasons like that. It's literally in the dm guide.

edrey

They should just seal her name away and send her to cordelia saying is not their jurisdiction and asking for her head, mazego should be able to do the ritual and the arsenal must have the tools too. Then the truce will hold because she isn't named

[sivarajan](#)

That's a clear violation of the spirit of the Terms, and acting so clearly in bad faith will break them.

edrey

You should read the several debates in the story and the people reading it, again. It's not a perfect system, they are humans, what's more important, morality or avoiding damage, and how it was said in the previous chapter 'at its core is only pride'. Millions of lives or the illusion of a utopia is the question here.

[sivarajan](#)

Who said anything about morality? The whole point of the Terms is to get Villains to cooperate, since appealing to their better nature, asking them to consider "millions of

lives" won't work; if Cat starts poking loopholes in them for herself, they will break.

edrey

The truce and term are temporary and even the accord just put a base line with just limitations, the spirit of the law will break and not just the villains will do it, this is a gradual change for the future, killing red axe that way won't destroy the truce because the whole point is making named learn they are not above mortal law, if cordelia, cat and the blood ask for her head it would fall. The terms are just a temporal tool for that. Now i think about it. Cat should just contact them directly and tell them that she is a enemy of the GA and deal with her not with procer law but of the three nations

[TeK](#)

Oh come on. What kind of logic is "the system isn't perfect so let's BURN IT ALL DOWN TO THE GROUND"? She didn't even had to do anything, just wait a few years and she would be free to kill him anyway! I can't even find any sympathy for her, the whole "my wants outweigh the needs of everyone else lol" worldview is unforgivable no matter what happened to her.

Ninestrings

Red Axe is a revenger, she's going about it in a pretty cold way but her story is fundamentally retributive one.

A wrong is done to her, and she redresses it. Even Cat acknowledges she understands where she's coming from.

In any other telling of this, a woman tracking down her abuser across half the continent and finding him sheltered by a corrupt system that she dies striking against you'd be cheering for her, but she's not our protagonist, and our story isn't that simple.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I'll give you the premise but for one thing.
Actually one Named. The Dead King.

Continental Threat.

She deliberately decided her pain was worth wrecking the Continent.

F that B.

[Liliet](#)

It's pretty human to not understand the scale of a threat that's beyond any precedent.

Aotrs Commander

"Being human" is not a blanket excuse for any amount of wilful stupidity.

If it was, it'd be a strong argument in favour of the Dead King, to be honest.

Salt

We currently live in an era where large groups of people are actively protesting for their right to get infected with a plague. If anything, the level of stupidity in this web novel is a pale facsimile of everyday human stupidity.

Pretty realistic, all in all. Could use more angry Proceran peasants rioting to let the Dead King kill and raise everyone because he's "a straight shooter that tells it like it is". 9/10 realism, EE.

Shveiran

Well, yes, but is this meant as a reply to Aotrs? Because her attitude being realistic doesn't make it any more defensible, in my opinion.

Aotrs Commander

Precisely.

Salt

The fact that the characters have fairly realistic flaws as well as virtues is good writing. Unrealistically virtuous caricatures of people for characters does not typically make for a very good story.

If you mean moral defensibility, her Aotrs point still doesn't hold up. Near every character in the serial is a relatively complex one, no real one-dimensional antagonists or protagonists, and the Red Axe isn't an exception. Her final conclusion on the T&T being wrong doesn't mean at least parts of her rationale aren't correct, or at a minimum understandable.

Miles

The dead king had plenty of precedent. That's how everyone else knows he's a threat.

[Liliet](#)

The Dead King has established precedent mostly for raiding. Everyone "knows" he's "a" threat, very few people REALLY know WHAT kind of threat he is.

[sivarajan](#)

Is a continent that grants amnesty to the Wicked Enchanter worth protecting against the Dead King?

erebus42

Yes, because it is full of people who are not the wicked Enchanter

[sivarajan](#)

Then you hate the Wicked Enchanter less than the Red Axe did. Her perspective was, presumably that she would break anything, anybody who got in her way, whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.

erebus42

As the chapter showed this was more about the Terms and what they stood for in her mind and not wholly about the Enchanter. I also feel like you're not taking the context of that line into account and are trying to draw a false equivalency between her and Cat. She said that in regards to the protection of her home and people. If anything the Red Axe is far more comparable to William or the Saint. It's not about protecting people or building things. For them its about destroying what they find unpalatable based off of nebulous ideals and without regard to collateral damage.

Shveiran

Her perspective is also that it doesn't matter if her mum, her nieces, all her childhood friends and also all puppies and orphans on Calernia died and were turned into zombies, so long as she got to kill the Wicked Enchanter.

I really can't symphatize with that.

Ninestrings

Random question but do we know the Dead King is a Name? or just a title?

He's effectively reached apotheosis, he may be beyond Names.

Salt

Presumably, but we don't know for sure. I don't believe he's ever used an aspect in the story. This could mean he has no aspects, that he has only passive aspects like Ranger, or that he's hiding his aspects in the longest long-game ever. All pretty much guesswork at this point.

Miles

Technically most or all villains are immortal, except their one weakness: lethal injuries.

Meaning they don't age, and live forever until stopped by violence, usually of the heroic persuasion.

Or lose their Name, I guess, which is basically just suicide by that point so it doesn't count.

[TeK](#)

I am not easily entrapped by narrative no matter the side represented. Thanks in no small part to PGtE, tbh.

I do not cheer for revenge. Punitive system should serve to prevent crimes, punishment is a side-effect, not an intended consequence.

[Liliet](#)

I'm here with you, but I also see Red Axe's perspective. It's fallacious but what the fallacy is founded on is actually trust in Catherine and the leadership of the GA, ironically. She doesn't believe the T&T as they are can possibly be NECESSARY. She believes they surely have power to make something BETTER, and they must be pushed into it. It's... very idealistic, and the flaw in her perspective is that she's *not intimidated enough*.

That's... honestly sympathetic to me from an angry teenager.

[TeK](#)

Oh yeah. I acknowledge my own bias, because all my life I was usually T00 intimidated. Also pessimistic. In her position I would probably think that if I fuck everything up, the new alternative would be even worse, lol.

M0och123

No longer being able to be trapped by the narrative is an (unfortunate/fortunate I don't know which) side effect of reading PGtE that is true.

I also like your point about punitive systems and their goals. A recurring problem in this story is Named not seeing the actual goal of an action and freaking out and completely ignoring the explanation in favour of good ol' stabby stabby. *shrug*

[sivarajan](#)

The conflict you're describing is the classic deontology ("good ol' stabby stabby") vs. utilitarianism, seeing the good final goal of (usually evil, or at the very least morally dubious) actions.

[sivarajan](#)

There ARE different perspectives on the purpose of a punitive "justice" system; you are wrong, but in an understandable way.

[sivarajan](#)

Crimes will happen anyway. The state punishes criminals because the weak typically cannot revenge themselves upon the strong.

Justice and law are different. What you describe may be law, but justice is usually proportionate revenge.

Salt

Justice in the guide-verse has been alluded to as being far more complex than eye for an eye style revenge, by the Hanno perspectives that show what the Seraphim see. Hanno looked at an irredeemable asshole criminal and the Seraphim showed him their POV, the cause and effect of every action/circumstance in the criminal's life that led to the crime as well as every action of every forefather of that criminal. It nearly burned Hanno's mind into cinders just to witness it.

Probably won't ever be defined in specifics though, considering how much of a moral quagmire that could turn into for a writer to seriously attempt defining Justice as a broad term.

[TeK](#)

Yes they will happen anyway, how does it in any way argues against the intended purpose of a system. Like yeah,

people get sick and die anyway, yet the purpose of wearing masks is not to instill slave instincts in the populace.

TeK

Justice is an inherently selfish egotistical indulgence, nothing more.

Mental Mouse

Yeah – no matter how sympathetic her personal cause, she's a loose cannon in the fight against the Dead King.

Big I

I'm worried for Cat. Her confidence in her own victory is reminding me of Malicia. I think this chapter, and the book in general so far, is foreshadowing the failure of the Truce and Terms, and the necessity (hah) of some radical, half chocked, reckless plan from her to make the Accords a reality.

Salt

It'll probably be a narrative battle more than anything. Catherine is right that she's beaten the old "lighting a torch without an alternative solution in mind" story plenty of times before. However she's also been on the other end of "the underdog beats Goliath who is attempting to sacrifice them for their political convenience" story equally often. Cat vs the Lone swordsman in the Liesse rebellions, Cat vs the Grey Pilgrim in the Tenth Crusade, Cat vs the Saint in the ruins of Liesse, Cat vs Cordelia throughout the better part of four volumes, Cat vs the Bard just now.

If she does win, she'll need to make sure she stays on the former side of the story and not get caught on the latter side. Whether she necessarily deserves to win? The jury is out on that one, fierce debates in comments to follow.

Juff

Typo Thread:

No so > Not so
the that > that the
out in the > out to the
had still had the muscles arms > still had the muscled arms
if I she > if she
before the ever > before she ever
neither I would not > I would not
But there were > But these were
so land as it > so long as it
she has she my blood (not sure what this should be)

to labyrinthine, > too labyrinthine,
right bout > right about
"It would not > "I would not
reminded myself (missing fullstop)
movement form > movement from
stretch if his > stretch of his
Autumn," > Autumn."

[theorel](#)

she has she[d] my blood
took me a bit to figure that one out too.

Naeddyr

She's gonna get pregnant, it's gonna be twins, one of them ends up as a Hero and the other a Villain, calling it now.

Decius

Twins, but one ends up being an old-school monologing flying fortress, and the other one is a more practical version that gets goblins and dwarves to coordinate on anti-air artillery.

Both are ambiguous between good and evil.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not until the epilogue, she's not! Between narrative and Sve Noc's oversight...

Burnsy

So far Cat's crammed one crown into Sve Noc and made a pair of murder goddesses, and turned the other one into an entire domain/pocket universe. Can't wait to see what she does with #3.

I also have absolutely no doubt that Cat is gonna sleep with Kingfisher and in doing so completely undermine his credibility in the eyes of MK and his followers. Win some, lose some I guess

[Adrian_V](#)

"I did it, Catherine."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Did what?"

"I just ended it on a cliffhanger!"

M0och123

Just an observation... I absolutely love the comment section of this series!
Cheers to Lilith and Konstatin for always commenting their interesting insights!
I almost look forward to reading the comment section as much as the actual chapter.

Konstantin von Karstein

Thanks! 😊 It's exactly the same for me. And the fact that everyone is so respectful is a big plus.

trashdragon

I kind of love how the Red Axe is very clearly NOT talking about Names or Villains or Evil or Below but unjust systems and the victims of them that the people at the top of them just brush off as acceptable losses and it just completely flies over Cat's head because she's all about Names, and Stories and her dick waving contest with stoopid, poppyhead heroes, and has never actually herself been on the receiving end of the injustices of Praes, which is fact has one way or another has been patronizing her her whole life.

I really do get the idea that Cat BELIEVES that her way is the best way to stop conflict and chaos and defeat the Dead King. But in that belief she's just as stubborn and bull-headed than any of the heroes, and as much as she talks about compromises, she refuses to make compromises in any way that pulls things in the opposite direction from her brutal, hard woman making hard choices system.

And then people like Cat wonder why OTHER people end up radicalized lol.

Abrakadabra

Fair point. People do get radicalized a lot more if the system is inflexible.

erebus42

You're never going to get a system completely free of injustice. And while it's fine to get angry about it when you don't have anything actually constructive to contribute or provide any better realistic alternative well...

Miles

Red axe has a point though. Its not like life is just on pause while the t&t are in effect. While the amnesty is in effect people are building up their power bases. Given the situation if Red hadn't at least tried she'd likely have lost her Name.

Severely weakened it and hurt her later chances at the very least.

Burlyraven

Considering I have the theory from the monthly bonus chapters that we're seeing the Wicked Enchanter's origin, and the nagging suspicion that the main female character therein may be the Wicked Enchanter's first victim, and the fact that said female character is a minor noble, it would certainly make things far more complicated if Red Axe were to be revealed as having the same name as said female character.

Miles

Too bad the crown rightfully belongs to the Mirror Knight, who recovered the sword of the lady from the lake.

It would be cool to have an artifact for the villain to keep this duality going but when there's a hero with a sword and a villain with a crown the only way it ends is going to leave the truce in flames.

Too bad the MK is going to die and the sword returned to the lake.

Salt

Isn't Catherine's staff already her Artifact anyway?

She was offered the Good King's sword after the Twilight Ways were made. She decided to give up on swords and asked his grave for something to help her stay on the right path, at which point the tree he was buried under snapped off a branch in response.

We know the thing is semi-sentient already, judging by how it threw a minor tantrum when Cat tried to illusion it into looking like the Wicked Enchanter's staff with Night. She had to calm it down by talking to it, of all things, which narratively just screams early stages legendary artifact.

Drunken Dwarf

Well the Red Axe not being worried is bad. Cat seems to think it's cause she is cut from the same cloth as the Lone Swordsman but the Wandering Bard has gotten a lot more involved since that one.

I wonder if the Red Axe will actually end up being that Constance person the Doddering Sage got Cat to promise to protect. It might not be enough to break the Terms but it might provide enough of an opening for the Mirror Knight to rebel.

Sam

Oh, I caught up. Now what am I going to binge read?

Chapter 30: Quarters

"Admittedly, it was my fault for not specifying the flying fortress had to be able to fly in directions other than up. Oh, it can fly down as well? Splendid. Guards, drag the Lord Warlock beneath my fortress. It'd be a shame not to use it at least once."

– Dread Emperor Inimical, the Miser

"Walk me through it," I said, then added, "metaphorically speaking."

Masego's mouth snapped shut. His quarters were larger than I'd expected, but I was rather familiar with the way it got filled from our years together. It was unusual, by Wasteland standards. Given how sorcery tended to come with some degree of wealth and influence, at least in Praes, the rooms of most mages I'd seen tended to be tasteful and well-furnished. Many even had a corner set aside to receive guests and a few impressive-looking magical trinkets to impress the uninitiated. Research or actual practice of sorcery would take place not there but in workshops and mage towers, behind heavy wards and away from the prying eyes of rivals. Masego, on the other hand, had never seen sorcery as something he *practiced*. He was a mage first and foremost, even without his magic, so in his mind there was nothing to separate his living quarters from a workshop. Our surroundings made that exceedingly clear.

Where my own quarters in the Arsenal had a parlour to entertain guests, he instead had a neat and well-organized library whose shelves went from floor to ceiling. A comfortable scribing desk – I'd actually seen cushions like this one's on Alcazar furniture and the red didn't match the wood, so Indrani had probably stolen it – with enough leg room for him to sit reading without feeling cramped was the only concession to this being somewhere actually lived in. The same couldn't be said of the larger room deeper in, where I found the mixture of lazy chaos and almost rigid orderliness to be a nostalgic sight: like his tents out on campaign, or his rooms in Laure. While dirty clothes, plates with half-eaten meals on them and the blade cleaning kit Hakram had gifted Indrani a few years back had been strewn around

without a care, it actually only served to contrast with the parts Zeze did care to keep clean.

Like a long table with half a dozen leather-bound manuscripts, the sole open one revealing Masego's finicky calligraphy in ink, also boasting several reference books I dimly recognized from my continuing lessons on sorcery with Akua. All were laden with bookmarks, though none more so than the heavy tome titled *Metaphysics of Realms* from some ancient Warlock by the name of Olowe. Stacked scrolls and carefully folded parchments along with a nice leather armchair told me this was likely where Zeze sat to work, and there was not a single crumb or speck of dust on that table to be found. Another nook looked like a small alchemy lab, another like an enchanting table and yet another was covered in glass domes constraining pulsing luminous mushrooms. Experiments, I rather hoped. Around those islands of order even the wood shavings from the wooden carvings Indrani had carelessly sown around everywhere else seemed reluctant to enter.

I wouldn't but it above Masego to have warded them.

The large bed in the corner, which evidently neither he nor Indrani had bothered to make, seemed to have been placed there almost like an afterthought – fitted in there after the important stuff had been, half-heartedly wedged in where there was still room. My suspicions that he might have forgot to put actual furniture in there at first were deepened by the way the dressers were on opposite sides of the room and the closet was awkwardly close to a cupboard opening the opposite way. It went from suspicion to standing assumption when I noticed that the small table where they ate meals – by the amount of dirty plates – was clearly Archer's work by the look of the carvings. Zeze was not particularly fond of tapestries, so I assumed the few hung on the walls were there at Indrani's addition, but the sheer amount of magelights and candles was all him. Beautiful and elaborate carpets clearly from the Wasteland – no one wove those quite like the Taghreb – added a splash of colour that livened up the room into a place where it might actually be pleasant to live.

Yet it was a small room behind all this where we stood, though, behind a steel door warded tightly so none of the influences from the other parts of his quarters could drift in and contaminate the workings. Here the walls were bare stone and even the tables and chairs polished granite, with only his work on the Quartered Seasons breaking up the stony monotony. Half a dozen copper boxes with glass lids and water held in crystal spheres – an improvement on the traditional scrying bowl, though significantly more fragile – revealed shifting colourful shapes from places beyond Creation, while on the left wall a great slate covered in markings and formulas depicting the secrets that the Hierophant had successfully teased out of the Pattern. I'd been invited so

sit on one of the granite chairs but instead elected to stand at his side, looking at the slate.

I gestured for Hierophant to begin, and with sharp nod he moved closer to the slate. He found a corner of it without writing, then paused and turned towards me. With his full body not, just his eyes, which got my attention.

"I will begin by noting that the Hunted Magician's information was the definitive factor in this success," Masego said.

My brow rose. I'd suspected that it'd be useful stuff, but this was much stronger praise than I'd anticipated. Hierophant was in no way shy about claiming intellectual successes when he believed himself their author, and to this day still utterly disinterested with politics, so if he was talking up the Magician then every word spoken was true.

"I hear he's come across some trouble under the Terms?" Masego continued.

"He worked with the Bard, among other things," I said. "I'm not eager to press for an execution, given his uses, but letting him off with a slap on the wrist isn't in the cards."

"I've little interest in those matters," Masego admitted. "But since you told me he gave what he knew as part of an arrangement for leniency, I'll specify that his information saved me possibly literal years of work. I was looking in entirely the wrong places."

That'd weigh on the scales, though less than Zeze might expect. The way I saw it, the Hunted Magician couldn't be allowed to *buy* his way out of consequences no matter what he offered up. All that he floated us and ended up panning out, though, should be put together as a case for why certain punishments should be sought instead of others.

"I'll pass that along to his tribunal," I said. "And I might need you to put it in writing at some point."

He nodded.

"Duly noted."

From the look on his face, he was already tossing the entire matter into the pile of things he felt no particular need to remember. To my eye it was still an improvement that he'd bothered to speak to the subject at all instead of simply assuming I'd handle it, so if anything I was rather pleased.

"The crux of the matter is a question that concerns one of the few commendable books on sorcery to come out of the Principate,

Madeline de Jolicoeur's work '*Essences of the Fey*,'" Masego said, charmingly taken by his subject.

He drew a small circle on the slate, his long fingers deft. It was always heartwarming to see him genuinely in his element. I frowned a heartbeat later, though.

"I'm pretty sure I've heard that name before," I told him.

Where? Obviously it was from Proceran history, but my studies of that had been rather skewed. I'd focused on the major wars and turning points, along with Cordelia Hasenbach's rise and reign. Considering the sheer size of the Principate, even though the state hadn't even existed for half the time Callow had that still meant a staggering number of things would have slipped through the cracks of my learning.

"I believe she was also known by her contemporaries as the Fey Enchantress," Masego said.

Ah, *her*. Leave it to Zeze to primarily remember the villainess that'd taken over most of Cantal and Iserre only to fail at toppling Salia and the Highest Assembly for her apparently impressive magical research.

"Lady Madeline was part fae herself, and familiar with the Courts of Arcadia, which eventually led her to ask the question of what happens when fae are killed," Masego said. "Her work was the first to suggest that fae cannot truly die, and that the changing of the seasons is the mechanism through which the Courts renew themselves."

"So fae don't die," I said. "You told me that several times in the past, and I've seen the proof of it myself. What's useful about this?"

"When the physical body of a fae is slain, they are not destroyed," Masego said. "We know their essence continues to exist, as it will be spun anew into another fae come the changing of seasons. Where, then, does that essence *go*?"

Huh. I'd not considered that, actually. Fairies didn't have souls, so it wasn't like they'd pass into beyond and then be resurrected when they were needed by their endless cycle again.

"It could lapse back to the crown of their respective court," I eventually said. "Some fae are dukes one cycle and princes another, so we know there's a variance in power to some extent. It might be the 'crown' is a system for apportioning that power into different fae."

Masego turned burning eyes towards me, noticeable even under the eyecloth.

"Akua has been very good for you," he seriously said.

Words to make half of Callow faint in rage, but I decided to let him finish his thought before settling on a reaction.

"You've always been clever," Zeze continued, "but now your instincts are grounded in knowledge. I am glad she has been tutoring you, even if your closeness makes Vivienne unhappy."

"More than just Vivienne," I reminded him, and left it at that.

He shrugged, unconcerned with the broader ramifications. Most days I wished I could be as well, given how much simpler it'd make my life.

"A return to the crown was my first theory as well," Hierophant told me. "Which led to the creation of the copper eyes. Through a process you are not educated enough to understand even if I explain, I created power that would behave similarly to Spring or Autumn and released it in different places with the aim of tracing it back to the crowns."

This part I'd known about, though not the reasoning behind it. The 'copper eyes', the scrying boxes in the room with us, were meant to follow the power he was releasing into the wilds and so find the location of the crowns. They were linked to measuring devices that'd been put out in different layers of Creation and adjoining realms, with great difficulty, but for all the trouble last I'd heard that avenue had proved to be something of a dead end.

"It didn't work, though," I said.

"It worked perfectly," Masego contradicted. "It simply found nothing. My theory when facing those results was that I was simply not releasing the power in the correct places, which was not improbable given the size of Arcadia alone – much less the full spectrum of the search."

"So what changed?" I asked.

"To understand that, first consider a more recent theory introduced by my own father," Masego said, drawing a second circle on the slate. "Namely, that all of Arcadia – even the fae themselves – are of the same fundamental matter, with the differences between a stone and a duchess being essentially cosmetic. Father suggested that fae cannot truly die not because of an effective immortality of essence, but instead because they are not truly alive."

He spoke of Warlock with a tinge of wistfulness, but the grief had visibly faded. I wasn't too surprised. When the Dead King wasn't riding in the back of his head, Masego actually tended

deal with his emotions better than most of the Woe. I set that aside and considered his actual words instead, the theory the Sovereign of the Red Skies had put forward. I wasn't quite sure I bought it, not after some of the things I'd seen.

"If the fae were entirely self-contained in their story cycles, I'd agree with that," I noted. "But that theory doesn't explain Larat."

Who had walked away from kingship Twilight and become something else. If fae were not more thinking than a trebuchet or a water wheel, merely more complex, how could his actions be explained?

"A fascinating contradiction," Masego warmly agreed. "Are Larat and your former Wild Hunt then the first fae to have ever lived, or by virtue of living do they cease being fae at all?"

"Which links to Quartered Seasons how?" I asked.

"It doesn't," Hierophant replied without missing a beat. "I simply find it a gripping mystery."

I, uh, should have seen that coming. Honestly it was a sign of how engaged he was with this subject that he'd only ended up going down a side path the once.

"Returning to the theoretical framework," Masego happily said, "if we believe both Lady Madeline and Father we are led to a particular state of affairs. Fae are not destroyed when their body is slain, return cyclically, and are not fundamentally distinguishable from the rest of Arcadia."

My eyes narrowed.

"A return to the earth," I said. "That's what you're getting at. Like Arcadia itself is a pool of water, and when they 'die' the water just returns to the pool."

"Precisely," Hierophant grinned. "From there I draw not on the work of others but on my own, if you'll forgive the intellectual vanity."

"I'll magnanimously deign to do so," I replied.

He eyed me sideways, knowing there'd been sarcasm in that sentence but with little interest in deciphering where and why. He still drew a third circle, below and in between the first two.

"My own Quartered Seasons theory was built on the back of the two older theories I've introduced you to," Masego said. "Madeline de Jolicoeur suggested that the changing of seasons was a way for the courts to renew themselves, but I would venture to go further. The existence of the seasons themselves is a mechanism for that very purpose, allowing a set of two seasons to be active

while the other two become ambient and begin condensing into their coming shape. Your own vision, Catherine, made it clear that the transitions between seasons were not instantaneous. Given Arcadia's otherwise loose accord with creational laws, there must be a mechanical reason for this to be so."

"You're losing me," I admitted. "I thought that your theory was about the separation between a court's 'crown' and its 'power'."

"It is," Masego said. "Think of Arcadia as the pool of water you mentioned."

He drew a large circle in the centre of the space.

"Each Court is, for lack of a better term, a smaller pond that will be filled through a canal at regular intervals."

His hand moved again, depicting four lines leading out of the large circle and leading into four smaller circles.

"All power is limited," Hierophant stated, idly filling in the large circle with 'water'. "I believe that, for reasons of stability and coherence, only two ponds can ever be safely filled from the pool's water. That leaves two ponds' worth of power returned to ambient Arcadia, slowly shaping themselves into the coming seasons. If all four ponds are filled..."

"The pool would be empty," I frowned. "And so Arcadia would grow thin. That seems dangerous."

"It would be, which is why I believe a deeper mechanism ensures that only two ponds can be full at a time," Masego said. "The decay in victory of Winter or Summer until they become Spring and Autumn, which you saw in vision, would be the visible part of that mechanism in action."

"So the water is the power, that I get," I said. "That still leaves out the crowns."

He nodded, pleased, and methodically drew little crowns above each of the four smaller circles, the 'ponds'.

"The crowns are, in effect, simply the shape of the pond the water is poured into," Masego said. "Given the cosmic scope of these 'waters', however, this had still made them godheads in every meaningful sense."

I watched the slate board, fingers clenching and unclenching. He'd not kept talking, which meant he'd given me the rules of this as he knew them. It also meant that I might be able to figure it out, at least in part. It was a sloppy habit to have all this explained to me all the time, one that might come back to bite me in the future, so I forced myself to think.

"When the King of Winter and the Queen of Summer wed," I said, "neither of them lost their crown. They didn't stop being royalty, just became the royalty of something new."

"Correct," Masego said.

He drew a line through two of the found crowns. On opposite ends of the pool, as Hierophant was nothing if not precise even in his doodles.

"But I know they didn't get to keep the power of Winter, because I got my hands on it," I said. "And then Sve Noc ate it, to stabilize the Night into something that won't destroy their entire species if it collapses."

He drew a line through one of ponds already bereft of a crown.

"I am still uncertain whether the lack of corresponding crown to go with the power you inherited is what kept you largely sane or was instead the very reason for your troubles with principle alienation," Masego admitted. "Regardless, it is undoubtedly why you were only ever able to command but the barest fraction of that power."

"If your 'deeper mechanism' was working right, when the newborn Court of Arcadia Resplendent was formed there would have been two ponds back in the pool," I slowly said. "The power of Spring and Autumn."

His lips quirked. I'd underestimated how much and how long he'd been wanting to talk to someone about this, I thought. The secrecy meant neither of us had brought in even the Woe fully, though Hakram knew some things and no doubt Indrani had gone looking through everybody's papers as was her wont. Masego drew lines through two ponds, the same who still had their crowns.

"Given that in this state their very purpose is to be shaped anew for a coming cycle, it would explain the ease by which this unprecedented Court of Arcadia Resplendent was formed," Masego agreed. "And we look at two crowns' worth of control for two ponds' worth of power, which would lead to a highly stable arrangement explaining why we've not heard of collapse in Arcadia since."

"Winter's power went into Night," I said. "Which means it has to be Summer that went into Twilight, it's the only pond of power that was still free. Except we had no call on that power, Zeze."

"We did not," Hierophant agreed. "Yet you struck a bargain with the Prince of Nightfall, who did."

What I'd promised him was seven mortal crowns and one, though, and while we'd undeniably both been at war with Summer at the

time neither of us had held a right to its power. Although hadn't the imprisoned Princess of High Noon gone spare when I'd told her about the bargain with Larat? She must have seen something looming on the horizon even that far back.

"I can't see how we got our hands on it, even then," I admitted.

"Though I cannot be certain, I believe it to have been a matter of blind mechanics having worked to our advantaged," Masego said. "Larat was fae, and so his ritualized apotheosis called to power of a fae nature. It made the water go down the canal, so speak, and there was only one pond's worth of water left to flow."

"And the seven crowns and one?" I asked.

"When trying to force such a powerful mechanism to work, some manner of power must be spent," Hierophant suggested. "It is telling that the same fae who escaped the foundation of united Arcadia asked for this specific bounty, among all those that could be asked."

That many crowns would have a weight to them, undeniably. Was that what the Princess of High Noon had seen and panicked about? Not necessarily that Larat would eventually use up the very stuff of Summer, I doubted even fae could be that farsighted, but that he was aiming to make a Court of his own. It fit, I had to admit. If there was a recipe to make a Court, it made sense that royalty on both sides of the fence would be at least vaguely aware of it.

"So that leaves the crowns of Spring and Autumn up for grabs, like we thought," I said. "Where were they, that the Hunted Magician was able to help you – wait, actually, what about the fae we fought here in the Arsenal?"

My brow knotted. I'd almost forgotten those, but they were a stick in the wheel of what had been explained to me so far.

"They were Autumn," I said. "There shouldn't be an Autumn left, Masego, by your theory."

"The answer to this was obtained by Roland, though unknowingly on his part," Hierophant said. "He captured alive one of the fae, whose physical body it turns out we've destroyed before. The Duke of Green Orchards, who was slain in Dormer, though he now goes by Count of Green Apples."

So I'd not been wrong, I thought, when I'd noticed an eerie similarity.

"I saw him," I admitted. "Noticed his face. So you're saying all those fae that attacked the Arsenal are, what, salvaged corpses?"

"Those entities whose bodies were slain can never be made anew with a new Winter or Summer, as there will never again *be* either of these," Masego said. "That leaves them existing, yet purposeless. Some must have bound themselves to the crown of Autumn to acquire that purpose. There will be some of other natures, kept into existence by outside ties like contracts or debts, but I imagine much of the roster will be those killed in the Arcadian Campaign. For all those that anchored themselves to Autumn or Spring, I expect ten times as many went wild and are now partaking of sundry powers on Creation or elsewhere to sustain their existence."

The Prince of Falling Leaves, then would have continued existing *because* of the Hunted Magician's unpaid debt. That had a sharp little irony to it I could not help but find amusing – that man really was prone to shooting himself in the foot, wasn't he? Actually, now that I was considering this, was my pact for the crowns with the Prince of Nightfall what'd allowed him not to become one of the subject princes of Arcadia in the first place? *Larat*, I thought with reluctant admiration. *You cleverest of foxes.*

"So fae fell through the cracks of our mess and now suckle at whatever they can find, including Autumn," I summarized.

That sounded like it'd be an issue in the long term, fae loose in the world and grown hungry, but right now we had more pressing cats to skin. And it was now occurring to me that if the dead fae from my old campaign were excluded from the newborn Court that'd followed it, then most of Winter and Summer's royalty had been removed. The very same kind of entities that might be rivals for whoever sat the newborn thrones.

Somewhere, I suspected, the creature that had once been the King of Winter was smiling.

"More or less," Masego agreed. "And to answer the question you never finished asking, what the Hunted Magician provided was not exactly a location. There is, if you'll forgive the metaphor, no buried treasure to unearth. That was what he clarified for me, that I could not find a crown because in a very real sense it does not currently exist. What he gave us is a set of circumstances that will coalesce the crown of Autumn into being. More specifically, a ritual to be used in a particular place and alignment."

"So when you said you found the crown of Autumn," I leadingly said.

"An artistic flourish," Masego proudly said. "I have merely confirmed the ritual will function and located an appropriate ritual site and date."

I let out a noise of appreciation.

"Well done," I said. "What kind of a timeline are we looking at?"

Considering how much about the fae had to do with seasons, I'd guess somewhere around a year. Maybe the autumn solstice or something else along those lines.

"Thirty-one days," Hierophant said.

I blinked in surprise, lapsing into a stunned silence.

"I could make the attempt tomorrow," Masego said, misinterpreting the reason for my quiet, "but to both travel and prepare for the ritual over so small a span would significantly increase the chances of failure."

"That..." I began, almost at a loss for words. "That changes things. The location, the resources you need, it's all set?"

"I'll have to significantly empty the Arsenal reserves of gems and precious metals as well as require of the services of at least two hundred mages – three hundred would be more comfortable, it would allow for replacements and adjustments – but in principle all needed is at hand," Masego said.

Noticing my surprise, he smiled.

"You have helped create one of the grandest magical sites of learning and magic on Calernia, Catherine," he said. "Do not then be surprised that it serves that purpose with distinction."

I coughed, slightly embarrassed.

"The ritual site itself will be familiar to you, as the Princes' Graveyard was fought near it," he continued.

"The Mavian prayers on the hill?" I asked.

"Indeed," Masego said. "There are other locations with perhaps more precise alignments, but this one benefits from being the seat of a permanent Twilight gate. The logistical benefits are obvious."

I could definitely believe that tumulus would work as a ritual site, at least. I still remembered walking the tall raised stones and feeling the echoes of long-faded might, the call they'd made to the last wisps of fae power in me.

"The ritual could fail," I said.

"All rituals can fail," Masego pointed out.

"Allow me to rephrase that," I said. "If the ritual fails, what are the consequences?"

"The ritual site will be obliterated, a significant portion of the mages involved will die or go mad, the fabric of Creation on a regional scale will be weakened for several centuries," Hierophant calmly listed.

My fingers clenched. That was not negligible losses.

"The Twilight gate?" I made myself ask.

"Three in five odds of withstanding the damages and keeping full functionality," Masego said. "No chance of destruction, or that partial functionality will not remain. We did not craft a fragile artefact, Catherine."

Considering the sheer amount of Night we'd wielded that day and the way he'd come into an aspect halfway through, I was not inclined to doubt him.

"Odds of success?" I pressed.

"Tomorrow, perhaps one in five," Hierophant mused. "Likely a little less. By my suggested timeline, I'd say somewhere between seven and eight in ten. Closer to eight, by my calculations."

"If we wait longer can you bump that up?" I asked.

He frowned, staying silent for a long moment.

"With another two months, perhaps a little over eight," Masego finally said. "With a full contingent of Wasteland mages and a month to teach them we could near nine in ten, though I believe that Dread Empress Malicia might be disinclined to lend us these."

By the tone of his voice, that was very petty of her. I suppressed a smile. Indeed, how dare international politics and all these wars get in the way of one of the great magical feats of the century?

"I'm currently inclined to wait the three months and get all the sureties we can," I said. "But I'll discuss it with our allies, since Quartered Seasons is starting to become a genuine war asset."

If nothing else, having this kind of a tool in our pocket would greatly strengthen the case of those commanders among the Grand Alliance who favoured the defensive strategy to this war. Princess Rozala and Prince Otto Reitzenberg had been arguing from the start that so long as we held our defensible borders, time would be on our side – either because of the amount of Named we'd accrue, or because the Arsenal would eventually produce a weapon

capable of turning around the war on a strategic scale. The crown of Autumn might just qualify, since while it had no real use against field armies it could potentially allow us to deal with Neshamah himself. Not destroy him, mind you, that'd been what the Severance was for, but neutering him as a threat was more important than outright destruction.

"Assuming you successfully coalesce the crown," I said, "will it be a physical artefact?"

Masego nodded.

"One not unlike the crown of Twilight when it was formed," he said. "Though the strength of the godhead is in the concept and not the material."

"And once we have the physical artefact," I said, "you can begin shaping it."

"I've had the appropriate workshop for the work built in the Arsenal for some time, though it is currently sealed," Hierophant said. "It is difficult to estimate how long it would take me to shape the godhead, as even the Dead King's work in Keter bears only passing similarities for me to draw on. It is safe to assume at least several months."

I hummed. We wouldn't need the crown to take back Hainaut, anyhow, which in my opinion was a prerequisite to taking a swing at Keter itself. We simply couldn't afford to thin land defences against his armies the way we'd need to in order to make a serious crack at the Crown of the Dead, the risk of collapse was too high. Pushing Keter back beyond the lakes would allow us to dig in, though, and muster the armies properly for an assault on the Hidden Horror's capital next spring or summer.

"We can afford that," I said. "Especially if it wins us the war, which it will if we can make him lose control over the undead."

That was, after all, what lay at the very heart of Quartered Seasons. Something like the Severance, an offensive artefact, it could be resisted. Which was why we wouldn't be attacking the Dead King, we'd be *giving* him the crown – not in a way he could refuse, but still as a gift of godhead. That'd slip right through the overwhelming majority of his defences, by Masego's reckoning, and Hierophant had spent most of the year with Neshamah riding in the back of his head. He knew the Dead King, understood him in ways most of us could only dimly grasp. The trick was that we wouldn't just be tossing him the crown of Autumn, Hierophant would be shaping it first. It had to remain powerful, or it'd wiggle out of the groove of being a gift, but we'd get to choose what power was given. And what strictures accompanied it, of course, because the mantle of godhood could hardly come without costs.

I was more than comfortable making the Dead King physically indestructible if that power came at the expense of, say, *his ability to command the dead*.

I jolted myself out of my thoughts, since there still remained a question I'd forgotten to ask.

"Spring's crown will still be out there," I said. "That strikes me as a dangerous thing to leave simply lying around."

Not the highest priority, but given my personal role in shattering the old order of Arcadia it'd be irresponsible to simply hide my head in the sand when it came to Spring.

"I agree," Hierophant calmly said. "And since me might not have need of it for the war efforts, I've been considering how else it might be used."

My lips thinned. I knew where that was headed. It wasn't like Masego had ever made it a secret that he still intended on apotheosis, though he'd set those pursuits aside temporarily in deference to the horrors currently trying to sweep over the continent.

"I'm not sure I have the pull to allow you to get your hands on that," I admitted. "Not after that mess in Iserre before the peace. I've been having trouble with heroes as well, so to be frank your pursuing godhood might end up the proverbial match in the munitions warehouse."

"I believe that power is even less in your hands that you know, Catherine," Hierophant said. "I attempted to narrow down possible ritual locations for Spring's crown, so that I might test them for essence resonance, but out of the five locations I scried three repelled my spell."

I breathed in sharply. While Masego might not currently have direct access to the Observatory, arguably the finest scrying facility in existence bar none, he was still one of the finest living practitioners of that art and sitting on a treasure trove of resources. There weren't a lot of people, of defences, that could just *repel* him.

"The Dead King?" I asked, tone gone grim.

If Neshamah got his hands on a godhead, he'd make anything we might make out of one look like child's play.

"No," Masego sad, shaking his head. "On the third attempt I was ready for the opposition and salvaged a glimpse before my scrying sphere was shattered. I'll show you."

Walking over to one of the granite tables, as I watched he opened a compartment and took out what appeared to be a small sphere of silver glittering with sorcery. His aspect pulsed and he wrested it out, weaving for my eyes an illusion. The background was unclear, though I thought a tall streak of grey might be stone and the muddled green perhaps a field, but the forefront was crisp. A tall, slender and inhuman shape turned and watched with too-large eyes. It did not move, but the spell broke less than a heartbeat later. Silence held the room for a moment before I let out a long sigh.

That, unfortunately, had been an elf.

laguz24

Oh, the rabbit-eared sissies have made their return, drat.

[unoriginalwritings](#)

Rabbit-eared sure, But considering the setting and the character of the Elves of the Golden Bloom sissies are not the word I'd use. Genocidal Supremacists with no small capability to make good on their threat on the other hand...

Or: What the Thalmor wish they could be.

RoflCat

Well, they lost their homeland to the less racial-supremacist group and had to escape to Calernia...

Morgenstern

Who says this one is one of the Golden Bloom racists? It might actually be the original ones that kicked them out.

[Javvies](#)

Because the non racist Elves are off on another continent.

The Elves of the Golden Bloom are the only ones known with a permanent presence on Calernia.

They've also been sitting around doing almost nothing.

Both conventional logic and story logic point to it being the Golden Bloom, rather than the non racist Elves from another continent.

Plus, I'm pretty sure that Masego has previously commented on the localized nature of Arcadia, that Calernian Arcadia has major differences from the Arcadia of other continents, and vice versa ... that they're distinct enough that the changes to Calernian Arcadia have little or no affect on non-Calernian Arcadia.

goliath1303

There's also the fact that the withdrawn from Creation for the 1st time since Triumphant's day. And where did they withdraw to?

goliath1303

Oops. Here's how that comment was supposed to end: F AE

... withdraw to? Yep, Arcadia.

So not only are they on the right continent, they were already in the realm of the Fae.

[sengachi](#)

You typed 'rabbit ear sissies', did you mean 'immortal racist ninja terminators'?

[TeK](#)

Can't be racist if there is no other race.

ValhallaGH

That is simply untrue. The presence, or absence, of a thing has no bearing on your attitudes and power structures towards a thing.

Do you have a zombie plan?

Zombies do not exist but that question has meaning.

Same principle.

LordSchulz

Racism is the strong believe that there are races in existens and that they are distinguishable by traits of any kind.

An actual existens is not required.

See humanity.

Cuckoo's Hatchling

Technically, we're mixing racism and specieism here. Humans on our world are racist, Elves on Calernia are simply highly specieist. The latter is slightly more

defensible than the former, species are far more fundamentally different than races.

[shikkarasu](#)

Humans do not have distinct races. The term is just a holdover from back when people actually believed that we were all different species, or different breeds. What we tend to call "Other Races" are not genetically distinct enough to qualify in any literal sense.

Don't look into it unless you want to scream at your monitor. We truly live in the dumbest timeline.

NerfContessa

Indeed.

That's. An unpleasant ending to this incredible chapter.

Well done once more.

Ninestrings

Well with the drow coming into play it was only a matter of time before creation brought in the regular elves as a countermeasure.

This universe does love it's binary opposites.

erebus42

That it does. I've been rather looking forward to a Drow V. Elf smackdown. Mainly because from what we've seen of them, the Elves seem like the worst sort of arrogant assholes and in need of a good and thorough humbling.

WuseMajor

Not that the Drow are particularly better people.

erebus42

Eh maybe not, but for me a sanctimonious misplaced sense of self-righteousness has always been far more odious than simple malice or sadism. Also the Drow are cooler than the few elves we've seen so far so they've got that going for them.

Someperson

The drow are becoming better, in my estimation. I doubt the same could be said for the elves.

Also the drow in this universe technically aren't "dark elves" which is a thing that I really appreciate.

Aeon Diablo

I've always considered the binary opposite of elves to be the ratlings rather than the drow. Although this is based mainly on how both elves and ratlings get stronger the older they get, and seemingly live until killed

CoyoteSpeaks

I agree. Ratlings and Elves seem to be dark reflections of one another, in the same way the Drow and Gigantes are both "conditionally immortal beings kept alive only by soul-manipulating ritual".

naturalnuke

Oh shit, we really did forget about the ratlings didn't we?

Velrix

Ok... So Nemesha no longer need is breeding farm in hell, he now possess the largest breeding farm on calernia. The chain of hunger.
Fu**

Javvies

They'll need to be very careful with what powers they shape the Autumn Crown into providing the Dead King before they give it to him. And, preferably, have a way to permakill him afterwards, because if he's immortal or unkillable, he'll eventually become a threat again.

Well ... the Elves were bound to come back into this in some way. I'm not sure of their antipathy towards Bard will help or hurt. I bet they're trying to get their hands on Spring in order to counter the curse they've been under since conquering and genociding the ancient Deoraithe out of their lands.

Salt

Their rivalry with the Bard probably won't be helpful so much as convenient in a the-enemy-of-my-enemy-isn't-my-friend-but-it's-nice-to-see-someone-else-get-fucked-by-the-Bard-for-once sort of way

We know the Bard still holds a grudge against them for not taking a side and playing at being a poor man's Anaxares, back in Triumphant's day, when they temporarily evacuated the Golden Bloom to Arcadia. She probably won't be enthused that they're trying to do the same this time, except while also trying to steal a piece of the pie while they're at it. She did, after all, warn them that the next time they tried to meddle in her game she would make them "rue the day". That's actually a

pretty severe threat for a genre saavy character like the Bard, who knows exactly how much of a double edged sword an ultimatum can be.

goliath1303

7 I

dadycoool

I almost feel like Masego is EE's Author SI. He knows so much lore about the world, magic, and the workings of both, and has been itching to be able to share with everyone. Thing is, for me at least, it's so complex that it sails right over my head for the most part. Maybe when I eventually reread the whole thing I'll be able to wrap my head around it.

zenanii

The dilemma of making a world that is complex enough to be interesting, yet simple enough for the readers to follow.

The take-away from this (as I understood it) is that there are four eternal sources of power that makes up arcadia, and after Cat (and the king of winter) permanently broke arcadias cycle all four sources became up for grabs.

Cat got Winter which she later gave to Sve Noc
Cat later forged Summer into the crown of twilight, which was then used to create the twilight ways.

Masego has tracked down Autumn's power which he and Cats plan to use to override the dead kings power (for instance, instead of making him the king of th dead they could give him a crown that would make him the king of increadibly tasty bagels).

The power of spring is currently unclaimed, but it seems the elves are after it.

Konstantin von Karstein

Masego tracked Autumn's power? So what happened to the Winter King and Summer Queen? What power have they?

[TeK](#)

Ok, so here it is: there are total of four pond of power, and Arcadian pool that is also Arcadia itself always holds two. At the moment of formation, Arcadia held power from Autumn and Spring ponds, while Winter and Summer ponds were semi-independent. When they married, they took control over those bonded ponds from Arcadia itself, while leaving Winter and Summer leaderless. The Crowns of Winter and Summer belong to Arcadian court, so do ponds of Autumn and Spring,

but they are formless. Masego tracked Autumn Crown, not Autumn power, which is basically a "right to rule", without an accompanying pond. There is currently no available free pond of power, they were both used for Night and Twilight, but there are still two Crowns up for grabs.

Konstantin von Karstein

Okay, it's much clearer now. Thanks

edrey

In the end there was one point that wasn't clear, the elves had taken spring before the new arcadia was formed? Then it would be two crowns controlling one pond, because spring was already taken.
and the wild hunt from where its power come from, a lesser pond? So even when the four are taken it won't collapse the next second

Matthew Wells

They retained their raw magic, represented in the metaphor as water, and gained entirely new crowns through the sheer weight of the story Cat forced on them.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think it's the reverse. They kept their Crowns, but took the power (water) of Autumn and Spring.

Matthew Wells

I mean to say that they retain crowns, but those crowns are now the crowns of Arcadia Resplendent- made of the same metaphysical stuff, but no longer capable of shaping the water into the ponds that are Summer and Winter.

[5th Holy Sheeprabbit, Kilimanjaro Estelion Sharlulu Asheel
Vinchance Celenalia di ef Falufiluu'Luufilaafee \(The 35th\) da
ne!](#)

> The King of Incredibly Tasty Bagels
Ah, not the Hero Calernia needs, but the one that they deserve

Sir Nil

Damn elves, Cat was stealing fey crowns before it was cool.

alele

If Masego and Cat can swing this into Spring vs Autumn eternal fight they get an extra "cork" on the Dead King. Switch their curse from being barren to an eternal fight against the and Undying Dead King.

[doominator10](#)

Can someone give me a reminder on the significance of that being an elf? Weren't they just holding up in their forest around Callow last we heard of them?

superkeaton

They're turbo nazis who despise non-elves. If they're trying to gather Spring's crown, that could lead to Bad Things.

erebus42

Compound that with the fact that they're apparently pretty OP (at least compared to normal humans). I do hope some Drow can be spared to ruin some of their days.

Konstantin von Karstein

And they're ninja-terminators. According to Cordelia (not really prone to exaggeration), 12 Elves can kill a company (100?) of humans soldiers without casualties, and an Emerald Sword (whoever they are) can do the same by himself.

Miles

>whoever's they are

Cat fought one while vacationing in Keter

Konstantin von Karstein

It was a Named, the Spellblade, who was the Forever King's son. I think they are more of an elite unit, they were sent to kill Ranger.

[TeK](#)

You mean Good things, surely.

[Javvies](#)

They kill everyone except Heroes who get within bowshot of their borders.

Also, they got the forest by genociding the ancient Deoraithe, who still hold a grudge and want their forest back. Said genocide also caused the land to curse them with infertility, and so they haven't had any kids for millennia.

Also, they sent two high level Elves to take out Diabolist before she could pull anything, but Bard stopped them.

Also, Bard pointed them at the Dead King and got the Elven Crown Prince killed and turned into a Revenant.

zenanii

They're supposedly incredibly powerful (although I can't say I was super impressed with th revenant that Cat fought twice, who was the prince of elves.

Also they've been trying (and failing) to kill Ranger for her whole life.

Apart from the super speed/strength package they have the ability to ignore one creational law (interpret that as you will)

Konstantin von Karstein

It's only the older Elves that can ignore a law. For exemple, they can decide that Creation doesn't show them, and become undetectable.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah, but I'm pretty sure that all the Elves of the Golden Bloom are old enough for that trick.

Since, y'know, they were all born on another continent before they invaded the Golden Bloom, and none have been born to them since then.

Now, there are definitely non-genocidal Elves back in the multiracial empire they have on another continent that aren't old enough for the ignore a law of Creation trick, but they don't really count for this.

[TeK](#)

Remember that big part of Rangers power comes from being a half-elf.

Matthew Wells

I wonder if this is related to her conspicuous lack of assassinating Malicia?

[TeK](#)

How were you not impressed by Spellblade? The guy spank the Woe so hard they barely manage to escape with their lives! He was killed by Saint true, but I think the death she got really underwhelmed how fucking terrifying of a grandma Laurence was.

thearpox23

Apparently if you can't solo Ranger you're not impressive, because this is DBZ. And if you can't even go solo the Dead King and his 5000+ Revenants and survive then *pft* what kind of weakling are you I can't even.

Mental Mouse

He was killed by Saint *after* Cat used one of his own aspects to take out the other. And even then it took her several blows...

Tenthyr

The elves of Calernia are residents of the golden bloom, a home they gained by genociding the original dioraithe inhabitants and forcing them to flee. Unlike the elves of the main continent these ones take the idea of Good to a disgusting level and consider all mortal races irredeemable filth. The elves are sort of like day in that they're in tune with stories and are extremely powerful.

The only thing that basically holds them back is that the Golden Bloom cursed them with complete infertility in response to murdering the Dioraithe. Something that could be negated by, say...

The Godhead of spring, season of renewal and birth.

mamm0nn

From what we're told about the Emerald Blades, they are effectively as powerful as a middling Name considering the amount of soldiers they were claimed to be able to kill without a sweat isn't something to scoff at in this series. No- I mean less extreme- inverse ninja law here. The likes of Cat or Archer can likely slap around two, maybe three, but they might be as strong as the Radiant Blade or even our Kingfisher Prince. (Who's stronger in a purely physical spar, but hardly equal to Cat in a real fight.)

Of course, those are the elites of the elves, and the Revenant prince we've seen is a Named of a higher tier. But still, that combined with their immortal infertile issue suggests that they are as powerful (or more powerful but less numerous) than the drow. And the drow Mighty were scarily powerful and numerous, if you recall book 4.

Salt

If the Bard is to be believed, the elves in the Golden Bloom burned the Everdark to the ground before genociding the Deoraithe

" Armada of white ships lands under the Everdark, pretty little elves burn it immediately. You go into the woods and genocide your way through the Deoraithe until you own the land. I told myself 'old girl, these ones mean business'."

If we assume the current Empire Ever Dark is roughly on par with the heights they were at back then – most of their old culture/techniques lost, but with a godhead behind them and alliances aboveground – the Golden Bloom presumably is still capable of easily winning in an outright brawl.

This goes double since Cat mentioned Night is more suited for stealing of power in victory than actual combat, and tends to lose against both Light or Sorcery in a 1:1. The Drow will have to be flexible, rather than strong, likely in the "Below always gets their due" style as a mirror to the Golden Bloom's "Above always wins" line

superkeaton

Been a minute since the elves were relevant. Welp, time to deal with the Golden Bloom.

agumentic

Oh hey, elves. Last time we heard about them, I believe it was that they were still hiding in their pocket dimension. I wonder what caused them to come out?

I guess kicking their ass would be one way for Cat to restore her relations with the Daoine.

erebus42

From what we've heard about their relationships with literally anyone who isn't an elf my guess is kicking their asses might just win her points in everyone's books.

[Burlyraven](#)

Giving the Dead King a tainted apotheosis is the kind of logic adjacent plan that gets the heroes up in arms against the villains. It's of the type that the heroes end up going "Oh, wait, that's actually the right thing to do, our bad", but this is really feeling like it's going to end up with Cat dramatically begging her new heroic lover, Kingfisher, to trust her and let her finish the ritual as he and Roland do their best to hold back the Mirror Knight in order to give her a chance to explain.

I like the mental image, but it's still worrying.

Big I

Cat making the Dead King invulnerable to harm is exactly the sort of thing the idiot brigade (i.e. the Mirror Knight and his posse) will mistake as being her Evil Plan (TM) All Along.

Burlyraven

Exactly. And because the Mirror Knight's story's weight is increasing, any accusations he levels are going to be all the more damaging.

Big I

So the Golden Bloom elves probably want the crown to cure their infertility, which makes thematic sense since it's the crown of Spring. I've been hoping that Catherine kicks those pricks out of the Bloom and returns it to Daoine, that'd be great.

Reading this chapter it struck me that Catherine's hopes come down to a Crown and Sword, like on her personal banner. Which sucks, because on her banner the sword outweighs the crown. Damn you Mirror Knight. Damn you foreshadowing.

Letouriste

How exactly ascending to godhood would give them their fertility back?

Don't get me wrong, now you said it i can feel this is the reason but I struggle with the logistics.

Javvies

Well ... Spring is traditionally the season of birth/rebirth and new growth, e.t.c.. A season of new life. There's plenty of potential there.

They may or may not have a concrete plan for how to go about breaking the curse the land put on them.

They probably have at least some ideas.

But also, there's a lot of power backing even a single Court. They might figure they could just brute force their way into breaking the curse.

Alternatively ... the Elves are after the Crown of Spring because Bard told them to go after it, possibly telling them out could be used to break the curse, which may or may not be entirely accurate. And even if true, it's highly doubtful that Bard told them everything they needed to know to do so. Bard does, after all, apparently know at least something about the existence of Quartered Seasons, and may or may not be aware that the intent is to put a crippling Crown on the Dead King as opposed to putting an empowering Crown on Cat/

someone of Cat's choosing. And that Hunted Magician knew stuff about the Autumn Court, so they're likely to use the Autumn Crown.

And prepping the Elves to go after Spring as a contingency to counter Cat gaining control of Autumn would probably be right up Bard's alley, despite their antipathy towards her.

edrey

Well, there is also the possibility that they already have the crown with them and they made their little corner of arcadia with it, they cut a part of arcadia with the crown. The curse should be something like you can only have children with humans and not with another elf, Ranger exist after all.

mamm0nn

That's actually pretty logical, considering they now have the narrative balance of Winter having been used to stabilise the Night as Cat said this very chapter. Where before they couldn't do this, now Spring might be able to return them to their fertile glorious selves and stop being isolationists, due to the drow doing it first.

Big Brother

I LOVE when Masego gets technical. It helps me understand this world more on a fundamental level, compared to the political level we see through almost everyone else. Interactions between subrealities and the underlying currents of their very essence tells a great deal about the main reality they're branched off of.

[sengachi](#)

I loved the back and forth discussion Catherine and Masego had here. It's difficult to make this kind of exposition into something engaging, but you definitely did so here.

"I was more than comfortable making the Dead King physically indestructible if that power came at the expense of, say, his ability to command the dead." This had me delightedly cackling out loud.

Also, uhhhhhh. Wow. Okay. The immortal racist ninja terminators are going for apotheosis. Frankly the Dead King is such a threat and the Dread Empress operates on such a high level that the thought of adding a third threat apocalyptic threat to the mix hadn't ever occurred to me. I mean, what on Calernia could possibly rival them?

But yeah. Yeah the immortal racist ninja terminators getting access to Spring titles and a god would do that. The echo of one of their Named was a goddamn nightmare to fight, and the higher Fae titled play in the same leagues as three-aspected Named. A Prince and some Dukes/Duchesses were a credible threat to a five-man band of full-realized Named, even though they're about as vulnerable to Named as anything in existence. Throw the Duchess or Princess titles on an elf and that's ...

I mean. Okay. Elves and fae are both incredibly vulnerable to the Narrative. I feel like fae elves would be eaten alive by Calernia's Heroes in due time. But uhhhhh ... in due time might not be on the table with the Dead King and the Dread Empress in play. And the time it would take for the right Named to be spawned against army killers like that probably has a cost measured in genocides.

Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit.

Konstantin von Karstein

Are we sure Elves are more vulnerable to Narrative?

thearpox23

And with that every single faction on Calernia is now engaged. Uncork your champagne bottles and raise up a glass everyone, this is a moment of celebration years in the making.

Mad respect to every other rumored to be more advanced continents for politely staying out of this and letting Calernia descend into total world war on its own. After all, would be a shame if the Elven Empire got dragged in due to the Golden Bloom overstepping their bounds and stretched this story by several more books, he he he.

Speaking of books, I am growing more and more curious when the announcement that there will be an 7th book will come. This chapter, next, maybe in three months? Because let's be honest, dealing with the Golden Bloom will take more than a paragraph.

[TeK](#)

More advanced continents probably have their own more advanced world wars.

Also we already got one book split in two, I think EE will just constantly use Interludes, so that he can justify enormously long book by saying "But we're still only on chapter 41!".

khazan7

Why is everyone forgetting the ratlings? I can still vividly remember the fight against the Skein, and he was just one of the Horned Lords. I am sure there are some more out there...

thearpox23

Holy Shit! Well well wasn't that embarrassing.

I stand corrected.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Wasn't he stated to be the last one? Granted, even if that was the case, it would only be according to Catherine's knowledge, so there might still be, but it seems unlikely

Juff

Typo Thread:

but it above > put it above
wall a great > wall was a great
invited so sit > invited to sit
with sharp nod > with a sharp nod
full body not, > full body, not
tended deal > tended to deal
kingship Twilight > kingship of Twilight
empty," I > empty." I
clenching an unclenching > clenching and unclenching
sat the newborn > sat on the newborn
since me might > since we might

limwanya

Is Sve Noc a Name? Does she have a Name?

[TeK](#)

They don't.

edrey

It is. The first chat with cat in the everdark show us that is a name

dadycoool

Pretty sure the two sisters individually have their names, but together they have the "Name" Sve Noc. I put Name in quotes because it's like saying the Choirs or Demons have Names. Sve Noc is the title the two collectively have, like the Choirs are made up of individual angels that may have their own names, like Heirophant. (I can't remember his name, or I'd have used it.)

Mental Mouse

I think "Sve Noc" is just the Crepuscular for "Sisters of Night".

Konstantin von Karstein

They had a Name (the Priestess of Night), but I suppose that after their apotheosis they lost it.

Miles

It's butchered Russian for "all the night"

It's a name but not a Name.

Shveiran

It was a Name. Now it is the name of a low "g" goddess.

TeK

I've been waiting for YEARS on those Chekhov's elves finally paying off! By this point I frankly thought that bit about Forever King in summary was summarily ignored by everyone. Also, the community will be ecstatic at a chance to rant about how Above has literal Nazis on a payroll.

WuseMajor

Elves are on the side of Above? Where did we learn this?

TeK

In yearly books. They kill everyone except Heroes, whom they tolerate, which clearly implies they are rooting for Above.

Black Spiral Dancer

Having read Dostoievski book, I still don't understand wth Chekhov's got to do with elves.

TeK

He hanged them on the wall, so we shot them.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's a trope. Here's the explanation

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ChekhovsGun>

edrey

Now looking forward the talk of the forever king and his son via Wk

Well, some theoretical questions, since the new arcadia formed by crowns of S and W and with the power A and Sp that means the incompatibility of S and W was between the power and not the crowns, then all four powers return to the same pool? The nature of W didnt change with cat or the night and S was pretty explosive with W. Also you explain why there is A court but not the power, those fae were powerful and the other pools have owners. From where was that power?

Thanks for a great chapter and the new magic theory

[TeK](#)

Arcadia was always there, and it still is. The dimension itself is also the very pool of power. There are not four powers, there are four ponds and not enough water to fill all four simultaneously, which is why only two can be filled at any moment. Power takes shape of the pond, the same water in Winter pond will explode if it meets the same water from Summer pond. Doesn't change the fact that it's water. Think of pond as colored glass, and power as light, which is also water: the light goes through colored glass and becomes colored light, but it's still light. Power is one, crowns are different. Crowns are shape and not the power. What Sve Noc and Larat used weren't powers, it was a metaphorical shape of, respectively, Winter and Summer. New crown of Arcadia didn't use either crown of Winter, nor Summer, nor any other season, instead just taking pure power and shaping a new pond for themselves. Which still uses power from the common pool, which is the dimension of Arcadia itself. Everything is in the manual, really.

[TeK](#)

Actually wrong, Arcadian court used Crowns of Winter and Summer to take control of ponds of Autumn and Spring that made up Arcadia at the moment of their wedding.

thearpox23

Seems like either way you twist it, you're still stretching the Arcadia thin.

Arcadia Resplendent is still using power from the common pool.

Sve Noc is using at least a portion of Winter.

Twilight Ways I have no idea actually. I assume proving fast travel for the continent isn't non-negligible, but who knows. So I suppose because of that mess the Crowns of Autumn and Spring have been stuck in limbo on the edge of forming because there isn't enough free power flowing?

By forcing the two crowns into being aren't you inviting the exact kind of mess that the whole system is explicitly designed to prevent?

[TeK](#)

No, I was wrong in my previous post somewhat. So there are totally four ponds of Arcadian power. Two ponds worth must be in Arcadia itself, unless it destabilises. So there are at all times only two ponds allowed to be "independent". There are also four crowns, which are basically give control over one pond worth of Arcadian power. King of Winter and Queen of Summer did not lose their Crowns, they just changed which two ponds of power they controlled. Winter pond and Summer pond were left leaderless, because proper procedure wasn't followed, they did not take control of the other ponds. Instead, ponds were used by Sve Noc and by Larat. One completed apotheosis, another formed Twilight dimension. Crowns remain, but they are essentially powerless. Fae are finite and semi-sentient bundles of Arcadian power that are also shaped depending on a Crown they are attached to. But since there are still two ponds controlled by two crowns, technically the system is fine, and the mechanism that changes seasons isn't triggered.

thearpox23

Wouldn't be a point in giving someone a powerless crown, so my understanding is that the rituals Masego/Elves want to go through would give them access to a pool of power. At which point you would still have five independent entities simultaneously using Arcadia.

DK(Crown of Autumn)
Elves(Crown of Spring)
Sve Nox(previously Winter)
Twilight Ways(Crown(?) and pool of Summer)
Arcadia Respendent (Pools of Autumn and Spring according to you.)

Even if the system was sound before, this seems unprecedented.

[TeK](#)

You misunderstand. The Arcadian power itself is shapeless. The Crowns are what shape them. So by giving DK a Crown, the plan is to shape him.

The point is exactly to give a powerless Crown. Noone wants to give Neshie more power, but a Crown is akin to a colored glass, which gives shape to power. As Warlock put it, godhead is a trick of perspective. That is what

apotheosis and crown is: a way to look, a perspective, a window. And if you change how Neshamah perceives the world, you will change who he is, because the two are the same.

Sve Noc had their own perspective, they didn't need a Crown, what they lacked was weight, because Night was finite and they couldn't easily get more. That weight was provided by a pool of Winter, which was already colored by a Winter Crown, which is why it had Winter properties. The Winter power was already shaped, but that doesn't make it inherently shaped.

The realm of Twilight and its Crown were created, without a precedent, but they used the unclaimed pond of Summer, probably abusing the mechanism of creating new Seasons. And through doing that, the last bit of power was used. There is no free Arcadian power to give, even if it was the plan. But "the way to shape the power", which is the Crown, and also "the way to perceive the world", which is a trick of perspective, a godhead, is still out there, in a metaphorical limbo.

To summarize: Court of Arcadia (two dormant ponds of Spring and Autumn that form Arcadia itself plus two Crowns of Winter and Summer), Sve Noc (former pond of Winter, already shaped by a Crown of Winter, but without a Crown), Court of Twilight (former pond of Summer plus a brand new Crown of Twilight), and two Crowns of Autumn and Spring, with Spring apparently being claimed by Elves.

thearpox23

Alright, this part: "The trick was that we wouldn't just be tossing him the crown of Autumn, Hierophant would be shaping it first. It had to remain powerful, or it'd wiggle out of the groove of being a gift, but we'd get to choose what power was given."

The part where they stated that 'it had to remain powerful' led me to believe it wasn't just a bind but an addition.

But I can see the sense of what you are saying. So I'll go with your interpretation for now.

[TeK](#)

It is powerful in a sense that it is still a godhead. It is a "right to have power", so to speak. For example, if Cat had such a Crown, she would be able to use all of Winter without any backlash, she would

change the power, instead of being changed by the power.

It has to remain powerful in a sense that it has to be more than an empty set of chains, otherwise it would not fit the story of it being a gift, Dead King needs to gain something from it. It would just be not a raw power, but a higher degree of control.

Like Cat said, when talking to dwarves, she held power, but now wields it instead, and that made her more dangerous. Yet again, Dead King said that her trading more control for less power made her a potential peer to them. Bard was an example he used, for she holds not much power, but wields extreme control. Hierophant traded his own power for a right to wrest control any power.

It is a theme of series, again and again control was superior to power, for if the user does not control the power (as WinterCat didn't), the power will control the user. Black traded raw power for control, Cat did the same, Warlock, mad lad as he was focused on pure control at expense of raw power, as did his son, and so on and so forth.

Crowns are a set of rules, but also a way to apply rules. Power is just power. Shaped by Arcadia it's Arcadia, shaped by fae it's fae, shaped by the Crown of Winter, it's Winter. So if Dead King will be gifted a Crown, he will be shaped by a Crown. And those shapings can be all negative, or it would not be a gift, but there still must be a trade, and Cat can decide what that trade would be, getting a degree of control over Dead King. Compare it to Severance (and Mirror Knight), both hold power, incredible one, but little control over both. Christophe is bounced by the tidings of life, flowing from one confrontation to another like a log and a river, and Severity is a literal sword.

Konstantin von Karstein

Excellent overview of the serie!

'Ladi Williams

I'm liking your explanation... But it seems to me there would still be four draws on Arcadia at the same time.

Nessie. Sve Noc. Court Resplendent. Twilight. And now the spring crown.

Won't that tear Arcadia apart?

TeK

Nah. Sve Noc took her part. It's devoured, it's gone. Twilight does not draw on Arcadia, it draws on a Summer pond. Which is also had been used up to make up the Twilight realm. Arcadia is made up from two ponds, claimed by two crowns. Two different ponds from either Summer or Winter. On which neither Sve Noc, nor Twilight cannot lay a claim. Two crowns, two ponds, that is a simple system. Which is very stable. To contest that claim, someone would need to at least collect two other Crowns. Can it be done? Yes. Can Arcadia be torn apart? Yeah. But there is no draw. The pool is closed.

agumentic

The new Court is the Court of *Arcadia* Resplendent. It doesn't draw on Arcadia because in a sense it is Arcadia.

Anomandris

This is going down paths so interesting....

Also, what's happening with Black v Malicia? Seems so long that we've gotten news there. And seems strange that DK hasn't made use of the praesi alliance...

thearpox23

We got an update at the start of the volume. For all the shenanigans not much time has passed since then. Looks like Erra is trying to keep the story focused, which I respect him for. When the authors try to keep track of every character of every expanding conflict it always ends up in a mess. I'm hoping for an eventual side volume.

Wonder

Everyone has said almost everything I got to say(well the magical theory went way over my head so there's that.)

The Golden Bloom pricks want the Spring crown, Heiropphant wants it.

I want Sve Noc to aim for it so that they can use it to mitigate the sunlight weakness of their drows, though that would out Cat in a conflict of interests position , between helping a fellow Woe and her Patrons, though I guess She can just tell them to fuck off.

Cat has been backtalking Choirs of Angels , and that is going to feature in her nascent Name, will the appropriation of Arcadia crowns also bear an Influence on her Name?

Konstantin von Karstein

Story-wise, lessening the Drow's weakness to sun would make them too overpowered, so I don't think Sve Noc could manage to do that.

Miles

They're really not that powerful just unusual enough that nobody knows how to deal with them yet.

They'll have figured it out by the end of the war.

Konstantin von Karstein

Re-read the chapter where Sve Noc shows to Cat what the Drows have to fight, they definitely are that powerful. And it's called « Night », I doubt anything could make it resistant to sunlight.

medd

One of the ways you could pass sentences on heroes, is by imprisoning them for the rest of the war and writing down in history books that, when the nations were faced with ultimate destruction that, person/hero/fallen/named have worked against it.

Making them unable to help cos they behaved badly is how you deal with self-righteous people.

Shveiran

It's poetic, but also a resource sink to keep them contained or sand in the gears if you leave them free to do whatever (as Named will do something, likely throwing a wrench in the plans you made without them).

Daniel E

Dwarves have been in play for awhile now, the Elves are back in opposition to our cast. I'm really really hoping we get to see a surprise appearance by the Gnomes.

Drunken Dwarf

Maybe that's how Black takes out the Dread Empire. They already received two Red Letters so the third isn't out of the question.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

The gnomes don't just dismantle a political entity that had send a third red letter.
They glass the whole land it occupies.
So, no he won't.

Decius

And "the whole land it occupies" wouldn't be "Praes", it would be "Calernia".

Shveiran

Possible, yet not certain. The one intervention we have on record is them nuking a civilization based on an island and their colonies. We have no clue whether they tried not to hit their neighbors or if said neighbors were simply out of the blast zone.

thearpox23

We also have no clue whether receiving the third Red Letter is actually meaningful. The civ that got nuked has famously ignored all three warnings, while Praes has actually been on the up and up. It could instead be like a website receiving a DMCA from a vindictive publisher, where you could receive a hundred of them to no legal repercussions so long as you remove the material.

Tom

raises hand So, uhhh... This chapter's not going to be on the exam, right?

Chapter 31: Pursuits

"The man who sleeps with virtue finds the bed has no room for a third."

– Proceran saying

"Fuck," I said.

Ever eloquent in times of trouble, that was me.

"I thought that might be your reaction," Masego noted.

I closed my eyes. Was there anything we could do about this? I wasn't exactly overjoyed at the prospect of the elves getting

their paws on the crown of Spring, assuming they hadn't already. On the other hand, I couldn't think of anything the Grand Alliance needed less right now than picking a fight with a power as strong as the Golden Bloom. I didn't know anywhere near enough to be sure what to think about this. What did they want the crown for, how important was it to them? A decision on that scale couldn't be made without at least a solid guess at the answers to those questions, and it wouldn't be made by me alone anyway.

"Right," I said, opening my eyes. "I need you to keep digging into this, Hierophant. It's higher priority than Quartered Seasons, at least for the next few days."

The ritual wouldn't be happening anytime soon anyway: I doubted the First Prince would accept even the slightest unnecessary risk to the countryside of Procer. Not when the timeline to stacking the odds in our favour as much as possible was perfectly acceptable from a strategic view.

"There are limits to what I can accomplish," Masego said.

"I want you to find out if they already have the Spring crown," I said. "And at least check on the ritual sites, to guess at how much force they've actually deployed out there."

Likely on Proceran territory, too, not that elves tended to be particularly concerned with any borders save their own. But of I was going to have to break it to Cordelia Hasenbach that the Forever King had sent agents into the Principate, I'd prefer to at least like to have some estimates to offer her about how many of those there were.

"The latter I can assure, if not the former," Zeze said, pushing back one of his elaborate braids. "They're likely to resist my probing attempts, however."

The implied question there was, in essence, about how insistent he was allowed to be in the face of that resistance.

"Don't harm anyone," I said. "Try to avoid damage, if you can, and whatever you do avoid starting a fight. Other than that, you're free to use whatever means you want."

"It ought to be an interesting intellectual exercise, at least," Masego mused. "The nature of their defences is unique, which will force a degree of unorthodoxy to my approach."

"I'm sure you'll figure something out," I said, meaning every word.

I cleared my throat, after, hesitant to speak what I wanted to say.

"I don't need to tell you to stay safe, do I?" I eventually asked.

He smiled.

"I'll take precautions, Catherine, there is no need to worry," Masego said.

"We might have other ways to get to that information," I reminded him. "You, on the other hand, can't be replaced."

"I am fond of you as well, Cat," the blind man easily replied. "Now do be off. I'll not have you hovering about as I work, your presence alone is enough to disturb all my precision instruments."

Probably true, though that didn't mean that he wasn't just itching to get me out of here just so he could get started on the latest challenging task I'd presented him.

"Take care, Zeze," I quietly said.

To my surprise he placed a hand on my shoulder, if only fleetingly.

"And you as well," Masego seriously said. "Hakram is wounded but you are not alone. We are here if you need us."

I breathed out, since I was a grown woman and getting moist eyes over something this simple would be a little shameful. I left before another burst of that disarming earnestness could scrape me even more raw, returning to the cold halls of the Arsenal and the ever-increasing amount of troubles awaiting me.

—

When I went to relieve Indrani from her watch over Hakram's bedside it was past Noon Bell, so I returned her earlier kindness and brought a meal with me.

Pork with garlic sauce, a loaf of brown bread and a large saucer of some strange mix of oil, vinegar and olives. They were all Arlesite staples, the mixture in the saucer meant for the bread to be dipped in, and I'd grabbed a pair of apples to round the meal out. Archer was carefully carving an arrow when I entered, eyes on the wood and the knife in her hand carefully precise. Back in Callow this sort of work tended to be done out of logs with an eye to making many and quickly, but Indrani was rather more discerning with her own arrows: she picked the branches herself, when she could, and saw to their carving personally. Considering the rarity of some of the woods she used, that was only to be expected. She tended to treat mass-made arrows with

the same disdain Masego reserved for massed Legion sorcery, and for much the same reasons.

"I get to be served by a queen," Indrani bragged, even as I began unpacking the meal. "How many people can boast that, I wonder?"

Out of petty spite, I left her half of the meal on the table and only arranged mine on a plate. I offered her a pretty smile.

"Not you, for one," I sweetly said, and sat down with plate.

Huh, I'd been skeptical about the oil and vinegar but it was actually pretty good. Made the brown bread better than butter would have, for sure, and while I wouldn't trust Procerans to make a halfway decent stew they were admittedly good at roasts like the pork one.

"You're a terrible friend," Indrani complained, rising to her feet.

"You taught me well," I agreed.

She helped herself to her meal with a snort, the two of us settling comfortably in our seats. We were both hungry enough that conversation waited until we'd polished off our meals, though even as I tore into the pork I found my eyes drifting to Hakram's unconscious body. I missed him even more sharply now that I needed advice. Him and Akua, I was forced to admit, as I'd come to rely on the two of them quite a bit in Hainaut. Bringing Akua Sahelian into the Arsenal would have been ill-advised, though, and not just because it'd strip the Hainaut front of its sole high calibre spellcaster – it'd been as much the number of heroes awaiting here and the rulers I'd be meeting as the strategic considerations that'd guided my decision.

"You look glum again," Indrani said, licking the garlic sauce off her fingers.

"Quartered Seasons had a major breakthrough," I admitted. "But it's also looking very likely that the elves are trying for a fae crown."

She let out a lot whistle.

"A nasty people, the elves," Archer opined. "They never came after Ranger while I was in Refuge, but about a decade earlier a few of the Emerald Swords tried to ambush her in Bayeux."

The Emerald Swords, huh? Hadn't ever really given those any thought, to be honest. Their strength was quite literally legend, though there were rumoured to be no more than ten. Each was supposed to be worth a small army, the Forever King's blunt

instruments in eradicating what he could not stand. They supposedly rarely left the Golden Bloom, like most elves.

"I don't know what they want the crown for, but it worries me," I admitted.

"Also irks you something fierce, I'd wager," Indrani smiled. "They're scavenging power they had no hand in laying low."

I did not answer, looking away. She wasn't wrong. That the Forever King thought he could sit out the war against the Dead King and use the chaos to go grabbing mantles of power while we were busy fighting for Calernia's survival was not endearing the man to me. If the elves had played a role in the end of the old Courts of Arcadia I would have kept my mouth shut, but they were just being opportunistic vultures.

"We can't afford to push the Golden Bloom too far," I reluctantly said. "They could make keeping what we still hold in Hainaut a nightmare with little effort and if they send out the Emerald Swords we'd have to pull our best fighting Named from the fronts to be able to handle them."

"I figure the prick out in the Bloom thinks the same, Cat," Indrani said. "Remember, the Dead King made their king's son into a Revenant that you put down at Third Liesse. There's no love there, and the elves have to know that if the screw with the Alliance too much they're helping along 'Ol Bones."

"They're elves, Indrani," I said. "Their take on foreign policy is shooting even the *birds* that come within a mile of their forest. I'm not saying they're idiots, but I'm honestly not convinced the Forever King wouldn't be in favour of a few million uppity humans being eaten before the Hidden Horror is driven back."

"They haven't brought their lands back into Creation, so maybe you're right," Archer said. "Mind you, there's at least one upside to that."

My brow rose questioningly. I couldn't really see one, to be honest. The Grand Alliance had neither the leverage nor the strength to spare to do anything about this, while just letting it happen seemed like a mistake.

"Might be Duchess Kegan won't be so eager for Daoine to go independent, when she hears about this," Indrani said. "Elves were bad enough on their own, but elves with a godhead? I don't care how large the Watch gets, it'll be like fielding as shield wall of goblins against a pack of ogres."

I mulled on that a moment, even as I chewed on the bread. The Deoraithe were masters of defensive and irregular warfare, but as

a rule they tended to be weaker on the offence. Restraint and their isolationist streak had still earned them an impressive military reputation, but the era where a duchy's army could stand up to those of the greater powers of Calernia was coming to an end. The Conquest had proved that massed mages and siege engines combined with heavy infantry could crush armies in the mould of the Old Kingdom's, and the rest of Calernia hadn't lain asleep in the decades that followed. Procer had fielded large units of priests and mages with its field armies during the Tenth Crusade, a significant departure from their old way of making war, and the years of fighting against Keter were further refining their methods.

Even the Dominion was starting to change its doctrine, using its limited numbers of Lanterns and Binders to crack open enemy lines much in the same way that the Legions of Terror used scorpions and goblin munitions.

That was the death knell of Daoine's military relevance, whether Duchess Kegan realized it or not. Putting together the Army of Callow had taught me how damned expensive an army of that kind was to raise and keep in fighting fit, and it simply wasn't a financial burden that the Duchy of Daoine's revenues was capable of supporting. The Watch were devils on the field, and arguably some of the finest foot on Calernia, but you couldn't win a war with them. House Iarsmai's historical military prudence was, at least in part, flowing from that realization. The issue was that, when everybody's military doctrine was done with its growing pains in twenty years, the Watch wouldn't even allow Daoine to win *battles*. Throw in that the enemy whose destruction was at the heart of their culture might raise its ruler to a form of lesser godhood, and Indrani could very well be correct.

The Grand Duchy of Daoine might just find the world outside a lot colder than expected, after leaving the Kingdom of Callow's protective embrace.

"If we can keep Daoine in the fold I won't complain," I said. "Though that should be Vivienne's situation to handle, in the end."

If we weren't all dead, by then I was likely to have abdicated. Besides, if Vivienne could begin her reign with the diplomatic feather in her cap of having kept the Deoraithe part of the kingdom she'd have an easier run of things going forward. I'd taught the last remains of Callowan nobility the dangers of trying to go against a popular queen backed by a powerful royal army.

"She seems to have a handle on things so far," Indrani shrugged. "And if we win against the Hidden Horror, it'll be a long time before the shine of that wears off. Hells, we might actually get a few decades of peace."

I was not nearly so optimistic. Too many parts of Calernia had only heard of the Dead King without ever catching sight of his armies or his monsters. The League of Free Cities hadn't even bothered to stop warring against itself as thousands of soldiers from an large coalition died to hold the defences to the north, and Praes was knee-deep in a civil war being prosecuted at what I could only call a *languid* pace. The rulers who'd seen the worst of the war would come out of it reluctant to war against those who'd been their comrades in the face of annihilation, but that'd only go so far. One of my hopes was that the construction of Cardinal would sap interest in resuming old skirmishes, given the many opportunities it represented, and that the city-state's territory would serve to settle at least some of the people whose lives had been upended by the wars.

"We'll see," I replied. "Even the peace years ought to be quite a ride, after a war like this one."

The afternoon passed slowly, after that, as the two of us sat and talked. Several messengers came to find me over the following bell, as I'd made it clear that the infirmary would be where I stayed, but there was nothing truly urgent to see to. Some concerns about the current tonnage of water that my rank obligated the stewards to inform me about, then a bold request for funding by a Proceran mage that I sent to Roland after skimming and finding the idea worth investigation. The closest thing to a crisis came an hour before Evening Bell, when I was informed that someone had been caught trying to enter one of the restricted zones of the Arsenal. It turned out to be a young couple trying to sneak off for a tryst, and I was informed they were very apologetic when they learned they'd triggered an alarm ward in their attempt to find a dark corner.

Their pays were docked, and in a fit of mercy I spared the two men the necessity of having to explain themselves to me in person. I sent written note warning that a repetition of the mistake would see them suspected of espionage, which should have them thinking twice about where they sneaking off.

"You're enjoying this," Indrani accused, afterwards.

My lips twitched treacherous.

"It's been a long time since I was asked to weigh in on things so..." I trailed off.

"Easy?" she suggested.

"Straightforward," I corrected. "The lower stakes are a relief."

The knowledge that the worse I courted if I made a mistake was passing embarrassment instead of the usual lives lost by the hundred. I enjoyed the calm all the more for the knowledge it was

soon to come to an end. While the Arsenal might be its own little hermit kingdom, isolated from much that went on beyond its walls, the broader world was coming towards it. Tomorrow would bring the First Prince and the White Knight, and with them a great many troubles that for now still seemed on the horizon. The Painted Knife was nearing, too, and the envoys of the Titanomachy. Any of those visits would have been an event, but all of them in swift succession promised to be more of a circus. While I lost myself in thought, Indrani groaned and rose to her feet.

"Headed somewhere?" I asked.

"Having supper with Masego," she said. "You're welcome to come along but I'll be carving and he'll be reading."

"When you put it like that, how could I resist," I said, rolling my eyes. "Go on, have fun."

It left a strange taste in my mouth to say that. It wasn't jealousy, it'd essentially be the same as getting jealous Vivienne was having dinner with Hakram, but it was... odd. The ease she'd said that with, the way she'd not needed to check he'd be there or even just inclined to have dinner with her – all those things spoke of a habit. It wasn't the first time they were doing it, and they'd been doing it for long enough they considered it a given it'd happen. It was oddly domestic, given who they were. I waved out Indrani, and idly wondered if perhaps I was a little jealous after all. Not of either of them, but perhaps of what they had. It'd been a long time since I'd had that level of intimacy with someone.

Not since Kilian.

I wasn't sure if I wanted that, and I knew I simply didn't have the *time* to afford something like it these days. Yet the easy way that Indrani had displayed a sort of intimacy I'd have not believed her capable of when we first met had me uneasy. My friends were changing and making lives for themselves while I swung my sword at the world trying to make it a little more like I wanted. My eyes moved to Hakram's, his chest rising and falling in steady rhythm as the spell took care of keeping his lungs going. Sometimes the changes weren't for the best. A knock on the door – too respectful to be Archer's – caught my attention and I invited in the messenger. A report from the captain of the garrison, I noted with a raised brow, and one that bore his official seal.

I cracked it open and as I scanned the lines I had to forcefully keep my fingers from clenching. The Mirror Knight had tried to enter the Red Axe's cell, insisting even when the guards refused to let him in. It'd come close to violence before he walked away. I folded the parchment, ignoring the messenger's nervous gaze. Someone had informed Christophe de Pavanie that I'd gone to speak

with the Red Axe with Prince Frederic, I decided. This was not a coincidence. It also meant the Mirror Knight had friends within these walls that were willing to stretch the bounds of propriety to help him. I put away the parchment and dismissed the messenger without sending an answer to the report. I'd been warned of the incident, and since it'd not come to violence for now there was little I could do.

Not, that wasn't true. There were more than a few things I *could* do, but there was nothing I *should* do. At this point, overreaching would be dangerous. Restraint now could be used later to make the point to the White Knight that I'd tried patience only to find it ever more stringently tested.

Restless at the inaction, I rose to my feet and after patting Hakram's shoulder took to the halls. I had no precise destination in mind, though that parchment was burning a hole in pocket. I'd not been the only one to go to speak with the Red Axe, I considered. Maybe I should mention this to the Prince of Brus as well. I'd already been headed vaguely in the direction of the Alcazar, anyway. Halfway there I forced myself to admit that I wasn't going there to tell him about that report, or at least not *only* that. It'd do me no good to pretend otherwise. There were risks, although it wouldn't be difficult to weave an illusion around myself that'd ensure I wasn't seen going there. And if I was going to do this, which the way my teeth were worrying at my lip were telling me I was, then *now* would be the time. Before Hasenbach got here and the Arsenal was swarmed with guards and watching eyes.

I felt myself reach for the Night, beginning to weave an illusion, and admitted to myself I'd already made my choice.

I made sure to be seen returning to my rooms before backtracking under veil of Night, remembering the way to the Prince of Brus' quarters well enough from the last time I'd visited. If I'd been a few years younger I might have hesitated before knocking on the door, but in that sense Indrani had been good for me. A few moments passed and I felt a little like a fool. He might not be there at all, given that it was not so late. Perhaps it might be better if I left. Then the door was cracked open and Frederic Goethal curiously looked out, blue eyes slightly widening in surprise as he saw me. His blond locks were slightly dishevelled, and above the belt he wore only a loosely buttoned white cotton shirt that did nothing to hide the kind of muscles that came only from a warrior's life.

"May I come in?" I asked, doing nothing at all to hide the way I was looking at him.

Frederic of Brus's eyes darkened with something that I was rather looking forward to seeing unleashed.

"Please do," he replied.

The door closed hurriedly behind me and I came closer, noting he was just tall enough I had to lean up to kiss him. His hand found my hip, but it was my lips that found his in a soft, tentative kiss as I tiptoed upwards. A brief thing, and I withdrew to find his eyes still closed.

"You'll do," I decided, pushing him back against the wall.

There was nothing tentative at all about what followed.

—

I woke up not long past Midnight Bell, pleurably spent and sweaty. Frederic, still deliciously naked under the twisted-up sheets, was still asleep at my side. It'd be a mistake to spend the night, given the risk of being seen, so reluctantly I wriggled out of his embrace and sat up on the bed. It was enough to wake him and he stretched out in a way that pleasantly captured my interest for a few moments. Getting my hands on his body had done nothing to damper my appreciation for it. Much the opposite, as it happened.

"Restless or leaving?" he asked, voice still husky from sleep.

"Leaving," I said. "As soon as I can find my clothes, anyway."

Where they'd ended up had not been a priority around the time I was taking them off.

"How soon you dispose of me," Frederic teased. "Did I disappoint?"

"I was vocal enough with my opinion you shouldn't need to fish for compliments," I drily said.

"One enjoys hearing those anyway," he grinned.

It'd been a while since I'd been with a man, but I'd definitely enjoyed returning to that brand of diversion. Thinking of it was enough to stir my interest again.

"Considering you're Alamans, I expect I won't have to mention that this is best kept under wraps," I said.

He looked rather amused.

"This is hardly my first tryst, though it has certainly been a... vividly memorable one," Frederic said, sitting up in the bed as well. "I understand that some passions are meant to remain discreet. I'll not moon after you like a green boy either, if that is your worry."

"I'd tolerate a bit of mooning," I grinned. "It'd be rather flattering. But only a bit."

"I'll see what I can arrange," he quietly laughed.

It really was shame it'd be genuinely terrible politics for even the suspicion of an affair between us to fall on either, I mused. I'd have thoroughly enjoyed more than one visit to this bed. Safer to cut this after one night, though, I knew. I'd taken risks enough already. On the other hand, I mused as I tossed aside the sheets and pushed him back against the headboard and got on top of him, the night wasn't quite over yet.

"One more for the road," I suggested.

The gasp that followed was not one of disagreement.

—

The following day, the First Prince and her escort arrived several hours before the White Knight and still Hanno set foot in the Arsenal before Cordelia Hasenbach.

With the wards back in order scrying relays to Creation had been established again, so the Procerans had known in advance that we'd had not only a fae incursion but several demons running loose not so long ago. Considering that the First Prince would be a great deal easier to kill than Hanno and the that magnitude of the political crisis that'd followed would be... significant, I'd not been offended when her personal guards had not taken me to my word when I'd told them the Arsenal was secure. A company of mages and soldiers had swept through the attainted areas with a fine comb, though I doubted that any mundane mage out of the Principate would able to catch something that the likes of Masego or Roland hadn't.

While I debated heading to the Arcadian waystation where the First Prince was awaiting the word to go on ahead from her people, I ultimately decided against it. Hasenbach liked her ceremony, and I might as well ensure I had her in as pleasant a mood as I could before the negotiations started. There was precious little of what I wanted to discuss with her that could be spoken about in such a public place, anyway. To my disappointment I learned that Vivienne would only be arriving tomorrow, having been slowed on the march by sudden rains that'd flooded the roads, but I'd lived without seeing her for several months already. A day more or less wouldn't make much of a difference.

Besides, I kept busy: while security was an issue for Hasenbach the White Knight breezed right past her after a few greetings and proceeded straight into the Arsenal. I dragged Archer with me to watch my back, leaving as a lookout as I limped my way down a

long set of stairs. The White Knight came out of the translocation ritual in the same wide room where the Mirror Knight had nearly drawn on me less than a week ago, a single mage in Arsenal livery at his side. Hanno looked tired, eyes pulled tight, and was leading his horse by the reins. He'd ridden hard, I decided, after hearing about the attack. Even odds he'd even ridden through the night on the last stretch, for him to be visibly tired: it wasn't something that came easy, in Named of his calibre.

"Black Queen," he greeted me.

"White Knight," I replied. "I'm pleased you came quickly."

"I can only wish I'd been there when the attack happened," Hanno frankly said. "None of the affairs that kept me from travelling with you were even near important enough, seen in retrospective."

"Hindsight's no cure for bad luck," I shrugged.

A sharp whistle sounded from the heights above, a sign from Archer we were about to have company. Indrani wouldn't have bothered for guards or diplomats, which meant Named.

"I'd wager that's my latest headache trudging towards us," I said. "I tried my hand at handling it and failed, White Knight, so it'll be yours to deal with."

Hanno's brow rose.

"I thank you for your assistance," he said, turning to offer the mage a smile.

She blushed, much to my amusement, and replied by espousing the virtues of duty before scurrying away. However nicely phrased, it'd very much been a dismissal. I eyed him speculatively. Heroes tended to be popular with women – and men, when so inclined – but I'd never know him to keep company. I didn't believe him to be like Masego, disinclined towards the act, but neither did I believe him so discreet he would have been able to keep a bedmate quiet.

"I received some interesting missives from the First Prince, when I passed by a scrying relay yesterday," Hanno said. "Including a subtle but rather firm request that I take Christophe of Pavanie 'in hand'. I've rarely known you to be in such swift accord with Cordelia Hasenbach, Catherine."

Well now, wasn't *that* interesting? Frederic hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said that the First Prince saw the Mirror Knight as a potential threat because of his closeness – and occasional nakedness – with the House of Langevin. If she was willing to start putting pressure on the White Knight to

intervene before he'd even gotten to the Arsenal, then she was serious about curbing dear Christophe. While I'd only extend so much trust to Cordelia over much of anything, I was rather pleased at the notion that for once she might be entirely on my side – if largely for her own reasons.

"He still has the sword, and now he's making demands," I grunted.

"I've never known him to be prone to overstepping, only clumsy in expressing himself," the White Knight calmly said. "As for the Severance, while it should be temporarily returned to the Arsenal I can see no better wielder for it."

I could think of several, including the very man speaking to me. Those two had shared a front in Cleves, I recalled, before the Salian Peace and Callow joining the Grand Alliance. There might be a degree of trust there, the sort earned in battle. It didn't worry me overmuch, in truth, considering that Hanno was remarkably clear-eyed when it came to most things. Still, a warning was in order.

"Be careful with him," I said. "I don't think you'll find him all that pliable."

"Pliable is something a lord wants in a vassal," Hanno said. "I am not one, nor he the other. All I need of him is reason and a willing ear, neither of which he's ever failed to offer."

Our little chat was interrupted by armoured boots on stone as the Mirror Knight, in full armour and with the Severance at his hip, briskly began to make his way down the stairs. Looking rather uncomfortable and noticeably unarmed, the Blade of Mercy followed behind him. Christophe de Pavanie's green gaze was distinctly unfriendly as he took in my presence, though it stopped short of a glare and he began to pointedly ignore my presence. The boy at his side looked away from me when I glanced.

"White Knight," the Mirror Knight began the moment his boots reached the bottom of the stairs. "Your presence gladdens me."

A long moment of silence followed when Hanno did not reply. The White Knight eventually cocked his head to the side.

"I had assumed," Hanno slowly said, "that you were not done in your greetings. Was I incorrect?"

Huh. I threw him an appreciative glance for that even as Christophe's cheeks reddened.

"Wouldn't be the first lack of manners from him," I idly said. "I doubt it'll be the last. We'll speak later, White Knight."

"Until later then, Queen Catherine," Hanno replied with a slight bow.

I began to limp away, without further ado, and though the Mirror Knight began to say something that might have been a belated greeting I did not turn to hear it or bother to lend an ear. I was almost hoping he tried to pull something of the sort in front of Proceran diplomats, who'd be genuinely appalled at the sight. They were known to be polite to even people they despised, after all. Archer was awaiting at the top of the stairs, leaning against a wall. She'd kept the room below in sight the whole time, taking her duty of watching my back just as seriously in this place as she had in the tunnels of the Everdark. Different dangers here, perhaps, but barely fewer.

"So?" I asked as she pushed off.

"They were hurrying," Indrani said. "So they weren't just coming to greet Shiny Boots, I'd bet."

That soured the pleasant mood the night's exertions had left me in, even after this little interlude. They'd hurried because they'd heard I myself was there to receive Hanno, then. For them to have been forewarned, it meant they had more friends in the Arsenal than I'd hoped they would have. Not necessarily Named, as the Mirror Knight's slaying of no less than seven demons had earned him a great deal of admiration with soldiers and mages from the rank and file, but I wouldn't dismiss the notion outright either.

"With Hasenbach joining us tonight the number of soldiers in here will swell," I said. "We'll be able to spare some for more private duties. Reach out to Lieutenant Inger, Archer. I require some eyes."

With the First Prince's arrival, I finally had a pretext to meddle with the garrison without raising an eyebrow – given that Hasenbach would have a soldier escort of her own, it'd raise no eyebrows if I arranged one for myself out of garrison troops. I didn't intend to use mine guarding doors, though. I wanted to know who the Mirror Knight would speak with, and when. It would be imprudent to begin acting on anything before making sure how much support he had, exactly.

"I'll take care of it," Indrani said, pushing off the wall. "While you were down there a messenger came by for you, though. I took the message for you."

She fished out of her coat a small folded parchment, handing it over.

"And what's inside?" I asked.

Neither of us bothered to pretend she wouldn't have opened that without the slightest hint of hesitation.

"The First Prince of Procer is inviting you to dinner," Indrani said, waggling her eyebrows lasciviously.

Considering I could no longer claim to have never slept with Proceran royalty, answering that insinuation with even mock indignation would have, uh, weaker foundation than I might be used to.

"Well," I said, "I suppose I'm about due to have an exquisite meal spoiled by politics."

ruduen

And I will be inviting everybody to vote.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Patrick Herke

Honestly everytime I see the vote comment I'm just reminded of how glad I am that I wrote a little python script to do that for me. No need to worry about forgetting or messing with it

Frivolous

Yay! Catherine got laid, and by a man this time. Good for her. I'm happy for her.

[308924810a](#)

Yet I feel a strange worry that this romance is some prelude to the redemption story that the heroes think Catherine is heading into, and that for that purpose Nephele would have been better for her, and the romance both more supportive and less likely to blow up in her face.

WuseMajor

I'm inclined to agree. Might be why Bard got her killed.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, that'd be Hanno. Kingfisher is specifically somebody she likes, and she might make it a more than once things, but for now and as long as she stays cautious he's clearly a FWB

type. She should be safe from that sort of trap. Though the blowing up part is valid; always a risk of a scandal.

Ninestrings

Masego learning to read and express feelings has been one of the most heartwarming character arcs in the whole series.

[Javvies](#)

Mirror Knight is a problem ... and he's only going to get worse.

And I'm not sure Hanno truly realizes, recognizes, or understands the kind of problem Mirror Knight is and is becoming.

Which itself could easily become another problem.

[Javvies](#)

... dammit wordpress.

Gibborim

I imagine that the Severance is having a direct effect on his limp personality.

Insanenoodlyguy

Also the change in perception. Even if they got the sword away from him (and it'd find it's way back anyhow), he's on a different story now. The kind of story where people rally behind him, so he's become a more rally-able figure.

Salt

Hopefully not too much of an effect. That thing is the Crystallization of Laurence de Montfort. The old bat earned her stripes, sure, she was respectable in her own way. It doesn't change that she was neurotically paranoid of all things black cloaked, no matter how understandably so.

If it actually imparts her outlook on life to the wielder, it might as well be a cursed sword rather than a holy one.

[shikkarasu](#)

I wonder if there is a chance of him transitioning *into* the Saint of Swords, considering he is holding 1/3 of the name in his right hand....

It's definately influencing him, like Moonless Nights affected Catherine "No more than the mantle of [her] Name."

NerfContessa

Soo.... The Saint of mirrors and swords?

Bart

Zeze has known how to read for years...
(;

dadycoool

I can now say that Cat has slept her way across Calernia. Only laterally, east to west, since she hasn't slept with anyone from the southern countries, but still.

laguz24

She can always attend the festival of many sighs.

[308924810a](#)

She doesn't just need someone from the south, she also needs someone from the north to also do so vertically. Which might be more out of character, though not necessarily more of an obstacle.

[Burlyraven](#)

I don't know if it's been pointed out or not, but Catfish is an entirely viable ship name for Cat and Kingfisher. Just saying.

Also, I am so glad to see Mirror Knight get a little extra dose of humility from White Knight. I genuinely wonder if there might not have been a demon of pride or some related concept in the seven he slew

Ninestrings

If this relationship turns out to be an evil plot and Cat was Catfished that is some crazy long set up for a bad pun.

I absolutely wouldn't put it past EE either.

[Tohron](#)

Especially bad since Catherine HATES puns.

[vernal.ancient](#)

All the more appropriate then

laguz24

Oh I am so ready for Chrisophe to get metaphorically tanned.

Ninestrings

I'm just picturing White Knight looking him over, sighing, and then taking off his belt...

erebus42

My mind made that image way more sexual than it needed to be.

Ninestrings

I realised it after I posted the comment but stand by my wording.

Not my fault this whole fandom is full of sin.

erebus42

Sin is the spice of life

Matthew Wells

If we weren't looking to practice sin, why even read this in the first place?

[Javvies](#)

Mirror Knight is a problem ... and he's only going to get worse.

And I'm not sure Hanno truly realizes, recognizes, or understands the kind of problem Mirror Knight is and is becoming. Which itself could easily become another problem.

Salt

I think the Mirror Knight has a clearer read on his character than Cat, to be perfectly honest. Christophe handles himself like an absolute ass but his POV showed that he's mind-bogglingly awkward and insecure instead, and is also super sensitive about being used instead of respected.

Hanno's methodology, from what we've seen so far, is to somehow empathize with the kid and genuinely treat him like an adult or a peer instead of a vassal or a tool.

Hanno might actually be the perfect fit for the problem here.

Christophe has the best of intentions, ruined by his being a colossally awkward moron, and has a frightfully shallow understanding of what "justice" means.

Hanno can usually empathize with people like some sort of telepath (probably because he's been in so many dead people's heads), is endlessly patient/understanding in the face of insult, and spent years under the wing of the choir that likely

has the one of most nuanced, complex views of "justice" out of any entity on the continent.

Salt

The white knight* not the mirror knight. Damn it. It's late.

M0och123

Yet we all know what the road to hell is paved with.

Possibly in a literal sense due to who they are fighting.

Salt

So the best case is Hanno reasons some sense into him, and the worst case is he paves way to an assault on the Serenity?

I see this as an absolute win

hakureireimu

Somehow I doubt the Mirror Knight problem will be resolved so easily.

Shveiran

Although I agree in principle, I'd point out that Hanno has been aware of this issue for three books now, and still failed to address it.

The current problem is, if not his fault, something he failed to fix for a long time.

Salt

I mean, he's only been in charge of the kid for half a volume to be fair. It isn't like a garbage understanding of politics and morality mattered much prior to that, when they were just collaborating to kill endless waves of undead. His whole schtick at the time was "I do not judge", with the Pilgrim having a near monopoly on the Heroic mentorship Role prior to the Terms.

Cat did mention that it was an oversight that no one ever had a proper chat with the Mirror Knight after the Truce and Terms were established though, that is fair. I believe she mentioned it in passing at the start of the Arsenal arc.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Even after the Trial, Hanno is still not so good at listening to Cat's advice.

Miles

>Considering I could no longer claim to have never slept with Proceran royalty, answering that insinuation with even mock indignation would have, uh, weaker foundation than I might be used to.

And now Archer knows

M0och123

Archer and Masego could potentially have been scrying the two last night.

Salt

Archer insisting that this is important, with Masego patiently explaining in the background a list of all the things that are objectively more important

NerfGlaistigUaine

So is the bed small or is virtue "big-boned"?

caoimhinh

Maybe Virtue is a jealous, yandere mistress?

nick012000

So, a Queen having a one-night stand with a Prince, and both of them are Named.

Odds Catherine just got pregnant with a royal bastard?

dadycoool

I'd actually been thinking about that before. a) She's too careful for that, b) I'm pretty sure pregnancy among Legion soldiers is forbidden, so she'd have to take herself off the war effort in any meaningful way, having to account for the kid and all, c) the scandal for sleeping with him would be light compared to the scandal of a pregnant Cat, and d) a lesser reason is that Cat having a child would give her an heir other than Vivienne, which would splinter the line of succession, even if the child spent its whole life in Freddy's territory.

So yeah, I've formed a storyline in my head, tried to address these points, and found my addressing to be unlikely. Not to say EE won't go the Royal Bastard route, but every head-story I've ever come up with while reading PGtE, trying to predict the future, has been off the mark.

thearpox23

Between Masego and literally any other skilled mage or healer found in the entire grand alliance, the chances of not performing a successful abortion are nill. Your 'c' point might still be relevant, and I would put it past the spy network to notice something is off, but Catherine isn't nearly emotionally driven enough to implode everything because of an unborn kid. Would cause some mood swings though.

Don't expect the story to go there though.

dadycool

I wouldn't expect Cat to go full "I'm a mother now, which means I and my spawn are made of glass", nor would her magic suffer very much, but thinking about the physiological aspects of pregnancy and young motherhood, for 6-10 months she'd be forced into a non-physical role and, let's be honest, when a woman is pregnant, she's at her most vulnerable by far. I suppose she could hand the kid off to a wet nurse so she could go off murderizing, but while I don't see her as actively going out of her way to collect a family, I don't believe she would reject one. She never asked for the Woe, the Gallowborn, or the Legions that adore her, but she would and has given everything for each of them. I'd actually expect her to drag around a crib alongside that comfy chair if our theorized plot pans out, just so she could keep an eye on the kid and keep it close.

Addressing the abortion option, you're right. Masego amputated AN ASPECT when it got corrupted, back when he was the Apprentice. If Cat were to decide that abortion were the way to go and it doesn't spark a nasty Story, that'd be downright easy for him. If nothing else, he could Wrest it from her, but that might not be a good idea, for multiple reasons.

Not that we expect her to actually get pregnant.

magesbe

I'd guess extremely low. Catherine is the kind of person who'd be very careful about that kind of blunder.

MagicalContraception

Given their level of technology/magic, I doubt she'd be on magical contraception if she hadn't been with men... since before Chapter 1 of Book 1.

[vernal.ancient](#)

While I'm in no way an expert on contraceptives, my understanding is that every culture that makes the sex=pregnancy connection figures out a way around it, regardless of technology level. It may not be as reliable as modern methods, but there will be one. Now this particular culture may rely on magic for it, but Cat could potentially figure out something with the Night for that

Insanenoodlyguy

Her patron god came about by the act of stealing life from the unborn. The night in it's weakest, unshaped form could do that. What do you think it can do now? Even assuming she didn't use whatever they regularly use in the legion to prevent that sort of thing, or assuming the story makes sure it doesn't work, I'm quite sure Sve Noc can make sure she doesn't get shunted into that highly dangerous story. That kid could literally kill their entire coalition after all, if fate decides it's worth letting them all die just so this child can grow up in the Calnerian post-apocalypse and rise to destroy the Dead King and avenge all his ancestors.

AbraKadabra

Now, that is an interesting thought. If the child does Born, probably will have access to night, despite not being drow. The implications of that can be tremendous.

Salt

Extremely unlikely I'd say, mostly because it would narratively just be really weird. Suddenly bringing in new experiences of motherhood and family relationships into the eve of a climactic war with ancient, terrifyingly powerful entities is rather jarring.

I mean it definitely wouldn't be off the table to make an absolute banger of an arc looking into the foundling line and see if she falls into that old trope of amazing people being terrible parents, but the timing is just all wrong.

The main character getting partially taken out of a continental level brawl in high fantasy by bad contraceptives? Bruh

AbraKadabra

I bet Masego can put a stasis on it, to delay it from being Born. Because magic. It will born after the dead King bites the dust.

Salt

Feasible only if Catherine does not go near the Dead King or any of his undead for the remaining duration of the war, I'd wager.

The risk of putting an enchantment inside your body is... rather high, when the monster you're fighting invented the system of magic that arguably the most magically advanced nation on the continent uses.

Putting a spell inside your body in the presence of the Dead King is like swallowing a bunch of sharpeners just before getting punched in the gut.

Abrakadabra

Eh, no. Because on that note she should just avoid DK altogether, because she has night in her body, and using any artifact, for example the severance in the vicinity of DK would be just as dangerous if not more.

Salt

Night is something entirely different from sorcery in the first place, it's not a type of sorcery.

A stasis spell on the other hand, especially one casted by someone like Masego who specializes in Trismegistan sorcery, would be insanely vulnerable to the Dead King who is quite literally the original Archmage Trismegistus.

It's a situation where you make yourself reliant on a method that originates from the Dead King in the first place, and one he's mastered more thoroughly than anyone currently alive.

It would be not unlike fighting Malicia while being reliant on political plots, or getting into a sword fight with the Saint while being very vulnerable to being cut.

The Severance isn't sorcery either. It's an Aspect pulled out of one of the most narratively stubborn, uncompromising Heroes that ever lived. The entire reason it has weight is because the Saint was, by every measure we've seen so far, completely incorruptible when facing The Enemy.

RoflCat

I'm pretty sure Named can't accidentally get pregnant unless a Story makes them to.

Which admittedly the memento child where the father die soon after the one night stand is a thing...

I sincerely hope Frederick doesn't end up dying to prevent MK from becoming Saint 2.0.

Not so soon after Nephele :<

Cicero

Huh... that's... actually possible.

If being Named (and a Villian in particular) makes it unlikely to get pregnant (a likely possibility) it's possible that it might have slipped Cat's mind that she actually isn't Named right now.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She did complain about getting her "monthlies" in Everdark.

caoimhinh

I really would love to see from Hanno's POV some of the things about to unfold.

WuseMajor

Me too.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I have an honors thesis meeting in six hours and I'm reading PGTE at one in the morning. What is wrong with me?

Dome Zasrekh

Nothing.

M0och123

^^^

Death Knight

Alright, Christophe needs to die. Here's what I'm thinking, Cat, Masego and Sve Noc gate the Mirror Knight to Keter. Mirror Knight uses his shiny sword of Severance to kill everything in Keter or dies trying. Win win all around. Cat then uses her political clout with Hasenbach to smother the situation in the crib. Boomshitaki, war over or a lot more winnable.

Ninestrings

I think this is shaping up to a hero showdown between the white knight and the mirror knight.

MK overwhelmingly powerful, at the peak of his ability and wielding a sword that can cut anything

VS

WK, a humble hero with no magical gear and deprived of most of his powers.

WK would tear him apart.

thearpox23

Usually in that story the hero with fading powers is conceited and publicly goes for a direct confrontation while also trying to rig everything behind the scenes. Then the up and coming hero pulls through anyway while also revealing everything, intentionally or unintentionally, and signals the turnaround of a corrupt system.

I need not explain how the above script is off, and I think the diplomatic side of how this gets resolved will be more interesting and have more weight to it than whatever duel might happen.

Ninestrings

Yeah but there's no way Hanno tries to rig it, so it becomes a straight up "underdog versus the monster in a one on one match" Hanno either wins, or dies and inspires someone else to kick MK's arse.

thearpox23

Hanno makes for a poor underdog, and MK still doesn't quite cut it as a monster either. There's no narrative weight here, and there's not even any inherent weight to the duel itself because neither of them are Levantine.

So like it or not the path I outlined is the closest to what the Mirror Knight has to follow to succeed, at least it would conform to his vision of the situation if nothing else. But the part with rigging the duel is just one of the five things that are obviously wrong with the script, which leaves it lacking in weight as well.

A duel in and of itself is a specific story trope. For it to happen at all a story path is desired. For it to be inevitable even more so. For it to be effective, triply so, and Bard isn't around at the moment to exploit everything, so Hanno can maintain his position even after losing. Once again, they're not Levantine or Villains to crown the one with the biggest stick, so while showdown of

some sort is coming, things would have to change for a duel to be the biggest factor.

Salt

Agreed, underdog stories don't tend to hold well for someone like Hanno who has historically been in the superior position. If anything, a fight might become disaster, as the narrative could easily become the culmination of the Mirror Knight's own underdog story – growing and finally surpassing his previous superiors.

Politically the fight itself would also create divisions between Heroes that agree with one or the other, and start a precedent for challenge of leadership by force – which would be terrible.

If a fight was forced though, it would be best for Hanno to lean hard into the role of a wiser mentor and try to leverage a conciliatory position instead.

Something along the lines of a 'strong but unskilled youth vs experienced master past his physical prime' type of trope. This kind of story would be bolstered if he attempted a non-lethal takedown with greater skill (which Recall gives him plenty of access to) instead of aiming to cause real harm with force, since it further specializes him into the role of a wiser veteran teaching a harsh-but-necessary lesson to a promising talent. Go for one of the classics, like putting more importance on how you use your power than how much power you have, which both fits the situation and their respective personalities.

In a mundane sense it would be an easy way to defuse any anger and make him more receptive, if Christophe starts the fight and Hanno extends an olive branch after winning the fight. Moderation/kindness extended from a victorious position tends to take the edge off animosity, and that line of action would be in-character for him anyway, avoiding the same kinds of suspicions that came out of Catherine's abrupt change in attitude when she tried her hand at reconciliation.

Politically it would potentially turn a danger into a boon, if he managed to reconcile this way. The precedent would then change to show that duels for leadership are foolish and shallow, and that the whole thing was an exercise in youthful immaturity that was well-handled by the current leadership.

Salt

I'd honestly prefer if Hanno was successful in talking Christophe down, and pointed him in the direction of the elves or something.

What I wouldn't give to see the showdown of the insufferable: the Mirror Knight vs an Emerald Sword. They'd both offend each other instantly and look so far down their noses at each other that their necks would be in danger of snapping.

The Emerald Sword would be incensed at human vermin daring to be so arrogant, and Christophe would somehow rationalize the elf as a Villain before the first verbal joust is over.

Mental Mouse

Hanno has not been "deprived of most of his powers"! He's lost his coin-flip aspect yes, but he still has **Recall** to learn the secrets of essentially every hero before his time (and IIRC duplicate their light-shaping). And **Ride** to provide Light to shape. But as I've said before, his greatest powers are tongue and heart, and he's a lot smarter than Christophe! to boot.

Javvies

Is the Coin of Judgement even an Aspect?

I thought it was a very specialized artifact provided by the Titans.

Though, with the Coin presumably nonfunctional, he can't flip it for the bonuses riding the Judgement train. Which is, admittedly, a definite downgrade, although the Coin wouldn't necessarily help him when dealing with Mirror Knight, and he almost certainly wouldn't invoke it upon Mirror Knight even if it were fully functional. Ditto for Bard, probably.

Although, he most likely could've used it on the Dead King, but I'm not sure how much that'd actually help.

Salt

Definitely not an aspect, it's basically an ordinary coin right now, without the angels on his shoulder. He flipped it to demonstrate this to Cat, when they were chatting about what it was like to be cut off from the Seraphim. I was also under the impression that he's still the White Knight as far as Role and aspects go.

The coin isn't really a weapon though, as far as Hanno is concerned. For him it's just how he figures out whether the Seraphim consider an action/person Justified or not.

I suspect he'd flip it without hesitation on literally anyone and anything – including any Hero, any Villain, any civilian, the Bard, Rulers, Countries, or even inanimate ideas/decisions – that he considers to be questionably 'Just'.

After all, we know from the Kairos POV when he viewed everyone with Wish that nothing quite matters to Hanno as much as "I want to be Just".

Mental Mouse

Bard said it was an Aspect, she called it a "formulaic Aspect". He had a different gift from the Gigantes, the shapechanging sword that Black destroyed, but that was basically a convenience to help out with his Recall aspect.

vernal.ancient

Unless he becomes a revenant, still wielding the severance

JJR

If Mirror Knight fails this task the coalition gets to face him as a revenant, possibly still wielding severance. It depends on whether Dead Kings ability to usurp magic is stronger than Saint of Swords lingering essence's ability to perceive such an attempt and self destruct. I'd put my money on the Dead King though. There's also the issue of his Dawn aspect. If DK gets his phalanges on Mirror Knight with that intact, then it's just a matter of waiting a little bit (from an immortal liche's point of view) and he has an unstoppable warrior. One that story might not even be able to step in to stop. It would be a story of the alliance's chickens coming home to roost after all.

It just seems like a bad idea all round.

LizAris

I am ridiculously happy that Cat finally got to bang Fred (They would make a cute couple politics aside, ngl)

YES HANNO way to have Cat's back...to think I didn't even like White when we first met him

Mirror boy needs to seriously back off– I hope we get to see lovely Cordelia destroy him with some polite conversation real soon

Wonder

I am willing to do whatever it takes to be a fly on the wall or anything else ,just to see Cat sweaty and spent and hear her vocal opinions of the Fisher .

Of only we come some exclusives on this kind of things that Cat gets up to.

That sweaty scene is not getting out of my head anytime soon.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Guarantee someone is working on that fanfic already

Juff

Typo Thread:

But of I > But if I
wager," Indrani > wager." Indrani
if the screw > if they screw
fielding as shield > fielding a shield
far," Indrani > far." Indrani
from an large > from a large
sent written > sent a written
hole in pocket > hole in my pocket
anyway," he > anyway." He
mooning," I > mooning." I
was shame > was a shame
the that > that
that'd followed > that'd follow
leaving as a lookout > leaving her as a lookout
luck," I > luck." I

Big I

So does this make Cat the femme fatale of the Kingfisher Prince's story? Or vice versa?

I anticipate this liason is going to be used to sour the Mirror Knight on the Prince. I remember him saying "you've broken the Gray Pilgrim and fooled the White Knight", and now she's seduced the Kingfisher Prince. In his mind I'm sure he's the lone voice of reason in a world gone mad.

thearpox23

It's such a beautiful reasoning lock, one of the most beautiful we humans have. Consider a target to be a vector of corruption, and you can immediately discredit every person who have come into contact with the target and considers them reasonable. Meanwhile every person who didn't come into contact with the target yet is ignorant, and can be discredited just as well. It's just so hellishly difficult to disprove.

I am rather forgetful with terminology, but it strikes me that English likely has a term for this.

Salt

The funny thing is that Christophe would actually be half correct.

The Pilgrim and the White Knight both saw it – Tariq called Cat a “thresher”, which Hanno describes as having a pull that pulls people into her orbit – either as followers or as wreckage. They actually fourth-walled her character archetype there.

Her current pulled-into-orbit count consists of: all the Woe, Juniper, most of the legions, half the goblins (who volunteer for the Army of Callow just because of Catherine), the sisters, all the drow, Cordelia, the Pilgrim, Roland, Talbot, Akua, the entire grand alliance, nearly all the Villains under the Truce and Terms, and a shit ton of side characters. Am I missing anyone?

The half he’s wrong about would be Cat having a nefarious master plan underneath it all that viciously... undoes her own life’s work. I guess.

Kind of a big thing to be wrong about, but the first part at least is a pretty spot-on read of her from Christophe,

dadycool

I kind of want a confrontation where she’s accused of trying to rule the entire continent and she says something like “Yes, I am on my way to ruling the world. By proxy, with lots of advisors able to keep my head on straight. I WILL bring this world into a new era of peace and prosperity, under the direction of the rulers that know what’s best for their people.” I think that sidesteps a lot of the pitfalls such a Glorious Villainous Authoritarian Speech would have for the one giving it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Funny thing, in a Hero that’s usually called “leadership”.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Sounds like a subset of confirmation bias, not sure if there’s a more specific name

Cicero

Isn’t it just a form of “begging the question?”

In other words, you assume the conclusion, which assumption then provides the evidence supporting the conclusion.

thearpox23

We know the Black Queen is a dangerous schemer, because many people support her?

I suppose that kind of works, but MK is actually ready to answer the question of "How do we know she is a schemer?" with "She is a Villain and isn't trying to murder us directly." which is actually a good answer considering his world-view. And the nature of villains is explained by his scriptures and cultural knowledge.

Considering that "begging the question" seems to refer to a specific argumentation tactic, this seems a tad more complicated than that. More of a cult mentality, but that seems more of a general concept than something specific.

Salt

That seems rather severely biased towards Catherine. Christophe's evaluation of her as a "dangerous schemer" is, if anything, understating it. The part he's actually wrong about is something else entirely – that she necessarily must have bad intentions, or that it's impossible for them to be anything but enemies.

Otherwise though? Of course you treat the Carrion Lord's successor as a potential danger. Of course you consider her an insanely competent schemer, given her impressively long list of publicly known victories by scheming, since the Everdark arc.

She's not the squire anymore, and the color of her cloak is no longer the only reason to be wary or outright afraid of her. She's already become the kind of entity that can squash armies by stomping her foot. Anyone but very strong Named, heads of state, and literal gods should worry about her potentially ending you faster than you can say "high priestess of a murder-god worshipping Drow religion".

thearpox23

You're missing the forest for the trees again.

My post wasn't an evaluation of Catherine, it was an attempt to phrase it using the Begging the Question fallacy, which I found lacking. I could've found a couple better matching words, but that wasn't going to fix the overall issue of using that fallacy.

And even my first reply wasn't about what Mirror Knight's perceptive is. It was about the kind of circular reasoning that could be potentially used to discredit anyone who disagrees with him. Used in real life as well.

Salt

Fair enough, I misunderstood your point.

Hellspirit

Mmm, I'm not sure whether the Mirror Knight is justified in his behavior on the larger scale, but to my eye he's very much the Protagonist Hero in a typical story.

I just hope it turns out well. I really want to see him grow into someone I can like in This story.

Salt

It would actually be a fantastic redemption story if he eventually grew into the person the Saint could've been, if her Role wasn't a purely Avenging type that was always too late to save anything.

Could you imagine how much of a boon the old terror granny could've been in this situation, if she hadn't had every speck of kindness purged out of her with decades of losses and horrors? It would've been amazing watching her trade barbs with revenants before swiftly chopping them in half.

M0och123

Luckily this is Pgte where literally anything could happen.

Big I

Mirror Knight strikes me as a tragic hero destined to turn evil. I'm expecting him to be the next Black Knight.

jalexanderb

I hope Cordelia will bring up the point about the Severance that I haven't noticed Cat even thinking about, which is that they (collectively) own the damn thing. They paid for the resources and funding, and there is no way in hell Cordy is going to let "but I picked it up so its mine now" be the whole reason MK gets the sword.

Obviously Cat trying to pull something like that would've got her slapped down Narratively but that's what we love about about an unnamed ruler. God, I hope Cordelia just obliterates the idiot verbally.

dadycool

As the kind of person that rejects Religious/Named morality for mortal Law and Order, that would absolutely be in character for her. "Um, excuse me. We made that sword to be used in a fight against Keter, not in a civil war with doom on our doorstep. It wasn't commissioned for you or anyone else. And picking it up out of the armory doesn't make it yours any more than if a foot soldier picked up a lance he had neither the training nor equipment to properly use." She'd say it far more elegantly, of course.

Salt

The Principiate must honor alliances and be honest to its faithful allies (we can't afford to break alliance right now, idiot), and acknowledges the Empire Ever Dark's efforts in keeping the Enemy at bay (especially not with the Everdark). The Crown would like to recognize the Black Queen for her faithful service in the war effort (I have like, ten irons in the fire that I need to draw on her influence for), and would like to extend invitation for further negotiations, as to further mutual interests under the fairest of terms (I need to negotiate, stop weakening my bargaining position)

All of which would promptly fly over his head, greatly saddening him that even the First Prince isn't immune to the Black Queens treacherous corruption.

agumentic

"Unnamed" doesn't mean "Exempt from the narrative", as we've seen in Book 5. Anyone just trying to take Severance away from Mirror Knight would fail, I think. If he is to lose it, that would be by himself, either by willingly relinquishing it or by losing his head to the power of the sword.

Salt

I think it's a moot point, honestly. Christophe's identity as a person is so classically Proceran – the peoples who are generally appalled at even the notion of not following the letter of the law, even while ignoring the intent of it – that it's virtually impossible for him to even want to ignore the First Prince.

He might consider her tricked by Villainous treachery at worst, but he's still the same kid who got awkward at the sight of Catherine the ~royal~ breaking etiquette around him.

If Cordelia Hasenbach actually got pissed off enough to openly denounce him, the boy would likely cry himself to sleep out of shame, and we'd get a half a chapter of him

being very upset at once again proving himself unworthy of the mantle.

Cap'n Smurfy

I suspect Mirror Knight got saw caught up in rushing to greet Hanno he genuinely forgot to acknowledge Catherine.

Salt

Also wait, did we just get a hint about Black's overall plan in his civil war with Malicia?

Cat mentioned that it was proceeding at a languid pace. That probably isn't an accident, that's Black intentionally taking it slow, knowing that the civil war itself is a form of containment. He's essentially a sword at Malicia's back for as long as the civil war is ongoing, and she can't go full throttle at Catherine until he's dealt with.

If that's the case, then he might be narratively tightening the noose around Malicia's neck, by just sitting there and dragging it out. He knows Malicia, knows her well, that she tends to tunnel on trying to win every fight. She said it herself at the end of the peace conference – that she always, always wins. Does that sound similar to you, like a certain Light-clad mirror to the good ol Hellgods?

If Black allows Malicia to slowly choke the life out of this Dread Empress Sepulchral that he's set up as a rival, but achieves one of his goals anyway by buying Catherine time? Then he puts himself in a narrative where Alaya always wins, but Amadeus always gets his due. He shapes the narrative so Malicia is adopting Above's methodology while he adopts Below's, in a war over who gets to be Below's favored champion.

He's letting her walk right into that Sepulchral tomb he prepared for her by taking yet another page out of Catherine's playbook and very patiently, very slowly... surrendering the battle to win the war.

ninegardens

I mean... him taking things slowly means that Alay-bells isn't going to mess up the grand alliance, true... but it also means the Legions can't show up to HELP the grand alliance... which is something of a problem.

Salt

Logistically true, but narratively there are advantages of being late to the party anyway. Rushing to an ally's aid in

their hour of greatest need is a pretty big gust of wind in your story sails.

Works better as a Hero, but leaning on the father rushing to save an adopted daughter line is arguably even stronger, albeit one with more death flags attached.

Sparsebeard

Now, why would the Elves, a barren people, want the crown that symbolizes rebirth... such an enigma!

Abrakadabra

I think it is an enigma. Because it is not a common knowledge, the elf being barren that is. Bard knew about it but WHO else?

Sparsebeard

I thought it was relatively common knowledge.

Still, I do think it's the reason they want the crown rather than just a grab for more power. If that's the case, there is a parallel to be made with the drow.

[whaljan](#)

whaljan a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/2DgNPF1ncaFKPCWMHdj-A>

Chapter 32: Convened

"Let priests offer forgiveness before the hanging, a queen can only afford it after."

– Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

I found out, to my mild surprise, that there were not one but three private dining rooms in the Alcazar. I'd not even been aware that were any, though it made sense upon refection: it was the part of the Arsenal meant to host important guests, essentially the facility's diplomatic quarters. In my experience a great deal of diplomacy was had over meals and drinks, compared to the great formal conferences I'd envisioned as a girl. One of the two smaller rooms was where the First Prince of Procer received me, having brought her own private cooks to prepare the meal in the Arsenal kitchens. I appreciate the restraint of not having gone for the formal banquet hall, which was large enough

that any meal taken there would bring with it a tiring amount of pageantry.

Instead we sat in an elegant and comfortable dining room whose walls were covered by panels of painted wood that I vaguely remembered being donated by the recently ascended Princess of Cantal. Lovely work with a touch of warmth to it. It was a pleasant departure from the bare stone that was so prevalent everywhere in the Arsenal. The meal itself was of the quality I'd come to expect from Cordelia Hasenbach's personal cooks, which was to say both delicious and almost unnecessarily elaborate. Four services, each with a paired cup of wine – I noticed she drank on sparsely from hers – and ranging from some sort of potage whose ingredients came from a garden first planted by the founder of the Principate to a roasted bird that ate only enchanted seeds and was illegal for anyone but royalty to eat in most of Procer.

Unlike me, it seemed that Hasenbach had something of a sweet tooth. Though she'd eaten with measured grace throughout the meal, she dug into the fourth and final serving of a strawberry-topped custard tart sprinkled with slivers of marzipan with discreet enthusiasm. I ate enough of mine to be polite but found myself much more interested in the bottle of wine that'd been provided to me: Vale summer wine. Slightly cooled in a chillbox, as was the custom this side of the Whitecaps, it proved a pleasurable way to end the finest meal I'd had in a long time.

"I suppose it would be unpatriotic of me to admit I'm growing fond of Proceran cuisine," I mused.

"I will refrain from spreading it around," the First Prince drily replied.

I'd actually put on a dress for once, given that any fighting taking place tonight was unlikely to involved swords. One the downsides to being known as a soldier queen was that there was a expectation I'd show up to everything looking like I was fit for battle, something that was rarely compatible with the sort of cotton summer dress I remained fond of wearing. Not that I could put on one of those when meeting with the likes of Cordelia Hasenbach, sadly. The Arsenal was too cold anyway. Instead I'd put on a long-sleeved dress in black velvet, discreetly embroidered with my heraldry in silver thread on the sides. I'd not bothered with jewelry aside from a set of intricate silver bracelets set with grey agates I'd received as a diplomatic gift from Hasenbach herself a year or two back.

My own small preparations were, naturally, nothing compared to the spectacle that was the First Prince of Procer receiving foreign royalty. The intricate brocade dress in gold and pale she must have been helped into – it was too tightly fitted to her frame for it to be anything but laced in the back – ended in long

skirts that matched the length of the light ermine-collared cloak in the same colours she wore over the dress. A long, slender golden necklace set with sapphires reached well below her throat and over the cloak, calling attention to the narrowness of her waist by contrast. A clever trick of perspective, that, helped along by the way the skirts expanded swiftly outwards. It made her look like slender girl instead of the woman with the Lycaonese warrior frame she actually was. The cape hid the broad shoulders too, I'd noticed, which was a recurring pattern with her.

Still, with all the intricate layers and the way for once her long golden locks had been allowed to tumble down her back – in a very careful and artistic pretence of – carelessly I felt like you might be able to fit two of me in her.

"Much appreciated," I drawled. "So, if it's not too indiscreet to ask, how was it that you learned my favourite wine? I cannot help but feel deeply amused the prospect the famous Circle of Thorns going digging for that."

"It was learned by happenstance during the Liesse Rebellion," the First Prince idly replied, polishing off the last of her dessert. "A certain Hasan Qara used smugglers with which the Circle has ties to obtain a large enough quantity of the vintage that questions were raised."

I breathed out slowly, startled by the way the grief had jumped out at me. It'd been some time since I'd last thought of Ratface. Who'd trusted me and followed me, only to die by an assassin's blade on the night that Malicia had ensured that this could only end with one of us dead.

"I seem to have given offence," Cordelia softly said. "My apologies."

I mastered myself and waved it away.

"He was a good friend," I said. "He died during the Night of Knives and I miss him still."

The First Prince slowly nodded.

"If not for Agnes' foresight and the protection it affords, I would have lost much of my family to the Tower's assassins over the years," the fair-haired Lycaonese said. "I can only offer my sympathies for your loss."

I wasn't sure if she was simply that polished a speaker or if she genuinely meant it, but it made no difference. Ratface's corpse had been given a Legion funeral, in Laure, and one day I would settle his last accounts on his behalf. I could offer no more

than that, though it would still be too small a thing for all that he'd freely given.

"We'll lose more before this is over," I simply said. "Tears are best kept for when the swords return to the sheath."

"A sentiment my people are more than passingly fond of," Cordelia said, faintly rueful.

Our conversation paused as an attendant came to take her empty plate, another bringing in an elegant porcelain teapot to replace it. The First Prince gestured for the woman to pour and she filled a cup with a dark tea fragrant enough I caught the scent from my seat – it was distinctly bitter, as Hasenbach seemed to prefer her brews. The attendants withdrew again after one filled my half-empty glass anew, leaving behind the bottle. Within moments we were alone in the room, and the tension began to rise. After the meal and the idle talk that'd accompanied it, we would finally be getting at the meat of why she'd wanted this meeting.

"We have a great deal to discuss, Queen Catherine," the First Prince said. "This was true before I left Salia, and circumstance has since added to the heap of troubles ahead of us."

"The Prince of Brus conveyed your opinions and offer to me," I carefully said. "Yet I would take council with Lady Dartwick before speaking more to the subject."

Hasenbach lightly sipped at her tea, never making a sound.

"Jurisdiction over the Red Axe is one matter," she said. "The Mirror Knight and his involvement with the House of Langevin are another. Yet even further abroad we are not without ill news."

I frowned.

"Mercantis?" I asked.

Vivienne had recently warned me the situation there was bad and about to get worse, mentioning that we'd speak more of it in person, but I'd not believed it to have gotten to the point of 'ill news'. The Secretariat had warned me even earlier of going on there as well, through Secretary Nestor, but they'd been vague and I was not in the habit of flinching from shadows. I'd been skeptical then and remained skeptical now. The City of Bought and Sold might have gained some leverage over the Grand Alliance by its merchant lords and banks becoming the foremost lenders to the war effort, but they had to be aware that there were *limits* to how much they could push that. Given that most of the mercenary armies they relied on for protection were either six feet deep or under contract, these days, they were also rather vulnerable to directly expressed displeasure.

Also known as violence.

"There is a limit to the papers I can provide you on the matter," Cordelia said, surprisingly forthright, "as they contain privileged information on the Principate's capacities of production and trade. I will have what I can sent to your quarters, however, and I would myself convey the conclusions of my staff if you have no objection."

I hid my surprise. This was a lot more serious than I'd expected.

"Please do," I replied.

"To summarize, unprecedented burdens and the interruption of near all our usual trade routes have effectively ended Procer's ability to sustain itself without outside help," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "Conscription and the previous drains on our treasuries are shaping what would have been a dire crisis into a risk of outright collapse."

Coming from the woman ruling what was still the most powerful nation on the surface of Calernia, that was *stark* thing to hear.

"You should still be able to trade with Callow and Levant," I pointed out.

It wasn't that I doubted her, but rather more that I was surprised. I'd been reading the treasury reports for the Grand Alliance assiduously, and though there'd been dips they'd never been long-lasting. I'd believed we were staying afloat, if not necessarily by much.

"The profits to be found there are smaller than those our merchants are accustomed to," the First Prince delicately replied.

Meaning the Kingdom of Callow and the Dominion of Levant, the two allies who'd not closed their doors to Proceran traders, were simply too *poor* for their trade to sustain Procer. That, I grimly thought, actually sounded about right. I'd been shocked at the wealth of even minor cities in the heartlands of the Principate for a reason.

"And within your own borders the trade is failing," I said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Prices have gone up for nearly all goods," Cordelia said. "To protect their own tradesmen and prevent other principalities from buying up their reserves, princes have been raising increasingly stiff tariffs."

Which was reasonable enough, I thought, but with an eye on the Principate as a whole it must be crippling. Maybe Procer at its

peak could withstand every principality becoming as an island and cutting off trading ties, but it wasn't at its peak right now. Whole swaths of it had been ravaged by Black during his ill-fated march, the north had been turned into a series of ravaged war fronts and there was a mass of displaced refugees to care for in the heartlands. All those were drains that Procer simply wouldn't be able to sustain if all its principalities were closed-off and trying for subsistence instead of prosperity.

"Prince Frederic mentioned confiscations, when we discussed the state of affairs in Procer in passing," I slowly said. "How bad is it really?"

"They have become common practice even south of Lange, now," the blue-eyed princess replied. "If princes attempted to keep to their war quotas without resorting to them, nearly two thirds of the Principate would begin toppling into bankruptcy."

Oh *fuck*. That was... Hells, we were scraping through at rough cost and with only a little hope in the distance right now, but that was with the full weight of the Principate of Procer behind us. If it collapsed behind us the Dead King wouldn't even need to crack our defence lines: we simply wouldn't be able to field and feed large enough armies to keep him back. At that point we'd be forced to retreat, otherwise we were just feeding him well-armed corpses to march south with.

"But the Mercantis loans are keeping you afloat," I said.

"It is not sustainable in the long term," the First Prince said. "We will need increasingly larger loans to remain standing where we are the longer this continues. Yet you are correct, at the moment the coin from Mercantis had allowed us to ward off the spiral downwards."

I drank deep of my cup, barely even enjoying the taste of my favourite wine.

"Are *they* aware of that?" I asked.

Meaning, was awareness of the not negligible leverage this represented the reason they were pushing us now?

"I am uncertain," Cordelia said. "Given the unfortunate amount of success the Eyes of the Empire have had in infiltrating the Principate, however, I believe that on the other hand Dread Empress Malicia *is*."

Of course she godsdamned was. This wasn't the kind of knowledge she was just going to sit on either. Considering that she couldn't really spare military forces to stir up trouble at the moment, the possibility of going for the Grand Alliance's

moneybags using her preferred weapons of knives and influence was the kind of opportunity she'd dig into with relish.

"For a woman fighting a civil war she's remaining unpleasantly active abroad," I growled.

The First Prince sipped at her tea.

"Lady Dartwick informed me that our... friend out east warned the Tower will soon take action in Mercantis," Cordelia said.

Yeah, she'd told me that as well. Our friend out east, huh. My lips twitched. A pretty little euphemism, that, used to refer to Dread Empress Sepulchral. I'd known her as High Lady Abreha Mirembe of Aksum back in the day, though our acquaintance had only been middling – I'd strong-armed her into backing the creating of the Ruling Council of Callow using her nephew as leverage, but we'd not really crossed paths since. She'd risen to prominence in the years that followed mostly by virtue of ruling one of the few High Seats whose holdings had not been touched by civil war or foreign incursions. She'd failed to ride the wave of discontent against Malicia that'd welled up after the destruction of Thalassina all the way to the Tower, but against all expectations her eventual rebellion had not been brutally snuffed out by loyalist legions.

The two empresses past the Wasaliti were still grappling even now, and though Malicia's position was the stronger Sepulchral's own was in no immediate danger of collapse.

"I'd count that as good information," I said. "Malicia scoring victories against foes abroad will strengthen her position with the nobles, so it's in Sepulchral's interests to see her thwarted."

"You had some involvement with Sepulchral when she was still High Lady of Aksum, as I understand it," the First Prince said. "Did you form an opinion of her?"

"Her nephew's the one I had the most dealings with, and he was a follower of the Diabolist with waning ties to his aunt," I cautioned. "But Abreha Mirembe..."

Black had considered her one of the most dangerous nobles in the Empire, considering the amount of blood she'd shed to claim Aksum, but it was not my father's opinion being sought.

"In a lot of ways, she's emblematic of Wasteland upper nobility as a whole," I eventually said. "Cunning, even brilliant in some regards, but also appallingly callous. Abreha Mirembe does not have ideals – or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that her ideal is the acquisition of power no matter the costs."

"The Circle judged her to be hard and opportunistic even by Praesi standards," Cordelia shared.

"Praesi in her rarefied circle of nobility are expected to exalt cruelty in the same way that your princes are expected to show off their piety," I frankly said. "That she not only survived but outright thrived in that environment should tell you a lot about her. She can be relied on to slide a knife into Malicia's back every chance she gets, but not much else."

We'd strayed from our original discussion Mercantis, though, so I subtly changed the subject back to it.

"Mercantis," I said. "I doubt you would have brought it up to me without having some sort of a solution in mind."

The First Prince drank from her cup, taking her time, and set it down so delicately I barely heard the clink of porcelain on porcelain.

"Diplomacy will not be enough to settle that matter," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "It is unfortunate, but no less true for it."

My brow rose. Well now, that was bold of her. And a far cry from her usual methods.

"I can't commit my troops still in Callow to an attack on the city," I warned. "Even if I could afford the vulnerability to Praes that'd bring, only a fool would try an assault on Mercantis without a proper fleet."

Which the Kingdom of Callow did not have. In theory it might be possible to requisition river barges and fishing boats up the Hwaerte until there were enough floating rafts to manage a crossing with, but considering that Mercantis had a small but professional fleet of dedicated warships trying that would just be pissing away an army at the bottom of the Great Lake.

"Nothing quite so significant is required," the fair-haired princess replied. "A few Chosen and Damned, however, would make the point felt quite clearly."

I grimaced. It'd be less of a headache trying to shake a few of those free than trying to shuffle around troops, admittedly, but it'd still be a headache. The real issue was that at least one of those Named would need to have a reputation as a genuine threat to something the size of a city-state if they were to serve as a potable warning against overreach. We had few Named of that calibre, and they were best used up north on the fronts. Pulling one off for what someone unaware of the nuances might think to just be petty politics would not be popular, aside from the actual martial considerations in pulling out such a war asset.

"I could reach out to the Kingdom Under," I suggested.

Mercantis was under their protection, and the dwarves had a vested interest in the Grand Alliance continuing to make a dent in the forces of the Dead King.

"If the King Under the Mountains can be convinced to intervene, it will have a significant impact," Cordelia agreed. "Yet the dwarves have traditionally been reluctant to involve themselves in such matters."

Which was probably why she'd not opened by requesting I try that – she didn't believe the Kingdom Under would actually move even if asked. She might not be wrong, since they were a pretty mercenary people and they didn't exactly owe me any favours at the moment. Those had been spent keeping the drow fed on their exodus, amongst other things. Might as well find out, though, there wasn't much to lose in asking.

"I'll draft a letter," I said, drumming my fingers against the table.

"Thank you," she smiled. "While I would ask you to consider the practicalities of sending Chosen to Mercantis, such a measure would yet be distant. I have arranged a conference with representatives of the Consortium here in the Arsenal. I would be pleased if you could attend it."

Impressing the merchants with a look at the Arsenal, huh? A pretty simple tactic, but it'd probably still be somewhat effective considering how unearthly and impressive this place could look. It wasn't like this place wasn't going to turn into a major diplomatic artery for a month or two anyway, we might as well make use of it properly.

"I'll be there," I agreed. "Have the details sent to my people."

I let a moment pass.

"To be sure," I slowly said, "you do want me in that room to scare them, correct?"

The First Prince of Procer was too self-controlled to be visibly embarrassed by my laying out the truth so bluntly, but I doubted it was a coincidence she chose that moment to take a sip of tea.

"Your reputation carries a great deal of weight, Queen Catherine," the blue-eyed princess carefully said. "Your displeasure would not be courted lightly."

Meaning that those representatives were a lot less likely to try to push the Grand Alliance if I made it clear that such a mistake would lead to my gating in with a few thousand drow one evening

and expressing my *displeasure*. Fair enough. I'd have hesitated to be the rabid hound of this play more if there were likely to be long term diplomatic consequences for Callow, but my abdication should see to the worse of that. Besides, by then my home should be a lot less afraid of Mercantis' displeasure: if trade with Praes and Procer was open, then the Consortium's usefulness as a middleman waned significantly.

"I'm sure they can be made to understand that if their greed ends up feeding Calernia to Keter, before the end I'll personally lead my armies to raze Mercantis to the ground and salt the ashes," I mildly said.

"The very sort of talk that might give the ambitious pause," Cordelia delicately admitted. "The imprudence in relying too heavily on the Consortium has been made clear, however, which demands other measures be taken. Bringing peace to even part of the Free Cities would allow for the resumption of trade, and so lessen the burden on the southern principalities."

"In principle I'm very much in favour," I said. "I simply don't see a practical way to achieve peace in the region anytime soon."

The wars in the League of Free Cities had reached a point of stalemate, more or less. Basileus Leo Trakas still ruled in the city of Nicae itself, but he'd lost the countryside to Strategos Zenobia and neither could afford to dislodge the other. Penthes' armies had been whipped on the field by General Basilia, who'd managed to get Helike in order behind her, but after the casualties of the Proceran campaign and half her army leaving to serve under the Grand Alliance she didn't have the siege or mages to take Penthes itself – whose much-despised Exarch Prodocius was rumoured to be propped up by Malicia directly. Stygia was quietly feeding the flames, hoping to expand after everyone was spent, and neither Atalante nor Bellerophon seemed inclined to get involved.

Only Delos was keeping an eye on things, but while the Secretariat had passed information to me in the past it was also very reluctant to surrender its current neutrality. The askretis had no interest in a war after the way their last one had gone.

"Though there will be difficulties," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "if the signatories Grand Alliance were to wield their clout in accord it would not be impossible to effect change."

I watched her and drank from my cup, noncommittal. There'd been good reasons for the Grand Alliance being so reluctant to involve itself in the wars of the League, and though what I'd learned about the darkening of Procer changed the situation some I was still inclined to caution there. Any resources spent on trying to plug that sinking boat might very well end up wasted with nothing to show for it, leaving us even worse off than before.

"A shared recognition of Strategos Zenobia as the legitimate ruler of Nicae, for example, would strengthen her support," she suggested.

"Not enough to topple Leo Trakas," I pointed out.

Which would make the gesture entirely pointless, as far as I was concerned.

"Perhaps so, if paired with a severing of all ties with territory under the rule of the Basileus," Cordelia said.

That'd put pressure, though not an enormous amount: with sea trade in the Samite Gulf good as dead, Nicae wouldn't be taking any real losses by this. It'd still be made a pariah to a large coalition, though, and that might make some nobles in the city turn on the Basileus out of fear the sanctions would remain even when things calmed. It was also, however, something that might just backfire spectacularly if the people of Nicae were moved to anger by the foreign interference into their affairs. Something that the First Prince would be well aware of, which meant there was another angle there.

"Under what pretext?" I asked.

"I would have the Grand Alliance name Leo Trakas a friend to the Dead King, and so an enemy to all the living," the First Prince said.

My hands clenched. I forced them to loosen, then drank again from the cup as I gathered my thoughts. The refusal on the tip of my tongue had been instant, but it had been more a thing of instinct than thought. This entire proposal smacked of the House of Light declaring me Arch-heretic of the East to me, only even more shamelessly political. Basileus Leo Trakas was inconvenient to us, and circumstances might well have forced him into some degree of alliance with the Tower, but it was going a step too far to call him an ally of the Dead King. I calmly set down my cup.

"I don't like the precedent this sets," I said. "We're an alliance, not the ruling lords of Calernia. And while this sort of denunciation might be taken as face value by a lot of people, given the war we're in, we both know that Leo Trakas is mostly trying to stay alive at the moment. I've little pity to spare for the man, but I'm not comfortable using titles like 'friend to the Dead King' as a diplomatic stick."

It was the sort of thing that made a man genuinely desperate, and a Basileus with both nothing left to lose and *helpful* Wasteland friends was a recipe for disaster.

"I understand your hesitation," the First Prince said. "It does not please me to have to resort to such a method. My advisors

suggested the same manoeuvre be used to exert pressure on Penthes, in truth, but I balked. It would be an overreach."

So Exarch Prodocius, arguably by far the worse man of the two for having helped Malicia arrange a use of Still Water, would be spared the same epithet. Because Cordelia was trying to put together the western half of the League as a mostly stable trading bloc for the Principate, not the east. The naked truth laid bare by what she must have considered to be a demonstration of restraint only made me more uneasy. Some of that must have shown on my face, as she pressed forward.

"As you have yourself pointed out, we otherwise lack the means to truly affect matters in the Free Cities," the fair-haired princess said.

"I still think that even in putting out the fire in Nicae you'd be laying the foundations for a worse blaze down the line," I said. "Did you go to Levant about this?"

"The Holy Seljun was willing to agree," she replied. "Though only after a formal vote of signatory members, and only should that vote be unanimous."

Ah, so Wazim Isbili was cleverer than his reputation implied. That way Tariq's distant nephew could let me refuse Procer on his behalf instead of having to do his own dirty work. That trick of procedure, though, spoke to me of a smaller nation used to existing in Procer's shadow and wary of helping it gain too much influence even in a crisis. Those passed, after all, while influence gained during them lingered a lot longer. Of course, if I could figure this much out then Hasenbach could as well. I cocked a silent eyebrow at her.

"As I said," the First Prince of Procer repeated, "I understand your hesitation. Perhaps a more cautious approach would better suit? A private mock-vote can be had, and should it be unanimous a letter of warning can be sent to Leo Trakas as to what will follow."

I didn't like having even the pretence of my seal of approval on this, but unfortunately she was right that we weren't flush with ways to settle the mess in the League. It might not be avoidable for me to get my hands dirty here. *And I can always change my vote when it comes to actually going through with this.*

"You're leveraging him," I said, implicitly agreeing. "So what is it you're trying to leverage him into?"

"Opening the gates of Nicae to Strategos Zenobia, who by law is the senior ruler of the city-state," Cordelia said. "This would be under guarantee of safety for him and his partisans,

naturally. I have been corresponding with Zenobia and she is amenable to those terms."

I couldn't help but notice she'd not mentioned General Basilia, who'd been the one to raise Zenobia up in the first place. Mostly as a way to keep Nicae off her back while she went after Penthes, but it couldn't be denied the two were aligned with Basilia the distinct greater of that alliance.

"I could get Helike to accept those terms," I said, "if Zenobia is willing to turn on Penthes."

The First Prince's eyes narrowed as she watched me closely.

"In what sense?" she asked. "The city will have little force to field after this."

"It will have ships," I said. "The lack of which is one of the reasons Basilia can't siege the coastal fortresses properly."

Able to cut them off from the sea, the Helikean general might be able to starve them out even if she couldn't take the walls. Or at least make a good enough threat of it that Prodocius' army would have to either give battle or face the prospect of losing every holdout outside the walls of Penthes. Considering that Basilia seemed a lot more interested in winning her wars than cementing influence over Nicae, I suspected she'd take naval support from Nicae over Leo Trakas' head on a pike. He'd made for a pretty middling rival, anyway.

"I will have to contact the Strategos," Cordelia said, "yet I suspect she will be amenable to such terms."

I suspected that Hasenbach would push for acceptance, regardless of whether or not Zenobia liked the deal. It was compounding gain with gain, from the Proceran perspective: with a fleet on her side, Basilia would be able to become a serious headache for another ally of the Tower. More importantly she'd be doing that fighting in the eastern territories of the League, far from anything Hasenbach currently cared about. Considering that while I might be the effective patron of Basilia's Helike the Principate had a much more contentious relationship with her, keeping the general busy in the east might even be considered yet another gain. I nodded sharply.

"Stygia's going to be an issue," I said. "Lukewarm as they might be on the Tower, they're not going to let alliances firm up the western League without taking measures."

"I concur," the Lycaonese princess said. "And it so happens I have a few thoughts on how to check them."

We must have spoken for at least an hour more after that, breaking only for a bit when we had to send for maps – I was trying to make the point of why a Nicaean support fleet would practically double the size of what Basilia could field in soldiers just because of the supply line they represented – and Hasenbach excusing herself to use the privy. It was turning out to be a thoroughly productive evening, and though the suggestion of sponsoring defensive pacts between cities against Stygia in particular would be dead in the water without Atalante or Delos being brought on, it was a solid notion we could keep pushing without a significant investment of resources on our part.

In time the subject was exhausted, at least in the sense that more could not be discussed without the both of us having sought answers outside and read through reports. I was just starting on my third cup of Vale summer wine by then, though I'd been slow in drinking it, so I was largely sober and feeling rather vivified by how much we'd gotten done. In a concession to my own consumption Hasenbach had sent for a cup of hydromel she'd been nursing ever since she'd finished the tea, and it was that she set down when the conversation hit a low ebb.

"I believe we have discussed the matter exhaustively enough for the night," the First Prince said.

"Agreed," I said.

I sighed, leaning back into my seat.

"So let's talk about the troubles closer to home."

tithin

I'm looking at that Chekhov's gun of her going to the privy with suspicion

Ninestrings

Chekhov's privy really? you think she's gonna Corleone her?

Miles

She switched with a spy! The Wandering Bard in disguise! Or maybe she just stuffed that dress with explosives! Using Cat's dead goats trick against her. That dastardly Dead King is there any low he won't stoop to?

[*shikkarasu*](#)

You can't kill Cat with a dynamite dress. Cat had to write an entire paper on the topic after Marchford. If you're going to dress to kill it will have to be metaphorically; she's still quite susceptible to that.

[onedollargum](#)

I like the implication that Catherine doesn't need to use the toilet. When one is named, or better yet, First of Night... XD

[TeK](#)

She can just gate it, lol

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sve Noc: <ahem>

Ninestrings

When you poop into the abyss, the abyss also poops into you.

NerfContessa

Staaap..... My lungs....

You 3 just made my neighbors ask if I was alright...

Ahahaha

General Chaos

She got real horny for Cat doing Diplomacy and had to go to do some... petting of her cat.

laguz24

I do love these political speeches, and if Catherine's plan works mercantis is not going to enjoy its traditional value for much longer despite the debts.

[Javvies](#)

The economic problems of Procer are bad news.
And a compelling argument against delaying action against Keter any longer than absolutely necessary.
If Procer's economy collapses, the war is effectively lost, until/unless the right Story path starts ... which is what Saint wanted and very few other more reasonable people do.

I agree with Cat, Malicia is way too active in external affairs for someone who is supposed to be fighting a bitter civil war.

And we have to wait for the next chapter (at least) to find out more about the internal issues of the Grand Alliance/Procer, and the Named and the bullshit Bard pulled.

Salt

To be honest I don't like the shape of it, the thing with Malicia. The entire situation reeks of a trap to me. I'm wondering if maybe her supposed action in Mercantis is a ruse to bait Cat and Cordelia into making a mistake and offending Mercantis.

What if Cat's first instinct was correct, and Malicia appears too active for a woman fighting a bitter civil war because that's exactly what she is: just putting up the appearance of being active. If her resources are stretched too thin to strike a real blow, it would make perfect sense to make your enemies trip over themselves by overreacting to a non-existent blow, such as attacking Mercantis or overstepping their bounds in meddling with the Free cities. Let them make enemies out of their own allies for no real reason, and even if they found out the scheme later, revealing it would sound like the worst excuse ever constructed. "Oh, Malicia tricked us into thinking you were going to screw us over first, Mercantis, whoopsie sorry for threatening your sovereignty with overwhelming violence."

It would fit Malicia's MO – plots within plots, and would take a hell of a lot less resources to pull off than actually turning anyone against the Grand Alliance.

Remember that this entire thing is based on a missive from Sepulchral, not directly from their own intelligence networks, which is again a vastly easier to do than fully infiltrating the Jacks or the Circle of Thorns. All she'd have to do is have a halfway decent idea of their reliance on foreign trade, and find a way to send a fake missive "from Dread Empress Sepulchral".

Not only will the Grand Alliance have little reason to doubt it – as it is supposed to be a top secret/secure form of correspondence from a contact that has all the right motives for sending such a letter – they'll WANT to believe it. They'll be expecting a blow from Malicia sooner or later, and they will WANT to believe that this once they've caught onto Malicia's game ahead of time. That just this once they're beating her to the punch, when in reality they're just sabotaging themselves by playing right into her hand.

Salt

I mean hell, the missives from Sepulchral could've been Malicia missives from the beginning. It'd be insanely risky

for anyone to poke too much into the matter – open collaboration of any degree with a Dread Empress of Praes would spark minor rebellions if found out, especially considering Praes is allied to the Dead King – and Malicia could just make it believable by revealing moderately harmful information about her own moves to the Grand Alliance, before dropping a truly devastating lie after trust was already gained.

caoimhinh

True. It wouldn't even be the first time Praesi Intelligence infiltrated and falsified reports and correspondence of foreign countries. Procer and Callow being particularly susceptible to this. Malicia has been doing such things to Procer since as early as their civil war decades years ago and all the Princes taking loans from the Pravus Bank, and she held control of Callow for 20 years, *and* she has been toying with Praesi Nobility for over 40 years.

Infiltrating Abreha's agents is something Malicia probably dozens of years ago. So she seems pretty capable of falsifying a report from Abreha's agents to Cat and Cordelia.

hakureireimu

But the plot would fail once the Alliance had a talk with Mercantis, unless their representative is also compromised.

Salt

If Mercantis really was planning to betray them to Praes for the sake of profit, they wouldn't exactly tell the Grand Alliance about their plans to betray the Grand Alliance. It's not as if Catherine could walk up to their merchants and ask "are you planning to secretly stab us in the back?"

Gaunt

It's talk like this that makes me miss the Tyrant of Helike just a little bit.

Salt

LMAO

Rest in anything but peace, Kairos Theodosian. You died on your feet.

jamesc9

I was going to say that he was busy, rather than resting, but of course the busy person is Anaxares of

Bellerophon, who gained employment with the Choir of Justice.

agumentic

Well, Circle of Thorns was telling Cordelia that Mercantis was pushing to disclose the debts and fuck over Procer/Grand Alliance before Vivienne told her about the message from Sepulchral, so I think that is solid information. It's not like it would take Malicia a lot of resources to push that angle – she just needs to guide certain people to certain information and then normal human greed will do the deed.

Also, I believe that Scribe has joined Sepulchral, so infiltrating her networks and intercepting the missives to the Grand Alliance might be pretty hard.

Salt

I think that's the beauty of it though, you're right it is also a very real possibility that Malicia has actually gotten to one of the Merchant Princes that facilitated Cordelia's little accounting trick. They can't be sure, because while it'd be difficult for Malicia to get to they can't exactly say 100% that a woman of her brilliance didn't find a shortcut that most people wouldn't be able to fathom. So Cat and Cordelia can't take things slow at all – they need to move on this now.

But that's the genius behind the plan:

If Malicia IS making a move and they do nothing – the Merchants find out about the sheer size of Proceran debt and stops offering any more loans, cutting off Procer's funding.

If Malicia ISN'T making a move but they respond as if she is, Mercantis takes it as sign that Procer is getting ready to default on what they already suspect to be a massive debt that the First Prince has clearly gone out of her way to obscure the scope of, and stops offering any more loans, cutting off Procer's funding.

To either ascertain what Malicia has planned or to take mitigating measures is within their power, but it requires such immediate attention that the Grand Alliance can't afford to look Malicia's way if she starts truly winning the Wasteland's civil war.

I'm actually thinking that instead of solving the internal problem (the civil war) so she can tackle the external one (the grand alliance), Malicia is looking to tie up the external problem to bring the hammer down on the internal one without external repercussion.

If the Wasteland civil war starts heating up as soon as the Mercantis politics really get going, then we know that Malicia has already won this battle regardless whether or not Cat and Cordelia guess correctly. If Cat and Cordelia guess wrong, that's a win for Malicia on two political fronts.

caoimhinh

Yeah, but it makes sense that she is able to do that, as Malicia has a strong base for foreign monetary intervention through Mercantis, the Pravus Bank (which she used to fund Procer's civil war). Praes is one of the richest countries in matters of precious gems and metals like gold, plus artifacts (what they lack is food products, fertile land for planting, and ranching), so even if she is having to fight internally, she has the money to move things abroad. In fact, for Praes it is a matter of bare survival to have money to use abroad as Black's lessons to Catherine showed.

On the other hand, I'm a bit dubious about Procer's approaching collapse. I'm a bit confused about what exactly is happening and what caused it. The summary is "the war against Keter takes its toll" but the devil is in the details.

I thought they had problems due to not having enough food reserves (that was mentioned chapters ago), but Cordelia is making it seem like they are lacking *coin* as she only talked about loans of coin, not resources like food.

Then again, considering it's been over 2 years since Amadeus's burning march through Eastern Procer, the blow from that should have already been received and those lands affected reused, new harvest should be coming from there even if a great number of the population is up North as soldiers. And even if not, Procer has other Principalities that should be able to feed it. Iserre having problems due to Black's raids would make sense, not so the whole of Procer.

But the problem Procer *should be having* is a lack of manpower to tend the fields, rather than lack of money. I'd be surprised if Cordelia hasn't enforced laboring the fields just like she has enforced conscription. Civilian population staying in the cities at a time like this will cause losses due to so many mouths eating and no one producing food.

Also, since allegedly Procer needs loans of money to buy food, I wonder where the food is going to come from. It's not from Callow nor Levant, definitely not Praes (they buy a lot of their food from Procer, Callow and co.), and Mercantis is an *intermediary* for trade between countries, they are a small island, they are not the ones producing the food Procer needs. So that leaves the League or Ashur as the suppliers of the food

Procer wants to buy. Unless they plan to buy from outside of Calernia?

P.S: Princes making matters worse by rising tariffs and stopping trade, yeah, those guys are suuuch geniuses. To be fair, though, that's kind of how the wealthy investors and stockholders in our world react when rumors of crisis circulate: withdraw their money, refuse to circulate thus making the value of stocks drop... which in turn creates the crisis.

Speculation and panic are the real cause of the crisis.

mamm0nn

From what I understand, it's the issue with reserves and fielding the food to the front lines. The latter is likely a huge drain that takes a lot of manpower on top of a lot of food, while the former cannot slowly build up some fat again. Especially considering the reserves in the granaries and such would be the same long-lasting foods that would have to be sent to the front lines.

The people are likely relying on their cabbage patches and other vegetables that don't remain long-lasting without canning which this setting doesn't have yet. Which means plenty of local food most of the time, but tough winters where the farmers are scraping by likely by tapping into their cattle's meat and poaching are making things dangerous. And it means virtually no trade, while the agriculture that could generate trade is being almost completely used up by the supply lines to the northern front and the scraps are taken as tariffs (which are likely in produce rather than gold if possible).

For the lacking gold, this is both a matter of inflation and deflation happening in unison. Inflation because everything vital; food, metal and manpower, is getting scarce and expensive while things like luxuries have to move along to remain luxuries, and deflation because the Kingdom Down Under is a constant gold drain without returns (other than loans) that continuously remove gold from the economy. So there's less gold and silver to go around and you can buy less with it.

mamm0nn

Really annoyed that WordPress doesn't allow me to edit afterwards

The situation is dangerous because people are annually having rough winters of famine, and nothing makes the people riot like starvation. Everything else can make them form a mob, but starvation is an absolute that presses people

against the wall and makes them riot even if it costs their life because they and their families are dying anyway and they can do nothing else against it. Famine means that riots will preserve even in the face of armies and Named until the famine is resolved.

And, agriculture is always a huge part of the economy. Always. It's mass goods and everyone needs it. Most of the economy will be crippled when this falls away, meaning that a lot of merchants are currently out of a job or fighting over scraps while no one's buying from the luxuries merchants. In situations like these, it's likely that any merchant that can make a living through different means no matter how parasitic will do so to maintain their wealth and lifestyle, while those that can't will bottle up their money and further grind down the economy.

Salt

They're buying food from under Calernia I believe, not outside of it. The dwarves offered them essentially an unlimited amount of food and weapons as long as they can afford it, when Cat negotiated terms with the Herald at the end of the Everdark arc. It makes sense that coin is all they care about when they're basically dumping it all underground for supplies. 2/10ths cost on steel and at cost for food.

There was also mention of protecting their supply lines that way as well, since going underground through Dwarven territory would make their supply lines untouchable, provided they could pay for it.

The Kingdom Under was also trying to strangle them with predatory loans this way, offering loans to go with. Those, Cat warned Cordelia not to take because the terms were so bad.

I believe it was revealed back during in the first chat Cat and Cordelia had after the Twilight Ways arc.

SpeckofStardust

Yep easy talk out of the way the real discussion shall begin.

Salt

I find it kind of hilarious that Cordelia and Catherine are adopting a Good Cop/Bad Cop routine, with Cordelia being so unused to solving complex problems with a blunt instrument that she's a little embarrassed to even admit it outright. Like the proudest master fencer admitting that she'd like to use a hammer, just this once.

Although, the foreshadowing there is anything but hilarious, when the chapter ended on the conversation ending in a "low ebb". What was it that they called political warfare in Procer, the ebb and flow?

I have a suspicion the flow might very soon end up being more of a tsunami

edrey

Now i have the idea of selling that angel remain to the kingdom under for a insane amount of gold, well not for them they are too rich for that. That solve the problem of money, the bard and probably the DK, the bard wouldnt mind as long keter is finished right?

[Burlyraven](#)

The talk of sending a party of five to Mercantis sounds like an excellent date for Cat and Kingfisher. They can bring Archer and Zeze and call it a double date. Probably Roland as well, to keep the scales balanced, and maybe the fated sixth can save him from fifth-wheeling.

dadycool

As long as Masego can finish preparing for his prior engagement first, he might be down for spending time with his ladies. Problem is, every second he spends away from his workshop is a second wasted. Cat and Freddy, on the other hand, probably desperately need a break from the Front and it's probably easier to avoid a scandal out in the wild than in a fortress.

It just generally goes back to one of Cat's gripes about sending a group: anyone suitable is already needed where they are.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I appreciate the > I appreciated the
drank on sparsely > drank sparsely (or only sparsely)
me to I'm > me to say I'm
One the > One of the
a expectation > an expectation
look like slender > look like a slender
the all the > all the
of – carelessly I > of carelessness – I
the prospect the > at the prospect of the
was stark thing > was a stark thing
form buying > from buying
discussion Mercantis > discussion of Mercantis

potable warning (potent? potential? palpable?)
though, there > though; there
you," she > you." She
anyway, we > anyway; we
signatories Grand > signatories of the Grand
the drank > then drank
taken as face > taken at face

Catherine's inner monologue

We'd strayed from our original discussion voting for a practical guide to evil, though, so I subtly changed the subject back to it.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Adrian V

I have this strange feeling Cat or Viv will be travelling to Nicae or Penthes, whoever gives them more trouble (AKA gets desperate) for a little diplomacy

mamm0nn

A Practical Guide to Evil, where the politics are intriguing rather than boring, and boy is there a lot of politics.

SpacyRicochet

It's getting close to "too much politics" for my taste. This chapter wasn't all that interesting to me. Though I'm glad it helps with putting future decisions in perspective.

Charlie Hegarty

I enjoy economics, I like seeing the rest of this world continue to be fleshed out. I'm excited to see more of and to find out what Malicia is going to do, as she is one of the characters I most enjoy reading about.

But, the more the story focuses on issues like economics, feeding your country, home dissent to draconian measures and the like, and tries to convince me that Procer is in danger of collapse, the harder it is for me to gloss over the question of why Callow, which has gone through worse, hasn't collapsed yet.

Shveiran

Because it is smaller, mostly united, and the damage dealt to its productive capacity has been paired with a reduction of the populace for every generation. It also supports a specialized army which absorbs a smaller portion of its populace.

In comparison, Procer has been facing less numerical problem but a much longer one, is losing the most profitable trade avenues, and relies on armies largely levied from the populace. This has a much harsher effect on its industry and wealth, not to mention its capacity to produce food.

Callow is streamlined; it is not doing good, but it has a lot of farms and the arms to tend to them: it can feed itself and is in no danger to collapse.

Procer is a much more complex machine that lost a greater portion of its workforce and has to keep it fed on the front. It's more fragile, it turns slower, and risks tipping over.

Salt

Not to mention that while the Principiate has spent the last several decades prior to the Crusade scheming against and bleeding themselves, the Evil Praesi occupation (ironically enough) was economically much less damaging. Callow was in rather stable economic condition, run by an efficient centralized government, at the start of the story.

Politically and culturally suppressed as the nation was, it was also ruled-in-all-but-name by a man who spent much of his life studying and implementing mundane institutions effective enough to replace the old madness of the East; and who fully intended to make Callow stable enough to not want to rebel, rather than crushing them into "a pack of plundered provinces" with no ability to do so. I think it's safe to assume that the internal workings of the nation functioned a lot more efficiently in the first place than the pack of rabid cats that Cordelia has been trying to herd for most of her life.

Their insane national unity, as you briefly mentioned already, is nothing to joke about either. We've seen from Callowan soldiers' POVs so far that while the Black Queen might be a bit too black if it were peacetime, wartime is another matter entirely. Any perceived external threat has the nation closing ranks immediately, and their culture has been so conditioned to protect their own from a nonstop stream of external invasions that the crown receives near-absolute support from its populace in wartime, for as long as it's seen to be protecting the nation from possible invaders.

Essentially: it's mostly just good luck. Callow had the most administratively responsible oppressor imaginable in the Black Knight, was warred on so frequently that the nation and culture were suited for a state of total war in the first place, and had a convenient and wildly popular national war hero-turned-monarch to rally around.

[TeK](#)

Also, unlike Procer, Callow had been in a state of a total war for quite a few times during it's history, while for Procer this kind of crisis is unprecedented.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Seems at this point that it's mostly a matter of having a more centralized government than Procer. The latter still has a massive aristocracy, each ruling their own lands with little outside control except the things Cordelia can explicitly make into law, which if I'm remembering right requires votes in the Assembly? Callow, on the other hand, lost most of their aristocracy in the Conquest, and most of what they do have left is working directly for the monarchy as either officials or soldiers. Thus, while they deal with the same pressures, Procer has the additional pressure of a large nobility acting in self interest rather than the interest of the whole, while Callow's government is more able to take a big picture approach to their problems

Daniel E

I am looking forward to Catherine's meeting with the Mercantics reps. I really hope we'll see her take the opportunity to ham it up, really go 'old school Villain' on them.

Baron

"I suppose it would be unpatriotic of me to I'm growing fond of Proceran cuisine," I mused.

Admit has been omitted

jalexanderb

"Meaning that those representatives were a lot less likely to try to push the Grand Alliance if I made it clear that such a mistake would lead to my gating in with a few thousand drow one evening and expressing my displeasure."

Queen Catherine 'fuck around and find out!' Foundling strikes again

Alexis

Upon refection? I'm not sure if that's a typo, or a glorious pun!

>> I found out, to my mild surprise, that there were not one but three private dining rooms in the Alcazar. I'd not even been aware that were any, though it made sense upon refection

edrey

As side note, someone know what did happen with ashur?, they lost the second and third tier of the ruling class but anything else?

Hakram's Dead Hand

R.I.P. Ratface. I still miss you. 😞

Chapter 33: Convenience

"Thirty-seven: theft in the service of Above is not a sin. It is, however, still a crime. Be discreet."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

"Shall we begin with the least contentious of the subjects to be broached?"

Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Warden of the West and Protector of the Realms of Man, struck me as looking rather cautious right now. Wary of angering me? Might be, depending on what she considered to be the least contentious of the things we needed to talk about. It was always relative, when it came to stuff like this – the least murderous of three High Lords still usually had an unfortunate amount of murder under their belt. I took a long sip from my cup, letting the pleasant taste of my favourite wine linger against my palate.

"I'm all ears," I said.

"There are, from the reports I have received about the incident at the Arsenal, two Damned who will need to face punishment," the First Prince said. "Namely, the Concocter and the Hunted Magician."

I smothered a grimace at the pun, which I would generously assume to have been unintentional.

"All other villains who were involved are dead," I agreed.

So that was why she'd been cautious, huh. Dealing with villains was my legal responsibility, in the end. The Hunted Magician would stand trial before a tribunal, since he'd actively helped along an invasion of the Arsenal and the Arsenal was an interest of all the signatory states of the Grand Alliance, but the tribunal itself couldn't actually sentence him to anything. Only I could, as his representative under the Terms. In theory, at least. In practice, if I outright ignored the recommendations given out by a tribunal that'd count the White Knight and

representatives for both Procer and Levant, I'd be asking for a diplomatic shitstorm.

Hanno would be in the same situation when it came to the Red Axe. I'd have a seat on her tribunal as well, as both the representative for both Callow and Below's lot, but I wouldn't have the right to pass a sentence on her any more than the First Prince or whoever the Dominion ended up sending. There were good reasons for that. In my case, for example, if I had the authority to sentence heroes it'd lead to the rebellion of more than a few before the day was out. Hanno of Arwad was trusted as an adjudicator, and only him. Though while he had the same right to outright ignore anything the rest of the tribunal would say, when it came down to it he'd also have the same considerations as me to deal with.

Hasenbach was treading carefully here because, after pushing for the Red Axe to be tried by Procer and not under the Terms, she did not want me to mistake her asking about my current leanings on punishing my charges as an attempt on her part to keep usurping authority over the Terms.

"May I be blunt?" I asked.

Something like an amused flicker passed through those blue eyes.

"Have you not been?" the First Prince of Procer asked.

Well now, I thought, lips twitching. Get another few drinks into that one and she might actually be fun.

"I don't think you're trying to get your hands on the Terms," I frankly said. "Only an idiot would try to make that many Named into a personal army, and even back when negotiating with you regularly drove me to screaming I did not believe you to be one. You don't need to tread lightly for fear of offending me there. If I consider you to be overstepping I will say as much, but I am not looking to be offended."

Blue eyes considered me, weighing the extent of my honesty in speaking, then she nodded.

"A lengthy trial for the Hunted Magician would be damaging," Cordelia said. "And your intentions when it comes to the Concocter remain unclear. I would establish as soon as possible what you intend, so that the affair can be solved swiftly when it comes to deliberation."

"You won't be alone in that tribunal," I pointed out. "And, now that I think of it, will it be you personally or a representative?"

"I might have nominated Princess Rozala if we could afford to pull her from the front, but as circumstances stand I will personally represent the Principate," she said. "And while I will freely profess to be unable to account for the White Knight, Lord Yannu Marave's interests are well known to me."

Ah, so Juniper's old foe from the Champion's Blood was the one the Dominion has sent. Considering the Cleves front was supposed to be holding steady at the moment I supposed he was the natural pick. My own two Levantines might represent a significant bloc in the Dominion now that they were betrothed, but they were both still a little young for this sort of game. The Lord of Alava had a weightier reputation than either and probably better understood how to preserve the interests of Levant.

"What *does* Levant want out of this?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"To ensure punishment is dealt," the First Prince said, "and to avoid, at all costs, even the shadow of a precedent that might force them to ennoble one of their Damned."

Yeah, that sounded about right. Aside from the Grey Pilgrim, whose concerns tended to extend far from the borders of the Dominion, in my experience the Blood tended to hardly care about what went on beyond their borders. So long as their anger wasn't actively courted, they were unlikely to take a stand.

"Neither should be an issue," I said. "When it comes to the Hunted Magician, considering his cooperation with the Wandering Bard it's a given that he loses the right to object to assignments for the remainder of the duration of the Terms."

"Yet, given the nature of his talents, he would still be best employed at the Arsenal," Cordelia skeptically noted.

Meaning it was an empty punishment, as far as she was concerned, since he wouldn't be going anywhere or be losing anything.

"That'd be the basic consequence of dealing with an enemy, not the punishment," I replied. "For that, I'm currently leaning towards a fine. Within the next three days we should have estimates of what the damages to the Arsenal will cost to repair. A fine of that amount will be given."

I paused.

"Once for each signatory nation of the Grand Alliance," I said. "In addition, he will personally have to repay the pensions any of our nations give to the families of soldiers who died during the attack."

The First Prince's brow rose, ever so slightly.

"That would be a considerable sum," she said.

More than any man could repay in a lifetime, though admittedly the occasional villain got more than that. With a debt like that over his head the Magician was a lot more likely to leg it to the Free Cities after the war than stick around and repay it. I'd considered that, of course. The trick was in how it'd be paid back.

"It would be up to the nations to decide in what nature they might prefer that repayment," I said. "The Kingdom of Callow, however, will accept it in artefact-crafting and enchanting work."

Meaning Vivienne would have a fortune's worth of labour from one of the finest mages on the continent to call on when her reign began, already paid for. The Rhenian princess considered me for a moment, remaining silent as her well-honed mind parsed out all the implications.

"While heavily in debt, to a sum total comparable to a prince's treasury if not greater, the Magician will also have direct ties to the rulers of three great nations," Cordelia quietly said. "In the world of the Accords, that would be the sort of protection one of the Damned might well kill for."

It really was. So long as three crowns had a fortune's worth of highly valuable and difficult labour left to extract out of the Hunted Magicians' hide, none of them were likely to let the man get his head cut off by an overzealous hero or bar their door to him. I was still making the man a beggar for at least a decade, forcing him to largely live on the charity of the patrons he'd work for, so it wasn't like I was letting him off easy. But it was the sort of punishment that would win me points with the cleverer among my kind and avoid alienating the Magician entirely.

"The Concocter deserves less punishment," I said, "and I don't intend to convene a tribunal over it. She'll lose the right to refuse assignments, like the Magician, but aside from that I only intend to have her personally brew tailored potions for every lastingly wounded soldier in the Arsenal or the family of any deceased. The ingredients will, of course, come out of her pocket."

A princely gift, in the sense that few aside from princes would otherwise be able to afford the Concocter brewing for them personally. I owed the woman a favour for having kept Hakram alive, so I intended to offer to quietly float her a loan from my own funds to pay for the ingredients. If it just so happened that I forgot to ask for interest or a fixed timeline for repayment, well, so be it. Hakram was worth a lot more to me than the coin,

and it would have still been a bargain for a hundred times the price.

"A harsh price, given the paucity of her involvement," Cordelia said, "but that will win you esteem from Lord Yannu. You foresee no complications there?"

"None," I said.

"I had expected that I would have to push for harsher sentences," the First Prince admitted. "In that I did you disservice, for you have struck an admirable balance between stern and sufferable."

I snorted.

"I have weaknesses as a queen, glaring ones," I said, "but I've been a warlord and leader of Named since I was seventeen. When it comes to that, you can expect a steady hand of me."

It wasn't the same, handing out a sentence as a queen and as the leader of a band. No ruler in the world had absolute authority, true enough, but it was an even more tenuous thing Named. Too loose a hand and they would run wild, too firm and they would leave. I'd believed my father to have been as a lord over the Calamities, when I'd been younger, and half-believed it a fault when I later grasped he was anything but. Being a representative under Terms had forced me to understand, though, how delicate a balancing act his leadership of that band had really been. I'd done this for many more Named than Black had ever led, but I'd also done it for scarcely two years and with literal Death knocking at the door up north. He, on the other hand, had kept the Calamities largely sane and safe for several decades even with few outside threats to keep them together.

"Talent is distributed blind to titles and breeding," Cordelia said.

I'd take that for the backhanded compliment that it was. I doubted Hasenbach and I would ever see eye to eye on a lot of things – it'd be hard to, when she would always put Procer first and I Callow – but that'd not prevented a degree of respect from emerging as our working relationship grew less venomous. I would not soon forget how many of my soldiers had died in a war I'd not wanted to fight, or the burning anger of having peace refused again and again, but I had less unpleasant things to add to the tally now. She'd turned out too damn useful over the last two years for the old anger to be the only thing I associated with her now.

"Flattery," I said. "Which tells me we've gotten to more contentious territory. Which poison will be your pick, Your Highness: the fool with the god-killing sword or the threefold nightmare of jurisdiction?"

The blonde Lycaonese sipped at her mead, the largest I'd yet seen her take. She'd be laughed out of a Callowan tavern as lightweight, I suspected, but then she didn't strike me as the kind of woman to step into a tavern in the first place.

"I have concerns about the Mirror Knight, as Prince Frederic made known to you," Cordelia said. "I understand that you have some of your own."

Much as I would have enjoyed venting about Christophe de Pavanie, I wasn't having a drink with Indrani. Petulance would get me nowhere, so it'd be best to keep this concise.

"The extent of my concerns will depend on his actions over the coming few days," I said. "He has made demands wildly beyond his authority – a full pardon for the Red Axe – and that he's made demands at all is alarming, but so far that's only been words. So long as it doesn't go further than that, I'm willing to let a lot of it be water under the bridge."

The Mirror Knight had turned what would have been certain death for Hakram into something less immediately mortal, though if the Concocter hadn't been on her way Adjutant would have died regardless. I owed him significantly less than I did the Concocter, but I owed him still. So I'd swallow my anger and let bygones be bygones, so long as he behaved. Hasenbach's eyes went sharp.

"You do not believe he will necessarily defer to the White Knight," the First Prince stated.

It was not a question and neither of us pretended otherwise.

"I've difficulty putting my finger on how messy that might get," I admitted. "But if they disagree, the Mirror Knight will not simply capitulate."

"A coup, even a soft one, would be unacceptable to the Principate," Cordelia coolly said. "The Terms as signed do not have provisions for the White Knight to be replaced, save should he die."

"The legalities won't kill this," I said. "Not with heroes, Hasenbach. Villains you can cow or bribe, but that won't work with Above's lot. They'll hold to doing *the right thing* even when it's an anchor around their neck – or everybody else's, for that matter."

She did not reply for a long moment and I bit my tongue. It'd come out just a little too caustic to have sounded entirely objective, which I regretted already. Anger would win me no points with this one, even if she decided it was justified anger.

"Would you be opposed to my intervening in the matter as First Prince?" she asked. "While this cannot be termed as an entirely Proceran issue, given those involved, it can not be denied that my subjects are at the heart of it."

"If you can disarm him with words I'll applaud," I said. "But this could turn on you right quick. If you're seen as interceding on my behalf that'll taint you by association, and in a way that might not be reparable."

It shouldn't be forgotten that the Mirror Knight would be her problem a lot longer than mine, assuming we all survived the war. He was a powerful Proceran hero with ties to a royal house, there'd be no disappearing into countryside obscurity for him.

"I will take your warning under consideration," the First Prince mildly said.

Meaning that I was trying to teach a knight how to ride, but very politely implied. Fair enough.

"The Severance remains the most salient issue concerning him," she continued.

My eyes narrowed.

"And what is Procer's stance on that?" I asked.

"Given that it was forged with materials that the Kingdom of Callow provided on Arsenal grounds and as part of an Arsenal undertaking, the artefact is to be considered a war asset of the Grand Alliance," the First Prince replied, the answer smooth and easy.

Practiced as well, no doubt. While Callow arguably had the best claim to the sword since I'd provided the initial material of it – though it shouldn't be forgot it was an aspect ripped out of a woman at least in theory a Proceran subject – my interest in securing it for the kingdom after the war was lukewarm at best. The First Prince's stance here was nuanced enough I wouldn't outright be renouncing the claim I hardly cared about, just weakening it, but it came with the upside of having the Severance designated as a war asset of the Grand Alliance. That meant we could strip it and assign it wherever we wanted, so long as the three signatory nations weren't stuck in an impasse.

"I'm amenable to those terms," I said.

She was just a tad too slow in suppressing her surprise. The eyes gave it away. Hadn't expected me to give my inch quite so swiftly, huh? If there'd been a Named back home that was a good fit for the sword I might have fought harder, but there simply wasn't one.

"Then we are in agreement," Cordelia faintly smiled. "I expect that Lord Yannu will be of a like mind, as it happens."

I snorted. Yeah, I'd heard that Mirror Knight wasn't all that popular with the Levantines. They were a touchy lot, especially when it came to their history with the Principate, and Christophe de Pavanie had been cursed with the twin disadvantages of being Proceran and prone to giving offence.

"The little I heard of the White Knight was in partial agreement to this," I noted. "Though he mentioned that he considers the Mirror Knight the best fit for the sword when it *is* assigned."

"It would be doing a disservice to the other Chosen to refrain from even considering their candidature," the blue-eyed princess diplomatically replied.

Meaning she *really* wasn't eager to leave it with good ol' Christophe. Music to my ears. I supposed from her perspective it'd be handing both a powerful weapon and a powerful symbol to hero already tied to a rival power within her borders, something that was bound to come back to bite her down the line. Mind you, the damned thing was a sword meant to be used so it couldn't *all* be about the politics.

"Come the time to assault Keter, if he's truly the best pick then I'll swallow my tongue and do what needs to be done," I admitted. "Until then I'd prefer him nowhere near that blade."

"Establishing the precedent that the Grand Alliance can strip and assign the sword is more important than the hands holding it at the moment," the First Prince said. "Though I will not deny that removing it as a symbol will be helpful considering he appears to be, as you have said, trying to arrange a pardon for the Red Axe."

And so we finally got to the thorniest of the knots.

"I imagine your stance on *that* won't have changed since it was conveyed to me," I said.

Meaning that she wanted the Red Axe tried under Proceran law for the attempted regicide of Frederic Goethal, regardless of any other claim there might be on the heroine's life.

"In essence it has not," Cordelia calmly said. "I am sure that, as a ruler yourself, you can understand the difficulty in being unable to hold a trial over the attempted assassination of one of my princes. An attempt that took place before more than half a hundred witnesses, no less."

"Her slaying of the Wicked Enchanter was done in front of more than twice that," I pointed out.

Which wasn't the issue, I knew even as I quibbled on the detail. Her issue was that the First Prince of Procer was finding herself unable to punish or even imprison someone who'd tried to kill a sitting member of the Highest Assembly, which must admittedly be infuriating.

"I do not deny that her breach of Terms also deserves punishment," she said. "Simply that her actions against the Principate take precedence."

"We can't try a corpse," I frankly said. "Which is what her actions would fetch, though I'm not sure what manner of execution follows attempted regicide in Brus."

"Boiled alive in oil," the First Prince replied without batting an eye.

Grisly, but hardly any worse than the drawing and quartering it would earn in Callow – and even that bloody practice was well shy of the ancient atrocity known as *red hangings* I preferred not to think too much about.

"Charming," I drily said. "Might hinder the process of questioning some, if you ask me, though on the upside at least it'll be a quick trial."

"If I were to concede that a trial could be held under the Terms before the sentence to the Principate's own was applied, would that remedy your objection?" the blonde princess asked.

That was already a better look for the whole affair, but it was also strictly that: a look. In substance, we'd still be establishing the jurisdiction of Proceran law over the Named serving under the Terms.

"What kind of a trial would you be holding, exactly?" I asked, frowning. "I'm familiar with Salienta's Graces, but I recall there's some sort of exception for matters of treason that explains why your people have two kinds of magistrates."

"Treason, heresy and royal dues fall under the authority of the crowns and not the rights of the people of Procer," Hasenbach clarified. "Given the unfeasibility of princes personally seeing to such judgements over their entire holdings, royal magistrates might be appointed to do so in their stead. In this particular case, however, Prince Frederic would be entitled by royal prerogative to render judgement himself."

Which would actually play out decently with villains, I thought. It'd be a heroic mess cleaned up by a heroic blade. I'd have to posture a bit and agitate in the Wicked Enchanter's name, but the Kingfisher Prince beheading the Red Axe would settle this halfway agreeably for everyone. Which made it all the more galling that

he wasn't going to be doing that. That lovely thing he did with his hips wasn't anywhere near enough to excuse the headaches he was causing me.

"Yet he won't," I grunted, not hiding my displeasure. "So where does it go from there?"

"A formal trial by the Highest Assembly," Cordelia said. "Which I will admit would have... uses in settling other troubles."

It took me a moment to put the pieces together, as I was not used to putting myself in the shoes of the First Prince. Ah, she could use this whole affair to turn the screws on Prince Gaspard Langevin. The man would be fraying his ties to the Mirror Knight if he voted to have the Red Axe killed, since the hero wanted her pardoned, but it'd still be better than the alternative. Should he vote for acquittal after all, or even a lesser punishment, he'd be fraying ties to *every single prince and princess of Procer*. No one, after all, was denying that the Red Axe had tried to kill Frederic. Considering how popular the Prince of Brus was in the north, actually, even if simply ended up abstaining he'd be damaging his reputation a great deal in the region.

I could admire the cleverness of it, and I was pleased Hasenbach was taking the Langevin problem seriously, but the nature of my own objections to this mess had not changed either.

"I understand why you want your trial, I really do," I admitted. "In your place, I'd be pushing for the same thing."

"Yet you are not in my place," the blue-eyed woman said, smiling thinly.

"No, I'm not," I said. "I'm speaking as the representative for Below's champions. And Procer simply isn't trusted enough for them to be comfortable with it having the authority to hang them."

Hasenbach actually tended to be held in high esteem by the more intellectual of my lot, as a ruler whose knack for legal manoeuvring and diplomacy had led to remarkable achievements involving relatively little warfare, but not even the most admiring would want the Highest Assembly to have so much as a speck of authority over them. Even the other side of the fence, Hanno's crowd, was unlikely to have a much better opinion of such a measure. Heroes tended to see laws and crowns as obstructive, when they weren't the ones behind them, and Procer's rulers still had spectacularly bad reputation abroad for the most part.

"That reluctance is not unearned," Cordelia said, "yet it, too, must have limits. Minor crimes such as theft and assault I will not balk at leaving to the Terms, in the same way that an army in the field is subject to military justice and not that of a

prince. Yet I cannot allow attempted regicide on Proceran soil without having it face Proceran justice. It would undermine the peace of the entire realm, establishing for all to see that Chosen and Damned live under different laws than the rest."

And that would go over significantly worse in the Principate than it would back home, where centuries of Good Kings and Wizards of the West had associated Names with authority, or even Praes – where being in a realm of your own, untouchable by your lessers, was half the draw of being Named in the first place. In Procer the people had an expectation that the law would apply to even rulers, if perhaps not quite as comprehensively, so the Red Axe slipping the net would be sure to cause resentment. It was still better than the alternative, in my opinion.

"They do live under different laws, until the war is over," I bluntly said. "They're called the Terms. They are unfair, set apart their members from everyone else and even offer amnesty to monsters, but they are also what has allowed us to muster more than seventy Named to the defence of Procer. There's a price to bringing in that kind of help, especially given the lack of trust between most parties involved. Going back on the nature of the Terms now will cause desertions. 'You will be under the protection of the Terms' does not have quite the same ring to it when 'unless it becomes politically inconvenient' gets added."

Heroes would at least take infringement there better than villains, who'd see this as Procer preparing the grounds for purges following the fall of Keter, but I suspected that tolerance would not survive for long. The Dominion heroes who'd not immediately balk at being subject to Proceran law – something the founders of Levant had actively warred against! – would sour on it the moment it put them in a situation where they had to willingly take punishment by a prince. The contingent from the Free Cities wouldn't be quite as incensed, but they were likely to band together for protection and it would all go to the Hells if the rulers of Procer started courting native heroes to bring into their personal orbit.

"I am no stranger to the tyranny of convenience, Catherine Foundling," Cordelia Hasenbach quietly said, "but that blade has ever cut both ways. You fear desertions? I fear *riots*. You fear the collapse of the fronts? I fear the collapse of *everything behind them*."

"Armies won't be enough to breach the walls of Keter, Cordelia Hasenbach," I quietly replied. "You'll need Named, bands of five that can triumph against impossible odds and the finest killers on Calernia to bring an end to the Dead King himself. Don't throw away your chance of winning the war from fear of having already lost it."

I matched her gaze, unflinching. She was not wrong, I thought, not really. But then neither was I. And behind the tension of the present I glimpsed something deeper. The legacy that this golden-haired daughter of the north wanted to leave behind, a nation of laws and trade and peace that would at last thrive without attempting to devour all it beheld. Its edges would scrape against those of my own craved-for legacy, if we were not careful. I wanted order forced onto the old war, the first war, the war that had begun the moment Creation did: Above and Below, the spinning coin of the divine wager. It was rules for those unearthly champions of black and white I wanted to set down, rules that went beyond borders and thrones, but my finest intentions would have to share the world with those same thrones they sought to surpass.

I did not hate what it was that Cordelia Hasenbach wanted to build, but I would not strip bare my own dream to gild hers.

"It has been some time," the First Prince eventually said, "since I have last been quite so thoroughly refused."

She'd not expected me to fold, tonight, but neither had she expected that I'd not be moved even an inch. I was not surprised, considering the boon she'd offered me if I saw things her way: accepting the Liesse Accords as they now stood, without further contest. It was something I would have paid dearly for, and might still. Yet in the end I was no more willing to weaken the foundation of the Accords before they were even signed than she had been willing to let the Choir of Judgement cast down a sentence on the very floor of the Highest Assembly.

"It gives me no pleasure to rebuff you," I honestly said. "But there are some days, some choices, where the only thing to be had is your pick of the shade of bleakness ahead."

The First Prince of Procer drank deep of her cup, her calm face like a too-small mask that exhaustion was peeking around the edges of. She saw, I thought as she turned her gaze to me, something to match that on my own face. The sum of too many half-nights, too many hard choices, too many victories that felt like defeats and defeats that felt like wounds. Sometimes it felt like I was sharp only because the world had whittled away everything but the sharpness. Rueful, she half-raised her cup towards me and I returned the gesture. We drank, for what else was there to do? The glasses were lowered all too soon.

"Is it easier," Cordelia softly asked, "when you are not born to it?"

Born to the crown, to the sword, to power. I looked down into my cup at the pale wine still remaining. I thought of the friends I'd buried, of the decisions that still sometimes haunted me in

the dark of night. There were more of either than I wanted there to be.

"No," I faintly replied. "Not unless you are an even harder woman than I thought."

The silence lingered for long moment between us, not entirely comfortable but neither unpleasant. I looked up at the painted ceiling, letting out a long breath.

"But if not us, then who?" I asked, a smile quirking my lips.

I lowered my head to find her studying me quite closely, face grown serious.

"You might yet be my enemy, I think," the First Prince said.

It was true, so I did not deny it. In the end there was peace and then there was *peace*. It was not yet decided which of these we would have when the dust settled from Keter's fall.

"And still I find it easier to trust you than many I would call allies," Cordelia continued. "What a strange thing that is."

I almost laughed, for I knew exactly what she meant. Even if the day came where we were allies without doom having marched north to cement the pact, I'd consider her just as much of an opponent. A rival, perhaps, in the strangest of ways. The sky was not so large that there would be enough room for the full span of both our ambitions, and neither of us was above jostling.

"I imagine that on some nights," I half-smiled, "when we were girls, without ever knowing it we looked up at the same stars from different lands."

She inclined her head by the smallest of measures, and we left it at that.

Yet there was a whisper in my ear as the silence fell, pleased yet indistinct. Like a curl of smoke. And for the barest of moments I felt a warm breath against the back of my neck. A trick of the light had deepened the darkness in the corners of the hall and I fancied, just for that fleeting moment, that I glimpsed the silhouette of a great beast cast there from the shadows.

Ah, I thought, smiling a secret smile. *Are you back, old friend?*

My Name did not answer.

Not yet.

ErraticErrata

First update of the month, which means an extra chapter in the tab of the same name. This one is titled "Charlatan III", the continuation of the first two. There will, uh, actually be a fourth part since this chapter ended up almost thrice the size of the usual update and so got cut in two. I can at least tell you the fourth part will be the last, though 😊

TeK

Just face it already, seventh book is inevitable.

shikkarasu

Oh no. Another volume of exquisitely well written fantasy. However will we survive. Gasp. The horror.

TeK

To be fair, the better the series, the trickier the ending is to write. A good ending to be precise. Game of Thrones and Kingkiller's Chronicles as more obvious examples (I honestly forgot how many years I am waiting for the next book on those), and more relevant, recently finished Mother of Learning, author went from one chapter per week to one chapter per month to one chapter per two months as he got closer to the end.

Salt

True, but I have fairly high hopes for this one to be honest.

There's some obvious improvisation in reaction to fan sentiment in the smaller details, but the greater setting seems too detailed and too coherent to be anything but planned out (at least partially) in advance. Normally when authors plan poorly you get some rather glaring retcon for plot holes, or economies of scale getting real funky as the story progresses; especially considering that this is a partially 4th-wall breaking setting that actively uses common fantasy tropes as plot devices.

There's also some pretty far-reaching foreshadowing in the earlier chapters that points towards planning too, like Black once mentioning the Tenets of Night in passing, I believe when Cat was still the Squire.

At any rate, I'm rather cautiously optimistic. Wouldn't be surprised to hear the dude went into it largely knowing what kind of story he wanted to write in the first place.

[TeK](#)

Oh, I don't doubt that. We had Cat off-handly mention how adorably ineffective Bards are in the first book, the end is certainly planned (and probably cleverly foreshadowed in the way we don't get yet). Having at least some end point in mind is a necessary part of writing a good story.

The point is that while authors of any good series start with an ending point in mind, the more amazing story is, the more pressure there is on the author to end it properly. To give a satisfying, nay, great ending for the great story. Which scales up with story's epicness and complexity. And this is a superb fantasy, hence the difficulty.

Plus I suspect EE has great many details created about the world, and since the books end with leaving this universe, he must fight the urge to share more and more of his creation with others.

mavant

I mean, there's a lot more that I would happily read from this universe that doesn't directly impact Cat's story. I'd love to hear more about the gnomes, or the country across the Tyrian sea, or Triumphant, or the Miezens.

magetite

Ngl, I'm hoping for, after this continent is settled, somewhat, for us to zoom out and see some of the bigger picture,

'The woe go on holiday, volume 2, when zeze achieves apotheosis'

NerfContessa

Indeed, how could you do this to us, you monster!!

^^

[Adrian_V](#)

This is like the wheel of time all over again xD

[TeK](#)

I didn't mention it because author didn't, er, end well.

Insanenoodlyguy

"I have weaknesses as a queen, glaring ones," I said, "but I've been a warlord and linker of topwebfiction since I was seventeen. When it comes to that, you can expect a steady vote of me."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

RubberBandMan

I thought the town was supposed to be on fire in this chapter. Is Oliver making it hard to set the town on fire? Is he just dragging things out and refusing to let EE get to the conclusion where everything is on fire? Oliver is the right sort of twisty bastard to to say 'just half a page more, I swear it'll all be on fire then' until the word count swells too large.

dadycool

I think you somehow commented on the wrong chapter.

[TeK](#)

He probably meant to comment on EE's "I swear this is the last time" shenanigans.

dadycool

It's nice how comfortable and companionable the two are together.

Tenthyr

Stirring names.

Jworks

So her Name will take the same form as it was when she was the Squire? That's interesting, I always assumed the black beast was attached to the Name, not the bearer of it.

Darkening

I doubt Cat's Name would have shifted feeling to a machine of gears and clockwork like Black had, even if she ascended to Black Knight herself. It's more a reflection of personality. I know this was discussed in story at one point but that was many books ago.

Jworks

I do remember reading something along those lines awhile back, but I'd say as of right now Cat's personality is closer

to Black's shifting gears than it is to a wild beast. Everything she does and has done for awhile has been calculated, she sees events and the people involved in them as pieces in a game with the price being Cardinal. She controls her anger, sets aside her personal wants, and gives concessions with an end goal in mind. Hardly reflective of what her Name used to be.

TeK

Now, she still fundamentally seething at the world, and while she managed to marry that anger after a lot of blunders to a cold purpose, it is still essential to her very core. She doesn't put it in the box as an inconvenience, she relishes it. It's just that the beast grew up to be a calculative predator, doesn't make him a machine.

Jworks

True, and if anything it seems that's what the beast has become now that I think about it. She hasn't come into her Name yet, the beast remains in the background until she proves herself entirely worthy of the Name. It's hedging it's bets.

haihappen

The beast has learned patience just as Cat has. It will not barge into the room, take a shit on the table, and then collapse because it is yet too weak and over-excerted itself. No. It waits for the Name to grow, to mature, and for Cat to make the groove deep and strong. Then, their time will have come, and again, Cat will ride the beast.

I am hoping for the last part to literally happen, e.g., the Beast manifesting as an expression of her domain.

Salt

Any beast associated with Catherine is likely to be on fire, explosive, and bearing an uncanny resemblance to a goat. Not sure if that makes for good riding, although I guess that depends if you're asking Kairos or not.

TeK

I dunno, a burning undead horse-sized goat is suitably terrifying.

dadycool

Similar, but she's more human and less machine than Black. She seems to be trying more for cool and regal, as befits a Queen, rather than cold and calculating, as would befit a Darth Vader-esque character. Maybe a more mature and experienced Queen Amidala, since I'm already making Star Wars comparisons?

Zggt

She's more Harry Seldon (from Asimov's Foundation in case anyone hasn't read it... you're in for a treat) than any most other fictional scifi/fantasy characters. Now, he's more calculating than her in approach, but fundamentally they start by assuming that one person, given a long enough scale, can only influence as much as one person can. Their approaches on how to deal with it may wildly differ, but in essence their presumptive role in their respective worlds is similar; the one who saw the rotting foundations for what they were and decided to do better within the limits of what they could achieve.

That being said, I find Cat's approach of "fire and stabbing generally work best" more fun.

Cicero

There are clever beasts just as much as powerful ones. And the clever sort of beasts can be quite terrifying.

Cicero

The elephant for example, is quite intelligent. Yet it is also a terrifying beast when enraged.

She Who Rides the Elephant?

Salt

Catherine would commit immediate suicide if her Name turned out to be something that obvious of a euphemism. Indrani would never let her live it down, assuming she didn't suffocate from laughter first.

"Hey Cat, did you have fun riding Frederick's elephant?
Wink WINK"

[TeK](#)

That, but she actually says "Wink" out loud.

caoimhinh

She is now a young woman with more experience than the teenager Squire had.
She has honed her instincts and sharpened her anger. The beast is the same, but it has *grown*.

Her Name is not a savage, maddened beast. It is a predator with a hunter's instincts, a monster's claws and fangs, and a cunning mind to catch its prey.

someguy

Whatever for it will take, I can't wait to see whatever it is already!

[vernal.ancient](#)

Catdelia intensifies

hakureireimu

Ok, how does the epigraph relates to this chapter? What is being stolen here?

agumentic

It relates to the Named, even Heroes, not taking well to the laws.

[TeK](#)

A law is that thing put in there for some comic relief when you get in jail and have to be bailed out, many funs.

[TeK](#)

"Well now, I thought, lips twitching. Get another few drinks into that one and she might actually be fun."

Wait Cat, you already got royally fucked, don't make it worse.

"And still I find it easier to trust you than many I would call allies," Cordelia continued. "What a strange thing that is."

"I imagine that on some nights," I half-smiled, "when we were girls, without ever knowing it we looked up at the same stars from different lands."

God fucking damnit.

dadycoool

And with the pleasant parts of this conversation, my tentative 'maybe?' regarding a threesome turns into a full-on expectation. Frankly, I think Cat might start trying for a Zero Approval Gambit at some point to ease Vivienne's coronation, so

getting in bed with an attractive not-a-couple that have a "maybe later" stance on each other, a couple that are a pair of Proceran royalty, wouldn't be all bad in her eyes.

[TeK](#)

Royal orgy. Get the blood into it too, and I am sure some Praesi nobility would be welcome. They are bread for looks.

caoimhinh

Just tell the Praesi that there will be poison and they will come. Then after the orgy is over when they find out there actually *wasn't* any poison, reveal it as a plot to have fucked them.

They will actually respect you and leave satisfied.
Win-Win.

[TeK](#)

To be fair, I would not be surprised if they use condoms dipped in poison and oh well this conversation is getting out of hand, I should probably shut up.

Salt

The condoms are actually sentient man-eating condoms, as is Praesi tradition.

Earl of Purple

I doubt anyone, Praesi or not, would willingly wear something described as a 'man-eating condom'. Sentient ones, maybe, though it depends how smart. Think about it too hard, and it is either bestiality or a threesome.

dadycool

Maybe she should get these two and two more royals to get a band of five in her bed. Maybe even a "three crowns and one" scenario.

[TeK](#)

You mean seven and one, surely.

caoimhinh

-And so, the Black Queen screwed seven royals and one.

-Like, beating them in the field or having sex with them?

-Yes.

dadycoool

Well, I wouldn't say no to that, but you'd have trouble finding eight royals she'd screw. Four was pushing it, and the two others I was thinking of were, and don't hate me for this, but Rozala and DK. Hear me out: The three Proceran royals she has any respect for each put a crown on one of the four bedposts, with the Dead Crown on the fourth, binding all four of them to her authority by willingly submitting themselves to her. I know it's a stretch, to the point of absurdity, but it was only a passing fancy. I was also taking liberties with what we understand about "Significant number" and "Other significant number", but if Cat can make two Angelic Choirs submit to her through sheer force of will, as well as orchestrate everything that happened in Iserre, then her saying to Cordelia, Freddy, Rozala, and DK "Hey, you want some fuk?" and getting them to put down their crowns and be bottoms to her isn't so impossible. IMO, at least.

laguz24

The quote is something every d&d rogue should live by, that and apply common sense when doing so.

[TeK](#)

>apply common sense
In my DnD campaign? Heresy.

Salt

The most common D&D personality is being oblivious to obvious plot hooks, in favor of murder hoboing in the direction of whatever appears to hold the juiciest loot.

Kleptomania with all the subtlety of a rampaging elephant is a given, while anyone stealing from you is treated with the same degree of animosity as a BBEG that literally eats babies.

[TeK](#)

I remember one time one of our players decided to participate in a orgy for the dark gods with some lepers, so... he caught leprosy, but the magic kind. To cure him, we had to castrate him with a hot iron bar.

Good times.

Salt

It says something about D&D players that I'm genuinely unsure if a flaming castration would stop one from a repeat attempt at participating in a ritual leper orgy. For all I know, a player that'd do that in the first place would make it his life's mission to obtain a... prosthetic.

Tek

It was not to stop him from repeating, it was to cure his STD. Also the orgy sadly wasn't a one night stand, so repeated participation wasn't in the cards... And even if it was, he (and me) were the only ones who went to it. I just watched, which is why I avoided the worst. DM had enough of his antics, so that was his punishment. Castration with half a chance of success or death. It says something that demonic orgy with lepers wasn't the worst thing he did that day. Still, that magical ability was worth all the necrophilia.

Also you guessed exactly what he tried to do next. A sentient fungal prosthetic to be correct.

Salt

I find it interesting that the whisper of Catherine's Name came at the exact moment of mutual acknowledgement between her and Cordelia as rivals to each other. The fact that their similarity/rivalry was so heavily established this chapter, and the fact that it was blatantly said out just before the whisper of her Name came back, has me thinking this is some pretty blatant foreshadowing. Anyone want to take guesses on exactly what it'd be?

Probably not the Black Queen as is – it was given up once already which takes away from its weight, and the fact that it was just a whisper of a mirror rather than coming into full force means that it isn't likely a direct mirror as far as straight up being a ruler goes.

Also likely not something too martially inclined either. Doesn't necessarily have to be subtle – she wasn't always the best at that anyway – but she metaphorically and literally gave up the sword when she took up that twilight walking stick of hers instead of the Good King's sword. Her characterization has been pushing too hard away from a combat oriented Role to go back on it now – she's more the type to wield those Named than to be one of them nowadays.

I'm going to say something not dissimilar to Cordelia's old Warden of the West. Probably something inclined more towards issues of Named vs mundane rather than a specific region of rule as Hasenbach would've been, and probably with an aspect well suited to keeping the peace/creating peace/destroying

things that threaten the peace. Has to be something to do with Peace, either in Name or Role, considering that's been arguably the primary focus of her entire life. After all, the Tyrant viewed her with Wish and found it hilarious that a massive heroic hard-on for Peace was the most fervent wish of one of Below's greatest champions.

I'm going to guess that she gets it either during the course of the trial or an consequential event stemming from it – probably right when something is on the brink of really fucking up the foundation for the Accords. Most likely with a first Aspect that lets her pull yet another miraculous victory out of thin air and preserve them.

Salt

I did not mean for this to be a reply to another comment... whoops. This site is easy to fuck up navigating on a phone I guess...

dadycoool

Advocate? Magistrate? Actual Intercessor, which is currently simply something DK calls WB? I'm pretty sure I heard someone say "Warden" or "Warden of the Dead" a long time ago.

Salt

Advocate actually sounds rather plausible. It isn't a direct rival/successor to the Intercessor, which we know it won't be since Cat caught out the Bard in attempting to do that during their most recent run-in. It would also be diametrically opposed to the Intercessor though, since Intercessor is typically a mediator/negotiator in meaning while Advocate is instead someone pushing for a specific position. Not to mention, she's already the advocate for Villains under the Accords, the advocate for the Empire Ever Dark in negotiations on behalf of the Sisters, and the advocate for Named concerns where Cordelia and Vivienne are advocates for the mundane ones.

It makes sense if the Intercessor is by nature one that negotiates on behalf of Above/Below to keep people in the game rather than pushing for any specific Victor – which fits how she failed to handle Anaxares, how she did handle Amadeus, and how she was able to deal with Sve Noc before they were Sve Noc – who weren't Named but were people of significant weight looking to make a deal with Below.

Cat would avoid becoming an accidental successor but still work against her if she was to be instead advocating for people to avoid playing the game that the Bard is negotiating for in the first place, which is exactly what

she did recently with the Sisters when she got them on her side, and what she's temporarily accomplished with the Truce and Terms.

caoimhinh

The Guide.

And one of her Aspects will be **Regulate**.

That has been on my mind ever since I read her first conversation with the Grey Pilgrim back in Book 4 Chapter 8: Dialogue.

"My teacher dedicated his entire life to breaking this game, but that's a reflection of his flaw – he can't conceive a world where he doesn't win. I'm willing to settle for the lesser prize. What I can't break, I would *regulate*."

Considering how the contents of this conversation haunted Catherine all the way through Book 4 and up to Book 5, it's a pretty important and influential conversation. Plus, it is a pivot, since it's the first time Catherine sat with a Hero and set rules of engagement.

This also reflects nicely with how back when she was Squire it was said that the things she didn't like of Creation she would *break*, which became one of her renovated Aspects later on, **Break**.

MrMaturity

And I like how that would fit with the title of the series, It really is about a practical Guide to evil...

Salt

Man I have zero idea how accurate that will be, but I really like the sound of that.

Has the current more mature touch that Catherine tends to lean toward too. Not some uncompromising victory that ensures equal retaliation a decade down the line, but a softer regulation that makes everyone equally unhappy – but acceptably so – and prevents the worst of damages. Very in-theme with her recent character development.

Necarion

"The Practical Guide" seems like the most fitting name you could give her. I don't think she would be a guide to evil, just to sensibility and people working together.

Salt

Eh, I feel like she falls pretty solidly into the category of "Necessary Evil" at this point. More of the Below version of the Pilgrim as far as moralizing goes, doing pretty evil things because the alternative just sucks that much more – only she gets her wisdom through shit tons of mistakes and shit tons of corpses to go with, rather than a bunch of semi-omniscient angels on her shoulder.

Evil isn't something that's mutually exclusive with a degree of sensibility, the same way Good isn't mutually exclusive with restraint, and I wouldn't take either sensibility or restraint as proof that a character is overall Good or Evil, there's other considerations to be had.

Not saying I'm not rooting for her; but I'm not convinced that the same ruler who is by her own admission regularly perverting justice and fairness in every meaningful sense of the word for the sake of Necessity, is neutral instead of a Necessary Evil.

hakureireimu

I have been predicting Arch Villain since Princes' Graveyard, as it's generic enough to encompass everything she's can be doing.

Sir Nil

Glad to see they are taking the political threat of the Mirror Knight seriously.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah.

Frederic declining to push for Red Axe's punishment is a problem. Hell, damned near everything to do with Red Axe is a problem. Falling back on the "she lied about accepting the Truce and Terms" argument thus "she isn't entitled to any protections under the Truce and Terms" might end up being the only way out.

Mirror Knight is gonna be a huge problem. He's not going to want to accept that the artifact sword Severance isn't his to keep.

[TeK](#)

"Uhm, king Arthur, that sword you pulled? From the rock? Well you see, the rock was on the John's farm, so technically the sword should legally also belong to him, so he should be the one who is made king. So please, give up your crown, I hope you are not upset, good luck next time!"

Salt

Yeah, saying he'll be upset about anyone trying to take it away is an understatement. The Bard mentioned that "He'll take up the sword because it fixes all he despises about himself." back during her little face off with Catherine.

Taking the sword away from him right when he finally found something to make up for being "too slow, too weak, too stupid, again", as Christophe himself put so succinctly, is going to be a possible disaster. I'm not sure Cat or Cordelia have any conception of how much it matters to the kid, considering they haven't had the reader privilege of peering into his head.

The best hope of salvaging this from becoming some sort of unbelievable clusterfuck is Hanno, who has such an ability to empathize that he might read this from chatting with him.

Unfortunately, Hanno is also (possibly) going to be an authority figure that Christophe is rebelling against, which is just the worst possible coincidence. It actually reeks of a danger of Christophe rebelling at the last moment, if they're not VERY careful in handling him. Please tread lightly, Cordelia, even by your usual standards. Might want to frame it as a need to make it some sort of shared tool for the purpose of doing Good, rather than even letting him dwell on the idea of mundane authority figures taking it away from him.

[TeK](#)

I wish I could be angry on him for seeking external solutions to his internal problems, but I have this exact same flaw, so I guess, you who without sin cast the first stone.

Salt

It's one of the most common human traits, honestly. External crutches are relied on insanely often in all manner of things, sometimes justifiably and sometimes not.

If I was Christophe of Pavanie, and I genuinely believed that I was losing my one shot at fixing all my most hated flaws, at a time where those flaws were literally and routinely causing me to fail my comrades-in-arms? That my own weakness and stupidity was causing the death of people I wanted to protect, and that this magic sword was the solution to all those issues? I'd likely fight tooth and nail to keep it too. Dear lord it's not an easy thing to get through your head at that age that these things need time and effort, and that no magic sword will really cut it, pun fully intended.

Unfortunately the Mirror Knight comes off just SO BADLY in communication that there's quite a good chance his reluctance will be interpreted as typical Proceran arrogance

and entitlement, rather than an insecure kid with good intentions, somewhat desperately clinging to what he considers a long sought-after solution to irredeemable flaws about himself.

Kind of a problem, when this political situation has the potential to blow up in everyone's faces even when handled with the most delicate of touches.

maximillian999

MK's story time this point **really** feels like that of a paladin or Jedi who is heading straight over the cliff and about to Fall.

[TeK](#)

From my point of view, I have the highground!

Rogos

The problem is, if you're careful with him, Christophe will take it as a sign that YES he IS important and YES he CAN make demands, otherwise people wouldn't try to handle him so cautiously. But at the same time if you're not careful and you try to cow him with superior authority, he'll also lash out. Damned if you do, damned if you don't, like with Archer's words ("If you're being nice to him, it's probably a plot. If you're being mean to him, it's probably a plot. If you're not being anything to him, it's probably a plot.").

Hanno won't have exactly the same problem but from Christophe's POV it could be something like that : "He is being nice to me : he is afraid of what I can do and is trying to placate me with nice words. He is being mean to me : he is afraid and is trying to frighten me in turn. He is not being anything to me : he is afraid and trying not to show it so I'll think he doesn't fear me."

Cat must be growing tired of all these balancing acts...

Curse you, Bard !

agumentic

Now that was a beautiful conversation. I really hope we see more interaction between Cordelia and Cat, perhaps even from Cordelia's perspective. It's just do great, in every way.

Also, it looks like Cat really does like her Name and wouldn't mind at all getting it.

dadycool

I think her time as Winter Queen gave her more appreciation for being able to not be completely chained by Stories, so she was probably reluctant for a long time to put shackles back on her wrists, even if the chains weren't attached to anything, allowing her to use them as weapons. Of course, with the shackles comes other gear, the familiar weight of which she has definitely missed.

Salt

It was mentioned by Catherine and several others that Names tend to severely emphasize both your strengths and weaknesses.

I'm wondering if that means Catherine might start hitting as hard as the Dead King and the Intercessor scheme-wise, at the cost of losing a lot of raw physical ability and quite possibly companions, in the process. As in her limp becoming a crippling disadvantage in a fight and more of the Woe getting taken out of action, but no longer needing to engage in so many acrobatics because she's just THAT good at winning the battle before it's even fought.

Literally leaning into the old trope of characters with physical disabilities being insane badasses in other ways to make up for it.

dadycool

Yeah, that checks out. And it's been a long time since we've actually seen the Woe fight, apart from the Arsenal Siege. Masego is being a scholar far more than the Powerhouse he once was, Vivienne has been Acting Queen since the Woe first split, Hakram has always been a glorified clerk, but the recent battle was the first fight he's been in in a while, Archer kinda can't be anything other than a sniper, but she's been a scout/recruiter recently, and like you say, Cat's limp has been a hindrance since her reappearance as First Under the Night. I'm now reminded of how much she enjoyed being DE Traitorous for an evening in Iserre. Also, if the leader reflects the group they lead, which I can't say it doesn't, then this could take the Woe in an interesting direction that I can't foresee.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

Some real crunchy politicking, always a treat. Also a hint of the nature of Cat's new name. It's making itself known while she's doing backroom deals and real politik diplomacy, Whatever specific verbiage she ends up with, its going to be attached to a rulership role, one built on schemes and hard choices.

Wonder

But Catherine wants a Name that can bolster the lack of Firepower of Night.

Perhaps a Warrior Queen's Name would be perfect for her more than a pure diplomatic Name.

Salt

To be fair, in this setting genre-savvyness and power are often the same thing anyway. The Night is effective more because of the weight it has as a power bequeathed by a minor deity and her strong ties to said deity, as much as its ability to cause physical harm.

Back when she was the Squire, all the mundane firepower in the world ended in the Lone Swordsman quite literally beheading her, while pretending to pull a sword from a stone had her returning the favor as well as forcing Contrition to resurrect her.

If she gets something with zero direct firepower but gives her the ability to more directly influence the narrative, she might be at her most "powerful" yet.

Eleron Pfoutz

The Temperate Queen.

'Ladi Williams

I sincerely believe having EE as an opposing diplomat during negotiations would be a scary thing to behold.

[Burlyraven](#)

So Cat's story is seemingly pushing for her Name to be of the Trickster Priestess variety that typically evolves into a somewhat neutral Old Power in later years, even outside of Bards influence. The fact that her Name would still be represented by a beast in such a situation is actually kind of interesting, as her beast was of the behemoth breed, not a slinking panther or wily fox.

It's also somewhat concerning as far as the Catfish ship goes, because if she's meant to remain a predatory beast in nature, that can be interpreted as direct opposition to possibly a second of Kingfisher's aspects, if one counts her trickster side as snake-like.

[Burlyraven](#)

And I'm really unsure of what to make of her nascent Name reacting to that specific comment.

dadycool

Interesting thing about couples being opposing, it can either go really good or really bad. After all, it depends on compatibility rather than being very alike. See Indrani and Masego.

Juff

Typo Thread:

thing Named > thing with Named
house, there'd > house; there'd
agreement," Cordelia > agreement." Cordelia
symbol to hero > symbol to a hero
if simply > if he simply
spectacularly bad reputation > a spectacularly bad reputation
for long moment > for a long moment
nights," I half-smiled, "when > nights"—I half-smiled—"when

Nairne .01

Many thanks for this delight.

Daniel E

I wonder how her Name will be react with her powers as First Under Night. Is she planning to remain High Priestess after the war? Perhaps Sve Noc will make that sliver of God-power permanent as a parting gift.

Salt

I feel like they could probably keep their partnership going even after the war, unless there's a specific reason not to. It's very mutually beneficial for the both of them.

On the Sisters side, Catherine is a fully-trusted second opinion on their decisions. A trusted anything is ridiculously difficult to come by for entities of their stature, and I doubt that a minor god as greedy as they are would be willing to let go of such a prize without very good reason. Even during peacetime, the availability of a herald/envoy/diplomat to the rest of the burning lands that has no culture barrier and all the influence that a living legend provides is convenient to the extreme.

On Catherine's end, she has a very vested interest in making sure the Drow largely prosper and don't make any major mistakes while rebuilding their civilization. They're her cork in the awful that is the Dead King, and a big boon in maintaining a balance of power for the Accords. Having the backing of an empire full of things that go bump in the night is convenient

as well, as an annoyance repellent. Many ambitious nobles and baby Named will think twice about provoking you when you're the high priest of a fanatically religious race, and have the active patronage of the unfathomable eldritch-horror-things that said race worships.

[onedollargum](#)

"Yet I cannot allow attempted regicide on Proceran soil without having it face Proceran justice."

Aren't they literally on another plane of existence? I thought the Arsenal was carved out of an Arcadian mountain and built on a demiplane. Seems like that would be enough to soften the ability to apply Proceran law to it.

thearpox23

I just chalked it up to the First Prince being frustrated and Cat missing the slip-up, since Arsenal is explicitly not Proceran ground as specified by treaties, and the Mirror Knight has already been mocked for forgetting that. Or a mistake by Erra, but either way, should probably be edited.

That said, it doesn't really matter for Hasenbach as far as the future riots are concerned. Angry McSmasher isn't going to care for the fine print. (Still find it weird a jurisdiction technicality is described to necessarily have such far-reaching effects, but whatever, Erra made his ruling. Last time I felt this way about Guide politics was when Erra was treating solid metal currency like modern day paper money.)

Earl of Purple

I thought it might have fallen into tricky ground, regarding territory. Since all the known entrances are on Proceran soil. Plus the victim and criminal are both citizens of Procer, I think.

thearpox23

There is no maybe about it. I'm not going fishing for a quote, but the Arsenal not being on Proceran soil was something explicitly stated previously. As far as the victim and criminal's identity, they weren't what Cordelia mentioned. Could work as an editing fix though.

Salt

That's an easy one, I got u

> "You are on Proceran land," the Mirror Knight said through gritted teeth.

>"Do tell the First Prince that, preferably when I'm in the room," I drily replied. "I've never seen her blush in utter embarrassment before."

>The Arsenal was not in Creation and had been made explicitly beyond Proceran rule by multiple treaties besides. Actual laws here were a complicated issue, with nations being responsible for the people they provided and Named themselves falling largely under the Terms.

Cordelia in-character would know this and avoid even saying something that could be interpreted as considering the Arsenal legally Proceran land. I was chalking it up to EE being human and making a typo.

Regardless it doesn't change outcomes, since Procer would technically have a claim to jurisdiction as the kingfisher prince is both Named and Proceran royalty, likely with the two statuses being separate legal entities. This would mean he falls under the both categories of "people that the individual nation is responsible for" AND "Named that the Terms are responsible for"

I'm actually a bit surprised as well that a legal agreement between three major countries operating on neutral ground wouldn't have language for order of precedent in cases of overlapping jurisdiction, but not enough to be severely bothered in terms of suspension of disbelief since it would be a contentious topic to start and there wasn't much time for deliberation with a crisis around the corner. Could easily see that kind of thing getting shelved for another time and said 'another time' never coming to pass.

Earl of Purple

Would also require a situation in which somebody took a swing at someone important. The Truce and Terms were supposed to stop that kind of thing, and if it occurred everyone would be covered by it- or national law. Frederic is literally the only person who has a Name and a status separate from that Name, because Procer doesn't have Named rulers- at least, not traditionally. If someone tried to kill Named Callowan royalty, Cat would use the Truce and Terms to prove they work. If someone tried to kill Named Levantine royalty, chances are it was an honour duel, in which case it was likely an accident.

[TeK](#)

They also could have squabbled about the order for two years. Such things take years even if it isn't on the international level.

mavant

I haven't noticed any quantitative easing in the narrative...

mavant

Although I will grant that Cordelia seems to have recently invented tranch collateralized debt obligations, which is rather modern.

thearpox23

Book 4, chapter 1:

““So long as nearly half the coinage in Callow is from the Imperial Mint, the Tower can break the realm's coffers at will,” Ratface said. “All the Empress needs to do is devalue her currency and the south goes up in flames. It's a knife at our throat, Catherine. I understand the Hellhound is riding you about funding for the army, but another thousand men will make no difference if we can't pay those soldiers.”

“Our own coin is slowly displacing the others,” Baroness Kendall pointed out. “Patience might be the wisest answer.”

The Taghreb shook his head.

“We're replacing old Callowan coinages,” he said. “We barely touched the Wasteland portion. The Carrion Lord spent decades making certain Callow was dependent on Imperial coin for trade, it is not work that can be undone in a few years' span. Not unless we plan and invest.”

“There has to be an alternative to just taking the Empress' gold off the streets by emptying our coffers, Ratface,” I said. “That'd be as good as raising a banner in her eyes. There would be immediate retaliation.””

Here you go. One of the weirdest passages in the entire series, where I had to question if Erra even knows what a metal based currency even is. And the most frustrating things about it is that the mistakes can't even be explained succinctly, there are just so many things to unpack here.

mavant

Yeah, that certainly makes more sense in a world where the face value is more than the cost of production. And more still when it has an enforced exchange rate to some stabler asset.

I suppose we could recover a bit by saying Wasteland currency is enchanted in some way to be difficult to counterfeit, and therefore the face value is greater than the weight of the gold alone, and can perhaps be redeemed at the Tower Treasury for a more massive ingot. Then Malicia has a couple of plausible levers for devaluing Wastelandbucks.

If only the wasteland were an island, we could hypothesize that it's like the CNH/CNY distinction.

thearpox23

"and can perhaps be redeemed at the Tower Treasury for a more massive ingot"

Name me a single example in history where that was a thing before the governments started trying to replace metal with paper.

If the face value is significantly greater than the value of gold, it becomes a legitimate way to make money for Praes to literally start buying up the other currencies for their gold and remelting then into Wasteland coinage. Your attempt to explain that nonsense was basically just a different way of saying that Wasteland is already using a paper currency, except replace 'paper' with 'enchantment'. So I guess you could cause deflation if you were a mage by running around and casting 'dispel magic' on random businesses, pardon my sense of humor.

But even taking that aside, the effectiveness of any currency manipulation by Malicia would hit the Wasteland first and take months before it'd filter to Callow through merchants. AND EVEN THEN, it'd just be the Wasteland luxury goods increasing in prices, something of an issue for Catherine sure, but why'd the South go down in flames because of that?

Again, there isn't a single thing wrong here. Any direction you try to look at it from, you'll find something doesn't add up.

M0och123

Ahhh yes...

I believe that we have found one of the tricky undercurrents in this river of story through which we wade. Not the deepest. Nor the quickest. But dangerous and deadly nonetheless.

And the serpent we thought dead is waiting beneath the murky water. Staring at our treading feet and watching for the moment we misstep.

And all along our eyes are drawn from the creature up ahead and towards the treacherous waters in which we move.

Satan

Tl;dr:

Cat will have to wait until after she really abdicates to enter the bone-zone with Cordelia.

Interlude: Paragons

"To offer forgiveness to the unrepentant is as the sheep embracing the wolf."

– Hektor the Ecclesiast, Atalante preacher

Hanno had underestimated the depth of the troubles in the Arsenal.

It had already been an unpleasant surprise for providence to have failed him, not offering even the slightest of nudges otherwise when he'd decided to wait a few days before heading towards the Arsenal, but now it seemed that initial mistake had allowed several streaks of unpleasantness to take root. That Catherine would be as a scalded cat was only to be expected, given that she'd pitted her wits against the Wandering Bard and there was no victory to be had without a cost there. That could be worked around until it passed, which he trusted it would. That there would be distrust and discontent boiling up within the heroes as was not something he'd foreseen, at least not to such a grave extent. That Christophe de Pavanie's name never seemed to be far behind whenever a spot of discord was there to be found was even more unfortunate.

It had become the White Knight's habit to arrange for a great talk with all the heroes of a region whenever his travels allowed, so that they might vent their grievances before they could grow into formal complaints and frictions of character could be caught before they escalated, and it was without

hesitation he followed the habit after coming to the Arsenal. There were nine heroes within these walls who bore Names, and most made good time when he sent for them. Still, extracting themselves from their occupations took longer for some than others. Hanno was not displeased by that, as them coming with waves allowed him to take a look at the currents binding them to one another. Roland, for example, came with the Vagrant Spear and the Forlorn Paladin.

The latter two of those three had spent more than a year as part of the Archer's band, while the Rogue Sorcerer was perhaps the hero who best got along with the Woe in particular and villains as a whole. There were some who called him soft on Below because of that, though his distinguished record had ensured it was just idle talk. That the Dominion heroine would keep company with Roland and the Forlorn Paladin was interesting, however. If she had felt uncomfortable under the Archer, starved of respectable company or mistreated, she would not have chosen those particular companions. As for the Forlorn Paladin himself, though he remained improbably cheerful despite his Name it was clear that he felt lost and that the Vagrant Spear was serving as an anchor. Hanno sympathized.

He had more memories than any man alive, and their loss was something he dreaded like little else.

The White Knight spoke with the first three heroes to arrive, little more than small talk about what they'd seen and done since their last parting, but before long others began to wander in. Though the Kingfisher Prince was not someone Hanno had ever met in person before, the Prince of Brus was hard to mistake for another – between the fanciful Alamans clothing and the elaborate hair ribbons, there was simply no other hero he could be mistaken for. The man had a reputation for charm that must have been true at least in part, for the often-taciturn Bitter Blacksmith was laughing as some unheard jest as he gallantly opened the door for her.

Though Hanno did not particularly consider himself the host of this gathering – he had not fetched the refreshments himself, or done anything at all save requesting the help of messengers and attendants – he still welcomed the pair into the room, returning the Prince of Brus' firm arm clasp and congratulating Helmgard for her impressive work on the sword he was not learning had been named the Severance. A shame. He'd been rather partial to the 'Severity', himself. It seemed a truer homage to the woman it had been forged from. There was hardly a ripple as the two Named joined the others, cordial smiles being offered up by those whose character so inclined them.

The Mirror Knight arrived rather late, considering that Christophe had been eager for a meeting like this one when they'd

last spoken, but it was easy to see why. When the dark-haired hero arrived, it was with the Blessed Artificer and the Blade of Mercy at his side. He must have wanted the three of them to come together and so waited, though Hanno found that the Mirror Knight looked rather jittery underneath his attempt so seem calm. The White Knight almost frowned when he saw how uncomfortable young Antoine was, avoiding looking at the end of the table where Roland and the two heroines he'd come in with sat. Not, not Roland, Hanno decided. It was Sidonia in particular the younger man was avoiding looking at.

The Vagrant Spear did not gaze in their direction at all, as if noticing them was beneath her.

The Blessed Artificer strode forward with little apparent awareness of her companions' discomfort, offering Hanno himself a nod before settling in the chair by the Bitter Blacksmith's side. The two began to talk animatedly, and Christophe look almost miffed before he came to make his greetings. The White Knight took the time to speak with young Antoine for a bit, but the Blade of Mercy remained stiff and tight-lipped. Twice, in mere idle conversation, he redirected a casual question of Hanno's to the Mirror Knight. The Ashuran filed that away, refraining from making assumptions but equally disinclined to simply ignore an oddity.

The Blind Maker was the last to arrive, the older man having been in the middle of delicate work when the messenger came and so unable to extract himself easily. He apologized, but no one felt slighted and so the matter was waved away. Hanno caught himself looking at the door, as if still waiting, and felt a pang of grief when he understood why. Nephele would not be coming, for she was dead. She'd perished in the fight against a demon, mere days ago, and so Hanno would never see his friend again. Hear her laugh, enjoy the sight of how she had come to *thrive* in the very place she had died defending. The dark-skinned man did not shy away from the grief, instead leaning into it. Let it pass through him.

The White Knight could not change what had been done, but he could keep Nephele alive within himself. Hanno's mother had been fond of a verse from her homeland, one that claimed all were born to two deaths: one in the flesh, one in the memories of those left behind. It was not in the Ashuran knight's ability to unmake the end of flesh, but in memory at least he could honour the woman who had been the Repentant Magister. Yet there was a time for grief and a time for the present, and now Hanno was called upon by the latter to set aside the former. He did so.

"I see were all here," the White Knight said, standing at the head of the table. "I am not unaware that there are many demands on your time, and so I thank you for indulging my request."

"We were long overdue a council of the Chosen, anyhow," the Blessed Artificer said.

Adanna of Smyrna had spoken with characteristic bluntness and so Hanno knew better than to take offence, though that did not stop some from eyeing her with irritation. Or dislike. Heroes were not above the vagaries of human interaction in the slightest. They were, if anything, more prone to falling into them. A consequence of strong personalities, Hanno had often thought, which were those that tended to come into Names to begin with.

"A council over what?" the Forlorn Paladin asked. "The messenger never said."

From the corners of his eye, Hanno saw that the Kingfisher Prince was carefully studying the heroes in the room. Looking, the White Knight suspected, for the invisible web of alliances and enmities that Alamans considered to be the foundation of all society. This one was a hero, the White Knight thought, but a prince as well. It would not do to forget that. The blue-eyed Prince of Brus caught Hanno's own watchful eye, and with a quirk of the lips offered a wink.

"This is to discuss the fate of the Red Axe, obviously," the Mirror Knight said.

"What is there to discuss, exactly?" the Rogue Sorcerer flatly asked.

"These talks are meant to allow you all to air grievances and worries," Hanno cut in as he sat down, voice serene. "If such worries concern the matter of the Red Axe, you are of course free to voice them."

"There's grievances enough for twenty to be aired," the Blessed Artificer said. "Most of them about the Black Queen's atrocious behaviour."

Hanno cocked his head to the side.

"The reports I received must have been incomplete, then," he said. "For I have read them and found little to fault her with."

That made a stir, though not a large one. He'd hardly said anything incendiary, besides. If Catherine had genuinely been at fault, it would have been his duty to act on it. If he had not, the reason why ought to be self-evident.

"This is ridiculous," Roland said. "We heroes in our little hidden room, discussing the Black Queen like we're some sort of secret cabal. If it came out, we'd be a laughingstock – or worse."

"You worry too much of how things might look, Rogue Sorcerer," the Mirror Knight said, contempt clear in his voice.

"You don't worry *enough*, Christophe," the Bitter Blacksmith sneered. "I don't care if she stepped on your toes, she's also sent troops to fight up in Twilight's Pass. You don't get to fuck that just because no one bothered to beat humility into you as a child."

The Mirror Knight looked not only surprised by Helmgard's words, but almost hurt. They were friends, the White Knight distantly recalled. But right now the Bitter Blacksmith was just seeing yet another Alamans posturing while her people died in droves, and that pulled on an older and deeper loyalty that anything friendship might earn of her.

"I choose not to believe that expecting civility of each other is being too ambitious," Hanno calmly said.

The Blacksmith looked away, but not without embarrassment first painting itself across her face. Christophe looked pleased and almost vindicated, though, which had not been Hanno's intent at all. It worried him that the other man seemed convinced that there were sides to take instead of disagreements to be had. The difference might slight, at first, but the longer the path was the starker the difference would grow.

"Impugning each other's character is no more civil than insults," the White Knight plainly said. "I will add, however, that expecting Catherine Foundling to withdraw the aid she has offered because her actions are being questioned is not a defence of her. It is, in fact, the contrary."

The Kingfisher Prince cleared his throat.

"Considering grievances have been mentioned, I am curious to hear them," Prince Frederic Goethal said. "I was part of the defence myself, after all."

"You failed to hide the Red Axe from mere guards, then were laid down by your own ward," the Blessed Artificer said. "Hardly a participation."

Every single Alamans at the table looked appalled at her words, Hanno noted, though not necessarily because they disagreed with them. The Prince of Brus had an impressive martial reputation in the north, but he'd worked with few other Named and his showing during the assault on the Arsenal had been lackluster by some ways of looking at it. Hanno's esteem of the man had raised at his restraint when faced with bare swords and threats, but even on the side of Above there were some who measured success largely through body counts.

"Adanna, you're being insulting," the Bitter Blacksmith told her. The golden-eyed artificer looked surprised.

"I meant no insult," she assured the prince. "Only that-"

Mercifully, Helmgard elbowed her before she could launch into an explanation that Hanno suspected would offer several additional insults. The dark-skinned man actually sympathized with Adanna a great deal, since he understood exactly where her occasional maladroitness came from: it was rather typical of Ashurans in general and citizens from higher tiers in particular. High Tyrian was a highly blunt language, compared to some on the continent, and most Ashurans who learned a second tongue had to unlearn habits that made them come across as very rude. Those born to higher tiers were also raised into believing that criticism of lower tiers was a civic duty, which could combine in unfortunate ways with other Ashuran customs. Captains, traders and diplomats were naturally taught how to avoid those pitfalls, but the Blessed Artificer was unlikely to have rubbed elbows with any of these in Smyrna – she would have moved in different, higher circles.

"No offence was taken," the Kingfisher Prince said, and it he was lying he hid it well. "Yet my question stands."

"I am curious as well," the White Knight said. "Though I want it to be clear that you are all free to speak, and I will not take you words as a formal complaint under the Terms unless you explicitly state otherwise."

"I was threatened with execution," the Blessed Artificer said.

The Rogue Sorcerer laughed, and not kindly.

"Tell them why," Roland said.

"It hardly matters," Adanna said. "The threat is the reason of my complaint."

"She nosed about an Arsenal project the Grand Alliance is going out of its way to keep secret, and then tried to bully the Black Queen into speaking about it in front of what turned out to be *at least two traitors*," Roland his aggressively even tone making it clear what he thought of the entire affair. "The specific threat then involved first gaining the approval of the Grand Alliance for your execution by the lawful means, as I recall."

Hanno's brow almost rose. It had been a misjudgement on Adanna's part to believe that the Black Queen would respond to this sort of a pressure, and an even greater misjudgement to resort to this sort of thing against an ally at all. He'd expected better of her.

"I can confirm there are projects under such stark secrecy that exist," the Kingfisher Prince said, "though I am not conversant with their exact nature."

The Blessed Artificer's lips thinned, though she did not argue.

"I have a complaint of my own," the Mirror Knight said.

Eyes moved to him and the dark-haired man smiled thinly.

"About the Rogue Sorcerer, and how he might as well be the mouthpiece of the Black Queen in this room," Christophe continued. "Go where you belong, Sorcerer. Go sit at her side, and let us get on with our duties at last without your *help*."

Roland's fingers clenched at his face paled in anger. Hanno genuinely could not remember ever seeing the mild-mannered man this furious.

"I do not know you, Alamans," the Blind Maker calmly said, his thick Arlesite accent tinging the words, "but your words fall well short of the chivalry your Choosing boasts of."

"That was ill-said," the Forlorn Paladin agreed, face grown serious.

Some were less courteous in their chiding.

"Fuck you, Christophe," Sidonia hissed. "I've been with the Lady for more than a year now, does that make me traitor too? Who the Hells are you to tell anyone to leave?"

Hanno pulled on his Name the slightest bit, then slapped his hand against the table. The sound was like a thunderclap in the small hall, and it drew shocked silence from all in it.

"Civility," the White Knight reminded them. "Be clearer on the nature of your complaint, Mirror Knight. Are you accusing the Rogue Sorcerer of having fallen from grace and become one of the Damned?"

That would, in fact, be a valid reason to ask for Roland's exclusion from this meeting. In practice it would be difficult to prove either way, but it hardly mattered since Hanno doubted the Mirror Knight would pursue his hasty words to the end. It was a profoundly serious accusation and there would be consequences to using so frivolously. That the Principate had used such methods frequently against heroes of opposing nations was one of the reasons it had such a poor reputation with Named, and for a Proceran hero in particular to be seen using the same means would see him made a pariah among their kind.

"I did not speak those words," Christophe de Pavanie stiffly said.

"Then you should be more careful when you address others," Hanno frankly said. "If you did not mean to make that accusation, then all you did was offer an insult."

The Mirror Knight looked like he'd been slapped, but then he'd offered the same to the Rogue Sorcerer with intent nowhere as kindly meant. He must be made to understand that he should be choosing his words more carefully, not blurting out offences and then apologizing for them.

"Everyone knows the Sorcerer's thick as thieves with the Woe," the Blade of Mercy spoke up. "It's not a crime to say that, is it?"

"No," Hanno serenely replied. "Though neither is it a crime to have a cordial rapport with an ally, Antoine."

In truth, it would be a poison to this alliance if heroes came to believe that being on good terms with villains was a sort of betrayal. Perhaps if bands of five had remained entirely Below's or Above's it could have been borne, but that had not been the case for some time now. The ability to forge a band out of Named of all allegiances was simply too potent a tool in the war against Keter to be easily discarded, and that meant heroes and villains must be able to maintain a degree of respect for each other.

"I have a grievance of my own, as it happens," the Rogue Sorcerer coldly said.

The anger was still in him, the White Knight saw. That boded ill, for Roland was sharper with wits and tongue than many were with steel.

"Why is Christophe of Pavanie still strutting about with the Severance?" Roland asked. "More than half a dozen of us worked on it, and a fortune was spent forging it. The peril has passed, Mirror Knight, so why do you still carry that priceless artefact with you like some ceremonial blade?"

"I am safekeeping it," the Mirror Knight harshly said.

"We've found no one else capable of using it," the Blessed Artificer shrugged. "Where else should it go?"

"It's an artefact meant to kill the Hidden Horror," the Bitter Blacksmith disagreed, "it should be under lock and behind wards, not lugged around."

"It hasn't been observed since it was taken up, has it?" the Blind Maker mused. "It should be, or we will not know how it takes to being used."

"It was taken up in a battle against great foes," the Vagrant Spear said. "And used worthily. It would be a grave dishonour to claim it back now."

The Mirror Knight threw her a look as surprised as it was grateful.

"Hear hear," the Forlorn Paladin said. "It is not a deed to be lightly gainsaid."

"Seven demons were slain with the blade in the Mirror Knight's hand," the Blade of Mercy fervently reminded them. "Seven. What fool would now give it to another, or put it back to rest?"

"I agree that Christophe is most fit to wield the Severance, given its temperament and his own talents," Hanno said. "I have already informed the Black Queen as much."

There was a moment of stillness in the room. Dismay on the Rogue Sorcerer's face, triumph on the Mirror Knight's – or was it relief?

"It must be returned, however," the White Knight continued. "It was taken up during a crisis for laudable reasons, but the crisis has passed. Until it is formally bestowed upon someone, it belongs to the Grand Alliance."

The scene of a moment earlier, reversed. Nothing about this, Hanno thought, ought to be taken personally. Diplomacy was setting the beat to the tune, not lesser and pettier considerations. He knew better than to believe it would not be taken personally regardless.

"The First Prince shares that belief," the Kingfisher Prince said. "I do as well, for that matter. You've fought mostly in Cleves, Mirror Knight, while the sword might be needed elsewhere. That front is the mildest of the three."

Christophe cast the prince an unfriendly glance, then turned to Hanno.

"Is this an order, White Knight?" he challenged.

He wanted, the dark-skinned man sensed, a confrontation. To make this about the two of them. That was disturbing, considering the White Knight had no enmity towards Christophe de Pavanie and had believe the opposite to be just as true.

"No," Hanno said. "I have told you my opinion. It will become an order if the signatory members of the Grand Alliance so decide, likely by vote. I expect the Severance will be assigned in the same manner."

The Vagrant Spear laughed.

"Should have been more careful who you insulted, Christophe," she said. "Even if your First Prince takes a shine to you, that's two out of three who'd rather burn than back you."

"I am sure Her Most Serene Highness will see reason, when properly made aware of the facts," the Mirror Knight said.

There was a certainty to his voice that Hanno would have found admirable were he not certain it was unwarranted. Though the White Knight had not lost the respect he'd found for the First Prince during the defense of Cleves, he'd since tempered it with appropriate caution. He could respect Cordelia Hasenbach without losing sight of the truth that she loved Procer more than she did most anything. It was why she now wanted the Red Axe to stand trial before the Highest Assembly, ignoring the protection promised the heroine by the Terms. The First Prince would not find many allies in this, unless he'd gravely misread Catherine so at the moment she was also highly unlikely to take a chance on championing Christophe de Pavanie.

"The Hasenbach will do what needs to be done," the Bitter Blacksmith bluntly said. "Whether it pleases you or not. That is their way."

There was an undertone of pride to the words, not quite hidden. Christophe looked upset, which led Hanno to suspect he had come into this hall expecting that Helmgard would support him in all things. The Ashuran was not the only one to notice.

"Is it because you've been fuckin Damned that you're so traitorous?" the Blade of Mercy bit out.

There was a beat of silence, the half a dozen people started talking at the same time. Sidonia was loudly laughing instead, Hanno noted, while the Kingfisher Prince was looking rather interested even as he kept his silence. The White Knight struck his palm against the table once more.

"Order," Hanno said. "Antoine, please apologize."

"I think not," the Blade of Mercy coldly said. "What did I say, save the truth?"

"So she took the Hunted Magician to bed," the Blessed Artificer replied, dismissive. "What of it? He's a comely man, and rather skilled in bedplay."

Several of the heroes choked in surprise. Hanno did not share their shock, benefitting from the perspective of a shared homeland. Adanna of Smyrna would likely equate having sex with a villain to a citizen of a higher tier doing the same with one of a lower tier, and so see nothing there to raise an eyebrow over. Considering marriages across tiers were exceedingly rare such

affairs were usually purely physical, and the Blessed Artificer would be highly insulted should someone imply her judgement – or that of a friend, which Helmgard was – might be affected by such a thing.

“Is he?” the Vagrant Spear asked, leaning forward eagerly.
“Elaborate.”

The White Knight could not blame the Archer for that behaviour, sadly. She’d been this way since they first met and actually tended to be significantly worse when Rafaella was around for them rile each other up. The Dominion spirit of competition did not exclude revels.

“Adanna?” the Mirror Knight said, sounding horrified.

“I took up with him myself, for a while,” the Blessed Artificer said.

“He thought we didn’t know,” Helmgard grinned. “We kept making appointments at the same time, you should have seen him panic and make those tortured excuses.”

The White Knight cleared his throat.

“How any of us choose to share our beds is not anyone else’s concern,” Hanno said. “And not to be subject to insult. Antoine, *apologize*.”

For the first time that day, his voice hardened. The younger man froze at the sound, eyes going wide.

“He meant no insult, Helmgard,” the Mirror Knight said, addressing the heroine directly.

The Bitter Blacksmith spat to the side.

“Only a boy needs others to speak for himself,” she said, but curtly nodded.

Hanno caught her eye, raising an eyebrow in question, but she shook her head in denial. If she was satisfied, then he would pursue the matter no further.

“Are there any further grievances?” the White Knight asked.

“The Black Queen should not be a high officer of the Grand Alliance,” the Mirror Knight flatly said.

The entire room went silent, as if breathing in simultaneously.

“That is not a grievance,” Hanno noted.

"She's corrupt," Christophe de Pavanie said. "She made a deal with the Hunted Magician to let him off-"

"The Hunted Magician is to stand trial within the week," the White Knight corrected. "I am to be a member of the tribunal."

"Don't be obtuse," the Mirror Knight insisted, "she alone gets to decide the sentence, and she was arrogant enough to take her bribe while I was in the room. She thinks herself untouchable, White Knight."

"She alone stands as judge over the Damned, by the Terms we all agreed on," the Kingfisher Prince said. "To argue against that is to argue against their very existence."

Which by the way his tone had cooled, was not a stance that would endear anyone to the prince.

"What meaning is there in the Terms, if the one enforcing them on villains abuses her office?" the Mirror Knight said. "We've offered amnesty to a parade of rapists and murderers but the Damned holding their leash is just as corrupt. Is it any wonder that the likes of the Red Axe strike against us?"

Christophe de Pavanie rose to his feet, animated and angry. The emotion did him no favours with some at the table, but it caught the attention of others. There had been doubts about the Terms from the beginning, after all, and two of the heroes who'd most stringently argued against their current form were in this hall – both Adanna and Christophe had been deeply opposed to the principle of villains policing themselves through the Black Queen. Enough that they'd threatened to walk, though it'd been an empty threat. It had been a point of principle back then, however. It'd since grown into a genuine belief for the Mirror Knight, it was plain to Hanno's eyes.

"We are losing the mandate of the Heavens," the Mirror Knight warned. "Every time we care more about the letter of a treaty than doing good, we lose ourselves a little more. That is Below's subtlest scheme: to make us embrace one evil in seeking the destruction of another."

Hanno had heard many people claim they understood the designs of the Heavens, over the years, and what their mandate for their children was. It was unfortunate that no degree of certainty seemed to prevent them from error, or mutual exclusivity in their claims. His attention, beyond the words being spoken, was on the heroes in the room. Some were skeptical, the White Knight thought as he studied the Named, but others were visibly in agreement. The Blade of Mercy, the Blessed Artificer. Reluctantly, the Bitter Blacksmith. Given the deep enmity she had with her brother, Hanno suspected that her leanings there were personally driven. She must be troubled by the thought that the reason she'd

refrained from fighting her brother to the death, the Terms, might have been some trick of the Gods Below.

"Horseshit," the Vagrant Spear said. "The Red Axe killed the Wicked Enchanter. He was an animal of the worst kind, but what does that change? *She gave her word*. We all did. And now you're trying to wriggle out of it, like a worm on the hook."

"She got Nephele killed," Christophe de Pavanie hissed.

"No," the Blade of Mercy burst out.

Astonished, the Mirror Knight turned towards the younger man.

"I was there, it wasn't like that," Antoine insisted. "She lost soldiers, too, and it was the Hierophant who caught the demon. Not her, not us, him."

"Hierophant hasn't enough interest in people to get them killed on purpose," the Bitter Blacksmith grunted. "And he liked Nephele, I remember."

"Praesi hide their intentions skillfully," Adanna said.

She then withered under Helmgard's skeptical gaze.

"It is perhaps unlikely," she conceded. "And though she is a vicious brute, I'll admit I have some doubts the Black Queen would have attempted to arrange the death of an ally in the middle of a fight with a demon. She is a practical sort of monster, and more careful with her life than her cavalier manners would make you believe."

On the account of the pragmatism and cavalier manners, Hanno tended to agree. Catherine was also savagely protective of those she considered in her care, whether they were objectively deserving of that protection or not, so that she might have arranged for Nephele to die was... improbable. Not impossible, of course, and he was willing to hear out Christophe, but he was more inclined to believe in a misunderstanding than a conspiracy.

"What leads you to believe that the Repentant Magister was the victim of a plot?" the White Knight asked.

The Mirror Knight blinked, biting his lip.

"A library was burned, and in it there were two false Revenants who attacked us as we tried to rescue the Doddering Sage," he said. "It must have been the Black Queen and one of her servants, who else could it have been?"

"Even if you were right, how would that lead to scheming Nephele's murder?" the Rogue Sorcerer asked.

"She lied to us," Christophe said. "Do you not see?"

The Blind Maker cleared his throat. The Mirror Knight's face tightened with anger.

"And now you mock me, just as she did," he said. "Does no one else understand what she's doing to us even now?"

Hanno chose his words carefully, but perhaps too slowly. He was not the first to answer.

"So here we are," the Rogue Sorcerer quietly said. "The truth comes out at last. Nephele died and your pride was hurt, so now you're throwing a tantrum painted over with righteous speech. The part that disgusts me most, *Knight*, is that you are pretending you actually knew her. The way us here at the Arsenal did, we who shared years with her. You swagger around arrogating the loss of others, as if it makes you important and worth listening to."

Roland cast a look of icy contempt at the other hero.

"All it makes you is the most despicable sort of braggart," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Have the decency of silence, Mirror Knight, and sit in your fucking chair."

"*Roland*," Hanno sharply said. "That's enough. Being insulted is no reason to return the treatment in kind, not amongst allies."

"You're a disgrace, Sorcerer," the Blade of Mercy spat.

"Swallow your tongue, boy," the Bitter Blacksmith harshly said. "You have already given away your right to speak."

"I will not speak to the Rogue Sorcerer's anger," the Forlorn Paladin said, "but his doubts I'll admit to sharing. You cast grave accusations, Mirror Knight, but offer no proof. Even a villain is due more than that."

"This is all pointless talk, anyway," the Vagrant Spear exasperatedly said. "Even if every word you spoke was true, Christophe, what is it that could be done? You want to spank the Black Queen's bottoms until she learns about virtue? The moment one of us – any of us – attacks her, the Kingdom of Callow's armies will leave and let Procer burn to the ground."

"They have a duty," Christophe tightly said. "And I do not speak of forcing her to abdicate her crown, Sidonia. Is Lady Vivienne Dartwick not her heir? Let her replace the crooked queen as representative for the Damned, then."

"That is enough of that," Hanno said.

Eyes turned him.

"We do not rule the Grand Alliance," the White Knight evenly said. "We do not settle its affairs for it, much less meddle with its constituent crowns. We are servants of the Gods Above who have sworn an oath of war against the Hidden Horror."

Hanno swept his gaze across the room.

"We must remain aware of our limits," the White Knight said. "We are not deciding the fate of the Queen of Callow between us, or the fate of the Severance, much less who the representative for villains would be under rules that we have already given our oath to observe. If you have concerns, I will hear them. If you have grievances, I will act on them. But do not delude yourselves, not for a moment, that we can *dictate terms* to half of Calernia bound in alliance."

Few looked like they wanted to object, and none who dwelled in the Arsenal. They understood best, Hanno thought, the actual scale of something like the Grand Alliance. They'd seen it at work, when this unearthly place had been carved out of nothing in less than a year. The others knew only their front, their battle, their struggle. It was human nature, Hanno knew, to reduce things to something that was easier to grasp. That did not make you uncomfortable about how very *small* you were. The Seraphim had stripped him of that, among their many gifts. The White Knight perfectly understood how insignificant a speck of dust he truly was, and that had allowed him a certain... clarity of sight, in some ways.

"You're going to kill the Red Axe."

Hanno turned a calm gaze to the Mirror Knight, whose green eyes had gone cold.

"I am," the White Knight agreed. "If a law cannot be borne, let it not be borne. I will not worship at the altar of our imperfections and pretend it is infallible. But if it is to stand, if it is to be heeded, there cannot be *exceptions*."

Hanno did not judge, for that was not his place even bereft the guidance of the Seraphim, but he was neither blind nor deaf. He would act as he must, knowing his actions to be blind and imperfect. Christophe de Pavanie rose to his feet. Slowly, inexorably.

"No," the Mirror Knight harshly said. "I will not allow it."

Those were not, the White Knight thought, words that could be taken back.

Insanenoodlyguy

"These talks are meant to allow you all to air grievances and worries," Hanno cut in as he sat down, voice serene. "If such worries concern the matter of the story's ranking, you are of course free to vote here."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[TeK](#)

Christophe de Pavanie rose to his feet. Slowly, inexorably.

"No," the Mirror Knight harshly said. "I will not vote."

Those were not, the White Knight thought, words that could be taken back.

thearpox23

It is always a little weird to me when there is a request to vote on a website I never use for a purpose that's never relevant to me.

I don't ever use topwebfiction. I only heard of it on this blog. The other works there don't particularly interest me, and if I am ever searching for something to read I won't ever be using it for recommendations.

You'd think the rankings would be decided by the userbase. If I were to actually vote I'd feel like that guy that goes into a cafe, fills out a survey for what drinks they prefer, then never actually buys anything or visits it again.

[TeK](#)

It's more of a reminder honestly. As if, those who want to vote, but may have forgotten will click the link and those who don't want will not. Everything is very much liberal, you do what you think is right.

Nairne .01

I agree

No one is forcing you to vote thearpox23.

[TeK](#)

We **will** find out where you live if you don't vote though...

[shikkarasu](#)

I love too many different stories in the Rankings to pick a favourite, but I do love the ever creative reminders.

Tom

You can vote for more than one story. You could vote for every one on the page if you wanted. 😊 I'm pretty sure it was put together that way so that you don't have to choose a single favorite.

aisard

Mayhap the purpose and relevancy is only in how it effects apgte's popularity and thus monetary compensation.

Topwebfiction only exists as a platform that ties together disparate blogs and sites that host their own fiction anyways. By reading apgte, you are in fact the user base Topwebfiction is aiming for.

Either way, it's more like going to vote in a poll organized by a Coffee Lovers organization whose sole purpose is making coffee polls. Hoping that your vote will boost the sales of your favorite local cafe. Benefitting the people who actually follow the polls, whilst also expanding their reach.

But also at this point its just a good meme :p

[impolitic](#)

You're reading this wonderful story for free. It's not an unreasonable hardship to suggest that you promote the story if you've enjoyed it.

Whether you use topwebfiction or not, plenty of other readers do. A high ranking on that page makes it more likely that some of those users will come here, read the story, and become fans in turn, thus building the market for EE's eventual commercialization of his work.

You sound like Mr. Pink explaining why he doesn't tip the waitress in the diner.

thearpox23

Voting inherently implies making a choice. Picking a favorite if you will.

And without reading or even glancing at the other works, I don't know if the Guide is better than them. It feels

disingenuous to simply go to some site and engage in a shouting match of 'my thing is better than the other things' when that is my only relation to that site.

Abolish tipping.

[TeK](#)

Tipping is objectively cancer.

[impolitic](#)

Your entire argument can be dismissed with the observation that you can vote for as many stories as you like. Voting does not express a preference for one story over another, it's simply a recommendation that **this** story is good. You don't have to decide anything about whether other stories are worth reading, much less whether they're more or less worth reading than this one, in order to make the simple recommendation that this one is.

thearpox23

"Your entire argument can be dismissed with the observation that you can vote for as many stories as you like."

You say that like it was obvious.

Then it's just an overly complicated way of having an 'most popular stories this week' datamine, where instead of monitoring traffic you're monitoring a dedicated subset of fans. (And my assumption is that the ratios of the these are going to be similar across the stories.) Kind of like novelupdates activity stats and reading lists, except that the novelupdates actually has the series description, releases history, reviews, et cetera. You know, where the website has actual usability aside from being a shouting room.

Honestly, we should just petition novelupdates or some similar website to open a web fiction section. Because when I compare the two, novelupdates does all the things topwebfiction does but better and in a less awkward way.

[Estelulu](#)

Please stop lol. Nobody really needed you to pontificate about why your opinion is so special and different, and why you don't want to support a free story that I can only assume you enjoy.

Just don't vote and leave it at that. Your replies are starting to look kind of crazed and desperately defensive.

thearpox23

Doesn't telling someone to 'please stop lol' after the discussion has probably already ended achieve the opposite purpose? You sure discouraged me from replying by throwing a bunch of stuff I disagree with at me. And nobody really needed you pontificating about why my pontification is you get the point.

For my part, I actually enjoyed expressing my dislike of the whole process and of the website's relative worthlessness, even if WonderDuckie ultimately put his point forth much better than I did mine. If you mind my statements crazed and desperately defensive that funny, but that just means I'm not very eloquent. Something best fixed with practice.

[Estelulu](#)

It's insurance for the future.

[anonymous4968](#)

Novel Updates DOES have a segment for western novels, it's called ScribbleHub. Where do you think those three sidebar novels come from? Also, other sites exist too, RoyalRoad and to a lesser extent Wattpad.

<https://www.scribblehub.com/>

WebNovel can go die in the harshest of nuclear empowered goblinfire.

Dome Zasrekh

You dont vote becouse you think its better than the others, you vote cos you think its good

KlatnYelox

There is a difference. You can vote for as many web fictions as you want on that list. Its more of a statement "I like this one" than a claim that "this one is the best."

heffalumps

or you could go contribute to the author's Patreon, which is linked in various places from this website, which does actually give money to the actual author directly, instead of constantly banging on this damn "go vote!" drum, which might make some money for the author... somehow? in some abstract way? maybe? *without actually giving any money to the author, or to anybody at all*?

I come to the comment section to read comments about the chapter I just read, and I get damn tired of having to wade through a score of screens about "go vote!" "don't tell me what to do!" "this is equivalent to giving the author money!" before getting to anything actually relevant.

(and for the record, I am contributing actual money to the author's actual Patreon, and I have never voted in the pointless poll and never will.)

WonderDuckie

Not to mention topwebfiction is a relic of a bygone era of armature web novels. It has extremely low user traffic now a days. Mostly just bot's or people from this specific website. To be honest I see no glory in reaching the number 1 spot on a largely inactive poll that barely anyone realizes exists anymore outside of a few tiny circles.

That being said there is nothing wrong with voting on it if that's what makes a few readers happy. Tho if your reason is "it shows my support for the novel" then go support their pateron. Something that actually makes a meaningful impact for are beloved author. No one seems to ever encourage readers to do that in the comments for some reason.

[TeK](#)

This is a very good point.

Vortex

I found practical guide to evil and dozens of other stories on that website. Even if you do not use it, surely you can see how it would be helpful to the author to increase traffic to your site.

Also if you are looking for high quality fiction to read, topwebfiction is usually a pretty good source.

thecorinthianman

Ooooooh, this is gonna be good.

NerfContessa

These are a villains words, not a heroes.

Careful, morror knight with that sword you'd make a good. Black knight in Jon Amadeus ways.

Dave

Boy do I want Christophe to die. FFS

Jordan Leighton

I did call that the Heroes side would be the side to fall apart. Fits too well with the tone/theme of the story for anything else.

Curious about how Hanno will handle this one.

Salt

I'm actually not sure if Hanno would even be willing to compromise at this point. I mean he's generally one of the most moderate of the lot, but he is still the Sword of Justice. He's by nature as completely and utterly uncompromising as the Pilgrim or the Saint, when it comes to his most prized principle. Him being so normally reasonable makes it easy to forget that this dude used to walk around flipping a coin and beheading civilians without batting an eyelash, if the Seraphim said they were Unjust enough to warrant it.

The fact that he gave a flat answer for pushing for execution, especially with such an absolutist phrasing, makes me suspect that of all things it'll be the Mirror Knight's *inconsistency in following the laws* that's going to be the roadblock. Not the insults, not the immaturity, or the arrogance, or plain being a pain in the ass, just the fact that he's taking a stand against what Hanno thinks is Just.

Darkening

Judgement, not Justice. There is a difference.

Salt

Ah, sorry typo, you're right.

Although, to be honest I'm not sure there practically is a difference as far as Hanno is concerned. Canonically we know the deepest desire of his heart is to be Just, and he's outright stated in the past that he considers the "judgement of power" to be evil because it isn't Just.

ThatOneGuy

When you spend a good amount of your life working as the blade for the angels in charge of JUSTICE you learn a thing or two about what is right and wrong.

It may not be pretty and some methods seem heavy handed to even seemingly giving up one's own free will... But White Knight stands by his beliefs and his actions.

He may not like it, but that is what justice and the law demands. Mirror Knight on the other hand... Stands by what he says when it suits him. He really didn't care for the reformed villain turned hero in his party and only took offense by blaming her death on someone he didn't like.

He took claim of a valuable sword, planned war on his own allies during a war, and now takes issue when he doesn't get his way.

Some heroes are brash, some blunt, and others... Hard to work with.

MK is just like lone swordsman. Willing to preach about good, honor, and insert line... But just as willing to brainwash everyone around them to become suicidal soldiers when he doesn't get his way.

MK has not done it... But he might cause a bigger blunder if he tries to kill White Knight and take claim of the position of "leader of the heroes"

medailyfun

Nephele was not villain before, just a Stygian mage

Sam

She wasn't a Villain, but it's hard to argue that she wasn't a villain.

Agent J

You're selling William short. Where GP is about No Unnecessary Suffering and SoS was about No Compromise with the Enemy, Billy's core principles were simply Free Callow, as his sister desired, and Atone for My Sins in the doing. Everything else was heroic dressing. He was, honestly, more similar to Saint of Swords in his willingness to bring great harm to his own countrymen in accomplishing his core principles. And, Hells, even the Grey Pilgrim is up for a minor spot of genocide in the pursuit of his.

Mirror Knight, by contrast, is not fighting for the Red Axe because of any such principles. That could have been argued when she killed the Wicked Enchanter, but all arguments flew

out the window when she try to murder the Hero and Prince who's only job was to protect her from harm.

Right now, he's fighting for her to massage his own bruised ego. "I was wrongfully manipulated like she was. If I am innocent, so is she. If she is not... what am I?"

Even William was better than that.

beleester

I would argue that judging based on just the facts and the law, rather than your personal dislike of the person being judged, is the **definition** of fair judgement.

One of Hanno's major character traits is his willingness to obey civilian laws, even to his detriment. He doesn't simply believe in his own judgement, or the judgement of the Seraphim, he believes in Law – the idea that society should have rules that apply to everyone equally. Like all Named, he's not going to budge on that principle, but it's very much his own thing, not the Seraphim speaking through him. The Seraphim don't have laws, they only judge "is it better for this person to be alive or dead?"

(If anything, this principle is what **stops** him from calling on the Seraphim – you don't face judgement without committing a crime.)

Salt

Ah, but there's the mistake. All choirs focus on a single virtue, and as good as each virtue is, they're not all encompassing or fully correct on their own.

I'd argue that Judgement as we've seen it does not care a single whit about "is it better for this person to be alive or dead"? That's Mercy's way of thinking. Judgement seems to care about "is it justified for this person to be alive or dead", which is completely different in that it focuses on the principle of the matter rather than Mercy's consequentialist view of ethics.

Are the Seraphim perfectly Just? I wouldn't doubt it. Is being perfectly Just the same thing as being perfectly Good? Not in every situation, not by a long shot, even if it is still quite Good in many.

Hanno has his own blinders. He'll be the one most often correct when you ask him if the law was followed, and how it should be followed. He'll be the one most often useless when questions such as "what matters more, the outcome or the law?" get raised – which is where the other choirs come in

for the many myriad other ethical basis that go into making a decision.

The point of what I was trying to say isn't that Hanno is unjust. The point was to caution that for all his temperate likability as a character, when push comes to shove he is a character who by Role sees the world through a very particular lens.

Fate

So far as his particular lens: keep in mind, Hanno has been blessed by enduring karma blindness. Speaking practically, much of his ability to collaborate with Catherine over the past few years originates from his cautious ambiguity towards Judgement. This is diametrically opposed to the standard interpretation of his Name; the catch is, Hanno has always been ambiguous on judgement, and took on the role atypically with the use of his trademark "leave it to fate" rituals granting him the certainty other Knights have by nature.

While he had Judgement at hand, their relationship was much more ambiguous, and more or less predicated on Catherine being the least of pressing evils. Since they've been blinded, he can't consult the Choir, and he is forced to make his own calls based on his humility, his experience, and his ability to reason, turning him from the fateful zealot into a veritable knight of 'practicality,' the same practicality that runs deep in the current Black Knight (thus completing yet another mirror, like the White 'Prince' / Black Queen parity that was just reinforced a few chapters ago.)

This strain of practicality and humility is exactly what has allowed Hanno and Catherine to transition from "temporary allies, fated enemies, but friends" into "enduring allies, fated rivals, but friends" for years and years, fighting off the Hidden Horror. Even once the Choir returns, that change will be challenging to reverse.

Actually, Hanno may be at risk of losing his Name entirely, or transitioning into a new one. His consistent understanding of fallibility and the consequences of his actions may indeed have him questioning the virtues of Judgement for the sake of Judgement, especially if the fallout from the Choir doing its job "right" is the horrific situation that the continent is currently trapped in.

Actually, have we divined what Choir the Bard supposedly answers to, if any?

Agent J

She answers to the Gods, both Above and Below, not any petty Choirs.

Mental Mouse

> the same practicality that runs deep in the current Black Knight

Ahem, *most recent* Black Knight, who has since lost his Name.

beleester

The Seraphim **explicitly** judge “Would it be better for this person to be dead or not?” When Hanno first becomes the White Knight, the Seraphim give him the Riddle of Fault and show him all the consequences that unfold from each possible decision, both good and bad – the lesson being that no human can predict all the consequences of their actions, but the Seraphim can, and therefore only they should pass judgement. That’s consequentialism, not deontology.

Salt

The seraphim showed him both the cause and the effect of each action. They went backwards in time as well as forwards. Consequentialism doesn’t place heavy emphasis on motive like the Seraphim do. You can’t just ignore half of what they showed him. See below:

> The impossible lay of action and consequence, of motive and result. It was too much.

They showed him how even his “good and faithful actions” were flawed precisely because of the prideful, selfish, and lustful intentions behind them. See below, you’ll notice that a majority of what they consider contemptuous about Hanno aren’t that his actions hurt people so much as his ugly intentions and beliefs – ones that could be found behind even Good Actions like showing kindness “for his own pleasure”

> Who could see Creation with eyes instead of scrolls. Disgust and fear at tierless beggars. The ugly press of reassurance when violence was dealt to make them leave his sight. Pride at his skill with a quill, at his cleverness and memory. The unadmitted contempt for those less blessed. Kindness offered only for his own pleasure, for the thrill of knowing himself good. Taking bread from his father’s portion, telling himself he had earned it more.

I don't even understand how you can interpret him as a consequentialist character when his entire backstory is based on ethics regarding justification of fault despite consequence. His eye opening experience was realizing that he wasn't qualified to judge people who did things that were plainly harmful – like needlessly sending his mother to the quarantined district and causing grief by not properly laying his father to rest – because he couldn't consider the full lay of motive, intent, and history that led up to the action.

His answer to the riddle of fault wasn't based on a consequentialist interpretation of how bad the result of the maid and noble woman's actions was, it was a value based interpretation that says the king is incapable of administering justice because he cannot understand the full intent and history that led up to the crime.

Nearly everything about Prosecution I and II denies pure consequentialism as a sufficient standard for a system of ethics

Cicero

Justice is blind, and judges by the scale, not by personal preference.

The Mirror Knight has essentially declared his intent to subvert justice. Also, he intends to enforce it by stealing the sword meant to kill the Dead King and using it to smite everyone he thinks deserves it.

Yeah... White Knight is going kill the Mirror Knight.

And a majority of the heroes are going to side with the White Knight.

In fact, right now I think only the Blade of Mercy will side with the Mirror Knight.

Do0d

I think MK will give Hanno a bad time and BoM will stop him.

[Javvies](#)

Oh, fuck.

This isn't going to end well.

Hanno probably should have had private meetings before the group meeting. He might have been able to come up with a plan to deal with Mirror Knight.

And Mirror Knight pushed a lot harder and faster than I expected that he would. And on factors and issues I didn't expect him to push on.

I'm starting to doubt that he's truly just clueless dumbass who got played.

He might have decided to fully throw in with Bard's agenda. Or some variation thereof.

Kingfisher Prince might have to change his mind on charging Red Axe for trying to kill him in order to hold the Heroes together. Which is something I'm still not entirely sure why he decided against in the first place.

Insanenoodlyguy

After killing Seven Demons in one day, the perception of him by the others, named and mundane alike, changed. Which means his story is changing. Which means HE is changing. Not necessarily for the better, but I put forth the idea that for all his ineptitude, he's actually smarter and more capable, at least of expressing and having his own opinion and direction, then he was before the battle for Arsenal.

dadycool

He just has a, if not simply wrong, then at least unrestrained and impatient opinion. Sure, bribery is bad, but there are things he refuses to see that make it a usable course of action, especially for someone who doesn't mind getting her hands dirty and acknowledging how dirty they are, unlike some people.

[Javvies](#)

It's not even bribery. It's a plea deal in order to avoid an automatic death sentence.

On the other hand, Mirror Knight has no knowledge or experience with how the judicial system, government, ruling, and/or leadership actually works.

dadycool

For someone who wouldn't fathom the concept of a plea deal, I guess it would look like bribery. Of course, he also refuses to understand anything beyond his narrow view and pats himself on the back for refusing to see.

[TeK](#)

To be fair I am not sure a plea deal is something that is that prevalent in Calernian judicial system. So he's lack of knowledge is understandable.

dadycoool

Yeah, I think it's actually a fairly modern judicial method, though I don't want to get put on a list by googling it.

thearpox23

A plea deal IS bribery. It is just that we have long since internalized the long and complicated argument for why it can be a good practice. I suppose thinking "It's not bribery" is easier than "it's a subset of bribery that can be beneficial".

[TeK](#)

That. I actually agree with the sentiment very much. It's ironic because "it's a bribery but a good one vs it's not a bribery" is a discussion of nuance vs monochrome, which very much applies to Mirror Knight himself.

[Javvies](#)

Eh, I'd argue that a plea deal is sufficiently different enough in degree that it effectively constitutes a difference in kind.

Like ... the difference between a holiday fireworks launcher filled for a fireworks display and a multiple launch rocket system loaded with live artillery rockets.

Technically they're the same sort of thing in the same sense that a plea deal is bribery. In practice, however, they are very different and not the same thing at all.

[TeK](#)

That was kind of an extreme case and not an equivalent analogy at all, but I'll let it slide because I like to do exaggerated analogies too. Both bribery and plea deal can be reduced to "provide us a reason why we shouldn't apply to you standard of justice we apply to everyone by default". Only difference is while in plea deal "us" is the society as a whole, in bribery "us" is a small group of people with power to change said standard of justice.

thearpox23

And by "society as a whole" half the time it is:
The lawyers who wants a good record, The judge who
doesn't want to work overtime, and the defendant
who has to go to work tomorrow.

And while there are many ways a plea deal can work
in practice, what Catherine did with the Hunter
Magician was very much a bribe to the Grand
Alliance in the form of the Crown of Autumn.

Shveiran

This isn't a small difference at all.

Bribery is the exchange of money or other benefit
so that a public servant will act against his
duties and in the donor's favor.

A plea deal is the accused renouncing part of his
rights in exchange for a lesser sentence, with the
system being the scale used to measure whether or
not the balance is beneficial or not.

There is just no comparing the two unless you only
go skin deep, because a bribery is about the
bribed benefitting at the expense of the system
and a plea deal is the system choosing between
different possible benefits to itself.

Comparing the two is not unlike comparing self
defense to premeditated murder: you are still
shooting someone, but when you look deeper than
that there aren't many similarities to be found.

[sivarajan](#)

That was my first instinct too, but upon consideration,
no: bribery is the most charitable interpretation of
plea deals, only applicable if you presume guilt. If
your "justice" system presumes innocence, it's actually
extortion, threatening the risk of a much harsher
sentence if one doesn't plead guilty.

[Javvies](#)

Depends on the nature of the plea deal.
If it's just "plead guilty for a lighter sentence
than if you go to trial and get convicted" ... it can
be that if and when the system isn't working right
and an innocent person thinks that they are in
serious danger of being falsely convicted if they go
to trial. Which, admittedly, happens way too often.
But the system is nominally supposed to be aligned

towards it being better to let a hundred guilty people go free than falsely convict one innocent. In theory, anyways, in practice it doesn't work out like that far too often.

If, however, the plea deal is about "I'll give you the evidence I have on someone who did something worse than what I did or other information the court will find valuable in another case, or otherwise cooperate with prosecutors in exchange for leniency on the stuff I'm guilty of and believe that you have more than enough to convict me on" ... then not so much.

thearpox23

The enforcers are engaging in extortion. (When operating maliciously.)
The victim is bribing them off.

Both things can be true at once, and the guilt isn't necessarily a factor. The intent of enforcement is independent of whether or not you've done something wrong.

[origamiflame](#)

Well, a mirror isn't meant to see. Simply reflects without understanding.

Nairne .01

And that is its failing.

[TeK](#)

"Working as intended."

– Devteam of Above

LarsBlitzer

I agree that it seems his story is changing. He pulled a magic sword from a pool in a time of great crisis. You can't ask for a more iconic footnote from Joseph Campbell. I fear he won't be up for the task, but no, he's not stupid. Intelligence isn't his dump stat; Wisdom is though and that spells disaster. The showdown will come next chapter and it will be a doozy.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh absolutely. I could have been clearer, I completely agree with you. He's gotten some bonuses to intelligence and

Charisma checks, but his wisdom penalty is as prevalent as ever

dadycool

I think he refrained as Prince Frederic helping the First Prince, not as Kingfisher Prince.

MK seems to me to be like Bitter Blacksmith said, simply too arrogant, also too much of a young Saint of Swords, which is likely why she chose him: she saw a kindred spirit who mistakes fighting Evil for doing Good and refuses to entertain the concept of grey areas.

[Javvies](#)

Except by Kingfisher Prince not pushing to punish Red Axe for trying to kill him under the Truce and Terms makes things more complicated for Cordelia, Cat, and (now) Hanno.

If Frederic charged Red Axe under the Truce and Terms for trying to kill him, that's sufficient grounds to execute her by itself, which means the other Heroes (ie Mirror Knight) don't have room to say she shouldn't get executed because Wicked Enchanter was a Villain who did terrible things before the Truce and Terms, and the issue of trying to kill a Proceran Prince gets subsumed because Red Axe already has a death sentence for violating the Truce and Terms, and she can only get executed once.

Red Axe getting tried by the Assembly helps Cordelia in the short term (driving a wedge between Mirror Knight and his Proceran noble allies) but complicates things for the Truce and Terms and the Accords in the long run.

dadycool

Sounds like a battle between two long terms. The long term of not having Procer burn to the ground regardless of DK and the long term of lasting, meaningful peace across Calernia.

[TeK](#)

Nay, I say there isn't much difference between Saint and Mirror beyond pure superficial ones. Saints ardent believes were forged after actually offering forgiveness and trying to coexist and being burned time and again, after fighting and facing the vilest and darkest parts of Below for so long, she could no longer unsee them even in more moderate Villain. Her believes may have been wrong, but they were grounded in precedent and decades of experience, and *still* she *recognised* that failing in herself, acknowledged it and deferred to

Pilgrim for most of the decisions because she knew she had bias.

That is far, far more than I can say about Cristophe at the moment. It is a haughty mix of arrogance, ignorance and self-righteousness. Nothing else.

Still, I can't miss the obvious parallels between Saint and Mirror and Pilgrim and Hanno. They are too numerous to count. I hope that Christophe will learn to trust Hanno's judgement and will grow more mature. I kinda hope they will be successors to Laurence&Tariq tag team. They worked very well together all things considered.

TeK

I meant to say there isn't much similarities between Mirror and Saint beyond superficial ones, curse my laziness and lack of proofreading.

Salt

Agreed. The Saint in her latter years was a stubborn ass and jaded beyond belief, but she was also the furthest thing from a fool.

We know for a fact that her early days involved actively sparing Villains like the Salutory Alchemist simply because she believed they had the best of intentions. A slap on the wrist, a promise to avoid crossing lines, and if Tariq is to be believed she left it at that and actually just trusted the kid when he nodded and promised to be a good boy. If anything, the young Saint of Swords from the Pilgrim's memory seems more like a Rogue Sorcerer or Vagrant Spear than a Mirror Knight.

I suspect that the Severance chose Christophe precisely because he's nothing at all like a young Saint of Swords. It chose him because he's in some ways strikingly similar to the elderly Saint of Swords – uncompromising and distrustful of Villains to a ridiculous degree. Whatever's left of the old bat sees a kid who probably won't make the same "mistakes" she made by attempting to trust Villains.

The problem is that the stakes right now do not make for a safe learning environment. The best case scenario here is Hanno whipping humility and moderation into him. The worst case is "character development by ruinous mistake of your own making", which tends to be followed by either a sharp redemption or going even further off the rails. Considering the situation, I don't think it takes much to imagine how bad that kind of fallout could be.

Here's hoping the kid learns a necessary life lesson by way of getting his ass handed to him.

Adrian V

I think the rush is that he is smart enough to notice he was losing the argument, so he went all manchild coupled with the need to make a stand (and the inability to admit even to himself he is wrong)

Ninestrings

The more we see of Christophe, the more I am struck by how incredibly childish he is.

I know he gets basically launched at monsters for a living but emotionally he's been coddled way way too much.

He seems to be confusing being physically capable with being emotionally developed.

Abrakadabra

I guess he is taken over by the Severance. He is acting exactly like the woman it was made of. No compromise on the smallest things even if the world would suffer for it.

Nairne .01

I'm inclined to agree. Names have power, literally in this story. And it is the Severance. Coupled with his natural predispositions it is itching to sever what he doesn't like. It is an aspect made manifest. And he is too immature to keep it in check.

KageLupus

I don't think it is anything as esoteric as that. This is just the result of the Wandering Bard being extremely familiar with the nature of Named, and setting up Mirror Knight for conflict.

Everything that is happening right now is due to the constant feelings of inadequacy that Mirror Knight has. The man fumbles every social interaction that he finds himself in, and is aware of it after the fact every time. He is not entirely wrong in thinking that people only keep him around because of his Name and the power it gives him.

Those feelings came to a serious head when he was talking with Catherine and realized that she was only engaging with him because he had the Severance. So once again his only importance comes from the power that he wields and nothing personal to himself. Christophe has decided to lean into that

role, in an admittedly childish manner. If all he is good for is power, and he has all of this power, then he might as well use it to push for what he thinks is right. Which in this case is saving the Red Axe from the wicked Black Queen.

[TeK](#)

The most unrealistic thing about this chapter is how allegedly bad at social stuff Cristophe has all the cool lines and never once was like "I uh, have, uh, like, uh, well, you know, I mean I don't think we should, uh, well, like, uh, trust the Black Queen, you know?"

Agent J

How often do real people stumble and stutter during regular speech? Misspeak or forget a word they wanted to use and struggle to find it? Nevermind when tensions are this heightened. Have we seen that ever in this series?

I've a running theory that everyone in Guide is made more eloquent in speech, because what kind of shitty dialogue has people fumbling over their words all the time? Who wants to read that shit?

Cicero

Christophe isn't bad at social because he speaks poorly, or lacks charisma.

He's bad at social because he speaks well and has a lot of charisma, but fundamentally struggles with empathy – particularly with those unlike him. Which leads him to continuously attribute malicious intent to others because what other reason could they possibly have for disagreeing with the obvious and right course of action?

You saw he repeatedly make that same mistake during this meeting. Assuming that others must have bad motives if they don't agree with him.

The reason he gets along so well with the Blade of Mercy is that Antoine has the same flaw, and so unlike most others, Christophe can actually empathize more with him than he can with others.

Nairne .01

Antoine, unlike Christoph is not a lost cause yet. At least I hope so.

[TeK](#)

I agree. But it is still weird to see someone like Christophe to not stumble and remain so well-spoken under such confusing and tense situation. He was utterly surprised quite a few times, yet it did nothing to his speech.

Cicero

Not really. Have you really not known someone who was good with words, and was well spoken, but for some reason never said the right words?

Instead their eloquence makes things worse, because it's so much harder for them to take it back later by pleading confusion and shock.

[Tek](#)

True. I meant it more as a broader statement applying to everyone in the series, I just took Cristophe as an example, and I shouldn't have.

Ahad Mahmood

A potential explanation may be people less articulate, like Antoine in this case, choosing not to articulate themselves. There have been incidences of characters being spoken over or being silent and whilst that doesn't inherently prove anything, it can imply that in a high pressure environment the characters that struggle to articulate themselves pick silence. There have definitely been accounts of characters blushing or becoming flustered and then becoming silent so that may be a possible explanation. I do agree that the lack of stammering is quite noticeable in hindsight.

Salt

It could honestly be both, I don't think it has to be one way or the other. If the weapon did have such an effect on mindset, for the Bard a person with that kind of stubbornness to begin with would be the ideal target to give it to.

They wouldn't resist the effects since it's in line with their tendencies anyway, and people wouldn't immediately be suspicious at someone being "more stubborn than normal", whereas someone being "stubborn when they usually aren't" would raise alarm bells immediately.

Not dissimilar to hiding a poisonous mushroom among the edible stock of mushrooms, rather than in a pile of carrots.

heffalumps

oooooh, *very* good catch, this makes a lot of his actions and reactions make a lot more sense to me suddenly. yikes.

Salt

No, no it's not. If Christophe really tries to force a pardon through, Hanno is going to see that as outright evil. He may have just crossed the singular hard bottom line that Hanno actually has.

I think the vision of himself doing what Christophe is doing, from the Seraphim's initial test of Hanno's character, says everything we need to know about how well he's going to react to the Mirror Knight trying to get his way by force.

> I charge you, he heard himself say, with cruelty and indifference. I charge you with choosing law over right, with embracing blindness. As as his eyes shone, they could not weather the Light that came with it. Blindness embraced embraced them in return. He left that courtyard a righteous man, and brought that righteousness to all of Ashur.

>"No," Hanno said. "That, too, is evil."

>The boy he watched bore power, but he was not just. To mete out retribution upon those he found at fault was no different than what he had despised, in the end. It was only the judgement of power. The rule of strength, bereft of equity. There was no sin in law or the defiance of it, but to clothe retribution in the guise of justice was a thing of evil. What justice could there be, in the blind exertion of violence? To do such a thing would make him unworthy of the very strength being used.

Salt

To clarify, I'm agreeing with you. I may have just pulled a mirror knight and worded it kind I'm disagreeing lmao

Point Point

I think it's too late for the Prince I change his mind. Now, the Mirror Knight would just see it as him siding with Hanno.

[Javvies](#)

Eh ... not unless Mirror Knight already knows that Kingfisher Prince had decided against charging Red Axe under the Truce and Terms. Which he probably shouldn't.

I think it would be very difficult to argue that Kingfisher Prince can not or should not charge Red Axe under the Truce

and Terms, and likely equally difficult to argue that she shouldn't be punished for that. Well, argue successfully, anyways. Mirror Knight might still try, but he'll look like even more of a dumbass as he fails to convince anyone.

Unnamed Goose

uh oh seems like the choosen are about to have a schism, or at least a fight.

[TeK](#)

I am the Bishop of Rome, the holiest man alive, second under God, a successor of the apostle, you all should clearly listen to me!

nimelennar

We are, all of us, bishops and patriarchs! We are all successors of the apostles! If you are first among us, you are first among equals as a mark of respect for the history of your bishopric! You are not above us, and we will not be treated as if it were so!

mordered

Bishops and holy men do not speak for me, let the voice of the people rule supreme! If the gods want to have a voice they better send an envoy to parliament to sit with the representatives of the people!

Dera

Well yes, but then the Gods will be subject to the law, which has a lot of peculiar implications... Just ask Bellerophon 😊

Jordan Leighton

I find it super interesting how the pre-quotes seem to apply to chapters afterwards. Like MK in this scene is representing all the reasons why the previous chapter's quote about Bring Good but not Speaking for who is true.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Oddly enough, seeing things from Hanno's non-judgmental perspective actually makes Christophe even less likable, by throwing into relief just how stubbornly blind he's being

dadycool

Yeah, it's like "Where is your evidence?" "I just know! She uses different methods than us and she couldn't possibly have good reasons for any of it! I'm too much of a hammer to see subtleties and she's a Villain, so she couldn't possibly have good intentions!" "You're being emotional."

[TeK](#)

I am not emotional, you're emotional!

[vernal.ancient](#)

"I can't be emotional because the Black Queen manipulates emotions, so clearly you're lack of emoting shows that she's already gotten to you and is trying to hide it!"

[Adrian_V](#)

You all get a like from me, continue!!

nimelennar

It's also a matter of, well, we can't really blame Christophe too much for being a dick to Catherine. He's a hero, she's a villain, and he has some legitimate grievances about the way she runs things.

When he treats other heroes, especially Hanno, the same way, though, there's really no excuse. Especially when we can see the kind of negative influence he's having on the Blade of Mercy.

[vernal.ancient](#)

True, although I actually think we've overestimated how much influence he really has on BoM. Granted, the younger hero looks up to MK, but he definitely doesn't see Christophe as infallible, and I get the feeling that he's heading for a broken pedestal moment pretty soon. His harsher comments towards the other heroes seems less like Christophe's influence specifically, and more Antoine being young, naive, and in way over his head with this whole "politicking" and "working with differing viewpoints" thing

Salt

Absolutely. The Blade of Mercy seems less inherently arrogant and more just shaped by growing up around a particular mindset.

Him being willing to both support Christophe when he thinks he's right and directly contradict him when he thinks he's wrong, all in the span of the same conversation, speaks volumes about his innate character.

I mean, consider this for a second. The guy probably lived most of his life around people who genuinely believed that the Black Queen was the most treacherous traitor to ever engage in treachery. His first impression of her was shaped by fighting a murderous Winter Catherine, followed immediately by fighting Akua fucking Sahelian pretending to be a murderous Winter Catherine. That's about as shit of a first impression as you could realistically get.

A single direct interaction that proved otherwise, and the kid is already starting to show signs of reconsidering if some of his assumptions were wrong. He might be low-key a very respectable character, although we'll have to see if he can break out from the shadow of Christophe and establish himself as a proper Hero on his own merit.

antichri5

Pretty sure their first encounter was Cat *ripping off his fucking arm*.

dadycool

Well, things seem to have officially boiled over. This Heroic infighting will be interesting to see, especially since the nine of them are the only ones that can participate, otherwise whoever joins will be considered intruding on an internal affair.

Salt

Wait. What if the external interference isn't with the conflict or any of the people involved? What if this is shaping up to be a Story that lets someone set Judgement loose from the Hierarchy, right in the middle of the whole mess? Such as certain incredibly important character who's close to regaining their Name?

You'd have a Narrative where the gods damned Choir of Judgement is showing up at the last minute in both a moment of dire crisis AND a landmark trial, to help their chosen champion deliver a Just sentence. It'd be made more possible just by being an incredibly fitting narrative, and conceivably would be one of the few things that could confront a Mirror Knight wielding his sword from the lake in a fight.

Hanno with the Seraphim back on his shoulder becomes at minimum an equal candidate to wield the sword, Catherine would have a massive vested interest in him winning both for the Terms and a way to mitigate the potential disaster of the Judgement corpse being used while Judgement is out of commission, and it remains an Above-only internal spat for political purposes. No Hero could seriously file a complaint about a wicked Villainous plot to... set a literal choir of angels loose from their prison.

agumentic

Dead King mentioned that Judgement corpse not being used when Judgement was online actually saved everyone from some yet unspecified catastrophe – and I am inclined to believe him, it wasn't a situation where he would lie easily.

[Casey Glick](#)

You know, this might be a situation in which Hierarch and the Seraphim could agree on a course of action.

[TeK](#)

"Ok, so we start by getting everyone in the Arsenal to cast a vote on how to cast a vote..."

[vernal.ancient](#)

"Actually, wait, there are multiple Foreign Despots present in the arsenal. We must first vote on a means of ensuring they cannot influence the vote, and then we can... wait, where are you going? We're all on the same metaphysical plane here, don't think you can just walk away! THE PEOPLE DID NOT VOTE TO ABJURE!... I'll just put you all down as 'abstained from voting,' then."

[TeK](#)

Nooo. I hoped against hope that Christophe will learn from his mistakes and be better, not double down on them once critique was offered. But that seems less and less likely, and now I kinda lost hope. Why do you have to make it so realistic EE? I want some fantasy in my fantasy, not a grim portrayal of the reality of a human nature. It is a Bard striking out against the Alliance, and she was hyped up enough to make that believable, but fuck.

Although, to be completely fair, I doubted that Christophe will learn his mistakes without fucking up and causing deaths of a hundred thousand people. He is hardly that smarter than the Catherine. I still hope that in the end he will see the light and understand the stupidity of his youth, if too late at that.

[TeK](#)

And obviously I hope that he loves and repents and strives to be better. That not only will he recognize his own failure, he will own up to that and will make it his lifes mission to recognise that failing in the young Heroes and help them to avoid it where he failed. Maybe even becoming a teacher in the Arsenal, with a heavy shadow forever weighing on his shoulders.

I do not want him to be discarded like a wooden prop after he served his purpose as a source of conflict in the story. I am way too invested for that. Although he can also be stopped before he causes any real damage, I highly doubt that would really be the case.

Salt

For real. Catherine really started understanding “how few problems get solved by having a bigger hammer” at the end of the Tenth Crusade. That’s even as an exceptionally sensible Villain with an exceptionally good teacher. It took the doom of Liesse, getting turned into a Catherine-shaped-imprint in the mantle of Winter, winning a war with said mantle of Winter, and finding out that everything is still on fire and terrible, even though she finally had a big enough sword to win any brawl.

But hey, Above’s side tends to have things a bit easier sometimes. Let’s hope his lesson involves a firm hand by Hanno, rather than succeeding in overthrowing Hanno and having to personally experience the incredible fallout that’ll result from this latest bout of stupidity. Maybe providence will go easy on how harsh his lessons needs to be, it’ll be a mercy for everyone involved.

Even Catherine probably won’t complain about how heroes don’t have to pay long prices for their mistakes, if it means tens of thousands of people don’t die for the sake of Christophe’s growth as a Hero.

Nairne .01

I really think he might be shaping to become a villain though.

[TeK](#)

By holding to everything Above wants in it’s servants?

Salt

Everything Procer* thinks Above wants in their servants, at any rate.

Many other regions’ opinion on the Proceran interpretation of Above’s intentions can be accurately summed up by Sidonia’s very nuanced and elegant argument of “fuck you, Christophe”.

[TeK](#)

You mean that some backwater barbarian provinces have heretical views? Go figure.

Joking aside, I meant more abstract traits that are really summarised by Aqua: "Above liked it's pawns strong but rather dim." And by Black in "blindness and certainty, I always wondered what's the difference."

Salt

Don't let the Levantines hear you say that.

At any rate, I'd take those descriptions with a grain of salt, considering they come from a man who spent most of his career primarily motivated by a personal vendetta against Above, and the gods damned Diabolist. Trusting Akua's view of Heroes is like trusting the Saint's view of Villains. Not entirely wrong, but uh, with some heavy personal bias mixed in.

I think it's safe to say that Christophe's utter lack of nuance is actually not a great representation of what it means to be ideally Good, when the criticisms in this chapter aren't coming from Villains so much as a literal room full of Above-fellators – one of which is directly endorsed by a choir of Above.

superkeaton

Damn good chapter, and with minimal grammar/spelling errors too! Hanno's discovering the miserable joylessness of being an online forum moderator.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Let's be honest, "the miserable joylessness of being an online forum moderator" has been Hanno's life since he started interacting with other heroes

[TeK](#)

He isn't even that. He is online forum moderator without a banhammer.

lsdf

I am so done with Cristophe. Can he be dead now?

[TeK](#)

Yeah, I mean he certainly is someone deserving of death, how dare he not only disagree with main character, but also be overall unpleasant and bad at social stuff? Not like Aqua, who is pretty and witty and smart and look those cheeks, how can you punish someone like that?

Agent J

People like the witty and charming fictional character more than literal sandpaper? Shock! Gasp! What a strange and terrible fanbase. Better snark them to death.

[TeK](#)

I was arguing against advocating for death of people terrible at social interactions. But you are right, we should just kill him, not like it is something people can learn and grow out of.

Agent J

Boiling the problems with MK down to “bad at social stuff” is grossly disingenuous.

[TeK](#)

True. But calling for death of someone who can be taught better and wishes to be better is far far worse. I do not disagree with most of the critique on Mirror Knight, and I think a good beating may be for the best. But I am appalled at people calling for his death.

[Javvies](#)

Thing is, I’m not sure Mirror Knight actually can be taught.

Also, his view of how “better” is defined does not seem to be in line with pretty much anybody else’s.

Mirror Knight isn’t going accept being taught by someone who he views as lesser than him (which is damned near everyone) or who he thinks is wrong, mistaken, or otherwise disagrees with him. And certainly not anyone who isn’t a clearly Above Aligned Named. And anybody who he thinks is somehow influenced by a Villain is also going to be disqualified.

Especially since he’s throwing down a gauntlet with Hanno over Red Axe standing trial and the inevitable mandatory death sentence.

And I’m pretty sure that Mirror Knight is one of the people who thinks Tariq got compromised by Cat after the Prince’s Graveyard, which means the experienced mentor-Hero won’t have any sway with Mirror Knight either.

[TeK](#)

That is sadly true. I just don’t want to believe it.

LizAris

I wouldn't be upset at Christophe getting killed. He's the old brand of heroism that the Saint of Swords was, and we know how far that got her. Catherine's whole shtick and the "peace" wish depends on completely overhauling his way of thinking, and there's an incredible amount of deeply ingrained villain-hatred there that's more instinct than logic. On the other hand, if EE can turn this character around I will be surprised and happy to read it.

Thank the gods above and below for Hanno. Love this dude, surprisingly the backing of a choir made him more clear sighted than a lot of his contemporaries. And as always go Roland! He's been opposed to Christophe's brand of stubbornness since Llesse 3.

Spear calling Archer "the Lady" makes my heart sing ugh SOO cute.

Hearing the Artificer's and the Blacksmith's take on Magician (and how causal they were about it) was great especially since Cat thought that was such a bad idea. Also Frederic looking "interested" at the whole sleeping with a villain thing is hilarious.

Salt

Lmao yes, my evaluation of the Mirror Knight dropped a few notches here but my opinion of the rest of the heroes rose a few instead. The Blacksmith might be one of my new favorites.

[Burlyraven](#)

So Mirror Knight is going to do something drastic, by the looks of things, but there's a chance he'll be standing alone, as even the Blade of Mercy isn't a blind follower. That said, discontent with the alliance is growing among the heroes as a result of the gauntlet he just threw.

I also wonder if Rogue Sorcerer and Kingfisher know they're more or less on the same side yet. As it stands, they're the two heroes meant to wade partially in the territory of Below, and they've bonded in their own ways with Catherine. If it comes to it, they may yet be forced into the role of devil's advocates, and likely with drawn blades instead of words alone.

Salt

Yep, mass discontent at a minimum. It might even get worse than that very quickly.

Heroes might be as a whole better for average civilians/the general continent than Villains, due to their collective hard-

on for Virtue, but that same quality makes them an even bigger pain in the ass when you shove a bunch of them in the same room without a common enemy.

Virtue tends to be rather bad for unity when every single one of them champions different virtues to start with. If this little insurrection doesn't get nipped in the bud, it could end up becoming a small scale civil war among heroes as they start aligning with each other by virtue.

cyborgCnidarian

Severence is exerting influence on Christophe. The Saint of Swords wasn't known to have the most flexible moral framework, and it seems like her personality is influencing Christophe, amplifying his black-and-white morality. In his POV, we saw how he is unsure of himself internally, prone to questioning his speech and actions. Since taking up the sword, he has become even more stubborn and even more like the SoS. Her will lives on in the sword, and is vying to use him as a vessel to carry it out. He can't even bring himself to separate from the dang thing.

[TeK](#)

So you are saying a weapon from the Above corrupts it's user's will?

Also that is a good point. I hope people around him will recognise that he is not entirely acting as himself.

Salt

Considering Contrition actively removes your will, Judgement breaks your will, and Mercy asks you to give up your will, a legendary Above-oriented artifact having a degree of mental corruption doesn't sound super far fetched.

The Saint was unique not just because of her power, but because of how harsh the crucible that shaped her was and how incredibly singleminded she turned out to be as a result of it. It wouldn't be out of theme for essence of Laurence in the shape of a sword to lend her... prejudices as well as her strength.

Hanno wasn't wrong, when he said "Severity" is a better description of the person that Laurence was.

Nairne .01

The thing is, it is not Laurence he is talking about but the sword.

Severity means "how grave something is", "how important". Severance is plainly removing connections, severing them.

Names have power, and the artifact has been named to as a remover of connections. No wonder MK is being influenced in this way, what he is attempting to do is literally to sever connections.

TeK

That is an interesting point. What if the process of a narrative growth for Christophe (let me dream) would be changing what he bears from Severance (as in, cutting ties with anyone remotely close to him through bruttishness and lack of tact) to Severity (a recognition of how his action affect the world as a whole and that his actions can have potentially dire consequences and he should always consider them before acting).

Salt

“Severity” simply means the state of being “severe”, which has two distinct meanings, not just one. It describes either how very important/intense something is, or how harsh/strict something is.

Considering the Saint of Swords was primarily characterized by being a very severe person and severing things with her sword, I’m inclined to believe it makes far more sense to interpret “severity” it with the second common meaning of “harshness/strictness”.

This would mean that Hanno preferring severity over severance implies he thought her rigid and uncompromising ideology was more fundamental to who she was, rather than her tendency to solve problems by cutting them down.

Xinci

To be fair Salt, no agent of above actually removes will, rather they just influence it. Contrition for instance showed William the scope of all his actions and how they caused suffering. The angels seem to show an unveiled view of what impacts your actions have had, could have had, and may still have. Most people frankly, arent really prepared to understand how much hurt they cause by small actions, nor big. However, an aspect of human psychology is that if people know a result will be good, they will by far, be more willing to do it even in a hampered mental or physical state. So if you show someone the actions that may get a good result, it isn’t surprising that so many take up their cause. It’s just a difference in held information between their usual states and the ones their states once given perspective on a larger, more long term scale.

Also yeah Severity would probably have the dedication/mental aspects more fit for making a hero who needed unbreakable mental and emotional fortitude against the worst horrors of the world.

Salt

True, you make a good point. I was thinking more of what calling contrition down on Creation would've done, but I guess that's more of an exception than a rule. It would be less brainwashing and more a humbling-into-repentance in a sense for their Heroes.

It's interesting that Above seems to corrupt as much as Below, just in a very different way. Below has the standard kind of crossing lines and spiralling down slippery slopes that you'd normally expect, whereas too strong an influence from Above has you tunnelling too hard on a single set of Virtues at the cost of many others. It makes for Named with mental fortitude in ways that Below can never truly match, at the expense of being way too rigid when it comes to the particular set of virtues they've had their eyes "opened" to

Which I guess is one of the underlying reasons that Heroes often see Villains as untrustworthy blights, and Villains often see Heroes as inflexible idiots. They're both pretty correct when you look at it from their respective mindsets, if not necessarily objectively.

Entrerist

In agree the sword has a influence on him. It's probably whispering in his ear what to say.

Christopher Davis

Ah, You were at my side, all along. My true mentor. My guiding moonlight. I can totally see Christophe going all Ludwig on us.

agumentic

For all the purported inflexibility of Saint of Swords, I would like to remind everyone she didn't just accept Grey Pilgrim's decision for the truce, it took her all of one journey with Catherine to say "Okay, maybe just this time truce with the enemy won't backfire". Let's not forget that even when she started acting on her own, she did not aim to kill either Catherine or Archer. The greatest tragedy of her death is that I do not think she was, in the end, completely beyond reason. Maybe if Kairos didn't decide to kill her for shit and giggles, she might have found herself living in a better world, like she

hoped others would. Maybe not, but I feel the possibility was there.

So, I think people are overestimating just how much the trace of the Saint of Swords in the Severance (Apropos of nothing, I agree that Severity is the better name) influences MK's current shitbaggery.

Shveiran

=> it took her all of one journey with Catherine to say "Okay, maybe just this time truce with the enemy won't backfire"

Personally, I don't think the sword needs to be influencing him at all; this development feels pretty natural for Cristophe.

But this comment about Saint is not quite right. Or at least, it is incomplete. She said "ok, maybe this time it wouldn't backfire BUT WE CAN'T HAVE ONE ANYWAY."

It's... kind of a big difference. Saint would not have seen the T&T as a better world. It was just not who she was. Granted, if she had lived it was possible for her to change – but I personally find it very unlikely. She was old, and she had held on to her beliefs strongly enough for all her life that she could use them to have a Domain. Kairos may have ensured her death, but her taking that stand was an act of freely determined will.

agumentic

Who knows, at this point. I think moving from "Truce with the enemy will backfire in all cases" to "Truce with the enemy will backfire in 99% of cases" is already a significant movement that showed the possibility of Saint of Swords changing further. Maybe she would continue to stand on her position that continuing the truce will ensure worse future. Or maybe she could've accepted the current Truce&Terms as the one that won't backfire, and then one more, and then one more until an agreement on rules of engagement wouldn't seem like a sin.

But the point is, I think Saint of Sword was a more considerate and thoughtful person than current MK, and so it's unlikely that it's the sword made of her that influences him to behave like he is.

[Tek](#)

She never denied that some Villains can be cooperated with. She argued that ultimately such a precedent wasn't

worth establishing, because far more people would be hurt by Villains weaseling in under the pretence of cooperation and slowly corrupting the society from inside by abusing human inherent flaws to keep away from a heroic eye.

agumentic

She denied that before the Third Llesse. Her argument at the end of it was the one you just said, and, like I mentioned in my post, I think that opinion could've changed as well.

[TeK](#)

I am going by my memory hear, but I don't think she never discarded possibility that one in a thousand Villains can be worked with. She said there never should be a truce with an Enemy, not that there never could be one.

agumentic

No, she was pretty insistent that truce with the villains will backfire due to their actions afterwards. It's only after their journey she amended that to "It will backfire if we take the actions of the future generations into the account".

[TeK](#)

That doesn't sound like she changed her views on cooperation with Villains, it sounds like she changed her views on Catherine.

agumentic

Changing from "There are no villains we can cooperate with and not get burned" to "There are almost no villains we can cooperate with and not get burned" sounds like a change in views on cooperation with villains to me. It still lead her to the same conclusion, but they are not the same.

[TeK](#)

She, uh, didn't think she won't get burned by cooperating with Cat in the end. That's, uh, was the whole reason she died.

[TeK](#)

Also, Saint had such strong beliefs that they allowed her to *replace the laws of Creation* and you think that those beliefs could not possibly influence a young adult without

any real beliefs in desperate need for clarity and certainty?

agumentic

They can, possibly. I just don't think that this possibility is true. MK is not doing anything just having a powerful sword couldn't do.

Salt

I think what he's trying to get at is that the Saint having had such strong beliefs makes it more likely that the beliefs themselves are part of the Sword, not just her abilities.

agumentic

I understand – Cat herself said that she felt something like a grudge from a sword, so a trace of Saint of Swords remaining in it is likely. I just don't think that this trace bears much of a responsibility for MK's behaviour.

Sam

The sword isn't Lawrence, though. It's Sever. It's the harshest, sharpest edge of Lawrence, distilled into a sword. It's hardly out of the question that it's missing the considerate, thoughtful bits of her personality, while keeping the harder aspects.

'Ladi Williams

Lol. She isn't influencing him.

He's just a weak willed indecisive waste of grace who's power set and shiny armor made him have some influence on the younger heros that don't know wassup...that is too dumb to even realise what he is.

Now that he's found a powerful sword. He bliv that validates all his delusions to grandeur and a way to correct every imagined slight he feels has been offered to him.

He blivs might makes right and so bcos I have the "baddest" sword and shiniest armor...I must be right and and know the will of "above" and so therefore you must all listen to me and follow what I say.

Unfortunately.

[TeK](#)

To be fair, this is a world where narrative turns into a reality. "I was given power by luck therefore I am chosen by

Heavens: is not such a ridiculous position when Heavens manipulating luck is an established fact.

erebus42

Fair, but there's no sign of that being a sure thing so that sort of thinking like much heroic thinking can easily get very tautological. It makes me think of #34 of the Two Hundred Heroic Axioms, "It's not grave robbing if it was your destiny to have that artifact, just proactive inheritance"

[TeK](#)

No sign of that being a sure thing? Have we been reading the same story?

erebus42

Yes but what I'm saying is that we have seen luck change hands between parties with opposing goals and have had heroes who have worked at cross purposes so while things have worked out in certain ways it doesn't necessarily mean that it was the "will of the heavens".

laguz24

I really hope that when Christophe plans on drawing the sword it remains stuck and he loses the one thing that gave him this delusion of grandeur. I also love Hanno being the voice of reason.

MsEvildoom

I wouldn't hold out hope. If there's any of Saint left in the sword, she will completely support anyone who refuses to compromise with Below, and damn the consequences. Actually, has anyone asked if the sword could be influencing its wielder?

Nairne .01

That would honestly be a very interesting twist.

[Adrian_V](#)

Wow, is this like watching a train wreck? At least we see most of them would side against MK in this, hell with that last low blow of using Nephele's death he may have actually put more doubts into BoM's head and lost him (also nice to see he at least has that much of a spine).

Oh and i really wanted to meet Helmgard, and she didn't dissappoint, her relationship with Adanna is funny as hell, and oh

god Archer is so going to find out thanks to VS about how they led the HM around xD, i can see her and Cat's reaction xD

zenanii

I would like to see MK trying to talk Viv into turning on Cat. She has already followed one idiot waving around a magic sword while spouting the virtues of righteousness, another one is not going to impress her.

zenanii

Hm, didn't mean for this to be a reply.

Salt

We might get to see him attempt talking "sense" into Cordelia Hasenbach as well. I'd be very much interested to see how the most practically competent First Prince the country has had in a hundred years, would react to a large child with a sword trying "educate her on the facts".

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, he *really* doesn't understand how things work – Viv was a Hero who then lost her Name, and he wants her to be the judge and adjudicator for the Villains? he seems to be figuring that "she's on the same side as Cat, therefore she's obviously just as much a Villain as Cat, and everyone who disagrees with Me is obviously wrong..."

Frivolous

Hero vs Hero fight! Hero vs Hero fight! Hero vs Hero fight!

There are more Proceran heroes that I expected. We already knew about the Mirror Knight and the Rogue Sorcerer, but the Bitter Blacksmith and the Blind Maker also appear to be Proceran.

[vernal.ancient](#)

"She lied to us," Christophe said. "Do you not see?"

The Blind Maker cleared his throat.

Very embarrassed I missed that joke first time around, assumed Christophe's reaction was just him being an uptight idiot as usual. Granted, he's still being an uptight idiot, but there was an actual joke there to misinterpret rather than just him flying off the handle at someone clearing their throat

LizAris

Okay that went completely over my head but it's hilarious now. Poor Maker. Nothing more insufferable than a hero who doesn't have a sense of humor

[vernal.ancient](#)

I have nothing to base this off of except that one quote, but I'm now imagining Blind Maker as an old, male Toph Beifong in terms of personality, who constantly finds himself surrounded by people who either don't get his blind jokes or just get huffy over them instead of seeing the humor 😊

[TeK](#)

Yeah, I had to reread that part because I was confused why he would say he was mocked.

wabbitking

OH boy here we go place your bets now folks.

grzecho2222

I bet that Kingfishers and Cat secret will come out at the most funny moment

nick012000

Looks like the Mirror Knight is planning on being the heroic version of the "flying castle" Villains that the Accords are intended to put down by ganging up on them with a combined force of Heroes and Villains.

Nairne .01

There is nothing heroic about him at this point. Sure slapping 7 demons around was heroic and brave, but now he is on the cusp of being an Oathbreaker. Good for him.

Frivolous

It occurs to me that, if this meeting devolves into an outright battle between heroes, that Below is winning.

Below is winning not, as you may think, because it's in the interest of Evil for Good to fight itself, but because (I assume) Good's precept is that Right Makes Might. On the other hand, if a fight breaks out, , clearly the victors will set policy, and therefore Might Makes Right,

That's Christophe's worst mistake at this junction. By turning a peaceful meeting into a battle where virtue does not matter and only the strongest prevail, he is unwittingly following Below's precepts, not Above's. He might as well be Praesi and believe in

Amadeus's saying of Only one grace, victory, and only one sin, defeat.

zhaláad

The sword is heavier than the crown, innit

[vernal.ancient](#)

Agreed, though of course anyone who does believe that Right Makes Might will simply argue that the winners were victorious because they were the "true" heroes and thus were granted the power to achieve victory by providence/ The Gods Above. Isn't it a lovely logical conundrum? Justifies pretty much anything for the hero who doesn't think too hard

Abrakadabra

It is the same argument the British empire used in their conquest. We won, therefore God was on our side, because nothing can happen against his will. Which justifies the conquest itself. The same argument is used by a bunch of rich people nowadays, claiming that they are rich BECAUSE God is with them, and poor people therefore deserve their lot in life, since everything is ordained by God to be that way. That is predestination for you in a nutshell.

Nairne .01

That's like a serial killer saying "I was able to kill so many people, and God allowed me to so aim not bad"

[TeK](#)

You guys do realise that unlike in our world, in Guideverse Gods are an objective reality?

[vernal.ancient](#)

Yes, though as Hanno states in this chapter, quite a few people make mutually exclusive claims about the will of the gods, and are often quite certain about it. Just because the gods exist doesn't mean that whoever won the latest fight is automatically in their favor

thearpox23

>He might as well be Praesi
no

>and believe in Amadeus's
doubly no

>saying of Only one grace, victory, and only one sin, defeat. The whole point behind the saying was that the methods do not matter so long as the proper outcome is reached. Alienating everyone is as far away as can be from securing a victory, and has nothing in common with Amadeus.

He could maybe be compared to your standard Black Knight, but even then Praesi are well known for deriving strength to be deceit, and MK hasn't coated his blade is nearly enough poison.

KpaxMaJI

He killed seven demons, sure. But, he is the one who brought them into the Arsenal in the first place. Why is no one asking him where did the demons come from? And frankly he is to blame for the Repentant Magisters death.

WuseMajor

Thanks to the Absence, no-one remembers where the demons came from and they keep forgetting to go back and try to figure it out.

Though....hmmm.... It's at least theoretically possible that he's blaming the Black Queen because if it's HER fault, then it's not HIS fault and this is the only way he can avoid falling into a pit of despair and self pity.

Well, and the Bard is still playing him like her fiddle.

Bart

I honestly hate all this talk about wishing Christophe dead. That's Black Knight thinking – if it doesn't fit, kill it.

The Mirror Knight is a representation of things that will be genuine threats to Cat's dreams. Heroes who won't abide by the Accords without being in control – heroes who won't trust villains who've made explicit attempts to craft personas of trickery and violence.

We get to see Cat from the inside. Hanno, Roland, and The Prince all have deep relationships with the Woe that let them understand the nuance. But Christophe only has his doubt, his fear, and his understanding that this is a Villain who seems to be able to let other villains off the hook for arranging an attack that left hundreds dead while a woman who killed her rapist is to be executed. Yes, he's short sighted and yes he seems almost wilfully blind to what's going on in the grand scheme – but that's hardly his fault.

If Cat can't bring someone like Christophe on side, her dreams are dead on arrival.

Frivolous

Cat's dreams were always based on deterring the behavior of and eventually removing "from play" the villains and heroes that were too destructive, the ones who couldn't play well with others.

The Saint of Swords was clearly never going to accede to the Liesse Accords if she were alive. Christophe is turning out to be the same type.

You could say that eliminating someone like Christophe from existence was her goal all along, though I don't know if the intransigence and the willingness to burn the village in order to save it come from his mere personality or is a function of his Name.

If it comes from his Name, Catherine's goal would likely remove the Name of Mirror Knight from appearing at all.

Reference: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/09/13/chapter-75-analog/>

"This is more than rules of engagement," the White Knight said, "this is a blade swung at the most callous servants of Above and Below. Within a few generations of grand gestures being harshly answered by all other powers, you would excise that entire manner of thinking from the Named on Calernia."

Bart

Right – within generations. And Saint was only killed after she explicitly attacked Cat. Not when she was difficult to deal with, not when she disagreed, when she tried to kill Cat.

You don't get rid of a way of thinking by killing those who think it. You get rid of a way of thinking by proving it wrong. After the Accords are signed, that can include leading large groups of people who already believe the idea is wrong and striking at those who break the rules.

But in the interim? She can't use what will happen in generations to try and strike Christophe down. She can't just kill him. He's Big Shiny Leader With Artifact Sword. That's got so much power in it – and the story that others here will be twisted if Cat isn't there to guide it. If she kills him, even with good reason, there will be lots of heroes who only hear the first part. Little Christophe's who use that death as more evidence.

But if they can get him on side, Christophe can help guide all the potential Saints down another path.

Truthhut

I personally don't want MK killed, but I desperately want him humbled. Which is why much of this chapter has been very cathartic, at least to me. Whether or not MK can be remodeled into something actually useful, he still deserves a good smack upside the head.

Bart

Humbled is good – but I want a humbling that's productive, which I don't think this was. Catharsis is what we want, but in our chase to get it we often forget what we need

[vernal.ancient](#)

I agree with basically everything except the idea that him being willfully blind isn't his fault. It is, by definition. That's what makes it willful

Bart

When I said 'almost willfully blind' I could have found a better term.

What I meant was it LOOKS like he's being wilfully ignorant, but it's more about his name/upbringing than him making the conscious choice of it.

Like, I don't think he says to himself 'The bribe is probably an overall good thing but I'm going to ignore that', and I don't think he says 'Cat is actually making the right choice by accepting the bribe in the big picture but I'm going to ignore that'.

I think those things are just... Impossible for him to grasp without assistance that he's not getting.

Nafram

This here is the final Affray, the card that fell out of the Bard's sleeve, the one neither Masego nor Cat noticed. And I hope that the abomination loses it

Captain Amazing

I think Hakram is going to wake up and talk Christophe out of doing something stupid. At the last hour the hero recovers and saves the day! Also, "Christophe" literally has Christ in it and is likely derived from it. This is interesting as I don't think any other biblical names have been used such as Joseph, Luke, or Mary. These "gods" probably kidnapped people a thousand or so years ago and aped their beliefs; all the nonhumans have notably distinct appellations. Levant says we need to strive to serve the

faith which is one of the pillars of Islam. Christophe's name seems to be an outlier in this as it directly references older beliefs instead of the usurpers.

TeK

I don't think you need to bother about etymology in the word where principalities of Brabant, Hainaut, Aquitaine, Bremen, Bayeux and Tenerife are a thing, there are towns such as Aksum and Kahtan in Praes (admittedly Praesi names are much less on the nose than Principate ones, well, at least he tried), there are polises of Nicae, Helike and in the Dominion of Levant (already a reference to a real world place) there are towns of Malaga and Alava, and so on and so forth.

Name Catherine has very much Christian origins too.

Draylen

As a point, while the name Christopher (and its derivatives, such as Kristoff – or Christophe, here – , a very common German name) does come from Christ, that wasn't a name. Christ was a title, or I suppose a Name, which translates to Anointed One, and mostly translated to Prophet.

Of course, it probably has different etymology here, although it's also fair to point out that Christophe was anointed by the Lady of the Lake and asserted other fae(?) Things. Point being, it isn't actually biblical here, so there isn't a major connection in that way.

vernal.ancient

Eh, that's the same etymology problem that came up with the Tenth Crusade, where crusade relates to the Cross when there's no indications of a major religious figure getting crucified in Calernia's history. Seems less an intentional bit of world building and more just it being difficult to completely avoid words with etymologies based in Christianity

Shveiran

That was justified, actually: the first crusade was born to fight Triumphant, and Triumphant crucified people. The Empress brought the punishment from Praes to the rest of Calernia.

The cross was adopted as a symbol by the crusaders because of tha, which serves as a justification for the name "crusade".

TeK

EE even said that crucifixion was brought in by Miezans and it was a punishment for rowdy slaves. Given that Miezans are

pretty much Romans, and Romans used that exact same punishment for mostly the same reason, well, guess what.

TeK

But, if we are talking etymology, let's look at his last name. De Pavanie. Hmm. There is a word in French (which is who Alamans are based on, and MK is Alaman) Pavane, which means "strut about".

Hmm...

Nairne .01

How fitting.

Abrakadabra

I Just guess our tortured mutilated orc full with prosthetics Just walks up to MK and sais to him: "Christoph, I am your father."



TheAtomicOption

So much for getting The Severance back. I'm genuinely pissed off at the mirrored idiot to the point that I had to stop reading and walk around for a bit before I could finish. There are going to be some nasty twists to this story because of that moron.

hakureireimu

Ok...so how does the epigraph relates to this chapter?

vernal.ancient

Well, Christophe would argue that it applies to Catherine, while Hanno probably needs to see that it really applies to Christophe, who is being unrepentant in idiocy and intentionally destabilizing the Terms that he swore an oath to uphold

TeK

I feel like it's a jab at people who continue to defend Cristophe despite, well, Cristophe. I feel personally attacked.

Darkening

It could also be referring to how, if they forgave the unrepentant red axe and let her go as Christophe wants, she would definitely start murdering more villains, like a wolf in a flock of sheep.

Raved Thrad

Ah, Christophe, Christophe, I so love to hate you. You may not be a Proceran noble, but you're every bit as bad.

If the Heroes were to break faith and Callow marched home, Christophe would be *exactly* the kind of person to sit wallowing in the ashes of Procer wailing at the injustice of it all, and how the people he'd insulted and offended should have stayed to back him up and die for him.

Maybe this kind of stupid arrogance is a sexually-transmitted disease?

Frivolous

Speaking of sex... I think much of this episode could have been averted if Catherine had simply had the foresight to request a sexy girl villain to seduce Christophe and Antoine and fuck their brains out.

Their self-righteousness is in part due to their priggishness. They might be much more congenial towards villains if a villain gave them orgasms. They could even have an MFM threesome. That way Antoine could gaze into Christophe's eyes while screwing and thus fulfill his probable homoerotic ardor for the older hero.

Raved Thrad

Unfortunately, I can see that ending in blood as soon as the girl's Villain status was revealed.

"What? What do you mean you're a Villain?"

"Did you actually think 'Sexy Fucker' was a Hero Name?"

"You Damned whore!" *stabbity-stab with the Severance*

Afterward, looking down at the mangled, dismembered body:

"Aaaah! I have been tricked by Below! It can't possibly have been my fault for being an arrogant, intolerant bigot! Aaaah! I MUST KILL EVERYONE!"

sutortyrannus

Well, this was an adventure.

framfrit

Does anyone else find it amusing that Cat was just complaining about the Procrean policies for character besmirching what with the arch heretic and friend to the dead king stuff and here MK

does the same with Roland WK sympathises and notes its one reason why they distrust Procer

Drunken Dwarf

Ok guys let's stop bullying Mirror Knight for a second and just think about the chapter here. Like just wow. That was Mirror Knight with providence on his side.

Oshi

Not it very much wasn't That was the Mirror Knight dooing everything in his power to make a play for the authority to lead the heroes. He wanted a confrontation with the White Knight. This is how he plans to force eevryone to break with th T&T. It was Bar'ds intent to make sure MK was as broken as possible before taking up the sword so he could break what Catherine made.

WuseMajor

I find it darkly amusing that Christophe is, arguably, the only living person (other than the Bard) who bears the responsibility for getting the Repentant Magister killed, seeing as he brought the Maddened Keeper there.

Of course, no-one remembers that because of the demon, so he gets to be all high and mighty about it.

I do wish that they'd go back over the timeline and events that happened in order to try to get some idea of what the demon might have erased, since that might actually pinpoint his involvement (without her skills there's basically no way the Mirror Knight could have gotten here uninvited, and an exploration of that might trace things in a useful way), but it's probably difficult to do when you keep forgetting that you need to handle it.

Nairne .01

Also it was he that let the demon that killed her slip from him so in truth he fucked up twice.

Konstantin von Karstein

To be fair, there was 7 others, so he was a little busy at the moment.

Anonymous

So, Hakram is probably going to save the day, isn't he? And it seems we're still due for the revelation that Red Axe is Constance.

IIRC the Doddering Sage also hinted at the slow-cooking revelation that Catherine is actually the long-lost daughter of King Robert. Well, there have been a number of hints to that effect for a long time, one of the earlier (but not earliest) hints being Catherine drawing the sword from the stone, a story where the sword can only be pulled from the stone by the rightful heir to Callow, and the Black Knight's claim wasn't rightful by any means, but if Catherine was the unwitting orphan daughter of the late king, she would've come into that story extremely hard.

grzecho2222

I'm not sure about her being daughter of king, but there sure is some weird thing/ revelation about Cats family. From missing bell in Book 2 to strange interactions with duchess and her family.

Anonymous

There have been a lot of hints to that effect, including multiple mentions of speculation that she might've been the daughter of Robert. And one of the blinding factors is that being the orphan daughter of the late king does not fit as a villain's backstory, but she was originally seeded by Above to be the heroine who would lead the fight for Callow's freedom. She took an unusual road and became a villain instead, but that only changes the present and future, not the past. She has a heroine's backstory, not a villain's.

grzecho2222

Still Kegan and others act very weird around her, in way that doesn't look like Cat is related to the late King, but more like she is somehow related to them, like her being Villain is a personal insult to them

Anonymous

Cat is half-Deoraithe. She is likely related to both of them, in a way that would give her considerable authority. She was originally intended to unify Callow beneath her banner.

grzecho2222

Question is who remains in story that could spring that revelation and why?

[Javvies](#)

As to how someone could have learned about Cat's biological family origins ... it likely would have been or would be simple enough for someone to summon another

blood imp or whatever it was that Warlock summoned to identify the Deoraithe Cat and company captured after Lone Swordsman and idiots tried to burn down the city and Warlock's tower to get a shot at assassinating Warlock.

There may or may not also be other methods of magically determining lineage that would be applicable.

As for who did it and why, that would probably be dependent on when it was done.

I could totally see Amadeus as having Warlock do it when Cat was being healed after her first dabbling in autonecromantic ambulation, and then leaving that a secret to be revealed later.

I don't think Heiress/Diabolist would have done it because she likely would have attacked Cat more directly if she had a sample of Cat's blood, although trying to track down Cat's biofamily to use as leverage would also have been in character.

Malicia could easily have had it done, which might contribute to her lack of trust in Amadeus's plan for Cat and Callow.

Anonymous

Doddering Sage, at least. Maybe Augur too. Wandering Bard, if she was aware of it and up to weird shit, but I doubt that or she would've handled Catherine very differently. Scribe, if she's been researching Catherine while offscreen. I feel like the Truce & Terms (as well as the Liesse Accords) would naturally attract her, but who knows. And in Callow, there are plenty of ways for someone to appear who has found out her genealogy. Maybe even the orphanage's matron knows a concealed thing or two about her past.

As for why, the legitimacy of Catherine's rule is being tested and Catherine is about to come into her own Name. I mean this chapter gives us one solid scenario why. Mirror Knight sends into motion an effort to discredit the legitimacy of Catherine's rule. Maybe Malicia will get in on that too.

grzecho2222

True, Cat being revealed to be Lost Heir while MK is trying to kick her out would be funny, but still not seeing who could have reason to reveal something like this and potential ability to learn this

[Javvies](#)

Akua would have had motive to investigate Cat's biological family back when she was Heiress or Diabolist.

Duchess Kegan Iarsme of Daoine has had plenty of motivation to investigate Cat's biological family.

Amadeus and/or Scribe, could already know and just be sitting on the information until a useful time to reveal it.

Malicia could have found out, which likely would have contributed to her distrust of Amadeus's plan for Cat and Callow.

Hakram could perhaps use Find to investigate Cat's biofamily, if he wanted to or had some reason to do so.

As for how, remember how Warlock summoned a blood imp or whatever it was to find out that the Deoraithe that Cat and company captured in the wake of Lone Swordsman and company's failed assassination attempt on Warlock.

It'd probably take someone with Praesi magical training – certainly nobody from the Above aligned places is likely to have the knowledge or training to summon a blood imp.

However, I would not be surprised to learn that there were other magical methods of determining lineage that others could more readily utilize.

Cordelia would be interested in the knowledge, though I suspect that none of her intelligence services could have found out, although Augur probably could have.

Tariq might have been able to find out via Behold and/or the Ophanim.

Bard would probably have tried to find out, though it's not clear what kind of information sources she has access to, and she's an incredibly unreliable source, and likely would not share that information unless it served her purposes somehow.

grzecho2222

I know that there are several parties that can get that info, but I was talking more about reason for such reveal since it wouldn't change situation a lot

Callow would still stand by Cat

Procer would be what – bit less rude maybe?
Praes wouldn't care
Levant the same
Named – aside from Keeper, none seems to be from
Callow (weird), so they also wouldn't care

[vernal.ancient](#)

Who's Constance?

Anonymous

>"It's not for you, Constance," the Doddering Sage told me.
"You're much too young, and this is a fool's vice besides."
>
>"Shit," Archer muttered. "Not a good day."
>
> [...]
>
>"That boy of yours, the one with the deadly earnestness,
he'll be a terror one day," the Sage said, "but he's a few
years short still. That's why an old sack of bones like me
are brought in even when there are all these swaggering
youths. I can look, yes I can. But you'll not hurt Constance,
will you? Promise me."
>
>His lip trembled in sudden emotion, and something in me
clenched. He looked fragile, in that moment, though the truth
of his fragility was hidden from him. Pity welled up, but I
pushed it down. You could be playing me, I thought. And so
I'll offer kindness where I can, but never without keeping a
knife in hand.
>
>"I won't," I said. "I promise."
>
>"Good," he muttered. "Good. You do remind me of him, you
know. Robert. He was kind, but he was not soft."
>
>I said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

Chapter 16: Divine

Oshi

I'm not loving the direction this is going. From a narrative
perspective it feels like EE is going to diminish the White
Knight in order to get Catherine in enough trouble. I don't think
that's good reading. I hope EE decides to go a different route
but so far it's exactly on track to where I thought it would be.
sighs

Letouriste

Weird, I see it as the exact opposite. EE is reinforcing Hano. The part about him still trying to be just without his angels backing him and also him getting the Severance sword after this mess is dealt with. Would set a precedent where the Heroic leader wield the Severance and it get transmitted to each future generation.

zenanii

I would like to see MK trying to talk Viv into turning on Cat. She has already followed one idiot waving around a magic sword while spouting the virtues of righteousness, another one is not going to impress her.

Raved Thrad

Also, he's so Proceran that he thinks he can force Callowans to die for him and his country. Vivienne is patriotic *and* Callowan enough that I can see her trying to arrange for him to be assassinated just for that.

Salt

Hilariously enough, Callowans would hate him because they're just as rabidly nationalistic as he is. Any perception of a Proceran anything trying to push around anointed rulers of Callow would have every man, woman, and child in a frothing rage.

Raved Thrad

In a frothing rage for *generations*.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Honestly, I want Christophe to survive and have kids now, just so the epilogue can leap forward eighty years to his teenage grandson getting punched out by a random Callowan who heard about the crap MK pulled and decided "Ya know what? I'm just the person to answer that"

Raved Thrad

"Michel de Pavanie?"

From where he was bent over inspecting the wheel on his wagon, Michel looked up to see a man, a foreigner by the looks of him, holding what appeared to be a rolled-up piece of parchment. Noticing the man looking on at him expectantly, he replied. "Yes, I am Michel de Pavanie."

The blow that laid him out on his back, head spinning from the impact, came out of nowhere.

"Your grandfather was an asshole."

Groaning, looking up from where he had fallen, he saw the stranger make a mark on the parchment before he wandered off, muttering about finding the next person on the list.

mamm0nn

We haven't been getting enough Long Prices for Small Sights lately. I actually expected a Callowan Hero that supports his queen Catherine, but who maintains that motto and thus causes political problems for her to have shown up by now.

Nairne .01

Can't wait to see how this will unfold.

Aotrs Commander

I think pretty much everyone has already said everything that I would have said on That Moron, so I will instead focus on something else:

AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Blacksmith and Artificer were winding up the Hunted Magician this whole time! That's fuckin' (literally) priceless!

(Seriously, though, a few more heroes with some more mischief in 'em makes them more likeable than the failure of Certain Other Quarters. Who would be enough to make Superman want to punch them out. He wouldn't of course (more's the pity), but he gosh-darned well would want to...)

Daniel E

This chapter warms the cackles of my little evil heart. *grabs popcorn*

Big I

I can't help but see Hanno as Obi Wan and Christophe as Anakin. I guess that makes the Blade of Mercy Ahsoka?

So I guess Mirror Knight is going to challenge White Knight for the job of representative. If Mirror Knight wins it'll be a godawful mess because he's probably the least suitable person for the job, and every thing about it would frustrate him anyway. And if he loses, he stewes in his own bitterness and insecurity. Either way he's on the road to the darkside.

I predict that the Blade of Mercy will be the one to take down the Mirror Knight when he goes full blown Tyrant.

[TeK](#)

But who's the younglings?

Dak

Nephele is. Since Christophe got her killed.

RoflCat

Nah, Nephele is more of Mace Windu if we consider Bard as Palpatine.

mavant

Were there seven-and-one demons locked up inside the Maddened Keeper? 7 for Christophe and one for Masego?

I feel like every time I see seven of something in this story there must be an "and one" not long to follow.

Big I

There were 8 eight demons, the Wandering Bard said so.

mamm0nn

Seven slain by MK, one slain by Cat and co. Remember the fear demon?

Letouriste

I'm running out of popcorn 🍿

flashburn283

Please, to whatever Choir is listening, make the MK DK fight be a mutual kill

JackSlainXIX

so, crazy idea about MK. Namely, that he might be getting screwed over by his own aspect in being made into an asshole.

The logic goes like this: the heavens are said to be entirely static. The number of angels and choirs don't change, and what they represent doesn't change either. They also represent different kinds of ideals: Mercy is the Greater Good, Judgment is Justice, Contrition is Repentance, and so on. Light is the power of the heavens, made into a rawer and unaligned form handed out to mortals. That means that it's nature is informed by the nature of the heavens. As an aside, this explains how Light based healing works and it's limitations: it's trying to bring an individual to a more ideal state of healthiness as understood by the priest wielding the Light.

MK's most important aspect is Dawn, which infuses his body with a small bit of light every day. My theory is that what that light is doing is less making him strong and more bringing him closer to an "ideal" form, as he understood it at the time the aspect appeared. It also makes him more resistant to deviation from that ideal, which is what makes him so durable: his ideal form doesn't include injuries so his body resists those.

The thing is, is that power always has a downside or flaw. In MK's case, I suspect that the light isn't just altering his body but also his mind, bringing it closer to what MK believed to be an "ideal" state of mind or mindset when he first started. He probably didn't consider that part of the effect too much though, and therefore didn't cover any personality flaws (like arrogance or not knowing how to talk to people). The real danger here is the resistance to change. As he grows in power, his mindset becomes more and more set in stone. Symptoms would include a growing inability to change his mind once a decision has been reached, inability to learn new things, and inability to understand or consider other points of view from his own. Of course, I could be completely off base and he's just that much of an asshole.

Shveiran

Or, you know, he could just be an asshole.

I don't mean to put down your theory, honestly; but assholes exists. He could be one without any real metaphysical explanation being required.

JackSlainXIX

certainly possible. It's just something that occurred to me because all the other asshole heroes we've seen so far have, in my eyes, at least an understandable aspect to the assholery/stupidity. The two main ones that come to mind are the lone swordsman and the saint of swords. William's came primarily in the shape of his racism and no restraint, which I felt is at least understandable as the residue of centuries of war leaving behind attitudes (racism doesn't disappear just because the environment changes, as in real life) combined with the view of "i'm damned anyway so no need to be overly moral" mixed with "no truce or surrender to evil". The saint of swords has basically been dealing with heiress wannabes and lookalikes (metaphorically) for decades, and to be fair princes were kinda overly ambitious assholes before DK got moving (the two main demonstrations of assholery on her part from our perspective).

MK however, doesn't have either of those to explain his assholery here. There's no background to him being so unreasonable as far as I can see (and feel free to correct me) beyond "I'm an overly self-righteous stereotype of procer

and will not compromise just because". And sure, it's possible that he's just that kind of asshole by character, but I feel that that would make him the first character in APGtE that lacks depth to his motivations.

Hitogami

That cliff at the end! Wow!
Thanks for such a damn good chapter.

ninegardens

So... its been mentioned that MK is like... super ultra indestructible...
And also that he USED TO BE immune to glamours, until he broke his oath of chastity or whatever....

So I wonder, are any of his other power ups oath based? And if they are, which oaths are they based upon... and is **breaking** those oaths the way to bring him down?

Javvies

I think that was an additional buff, in addition to, and not reliant upon, his Name.
That is, a blessing from the Lady of the Lake to help him in his duties, so as to not require his Name to burn an Aspect or power on glamour resistance/immunity.
There may or may not be additional such powers/defenses/blessings that he received that rely on him following certain behavioral rules.

They would, however, be in addition to what his Name gives him. The biggest booster he's got that we're know of is his Dawn Aspect, which makes him a little stronger and tougher every single Dawn.

I suspect that if he broke any other oaths/strictures governing any buff s he's got he'd still be a powerhouse because of his Name.

Unless said oath, stricture, rule, e.t.c was a prerequisite for gaining the Name Mirror Knight in the first place. Which probably wouldn't be impossible ... and might be related to why he's so gung ho to trash things – he already broke the rules on not getting laid, he might be worried that if he doesn't do what he's doing he'll break another, more serious rule, or cross some sort of threshold that would inflict greater penalties or loss of powers/defenses/blessings on him, possibly going as far as losing the Name of Mirror Knight.

mamm0nn

Just to put it out there: Evil's mantra is Might makes Right vs good's Right makes Might. And right now, Mirror Knight is using his Might to enforce what he considers Right and brute-forcing his due and opinion, instead of being aided and strengthened in Might by doing Right.

MK is not just failing to see and work with politics, and can be excused because it's all greys and complicated. He's a Hero properly educated in how Chosen and Good work, but he's ignoring the core principle of being Chosen. And by using his Might he's by no stretch of the imagination just unaware of or overlooking his faults or can be excused for not understanding it, he's actively putting his opinion and desires over principles and systems that he does understand.

There's no 'Oh, he's just an idiot.' excuse for him any more, he's gone too far into being in the wrong here.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Indeed, he's on the edge of becoming a Fallen Hero. Alas, I don't think he can be the next Black Knight, because that's a Praesi Name.

[ChillyPepper](#)

I can say many things about Erraticerrata writing, but the way s/he writes heroes to be so gut boiling aggravating shows enough about it.

God damn it, man, why do you have to make me this angry against fictional entities?

[Adrian_V](#)

Next chapter: villain's meeting

Cat: Alright people we are here for something extremely important

Random villain: We are going to spy on the heroes meeting right?

Cat: Yep!!

mamm0nn

Wait, I thought we only rubbed out hands menacingly and lisp 'Yesss...' for a couple of hours during these meetings while monologueing to one another? *Throws a questioning glance at chairman Hierophant who usually organises the Villain meetings*

[Adrian_V](#)

And practice our mad laughs in a safe enviroment!!

NerfGlaistigUaine

Mirror Knight thinks Callow's forces would keep fighting if heroes force the Black Queen to step down? In the defense of Procer? Out of duty? Good lord what has this man been smoking and where can I get some?

Black Spiral Dancer

Just passing here to congratulate. After some lukewarm chapters, this one had my blood boiling again as usual.

Also very nice discussion in the comments, I would advise anyone to give them a read this time.

Interlude: Epitomes

"For though the Gods Above laid down the path of righteousness for all to see, so did the Gods Below then lay down a hundred others that look just like it."

– Extract from the 'Truths of the Shore', a collection of the teachings of Arianna Galadon (considered holy text only in Procer)

Hanno would have to be very careful, to ensure Christophe de Pavanie was alive by the end of this.

Even as half a dozen shouts erupted in the wake of the Mirror Knight's challenge, the dark-skinned man wondered if he should first have spoken with the other knight alone. No, he decided. That, too, would have been a mistake. It would have been treating Christophe like a sickness to be quarantined instead of comrade whose doubts needed to be allayed. Hanno was no more lord over heroes than heroes were lords over Creation, and though the demands of experience often saw him walk the fine line between stewardship and government he must never cross it willingly.

"Sit down, Christophe," the Vagrant Spear called out, "this is-"

"-ful Gods, I will punch the sense back int-"

"Silence," the White Knight said.

The ripple of power in his voice sucked the cacophony out of the room, as if by magic. The Mirror Knight stood ramrod straight, as if the outpouring of anger had been a matter of indifference to him, but the slight hunch to his shoulders spoke otherwise.

Still, for all the red colouring his cheeks Christophe did not desist. Pride was the stone around his neck, and now Hanno would have to find a way to ensure it did not end up drowning him. First, however, the venom must be drawn out. The White Knight did not rise to his feet, or react beyond turning his head to properly address the other Named. Christophe watched him with strained eyes, his light brown hair harried.

The angle of his arms ensured the polished bracers he wore on his wrists reflected only a muddled haze.

"Let us avoid misunderstandings," Hanno calmly said. "What is it that you mean, Christophe, by 'I will not allow it'?"

"How many of us need to die before you face the truth of what you made us part of?" the Mirror Knight said. "The Exalted Poet was shot in the back by one of the Woe, and who here has said even a word of it?"

"He was a traitor," the Blessed Artificer coldly said. "Good riddance."

She looked more conflicted than her words might indicate, Hanno thought, but here and now she'd chosen anger over qualms. Few in the rooms shared her apprehensions, given that the man had been seen working with the fae of the Court of Autumn. Whatever his reasons, he'd sided with creatures that had slain soldiers and broken works dedicated to the end of the Dead King. That in the process he'd tried to betray two heroes had seen his memory grow increasingly reviled: the Vagrant Spear's face had gone icy at the mention of the Name, for she was Levantine as well and had taken the betrayal as a slight on the honour of Levant as a whole.

"Traitor to what, *exactly*?" Christophe de Pavanie said, voice just short of a shout. "To the rules and designs of a Damned? To 'terms' that would see us murder a woman for slaying her own rapist?"

"You have not answered the White Knight's question," the Kingfisher Prince cut in, voice measured. "Are you threatening to take up arms to enforce your will, Christophe de Pavanie?"

The fair-haired prince's hand had slipped, ever so slightly towards the sword at his hip. Hanno thought better of his comrades than to expect they would brawl like tavern drunks but, should there be fighting, he suspected it was not the Prince of Brus that would be the victor there. The Kingfisher Prince's role was a martial one, but also soldierly in nature. He could turn a company of riders into an unbreakable lance or fight as a champion for his host, but he would not be the equal of the Mirror Knight in a duel.

"Let him speak," the Forlorn Paladin hesitantly said. "Or has it now become a sin to even speak against the Terms?"

"Why bother? This isn't a vote," the Bitter Blacksmith bluntly replied. "No point in pretending otherwise, the Terms are there to stay. We can whine about it all we like, but at the end of the day I'd rather share a room with a villain than a Revenant."

"How often are we going to be made to bow our heads using that argument?" the Mirror Knight asked, turning to her and sweeping the room with his gaze. "Accept this, or the Dead King takes us all. So first we welcome crooks. Then we welcome thieves, then rapists, then murderers – and Gods only know what comes after that. What single thing can we not be made to swallow, when it is put to contrast with the end of days?"

"Spoken like a child of summer," the Bitter Blacksmith said, tone gone hard. "There is no bargain to be had with the night: do what needs to be done or disappear."

She was not the only here there to have doubts, though Christophe's appeal had not been without impact. Neither was it without sense, Hanno knew. It was all too easy to justify all manners of cruelty by drawing some invisible path linking their avoidance to the victory of Keter. Yet that was no excuse to ignore what still lay just beyond the horizon, waiting for a misstep. It did not surprise the Ashuran that it was Roland who gave further answer, for few among them better understood what still lay ahead of them all.

"We contrast with the end of days," the Rogue Sorcerer thinly said, "because the end of days is looming. It is not a rhetorical device, Mirror Knight. It's what happens this winter if we make too many mistakes."

"We've won wars like this one before," the Blessed Artificer disagreed. "And won them without destroying what we are."

"We haven't," the Vagrant Spear said. "This many soldiers, this many Bestowed, and all we can do is hold? No one's had a war like this in, maybe not since the Empress Most Dread."

Even in Levant the memory of Triumphant had not quite faded. Hundreds of thousands had died in the creation of the Titan's Pond, and most of them had not been Gigantes. Neither had they been Levantines, not exactly, but they had been kin to those tribes that would one day become the Dominion of Levant. It was a good conversation to have, what was being said, and a necessary one. Yet it had strayed from the words that first set it into motion. This was not happenstance.

"Fear, Christophe," Hanno said, and his voice cut through the room. "That is what I see now. You spoke words, and now you fear them."

The green-eyed man turned a burning glare towards him.

"You can retract them," the Ashuran man continued. "Spoken in heat, they can be set aside as the heat fades. Or you can stand by them, if that is your choice. But this pretence that they were not spoken is beneath everyone in this room. Let it end."

He simply could not leave the venom to linger in the flesh, much as it would be painful to squeeze it out. Else Christophe would leave this room believing that he could keep challenging the powers of the Grand Alliance without consequence, that a Name and a sword made him invincible. He was failing to see the power of the enemies he was making, how even the popular sentiment attached to his fame could turn with the wind. If the Army of Callow and the Firstborn left the fronts over his affronts and it was made known why, how long would it take for every throat from Rhenia to Tenerife to begin howling for the blood of Christophe de Pavanie? There were some who believed that the Black Queen had gone tame, lost her bite, but the White Knight knew better.

There was a saying, in Ashur, that a lioness in her lair was twice as deadly as one in the field.

"I will not allow anyone to kill the Red Axe," the Mirror Knight said, "not when-"

"That is treason," the Kingfisher Prince flatly interrupted. "You would be taking up arms against the First Prince and the Highest Assembly, never mind the rest of the Grand Alliance."

It was a mark of the respect afforded the man by those in the room that no one had even considered complaining that he was the First Prince's eyes and ears here, even though he'd more often mentioned the opinion of Cordelia Hasenbach than his own. Of course, those that did not notice would be more inclined to take it as their man in Highest Assembly sharing knowledge with them than the other way around. Which made it all the more pointed that the Rogue Sorcerer, by simple virtue of speaking up for restraint and the Terms, had been accused of being Catherine's creature. The taint associated with magic in these lands was, the White Knight had often thought, one of the most insidious poisons he'd ever seen.

"Taking up arms?" Roland quietly said. "No. Taking up arms is for an army, or at least an armed band. When a single man does it, that's just called committing a crime."

He'd meant to impress the pointlessness of such a stand, perhaps, but for once the other hero had misread the room. It'd been taken

as a challenge instead and Named were taught to answer challenges only one way. Another chair clattered back.

"He would not be alone," the Blade of Mercy said.

The young man looked both thrilled and terrified, taking a stand with someone he admired yet uncertain as to the consequences. The heat was rising in the room, and even those not all that inclined to agree with Christophe's arguments would be feeling a strange leaning towards him right now. Adanna, Sidonia and even the Forlorn Paladin looked troubled by the turn things had taken. *We are trained to this, Hanno thought. Conditioned. To side with the underdog, the dark horse. Most of us have been in that place, once in our lives, and it calls to us still.* This, though, he could and would nip in the bud.

"How," the White Knight calmly said, "will you prevent the execution of the Red Axe?"

There was a heartbeat of stillness. Hanno deliberately looked at the pommel of the Severance, leaving his gaze to linger.

"Is that how?" he asked. "Will you cut me down, Christophe?"

"I will not kill you," the Mirror Knight said, "unless you force me to."

And like that, he lost the room and the story along with it. He was no longer the rebel fighting tyranny: he was a man threatening to kill a comrade to get his way.

"Do you so badly crave to be part of injustice, Hanno of Arwad?" the Mirror Knight said. "They wouldn't even let me speak with the Red Axe, did you know? Black Queen's orders. She's to be butchered in some dark room-"

"After a trial is held," the White Knight calmly replied. "After I listen to the evidence, determine guilt, pass my sentence and carry it out. Which will be, almost certainly, death. That she killed the Wicked Enchanter and attempted to kill the Kingfisher Prince is not in doubt, it is established fact."

The latter man was keeping a close eye on them all, Hanno found. He'd spoken little but missed nothing. Frederic Goethal, the White Knight decided, had not come today to steer the conversation one way or another but to mark the positions and allegiances of his fellow heroes. And while the man was as canny as any prince of Procer, Hanno had no doubt that this was the stratagem of shrewder mind still. Cordelia Hasenbach liked to know the full lay of the board, before she cast her dice.

"She was used by the Wandering Bard," the Mirror Knight said, "as many of us were. And yet Chosen must die for this offence, while

the Black Queen will let off her Damned with a slap on the wrist. And these are the rules you would have us heed?"

Hanno cocked his head to the side. There was no point, he thought, in continuing to argue that Catherine had yet to render any judgement and that she would be holding trials over rather different breaches of the Terms besides. Continuing to drown in details would resolve nothing, for the Mirror Knight was not truly looking to debate anything. His fingers were grasping for a stone to throw, not an answer to consider.

"Yes," Hanno said.

Christophe visibly stalled at the unexpected reply.

"I will pass judgement over the Red Axe, and carry out the sentence," the White Knight explicitly stated. "In this matter I cannot be swayed or bargained with. It will be done, that is all. Do you now intend to kill me, Christophe? I will not be fighting you, if that is your choice, so strike at your leisure."

The eyes of every single person in the room went to the Mirror Knight, whose face had gone red. His hand was on the pommel of the sword, but he'd not unsheathed it. Even the Blade of Mercy took a step back from him. Antoine was not the sort of young man to let even admiration overcome a reluctance to kill in cold blood.

"Let us assume you do kill me," Hanno gently said. "What happens then, do you think? Will the Grand Alliance let the Red Axe go free?"

"It is the representative for the Chosen that would pass sentence over her," the Mirror Knight harshly said. "Do not now pretend otherwise."

"And killing me would make you the representative?" Hanno asked.

The dark-haired knight took a step back, as if struck.

"They would have to," he said, stumbling over the word. "It would be obvious that..."

"You would need the agreement of every constituent crown of the Grand Alliance," Hanno said. "Given that you believe the Black Queen to be scheming against us, why would she agree?"

The dark-skinned man leaned forward over the table.

"If she refuses," Hanno asked, "will you kill her too?"

"She's Damned," the Mirror Knight defended.

He took a step back anyway. Giving ground it had become impossible to defend. He would feel it, the way the room was turning against him. Even those he had considered to be his own followers, warped as such a thought was to even entertain.

"And if the First Prince refuses?" Hanno continued. "If the Holy Seljun does, after that? What then, Christophe? How many heads will you have to take before no one is left to argue with you?"

"I haven't killed anyone," the Mirror Knight said, voice gone faint. "It doesn't have to be me, the representative. It could be any of us so long as they see what you won't. What you can't, anymore."

The dark-haired knight's fingers tightened around the hilt of the sword. Hanno did not tense. Why would he? At the end of the day, he simply did not believe that he was facing someone capable of killing an unarmed man in cold blood.

"You are no longer the Sword of Judgement, White Knight," Christophe de Pavanie said. "The Seraphim have gone silent, you do not speak with their blessing. What sets you apart from any of us now, Hanno of Arwad?"

And there was his mistake, laid bare. The belief that the justice had ever been in Hanno, when it had always been in the Seraphim. Hanno had not become any blinder, by simple virtue of always having been blind.

"What sets us apart," Hanno of Arwad replied, "is that you are on your feet, with your hand on your sword."

The Mirror Knight flinched, fingers leaving the hilt of the Severance as if burned. It would be enough, Hanno prayed. Being shown himself in a mirror, bereft of all the little lies people told themselves to soften the edges of the world, it would be enough. Christophe was not a bad man, even at his worse. His mistakes were sculpted by pride and fear, but they rose from a bedrock of good intentions. And if it ended here, if Hanno had correctly walked the line once more, then this could end without any blood being spilled. Catherine would return to her usual mercenary pragmatism the moment she no longer felt cornered, the First Prince would withdraw if she felt the situation handled and there was simply no one else that would care to contest with him over Christophe. Hanno caught sight of his own face on the Mirror Knight's bracers, the reflection fleeting but troublingly vivid for the moment it lasted. He had looked calm, the dark-skinned man thought, but also aloof. Almost indifferent.

The Ashuran felt the turn of the tide in the air, even thousands of miles away from any sea at all.

"You are not the only one allowed principles, White Knight," Christophe said. "You are willing to die over this? So am I. And if you will not free the Red Axe, *I will.*"

The Severance cleared the scabbard with a rising whistling sound, as if it were cutting the very air of the hall. The Mirror Knight's sleeve tore with fine cuts that looked like veins, but his polished braces remained untouched. Already he was learning to use the artefact, Hanno thought, though if not for the whistling the Severance would hardly have looked like one. The arming sword, for all its power, was not a fantastical sight. Its steel was fine and touched with small, shadowy patterns like trails of smoke that could hardly be seen with the naked eye, but it neither glowed nor shone, or boasted some fanciful enchantment. The guard was straight, the pommel an angular globe, and the handle covered by an iron grip. The sheath was an ornate thing, but the sword? No, the sword would not have suffered ornament. There was still enough of Laurence de Montfort in there such frivolity would have been carved right through.

Three people rose to their feet in quick order – Sidonia, first, then the Kingfisher Prince and lastly Roland – but Hanno was not of them. He only met Christophe's green eyes, unblinking.

"Nothing of what you seek can be obtained using that," he said, gesturing towards the blade.

"You've drawn steel on allies," the Vagrant Spear said, tone icy as she palmed a knife. "Sheathe now, or you will be treated as a foe."

The Kingfisher Prince drew as well, sword coming out with a muted ring, and Roland pushed back his chair so he could have a clear line of fire for his sorceries. The Blade of Mercy had only a hunting knife at his hip but he drew that, falling to Mirror Knight's side and covering his flank.

"This is madness," the Blind Maker said. "We are Chosen, not-"

"Sheathe the sword, Mirror Knight," the Kingfisher Prince coolly interrupted. "And put it on the table: you have proved unfit to bear it."

"Enough," the White Knight said, finally rising to his feet. "Christophe-"

Hanno saw, from the corner of his eye, Helmgard's eyes go flinty as she glared at the Mirror Knight. He was, damn him, still just a little too slow. The Bitter Blacksmith kicked the table into Christophe, half-flipping it, and the Hells broke loose. Hanno tried to catch it but it slipped through his fingers, and before he could do anything more the Severance had carved an eerily neat path through it. The Vagrant Spear was halfway into a leap, knife

raised, but the Blade of Mercy made to stop her even as the Blind Maker scrambled to get out of the way. Helmgard had already snatched up half the table and she swung it with little skill but enough strength to shatter stone – the White Knight, Light flickering around his hand, shattered it in her grip.

Antoine made to avoid the blind old man between himself and Sidonia and succeeded but at the cost of a stumble. The Vagrant Spear's foot hit his jaw and the young man went down, but before Sidonia could try to move on the Mirror Knight a streak of Light tossed by Adanna passed in front of her – it hit the edge of Christophe's left brace and most of it careened away, though the metal glowed with heat. The Kingfisher Prince weaved through the chaos with a dancer's grace, ducking under a flailing Helmgard and coming up against the Mirror Knight's flank. Sword met and the Alamans prince parried adeptly enough his sword was not simply sliced through, but in matters of might he was outmatched and had to take a step back.

Hanno did not let him press his attack, grabbing him by the back of the neck – the man started in complete surprise – and tossing him towards the back of the hall unceremoniously. The Blade of Mercy had gotten back on his feet and he tried to force back the Vagrant Spear but she turned the blow, caught his shoulder in a hold and forced him to his knees. Passing the knife into her free hand she twirled it as she readied a blow. Hanno, from where he stood, could see she meant to strike Antoine's temple with the pommel of her knife after flipping it. Yet from where the Mirror Knight stood, all that could be seen was the Blade of Mercy on his knees and the Vagrant Spear drawing back her arm for a blow.

The White Knight saw it all come together, as if he were looking down at it from above. Christophe's wrist rising as he prepared his own blow, stepping forward through flying shards of wood. Sidonia seeing the movement at the edge of her peripheral vision and her body trying to react – she lost her rhythm, and what would have been a blow of the pommel as it went down instead remained a strike with the point of the knife. And in turning towards the blow, what would have been a cut through her wrist instead passed through the front half of her face. It would kill her, sure as day, even if it had not been meant to.

The window to act would be slight, for all here were Named, but he was not among the least skilled of his kind. The White Knight moved with purpose, balancing it all on the span of a single breath. His left hand caught Sidonia's wrist before it could come all the way down, leaving to prick Antoine's skin just lightly enough no blood was drawn. And with his right he turned aside the Severance, forcing it to the side so that no life would be taken. The edge of the sword carved through the first two phalanges of his middle finger and through his ring and little finger before

veering off, the Mirror Knight ending the blow before it cut into the ground.

Hanno had yet to draw his sword.

"No," Christophe hoarsely shouted, drawing back.

The White Knight's fingers dropped to the ground. The cut had been clean and painless, but it might still kill him if – Hanno resorted to an old trick let out a pulse of blinding Light, brute forcing the healing and hardening the skin irreparably. There'd be no mending what the Severance had cut, anyhow.

"Sheathe your blades," Hanno said, and his tone brooked no argument. "Every last one of you."

It had taken more than just Christophe de Pavanie for it to come to this.

"I-" the Mirror Knight stammered, "I didn't mean to-"

And before anyone could speak so much as a word, he bolted for the door. Hanno almost cursed. He'd expected anguish, not flight. This was potentially much worse. The door opened the other way but it had not been meant to resist Named and it broke with barely a touch as the Mirror Knight pushed through, the White Knight forcing aside the Vagrant Spear as she moved into his way. He flicked a glance back to the assembled heroes.

"By my authority under the Terms, I order that you all return to your quarters and remain there until sent for," Hanno said, tone forcefully calm.

He did not stay long enough for anybody to begin arguing, instead stepping into the halls of the Alcazar and catching sight of the Mirror Knight turning the corner. Christophe would have no destination, right now, but Hanno knew that the longer he ran with the sight of burning bridges at his back the more the Mirror Knight would look for a way to justify all of this, any of this. And that mean, right now, the Red Axe. If Christophe hurt or even accidentally killed guards breaking her out, Hanno knew there would be no saving his life. There would be no deal to be made, no bargain when so many heroes had broken so many roles. The tolerance from the Grand Alliance would run dry.

As things stood, there was only one way to settle this.

The White Knight breathed out and let Light flood his veins, hastening his steps. He scarred the stone as he turned the corner, Christophe not far ahead, and unclasped his sheathed sword from his belt. The Mirror Knight glanced back just in time to see the strike coming and twist around to face the White

Knight, narrowly avoiding the blow at the back of his knee that would have had him tumbling.

"It didn't have to be like this," Christophe pleadingly said. "You could have listened, and you can still-"

"I'm sorry," Hanno said. "But now it has to end a certain way."

If I do not show them I am capable of handling you physically, this can only end in your death. Christophe did not truly want to fight, even if his body reacted to being attacked, so his initial reaction was sloppy. The Severance was swung quickly and powerfully but with little skill, trying to cut through Hanno's own sheathed blade, but strength without precisions was meaningless. The White Knight took half a step back, then use the backfoot and a flicker of Light in what had once been the Flawless Fencer's favourite trick: the side of his sheath struck the Mirror Knight on the left cheek, smashing him to the side. The pain returned Christophe de Pavanie to the there and then, his eyes hardening.

"You lost a hand," the Mirror said. "Retire, before I must hurt you."

Hanno had lived through so many memories he hardly recalled whether he's originally been left-handed or right-handed, not that it mattered. He was perfectly capable of using either hand to wield a sword.

"Your worry does you honour," Hanno evenly said, "but it is unnecessary."

Something like anger flickered across the other knights' face and he rushed forward. A simple swing forced the White Knight back and with a half step he feigned use of the same trick – yet when Christophe threw a punch where his face would have been were he reiterating, instead the other man caught the Mirror Knight's wrist with the hand he'd freed by dropping his sheathed sword. Light scouring his veins, Hanno clenched his fingers around the bracers until they crumpled and threw his hip. Lifting Christophe de Pavanie, he smashed the other hero into the ground like a mace. The stone cracked rather than the Mirror Knight, but the tremor toppled several of the magelights hanging above. They toppled, several cracking and the light of the hall began flickering. Christophe shouted, Light glimmering over him, but Hanno called on it as well and threaded the two together.

Before the Mirror Knight understood what was happening, he seized the now single-entity Light and used it to strengthen both his kneecaps as Implacable Monk had been fond of doing – he then hammered his boot down into Christophe's throat, knowing that the Mirror Knight was too tough for it to kill him. The other man choked and Hanno repeated the process thrice, each time

increasing strength as the stone fractured beneath them and the ground shook. The Mirror Knight's hand seized his ankle after the third time and he swung the Severance upwards and half-blind. Hanno leaned down, snatched up his sheathed sword and pragmatically slapped the other man in the eyes with the side of the sheath. Christophe yelled and released the foot, which returned to kick his chin at full strength.

The White Knight had not strengthened his kneecap this time, unfortunately, so while the strengthening on his limb held fine he felt the bone of his knee crack.

Pushing down the wave of pain he drew back a step, waiting for the Mirror Knight to get up on his knee before sweeping it – and, this time, smashing down on the wrist with his sheathed sword. The Severance clattered on the floor and Christophe screamed in pain and anger, catching the sheathed sword in his grip and effortlessly crushing it. Hanno released the hilt, but not quickly enough: he was tugged down enough that the Mirror Knight caught his tabard and dragged him even further down. Aware that wrestling with a man who might as well be made of steel would be foolish, the White Knight used his still-bloody mutilated hand to hook a finger into the Mirror Knight's mouth and drag the other man's face straight into his knee.

Christophe's nose broke, but so did Hanno's kneecap.

It bought him long enough, however. Catching the bloodied man by the back of the neck even as he dropped to his knees in pain, Hanno let the Light run loose through his veins until he could feel it filling him to the brim. He smashed the Mirror Knight's head into the ground, repeatedly, as Christophe struggled against the other hand keeping him from turning properly to fight. Hanno felt several of his bones fracture from the other hero's twisting about, but on the sixth impact Christophe de Pavanie finally fell unconscious. The Light slowly left him, leaving behind only waves of pain as the lights continued flickering and casting the fractured and bloodied stone into strange reliefs. The White Knight breathed in and out slowly for some time, but the sound of boots forced him to open them again. Gingerly, he took the sheath of the Severance from the Mirror Knight's side and slid the artefact back into it at the costs of only a few shallow cuts on his fingers.

Soldiers poured into the hallway from both sides, staying in the steady lights.

The legionaries of the Army of Callow were the easiest to recognize, the painted shields and red tabards that heralded some of the finest professional soldiers of Calernia putting a name to them just as surely as the unique mixture of orcs and humans of different hues. Yet there were other soldiers there, in colours less straightforward to place even though their long mail coats,

coiffe and broad rim helm marked them as Proceran. Swords and spears came to the fore in good order, the now infamously deadly Callowan crossbowmen spreading out in the back. Quite a lot of trouble, Hanno thought, for only two men – only one of which was conscious, besides. Admittedly, he tiredly thought, they had made something of a ruckus.

Unfriendly eyes remained steady on him as he rose to his feet with a swallowed moan of pain, but the White Knight was hailed by no officer. He'd not expected to be, as it happened. There were only two people in the Arsenal who would have had the authority to mobilize troops like this, and it was unlike the First Prince of Procer to be so heavy-handed. With the crisp sound of steel-clad boots hitting stone, the legionaries smoothly split to the sides and a shadowed silhouette began limping her way towards him. Even through the helmets Hanno could glimpse the burning, violent devotion those soldiers had for Catherine Foundling. It was in the way they looked at her as she moved past them, in the way they stood taller and with straighter backs for her mere presence.

Some of the White Knight's colleagues worried of the Black Queen's power, of her fearsome mastery of Night, but that'd never been anything to him. It was strength, and strength failed. But the look in those soldiers' eyes, those orcs and Taghreb and Soninke and Callowans? That was a dangerous thing. Hanno knew faith when he saw it, after all. Faith in their saint of impossible victories, in their hard-handed goddess of blood and mud. That look in their eyes would still matter long after strength had faded into irrelevance.

Catherine Foundling limped forward, the uneven steps somehow ominous even without the sharp contrast of her absent staff against stone. The Queen of Callow was, to his great surprise, wearing a dress. Long-sleeved and lightly touched with silver thread, the black velvet suited her well and was even accented with a set of silver bracelets. The dark fabric complimented the tan of her skin, and her braid was rather more elaborate than the simple ponytail she usually kept her hair in. It was an odd sight, in the sense that he was unaccustomed to it, but it was returned to a semblance of normalcy by what followed.

The Archer, who sometimes filled Catherine's shadow in place of the Adjutant, stepped out from behind her queen and flicked her hand. A small packet was caught by the Queen of Callow, who then produced seemingly from nowhere a long pipe of Hanno suspected to be genuine dragonbone and began stuffing it with wakeleaf. The White Knight studied the Archer, whose bow was not yet strung, and decided this would not be a confrontation. Deadly as the Ranger's most famous pupil was with her blades, it was a paltry thing compared to the threat she was with a bow in hand. Falling in slightly behind the Black Queen, the hard smile the Archer was

offering him was revealed by the sudden flicker of flame of Catherine lighting her pipe. Within moments, she spat out a thick stream of acid smoke as the red embers lit up her face.

Wreathed by shadows and smoke, Catherine studied him with cool eyes as she closed the last of the distance. A moment of silence took hold between them, and she was the one to break it,

"Busy night?" the Black Queen asked, smiling as if she'd spoken a jest only she knew.

Wealthy Aardvark

I really like the three beat of Christophe's bracers and how they function as a mirror.

" Christophe watched him with strained eyes, his light brown hair harried.

The angle of his arms ensured the polished bracers he wore on his wrists reflected only a muddled haze. "

First we see Christophe in them. He's still running around and making leaps of logic, trying to make sense of what's happening around him. He's coming off as muddled or addled to his companions.

" Hanno caught sight of his own face on the Mirror Knight's bracers, the reflection fleeting but troublingly vivid for the moment it lasted. He had looked calm, the dark-skinned man thought, but also aloof. Almost indifferent.

The Ashuran felt the turn of the tide in the air, even thousands of miles away from any sea at all.

"You are not the only one allowed principles, White Knight," Christophe said. "You are willing to die over this? So am I. And if you will not free the Red Axe, I will." "

Hanno realizes how the Mirror Knight and (and perhaps the other heroes) see him, too late to correct his course.

" Light scouring his veins, Hanno clenched his fingers around the bracers until they crumpled and threw his hip. "

Finally, Hanno breaks the mirrors during his scuffle with the Mirror Knight.

Nicely done, E.E.

Wealthy Aardvark

Also, I'm amazed to find that I was giving the Mirror Knight too much credit. I thought after the last chapter that he had seen Catherine (one of the creators of the Truce and Terms) being "corrupt" and had thus decided to fight against the T&T just like the Red Axe.

But no, it's not even that. He thinks that the representative for the Damned is letting her people off easy but the representative for the Chosen isn't and that this is unfair, so he wants to (somehow) become the representative for the Chosen so he can be partial to the Chosen instead of impartial like Hanno is. And because he's still a brute who thinks this whole enterprise is held together by personality and force of arms instead of politics and rule of law, he thinks he can just become the new representative by slaying the old one!!

Ugh. I could have respected him like the Saint of Swords and the Red Axe for taking a stand against the new order, but no. He's just a fool who doesn't understand what's happening around him.

fbt

This is really well done. I mostly stopped following/supporting PG2E as it went from funny and cynically hopeful with great banter to endlessly dreary (the next chapters address this somewhat, I'm thrilled to see); just too dark for me. But still, very well done, if no longer my cup of tea. Great writing, really.

ByVectron!

If you haven't come back already, the current chapters are simply amazing.

dadycoool

Yeah, the beginning of this book was horrid, in a "Doom and Gloom" kind of way. Even rereading it was hard, never mind when all we got for a month was the bleakness without Vivi, Zeze, and 'Drani to balance it all out. That, I think, was the worst part: that the Woe had been splintered for two years at that point. Much worse than the Everdark arc.

aerandriak

I can barely recall the last time I both cared about the outcome of a conflict in fiction, and did not know how it would turn out. I was on the edge of my seat this whole chapter, completely unsure how things would turn out.

Cat's fights are a joy in their own way, but we're rarely left wondering if she'll survive the night. I really thought Hanno might die here, and I'm glad he didn't.

Chapter 34: Quickening

"If you want something done right, steal it from someone who did."

– Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

I'd become unfortunately familiar with a certain feeling over the years that was hard to describe, at least in Lower Miezán.

It was that mixture of relief and wincing that came from looking at a debacle but knowing at least it wasn't a catastrophe. Like if you came back one evening to find your barn was on fire, but at least the livestock wasn't in it. I'd told Akua this, once, after one too many times looking at the near wipe of a forward patrol that'd still caught a probe from Keter before it could do damage, and she'd answered with amusement that there was in fact an expression in Mthethwa for it. *Kutofa ushidi*, which more or less translated to 'victory in failure'. It was a recurring theme in Praesi plays, particularly their comedies, with the traditional protagonist of those being Dread Emperor Baneful – who'd never actually been emperor, only one of the claimants during the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One. He was notable mostly for somehow having managed to hang on until nearly the end with only a string of mitigated defeats to his name.

Akua could actually quote some passages from one of the more famous plays, *The Long Road to Ater*, and it'd been as endearing as it had been surreal to hear her chortle about Baneful accidentally poisoning his cousin instead of his husband – only to later find out that she'd been about to betray him. He had, Akua had gleefully explained, avoided his own assassination but only at the price of a feud with his distinctly unimpressed warlock brother-in-law, who promptly cursed him. Any play with that much murder in it would probably have been a tragedy instead, in Callow. Except if it were foreigners doing the dying. Which was why I had rather mixed feelings, looking at the mutilated White Knight and the bloodied, unconscious body of the Mirror Knight. The Severance had been returned to the sheath and was now in Hanno's hands, but there was less of those than there used to be.

Three fingers lost on his right hand, though at least he'd kept the thumb and index. He'd still be able to write with it even as he waited for a prosthetic, though I did believe he was ambidextrous regardless.

"You might say that," the White Knight serenely replied.

Not quite so serene he was able to hide how he was trying not to put too much weight on his knees, gingerly shifting his footing. Though the cracked stone floor and the lack of cuts spoke to an overwhelming victory by Hanno of Arwad, I suspected it'd been a closer thing than it seemed. How many bones had he cracked just by hitting the other man? If the Mirror Knight had not fallen unconscious, it would have been the beginning of a downwards slide for the Sword of Judgement: I knew for a fact that his healing was shoddy, and not without adverse effects. Mind you, I thought as I pulled at my pipe and eyed Christophe de Pavanie's blatantly broken nose, he'd still won. And without using a blade, by the looks of it, which was impressive. *You were making a statement*, I thought, studying him openly. *That you can handle him on your own, and so there is no need for anyone to step in.*

It was about three fingers too late for that.

Indrani, who'd been at my back this whole time, let out a low whistle.

"Nice scrap," she praised. "But you missed a spot."

The way she trailed a finger across her throat while looking at the Mirror Knight made it clear what she meant by that. I didn't correct her, or indeed say anything at all, simply watching Hanno. I'd be a grave misstep for me to have even the slightest and most indirect of hands in the death of Christophe de Pavanie, as even the appearance of my involvement with the killing of a heroic opponent of mine would blow up in my face like a crate of sharpeners. If the White Knight was the one who took his head, though, that was a different story. While an argument could be made that the Mirror Knight was simply too useful and powerful a Named to execute, I was lukewarm to the prospect of keeping the man alive. Part of that was that he was a very direct threat to me, but there was also the fact that he'd just fucking cut up the representative for the heroes under the Terms.

The White Knight hadn't said anything, but after days at Hakram's bedside I was painfully familiar with what cuts made by the Severance looked like.

"The Mirror Knight breached the Terms," Hanno said, ignoring Indrani outright and looking straight at me. "But he has been subdued without lasting harm being done. I will now take him into custody, if you have no objection."

I spewed out a stream of smoke, watching it spin and writhe before me. I didn't want – and couldn't afford – my hands on any of this, but I balked at simply leaving the Mirror Knight in a cell without further supervision than what Hanno might judge fit to provide. On the other hand, what were my alternatives? I couldn't put him under a guard of my own without it looking like a villain had taken a hero prisoner and I sure as Hells wasn't going to leave him loose in the Arsenal. Besides, the White Knight might have asked if I had objections but he wasn't simply going to do whatever I asked. He'd listen to any grievances I had and try to address them, but Hanno wasn't going to roll over something like this and I had little appetite for picking a fight. I still tapped the side of my own hand, where the dark-skinned hero was now missing fingers.

"That requires consequences," I warned. "And do not expect to find much mercy in me."

Or Hasenbach, for that matter, I thought. The First Prince would have taken it a greater victory to bring the Mirror Knight to her way of seeing things than to quell him, until now, but this little episode would change things. The baggage he'd be bringing with him when going under her wing would begin outweighing his uses, to such a canny princess' eyes: anything he did after becoming an ally would reflect on her, and her position was too delicate to be able to afford much bumbling. Considering I spoke for Callow as well as Below's lot and the Dominion had little reason to be fond of the Mirror Knight, that boded ill for the man in question. Hanno would be the one to pass the sentence, in the end, but the White Knight no more operated in a vacuum than I did.

Hanno did not blink in the face of my stare, unmoved.

"The Terms will be upheld," the White Knight answered. "I will not let intentions excuse actions."

But, I thought, for though his eyes were calm they had hardened.

"But make no mistake, Catherine," the Sword of Judgement continued. "I will not sacrifice a good man for the sake of convenience. The Terms constrain, but they also protect."

"At three fingers the chance taken on a fool, you'll run out of one long before the other," Archer sardonically said.

Well, she wasn't wrong. I breathed in a mouthful of wakeleaf, savouring the burn I'd not allowed myself to indulge in when sharing a room with the First Prince out of politeness. Through flickering lights, rows of soldiers on both sides awaiting only my command to bare steel, I watched the White Knight. Even without armour, even without either of the swords on him having left their scabbards, he felt dangerous. Not like a blade at my

throat, for there was not a speck of hostility in his stance, but like a sharp stone under water. It didn't look like much until you tried to step on it, and by the time you felt the pain it was already too late. I'd trust him, I decided, at least for tonight. He had yet to disappoint me, and I'd not break that streak by forcing a fight that was not necessary. I hoped it would never be. But if it ever were, I would pick my grounds better than this.

I spat out the smoke, making my choice.

"I won't war over what *might* be," I said. "Take him, Hanno. But don't forget how many eyes are on you, either."

He inclined his head the slightest bit, not in concession but in acknowledgement.

"Have the Severance back in its room before night's over," I said, and it was not a suggestion.

On that I left him to his bloodied and bloody fool, Archer offering a singsong and almost taunting *good night*, and limped back to the ranks of my legionaries. They closed behind me seamlessly and I took aside the commanding officer long enough to order a line be sent to escort the White Knight as he carried the other Named to his holding cell. Some Proceran soldiers, I saw, were missing.

Cordelia would be getting a report soon enough, and tomorrow would bring consequences for all.

—

I woke up around what would have been dawn, were we still in Creation.

For all the weight of what had taken place yesterday — as much my conversations with the First Prince as the Mirror Knight's beating and imprisonment — I found relatively little to do when I woke. I broke my fast quickly and retreated to Hakram's room in the infirmary to see to what few affairs I had. I penned a recommendation to the First Army's general staff for Lieutenant Inger to be promoted to captain, for her exemplary service when commanding against a demon, knowing it'd likely end up on Juniper's desk. The First Army had been gutted to fill all sorts of needs, from garrisoning the Arsenal to organizing training camps and providing escorts for supply trains, which my marshal had been less than pleased by. It'd still been the natural pick, even she had admitted that, considering that Juniper still couldn't work for more than a few hours a day without having... episodes.

Malicia had a lot to answer for. Tariq had seen to my old friend personally and assured me that eventually the damage that'd been done to her mind by the Empress' planted controls would mend itself, but that it would take time. The Hellhound still got more done in a slice of a day than most people did with a full one, and had violently resisted the notion of resting more fully even though it'd accelerate her recovery, but these days she was forced to rely on her general staff too much for the First to be a functional battlefield command. I could have named someone else to serve as general under her and lead on the field, but why offer that insult when I had need of soldiers for all sorts of detached duties? At this point even if tomorrow she was healed her soldiers would still be more useful in their current assignments, so it'd change nothing. Mind you, if we were to assault northern Hainaut come summer I'd want her to be part of the planning so she might have to leave her staff behind for a bit. Aisha would be politely furious at me for making her travel, but there was no helping it.

I saw to some minor correspondence after that, the sort that seemed to accrue like dust wherever I stayed for more than a day, and wrote a formal request for the Arsenal to begin working on prosthetics for Adjutant. I'd already gone to the Named directly and found both the Blind Maker and the Hunted Magician highly amenable – the latter in particular, since he wanted to buy his way back into my good graces – but it would be easier to shake loose rare substances if this was made formal. As Queen of Callow I had no problem paying for any of this from my treasury, but a lot of the more precious materials in the Arsenal were bought through the Grand Alliance instead of anyone's personal agents. It was half past Morning Bell that Archer strolled in to tell me of the day's first arrival, which I'd been expecting for some time: Vivienne was, at last, about to get here.

To my surprise, Masego had roused himself to welcome her in person as well. The three of us set out together, which drew eyes enough as we made our way through the halls. The Woe had something of a reputation.

"I'm glad you made time for this," I told Zeze. "It's been a while since you've seen her, right?"

"We scribed a fortnight ago," Masego contradicted.

He was, I supposed, technically correct. He usually was, especially so when it was most annoying for everyone else.

"In person, I mean," I specified.

I'd not seen Vivienne in person for... a little over a year, now? There'd been that conference in the Brabantine heartlands last winter, when I'd gone down in person to hasten along the negotiations over how the refugees were to be settled – the new

Prince of Lyonis had been pushing for forced conscription of all those of fighting age, which would have been a disaster – when she'd sent word the process was being stalled. In all fairness, the Procerans hadn't even been the most obstructive people in that conference. That honour had belonged to the delegates for the Dominion, who'd been trying to argue that the mass of displaced were an issue of the Principate alone and not worth discussion by the Grand Alliance at all.

We'd been in the same small city, Malben, for about a week before I returned north to prepare for the offensive. We'd spent a few hours together on several evenings, aside from the time duty ensured we'd spend side by side, but in truth we'd simply been too damned busy to spend much time together. She just as much as I, which not that many people could claim. I'd effectively dropped all Callowan affairs and foreign diplomacy into Vivienne's lap, and while she'd taken to both admirably in tidier times both those duties would have warranted different appointments by sheer virtue of the work they represented. There was a reason that her personal staff had swelled by more than a dozen times over but I'd never once balked at signing onto the costs involved.

"Under those terms, it has been seventeen months," Hierophant replied. "Not since her official visit to the Arsenal."

"She actually likes the place, unlike some," Indrani said, glancing at me sideways. "Mind you, that might just be the Thief in her salivating at so much nifty stuff being kept in the same place."

"Vivienne would not steal from the Arsenal," Masego firmly said.

Aw, I thought, looking at him fondly. The faith there was a little touching.

"Given the authority Catherine has granted her, it would only count as a requisition," Hierophant told us.

A little less touching now, admittedly. Indrani snickered.

"Don't Procerans have a saying about thieves and crowns?" she said.

"Petty thieves hang, the great wear crowns," I quoted in Chantant.

Archer grinned at me.

"Give it a few years," she said, "and we'll proving that true."

I snorted, mildly amused. I'd never made a mystery of my intention to abdicate in favour of Vivienne after the war, at

least not among the Woe – though it wasn't common knowledge outside them, to this day. It'd been with a mixture of pleasure and irritation that I'd realized that few of them actually cared. Archer was largely indifferent to crowns, and I suspected she fully intended on continuing send up bills to the royal palace even after it became Viv's, while Masego had actually been *pleased*. It'd give me more time to help him with a few things, he'd been happy to tell me. We'd never made a proper study of Night, and since I'd have no use for all that power I wielded he did have a few projects that could use the fuel... At least it'd not been too difficult to talk him into setting up shop at Cardinal when it was raised, which as a side-benefit ensured Indrani would have a permanent anchor there no matter where the wind ended up taking her.

"I'm still glad you made time," I told Zeze. "Unlike *some* here, you're actually busy."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Cat," Indrani blithely said, "I'm sure that whole queen thing will pay off eventually."

"It pays for *you*, sullen wench," I grunted back. "Though I'm beginning to question the wisdom of that."

"I've never bought a drop of anything with Grand Alliance gold," she righteously assured me.

I raised an eyebrow. Did she really expect I'd fall for that?

"How about silver?" I pointedly asked.

A heartbeat of silence passed.

"Zeze's only here because he accidentally broke his spheres bothering elves," Archer said, shamelessly selling him out without even a speck of hesitation.

I mouthed at her she was not yet out of the woods, then turned a cocked brow to Masego.

"I made the spheres," Hierophant told me, a tad smugly. "And the spell that broke them. Therefore I did, in a sense, make time."

Huh. I'd be damned. Compared to his usual brand of sneakiness, that was positively devious. I was inclined to blame Roland for this. The Rogue Sorcerer was pretty tricky sort, for a man who went around in a leather coat shooting fire at people.

"You're spending too much time with Alamans," I told him.

"The only thing you should listen to them about is the kissing," Indrani agreed.

I shot her an amused look. Having recently basked in the luxury of displays of affections from her partner, it looked like she wasn't willing lose the goods quite to soon. The braided mage cocked his head to the side.

"But it was from two of you I learned to dissemble," Masego said, looking puzzled.

I swallowed a startled noise that was as appalled as it had been amused, because he'd been completely earnest about that. It was truly his most dangerous magic, I thought, that damned disarming earnestness.

"Catherine's a bad influence," Indrani told him. "The Grey Pilgrim said so that once, and that's basically just like angels saying it."

"Hear that?" I said, and allowed for a moment of silence. "That's the sound of your discretionary funds getting audited, Archer."

Naturally, she called me a brutal tyrant and the three of us managed to keep bickering all the way to the plaza where Vivienne would be translating in. Gods, but it was good to be home. It wasn't the same with just Indrani or Hakram, though they tried. We'd simply gone through too many crucibles as a band of five for it to ever feel truly complete without all of the Woe there. Not that we would be, even when Vivienne got here. Adjutant had yet to wake. With that thought dampening what had been a rising mood, I found myself limping down the same bloody set of stairs for what felt like the hundredth time. Wasn't there another access point without quite so many of those?

"It should all be slopes," I muttered under my breath. "Nice, gentle slopes."

The murderholes, siege engines and well-armed soldiers could stay, though. Those were always a good investment, in my experience. Indrani pretended she hadn't heard me, hiding her smile in her scarf, and the three of us settled at the bottom to wait for Vivienne. It would have been convenient for her to arrive immediately, but instead it took long enough we ended up playing dice on the floor to make the wait tolerable. Masego cheated with sorcery borrowed from one of the silver trinkets in his braids, but that was fine: they were Indrani's dice anyway, so they were loaded, and I'd yet to throw them without first weaving an illusion guaranteeing me the numbers I wanted.

Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the crown of the Kingdom of Callow, arrived to the sadly not unprecedented sight of the Archer threatening to rise in rebellion if I didn't stop abusing my powers to make her roll snake eyes – only to then roll another pair, as Masego was evidently finding her anger quite amusing and wasn't above using an aspect for petty indulgence.

"This is Grand Alliance property, you filthy gambling vagrants," Vivienne called out. "I'll have you tossed out."

The four mages that'd made the translation with her looked terrified, at least until I began laughing.

"She's cheating, too," Indrani complained. "It is a sad day indeed for the House of Foundling, that its head would resort to such sordid treachery."

"We were all cheating," Masego happily said, "you were simply the worst at it."

An offended squawk was his answer and I left them to it, instead turning to have a better look at my friend. I was struck, once more, with how little she now resembled the woman I'd first met in Summerholm all those years ago. In principle not much had changed: her hair was still dark brown, her eyes that pleasant blue-grey tone and her slender frame had yet to thicken. The hair was even longer than when I'd last seen her, and as was her habit kept in a milkmaid braid that evoked a crown, but it was the little details that made all the difference. She'd aged, not by much but enough that her face had grown mature. And though she was visibly tired, even in her blue riding dress and trousers there was a lightness to her that was the burning opposite of the anger she'd carried with her everywhere during her eyes as the Thief.

Losing her Name had been good for her in a lot of ways.

I limped up to her, leaning on my staff, and she met me halfway. I pulled her in close for a hug, enjoying how she was one of the few people close enough to me in height it felt like there was little difference there. Her grip was firm when she returned the embrace, and I noted with approval she'd kept in shape. Just because she'd traded the respectable form of theft that was burglary on rooftops for the organized form of theft that was taxation from a palace was no reason to let herself go. Mind you, Vivienne had always been whip-lean in a way that was from breeding as much as an active nightlife of skulking through alleys.

"Catherine," she smiled, after drawing back. "It's good to see you."

It'd been a while since I'd last felt pangs of attraction towards Vivienne, but now and then when she smiled like that I remembered why I'd felt them. It was a done thing, but not unsweet to look back on for all that it'd been entirely one-sided.

"And you," I replied. "Would that you could have gotten here sooner. I heard something about rains?"

She nodded.

"They flooded the roads," Vivienne said. "There were levees but they broke – no plot there, simply gone unrepaired for too long."

I grimaced. I doubted it'd be the only place where something like that had happened. Considering the dark picture that Hasenbach and Frederic had painted for me on the state of the Principate, I suspected that a truly staggering amount of maintenance work must have gone undone because there were more pressing needs to fill.

"We'll have our fill of plotting in here anyway, I think," I sighed. "Things had been moving quickly enough in here that I suspect even you won't have heard all of it."

The Jacks had people in the Arsenal, naturally, as did the Circle of Thorns. The Dominion did not have designated spies so much as captains sending regular reports, which was perhaps not too surprising – it was a lot less centralized than either Callow or Procer, and if I'd learned anything about spies since becoming queen it was that they cost a *lot* of fucking money. A lot more than, say, one of the major Levantine lords would be able to afford tossing into such an enterprise if they didn't want to fall behind their neighbours when it came to fielding soldiers. The Old Kingdom hadn't been all that different, even though the Fairfaxes hadn't been the largely symbolic leaders the Isbili still were. Nowadays we could afford the Jacks in part because nobility wasn't there to drain the pot anymore, so to speak. Callow hadn't gotten much richer, but a lot of more of its gold ended up in the royal treasury than before.

"I've no difficulty believing that," Vivienne grimly replied.

We parted ways entirely just in time for Indrani to squeeze in between us, throwing out her arms around our shoulders.

"Vivi," she grinned. "Long time no see."

The former thief snorted.

"Last time you gave me that grin it was after emptying my liquor cabinet," Vivienne said. "Though I'll admit it was a nice touch to fill the bottles back up with water."

"A lot harder than you'd think, too," Archer cheerfully said. "Especially considering how drunk I got from drinking all your liquor."

Masego's long fingers were laid on Indrani's shoulders and he gently moved her aside, freeing Vivienne at the price of leaving me stuck with a pouting Archer. Hierophant offered her a smile and, as 'Drani and I watched expectantly, bent down to kiss Vivienne's cheeks one after the other. She froze, not answering

even when Masego welcomed her to the Arsenal. The flabbergasted look on my fellow Callowan's face had been well worth the wait, I decided. She threw Indrani a confused and almost pleading look, which Archer answered with her usual shit-eating grin. She turned towards me after, perhaps expecting a greater degree of helpfulness coming from there.

"Zeze's been rubbing elbows with Alamans," I sagely said.

Which explained the kissing, at least, though the initiative to start doing it was all him.

"People keep repeating variations on that sentence," Masego said, sounding peeved. "As if it were some sort of conversational panacea. Shall I obtain such an elbow and carry it around so that I can behave outlandishly without facing questions?"

"There's probably a few still lying around the Graveyard," Indrani mused. "Couldn't be that hard to get our hands on one."

"I see that in some ways remarkably little has changed," Vivienne drily said, catching my eye.

I shrugged, offering her a small grin. If her days were anything like mine, and they most likely were, then this... lightness must be a balm on the soul. After hours of deciding life and death for thousands, of making ugly compromises and closing your eye to small evils, there was nothing quite like ribbing and idle talk with people you loved to remind yourself you were alive. A person, too, not just a collection of necessary decisions given a frame to inhabit. The four mages that'd translated with Vivienne had given us a wide berth, accurately guessing that the reunion of four of the Woe wasn't something to just stand around listening to, but she left us for a bit to thank them and request that she be informed when her personal affairs arrived. She'd come with several wagons, apparently, and only pulled ahead of them and her entourage when it came to crossing into the Arsenal itself. Zeze and Indrani took the lead in going up the stairs, leaving us behind in a conversation that was unlikely to be of much interest to either.

"We've got lots around the corner," I told her as we began our way up. "And it'll be coming at us quick."

"The trials, for one," Vivienne agreed.

She'd know about two, the Red Axe and the Hunted Magician, but there might be a third on the horizon she wouldn't have heard about. Whether the Mirror Knight would end up before a tribunal or not I couldn't be sure, but I suspected he would. Hanno would want the Grand Alliance to have the opportunity to speak, if not sentence.

"The war council, too, which will start when Lord Marave gets here," I said.

She nodded.

"I take it the First Prince has spoken to you on the subject of the Mercantis troubles as well?" my heiress asked.

"She did. Their envoys due here in a few days, Hasenbach and I are to dazzle and scare them so they continue coughing up coin," I replied. "You heard about the Gigantes?"

"The Arsenal seemed like the natural location to entertain their envoy, this Ykines," she confirmed. "Considering they requested the White Knight personally it was almost a given it would have to happen now, before the two of you return to the front."

"I've limited hopes there, but even their scraps would be damnably useful," I said. "Talked about them with the White Knight, he has good insight. Hard to say when they'll get there, but I'm betting after the trials."

"Quite a few weeks," Vivienne drily said. "And to think we used to have the occasional restful month, you and I, where there was no especially urgent fire to put out."

"A lot more ground to cover these days," I mused, "and a lot more fires with it. There's also a last thing, now that I think of it, which ought to be soon-"

Behind us sorcery roiled as another translation into the Arsenal began. Ah, of course Creation would deign indulge me *now*. A moment later the Painted Knife and her band of five passed through the gate, bringing with them a secret the Dead King believed would chill our blood.

Well, I supposed it'd make something to chat about over lunch.

Insanenoodlyguy

"I've limited hopes there, but even their votes would be damnably useful," I said. "Talked about them with the White Knight, he has good insight. Hard to say when they'll get there, but I'm betting after the reminders."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Ninestrings

So... whats our rampant speculation for what the Painted Knife has discovered?

Y'all think the Dead King has mastered Undead goat bombs?

[vernal.ancient](#)

A massive, undead dragon with ribs that swing open to drop a payload of undead goat bombs, mixed with other zombies to follow up on the chaos

dadycoool

Oh dear. Now I'm imagining it, and maybe that's one of the tricks Bard was talking about, that he'd unleash if/when he finally decides to take it serious.

Ninestrings

Too easily negated, one decent explosive or fireball would send the whole thing up in one big goresplosion.

Big expensive death machines with one small exploitable weakness is exactly the sort of trap the Dead King avoids.

Ninestrings

If a "One in a million" shot will take it down, heroes will reliably hit it ten times out of ten.

[vernal.ancient](#)

True, though most super weapons get one successful use where the heroes are helpless to stop them. Used properly, that could still be devastating before it has to be shelved.

agumentic

It's something related to the use of the Judgement "corpse", so undead is probably not the right direction to speculate about.

Cloud_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)

Unless...

Salt

Precedent is my guess. Use of Choir corpses are unprecedented in known history, but the Dead King probably predates most of the known histories by a fair margin.

I'm betting that there's some sort of permanent wound on Creation. Some feature of Calernia that tends to cause endless

problems, one that most people believed to be the natural lay of things, proving to actually be a wound leftover from the last time around. Maybe for example, Demons aren't something natural so much as an aspect of creation that was supposed to be beneficial, but was damaged beyond mending by a similar event.

Salt

Whoops, didn't mean to hit post yet. 2/2:

It's always been a bit off to me that Above and Below are supposed to be perfect mirror opposites of each other, but the Angels don't have a true mirror in the Devils. The Choirs are obviously virtues incarnate, based on classic Christian theology, so that begs the question: where the hells are the classic Sins? Pride, Wrath, Greed, etc...

The actual capital-H Hells seem to just be a collection of monsters more than any particular theology of Below. Maybe they once did have a direction, and instead of expanding endlessly and aimlessly, there was a real theology behind them as a true mirror to the angelic choirs.

Maybe devils are the substance, left over and separated from demons which are the wreckage of what used to be the ideologies of the Sins. It then makes sense how demons are all based on specific capital-letter concepts instead of just being big scary monsters – Absence, Fear, etc...

Xinci

Personally, I presume all three creatures(Angels, Demons, and Devils) are just aspects of the Gods experimenting in making concepts. I presume the Demons came first as they and their Hells seem to more or less be dimensional laws that want to spread themselves. Devils are more fragmentary versions of Demons to a degree, their concepts being wider and possibly smaller in scope in some ways. Though if given time like Tikloshe they can grow quite a bit. Devils too are immortal in a fashion as killing them just disperses them back to shapelessness and they are constantly being made in the Hells. Or at least the Hells are constantly generating and as such Devils cannot be exterminated just as Angels may not be exterminated. Angels actually seem to be sort of like Demons but aligned to a virtuous concept instead of a more physically aligned ones like Time or Apathy. The choir itself remains constant, it cannot be added to or taken from, which kind of makes me think of how Demons Hells don't go away. Given the Gods have worked to make sure their servants cant escape the bounds of their test I suspect that Angels don't grow for the same reason the Deorai the placed bindings on their gestalt. So that it couldn't easily be

usurped by others. The choir retains its power even if a physical body is killed as it can never be separated, which is an interesting similarity to how Winter itself was noted to never be separate regardless of time and space. Basically saying all of them seem to be different creations made as the Gods refined their test. Demons for the building blocks, Devils randomly being made in the Hells for ideas of what they could do with those blocks, and Angels to guide people down avenues aligning to specific concepts.

mamm0nn

I don't think so with the demons. While they are indeed not mirroring the angels that well, in truth they do. Angels and Demons are made to be a threat that cannot be destroyed by the Damned and Chosen respectively too easily, or they would've already been destroyed millennia ago.

Angels cannot be assassinated, for the Choir gets stronger if one is slain. Nothing is lost, the remaining angels merely grow equally stronger and become a greater threat to Evil than they were before. Likely the remaining ones are both those proven in battle and intrigue, as granted enough power to simply nope most Villains who plot to slay one. Angels are, in their design, not meant to be defeated by Villains, not even in the first act as a sacrificial lamb to the Villain before said Villain is slain by the Hero in act three.

Meanwhile Demons cannot 'just' be defeated. They can be defeated, for telling a Hero that they cannot possibly win or stand only but the smallest of chances is equal to making it more likely for them to prevail. Instead, though Demons can be defeated they cannot be defeated forever (They merely reform in Hell and/or new ones spawn) and their battle remains even after being slain. Where the White Knight may heal his broken kneecaps soon enough, a demon is like his fingers being severed. It won't be reversed ever, no matter the Story or situation.

A hero cannot win against demons easily, cannot have a shining victory instead of tons of misery and hard choices. A demon of corruption leaves behind corrupted people that have to be put down, no matter the Hero's ideals or the cuteness of that little now corrupted girl. If the Hero disagrees and tries to do the hard but good decision of saving these people, all the better for it will make everything worse by the Hero's arrogance.

Once a Villain summons the demon, often not the finale they're destined to lose rather than the beginning they're destined to win, there's no winning for the Hero even if they win. In that, the Demons are a fundamental anathema to Chosen

despite not being unbeatable. In this, the seven sins just don't lend themselves well thematically so EE probably chose against using them.

nick012000

I think you've gotten the relationship between Demons, Angels, and Named precisely backwards. Heroes are the **only** ones who can kill Demons; Villains can merely bind them away. Conversely, Villains can cause Angels to fall.

Salt

That's what I'm saying though – Demons do mirror the Angels in a way, but if I recall correctly the known Evil-equivalent mirror to the angels are supposed to be the Devils, not the Demons.

From what I remember the Devils are the direct Evil-equivalent mirror to the Angels that occupy nearly the entirety of the ever-expanding Hells, while Demons sort of just exist in the Hells, occupying several fixed layers of them (I don't recall the actual number).

The choirs are also supposed to be fixed rather than getting stronger if an angel is slain – angel corpses are supposed to be the stuff of nonsense, logically, because apparently killing one doesn't diminish either the overall power or the actual number of them.

The Devils mirror the Angels in being endlessly growing in number to their unchanging nature, but they don't really appear to have much in the way of actually mirroring the ideologies that the angels – they're not the "below always gets their due" opposite to the angels tendency to "above always wins" in a straight up confrontation; the damage done by Devils is apparently not permanent and can be healed or recovered. The ideological mirror seems to be Demons, which are the other way around. They don't properly mirror the Angels in only occupying a set number of the Hells rather than being endless like the devils, but any victory against a Demon isn't a true victory as the damage is done and permanent the moment they set foot in Creation. They always get their due, even if they lose.

It just seems to me that any true Evil-equivalent opposite to the Choirs should be some combination of what the Devils and the Demons are, rather than apparently just the Devils by themselves.

[TeK](#)

You miss more metalayer, I think. Below, fundamentally, does not *deal* in virtue – as in the set of inviolable moral principles rigidly defining good and evil. They, insted, operate in “as long as it works, it’s good”, basically “might makes right” taken to the logical extreme. In that, devils can’t represent any kind of “opposing sin” as you would expect from making obvious Christianic parallels.

Talking about Christianic parallels, in Christianity, sin and virtue are, though opposing, also fundamentally different concepts. Sins are nature. They are not some kind of creation of Satan, they are inherent characteristic of human and inhuman beings i.e. “original sin”. Virtue is, however, something that can only be found in following the teachings of the Church, and the words of the God. Unlike sin, virtue is fundamentally outside of humanity. We have to reach for it.

To put into perspective, we already know that Demons represent at least some of christian sins: Sloth (Apathy), Gluttony (Hunger), Wroth (Anger), so it is quite reasonable to assume all seven of them made it into the twenty three of the hells. Along with other things like Terror and Madness, along with Order and Time and Absence, my headcannon is that Demons are the stuff Creation was made out of, or a leftovers after the Creation was made. Or maybe, more creatively, they were the specifically crafted “brushes with paint” that were used to make Creation. No matter the reason, they are inherent to the Creation itself. This is why their “taint” is so pervasive, Creation is like a painting, so if a new layer of paint is put over, it will hid all that was under it forever. And why can’t they paint over each other? Because Demons are both brushes and paint. Not only do they paint things, but everything painted in their color becomes also part of a brush, which paints futher, which... you get it. And well, it ties also neatly into why Light is able to fight Demons and Demonic taint – to get the paint from the picture you need an eraser to just scrap it away. Of course, you can’t really get what was painted over that way, but you can scrap away all the paint.

Angels, coming over on the second place, are a direct outside attempt to influence those inherent elements of Creation. This is why they are of Creation, but not in Creation – they are also a set of brushes, in that they can paint over the picture, but they can’t be in the picture, because they are not the paint, the angel by itself is just a brush, with a Choir being the source of paint. This is how they can be killed and fallen without Choir diminishing. We know that the Creation is a wager,

so Angels are the way to win, by just painting over the Creation whatever Above wants. They are fundamentally the tools for the Gods themselves. Although the number of Choirs may very well be unlimited, they are just the number of paints that a painter can think of while making a painting, they represent what the author *wants to see*

Devils, however, do not represent any rigid set of concept. They are not limited by Below's desire to see something, because Below does not want to paint over the Creation. Instead, Devils are a set of tools given to the denizens of the Creation to paint whatever they want. The number of fundamental concepts Devils represent is infinite, because they represent every mortal concept that can be thought of. Not something as all-encompassing and bland as virtue of Compassion or Endurance. It can be just "desire", or can be specifically "hunger for fresh blood".

So they mirror Angels perfectly, because they are their opposite by the very nature. Angels represent a limited set of rules, used by Above to make Creation how it should be, while Devils represent a freedom of expression, used by people of Creation to make it how they want it to be. I personally think that the wager was about which method is more effective, with Above very smartly and pragmatically taking the "good" concepts, that most denizens of Creation would agree that are worth following. It is like them saying: look, these creatures don't need free will anyway: we are perfectly capable of making the right choice for them, the choice they would've made for themselves anyway. While Below probably argue that there are things Above couldn't think of ever while being outside of the picture. This is why they conceded to give Above chance to pick the "best" concepts, because they believe that inherent ingenuity and freedom will still be Chosen by the people of Creation in the end, that they can live their lives just ok without living up to the ideal and unrealistic standards of virtue that were made up by other people anyway.

Well that's my headcannon at the moment, but I am probably wrong anyway.

beleester

He said it dates back to the first Grey Pilgrim, and that Tariq would know what the secret was, so it can't be that old. I also don't think it's another angel corpse – the Pilgrim said that only two Praesi ever managed to harm a choir, and both of those are accounted for.

Maybe a fragment of the gods, like the one that attacked Thalassina? That would fit with the Dead King's comment that it would be interesting to the Hierophant.

That, or something related to the Bard, which is usually a pretty safe bet when you see something you can't explain but you know it'll be terrible for everyone.

Salt

To be fair anything related to Demons is a coinflip for recordkeeping – any time Absence is involved it becomes largely impossible to fully account for anything at all.

I do think it'll be something more directly related to Above and Below or the balance of them than something mundane, regardless of potency. There's too much narrative relation to Above and Below for an angel corpse, for the consequences to be wholly unrelated.

Cpt. Obvious

I'm way to confused to comment on most of the post, but I kind of remember something about demons not being of Creation whilst devils were. This suggests that demons either predates creation or at least weren't intended to interact with creation. Whatever the case it speaks against there being a connection between the two. In a way demons are more primitive, more primal forces than devils are. They are said to lack true intelligence and not being able to learn. Devils on the other hand start out with a animal class intelligence but grows more intelligent the longer they live.

Having said that makes me wonder about the demon that were bound to to serve gatekeeper for The Tower. It not only spoke, but had over the centuries learned a semblance of Praesi humor, as dark as that is.

And while I'm of on a tangent I wonder if that might be something that will be retconned as it was described in book 1 and it's possible that the "rules" for demons weren't quite finished when that was written. The fact that up until Hierophant no one was supposed to be able to counter or stop the taint that demons spread also makes the gatekeeper suspect.

Aaand I have no idea what I was trying to say here so I better stop.

[Javvies](#)

Could be something about Bard and her true agenda.

[vernal.ancient](#)

"The war council, too, which will start when Lord Marave gets here," I said.

She nodded. Vivienne was not

Last sentence is missing its ending

Cicero

Well that was an ominous cliffhanger.

Laguz24

Oh, it's not APGTE if it doesn't end on a suitably ominous cliffhanger to keep us in suspense all the way to Tuesday.

dadycoool

It's interesting how entertaining the image of Cat, Zeze, and 'Drani playing cheating, loaded dice is. The Woe really does need each other, in ways that are frankly surprising to realize. It's like they're each other's ties to their own humanity or something.

Konstantin von Karstein

In that, they are the true heirs of the Calamity!

LizAris

Yes this reminded me SO much of Sing We of Rage when Warlock described how the Calamities literally can't play any kind of game without all cheating. it's absolutely adorable but at the same time makes me heartsick for all Black has lost...

dadycoool

That's why climbing the Tower is the greatest tragedy that can happen to someone. The first step is losing everything/ one dear to them.

Juff

Typo Thread:

at leas the > at least the
I'd be a grave > It'd be a grave
roll over something > roll over for something
princess' eyes > princess's eyes
At three fingers the chance taken on a fool (is this correct?)
we'll proving > we'll be proving
was pretty tricky > was a pretty tricky

willing lose > willing to lose
quite to soon > quite too soon
from two of you > from the two of you that
"Catherine," she smiled > "Catherine." She smiled
I think," I sighed > I think." I sighed
envoys due > envoys are due
deign indulge > deign to indulge

'Ladi Williams

Yeah. The three fingers sentence seems to be correct.
Means the cost of taking a chance was three fingers...

[Burlyraven](#)

I wonder what Vivienne's reaction to Hakram will be. They were getting along better last we were informed, but they definitely had the weakest bonds of the quintet.

[Adrian_V](#)

Not again!!! How many tiems will you makes us wait anxiously for the next chapter?!!

As for the chapter i can only say this: I SIMPLY LOVED IT!!!!

Seeing Masego's character development is simply beatiful among other things.

[Adrian_V](#)

In case it wasn't obvious the exasperation is comically exaggerated, complete with anime tears xD

Although i do think you derive a certain sadistic pleasure with these cliffhangers...

ninegardens

See... here's the thing I'm trying to figure out with the judgement corpse:

How does EE make this interesting.

If its "Oh yeah, the angel corpse is used to nuke/mindcontrol/judge the entire continent", It's like "Yeah, okay, sure, we expected that."

So What is it that makes it MORE upsetting then "Yup, that's a superweapon".

Is it a superweapon where you gotta sacrifice 1000 innocent kittens first?

And how's it supposed to work? Its not like Angels haven't taken a swipe and Nessie before, so presumably there needs to be something more to it.

alele

I think it's the "oh shit!" Calernia Reset button. Leave a couple thousand "good souls" on the continent, "cleanse" the rest. New people and new stories to answer the "riddle of creation", none of the pesky non-complying people and cultures you have now.

Insanenoodlyguy

I think you're onto something. What if it effectively flips the coin in its area of influence? Contrition made a crusade, maybe Judgement makes a purge. So all the evil in the area is destroyed, but so is a vast majority of everything else. Only the most sinless left over, in much smaller numbers. Death of nations. And Bard wanted it because she knew shed be on the chopping block after all she's done

mamm0nn

Cordelia: Soooooooooooo.... We've got a problem.

Shows the angel's corpse.

Carved into the angel's chest: I have died permanently so that Dread Empress Triumphant may never return. Revive or destroy my body, and she too shall rise again.

Cordelia: *Puppy-dog eyes to Cat* If we use this corpse, would you defeat Empress Triumphant for us? You're the goddess of blood and dirt, you can do it...

Cat points at the P.S.

Carved into the chest as well: P.S. Remember that Dread Emperor who's now the moon? Yeah, he'd return too if I'm raised. And he's not going to leave the moon behind.

Cat: Yeah, no.

Konstantin von Karstein

What's the name of the emperor who is the moon? Sorcerous?

mamm0nn

Pretty sure it's Dread Emperor Mooooon~ now. I honestly wouldn't know, book 1 is so long ago for me...

[TeK](#)

Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, tugged her modest cotton nightgown closer together and watched the crescent moon from her rooms above the clouds, near the summit of the

Tower. Soninke called it Sorcerous' Grin, for the eldritch rituals the Emperor had concocted in its light had not been seen since the days of the Miezans. Some said a sliver of the man was still up there, scheming his escape from death.

Konstantin von Karstein

Thanks:)

Lox

It's Dread Empress Yue.

[Javvies](#)

That looks like confirmation that Mirror Knight is going to have trouble from more than just Hanno over his behavior.

It's good to see Viv again, and good that the Woe is getting back together at last.

Juniper still hasn't fully recovered from Malicia's mindfuckery? Dammit, Juniper, take the time to finish healing. You're going to need to be at the very top of your game for the offensive against the Dead King – and I'm certain you're going to want to be involved in getting revenge on Malicia.

I kind of expect that this secret the Dead King is spilling is likely to be related to Bard and the secrets he learned about her.

If there ever was a time he'd be able to find someone to listen to what he has to say about Bard, now is it. Which makes me wonder, just how many of the Grand Alliance's secrets did Bard leak or arrange to be exposed where the Dead King would learn?

Salt

The Bard probably leaked just enough that the Grand Alliance would be driven into a corner by the Dead King, but not enough to truly give him an edge in defeating the Grand Alliance.

The Bard is actually enemy to the Dead King as well, so I expect that she's more of a hand on the scales keeping the balance more than anything. She might even be a temporary boon, if Neshamah starts to get too much of an upper hand, I suspect that she acts as a rather heavy restraint on the Dead King just by existing, that stops him from pulling out many of his nastiest tricks.

As far as Malicia goes, Juniper being so heavily affected by her commands may be a slight advantage for Catherine in the long run. Poetic Justice/deserved retribution tends to give you a little bit of an edge in many stories, and every bit could make the difference. Simply wounding your opponents in a way

that causes great suffering but doesn't cause a lasting permanent loss tends to be a liability that way.

Cat used it against the Bard herself recently, where her victory was cemented both by the Bard making three mistakes and "the weight of what you did to us".

[308924810a](#)

So, these people are back from checking up on a battlefield where the first Grey Pilgrim killed a great many men. Something that the Dead King thought would chill them, and make them thankful for Kairos' actions.

'Ladi Williams

Wait. I think i missed the part of the story where this was... What did the dead king do to point them in a direction and how does it concern the first Grey pilgrim. Just point me towards the chapter please if you can.

hakureireimu

"There is a place," the last king of Sephirah said, "in the heart of Levant, where the first pilgrim of grey slew many men."

Red embers lit the hollow sockets, as the Dead King finally spoke.

c84: Declaration

ninegardens

"By the Grace of Kairos Theodosian"
-"Grace" and "Kairos" Words no one ever expected to see placed in the same sentence.

Gods bless that trecherous little gargoye.

May he look upon Creation from the Afterlife, and find amusement.

aurikdomi

is the plague Grey Pilgrim did somehow related to the angel corpse?

mamm0nn

No no, a previous Grey Pilgrim. Specifically the first. The one we know is but one in a string of many. Many Names are like that, almost like the avatar in that there's ever only one at a

time though in this case not with a new one appearing the moment the old one dies.

[lemyosotisbleu](#)

When EE said that Alamans are more or less french people I was reticent until I saw that the population defended their rights like mad people and now I see la bise c:

[sengachi](#)

It's one of those things which goes without much commentary for obvious reasons, but the chapters in which tension gets to unwind are really a key component to why PGtE is so good. The pacing they provide is masterfully done, and the characterization and humanization and warmth in them gives the story something it wouldn't be the same without.

Daniel E

I was wondering how that bit with Malicia's mind control played out. Also, so hyped to see the secret that DK warned them about during Kairos' trial.

BritishTeaLover

I must have missed it, I remember Malicia having implanted orders in high ranking officers, but I can't remember Juniper being affected (I remember her suspecting she might have been, but not it being confirmed), and I can't remember these episodes/consequences for the mind control?

Can anyone give me a link back to when it was mentioned?

[Liliet](#)

this is the first elaboration on that, actually, you're not missing anything

Daniel E

Juniper had herself arrested as she suspected that she was influenced. Although only the Legions of Terror heeded the call to return to the Tower, Malicia's mind control might have still messed with the Callow loyalty in other ways. This is the first time we're seeing any mention of it after Cat's discussion with Pilgrim about removing it.

Xinci

Well, it seems Cat retains some semblance of her mentors relationships in how she interacts with Hanno. Using trust as a bridge to make a great institution to reform longstanding issues reminds me of Black and Malicia for sure. I just hope it doesn't

end as tragically here when one of them doesn't take the leap of faith.

Insanenoodlyguy

I think you're onto something. What if it effectively flips the coin in its area of influence? Contrition made a crusade, maybe Judgement makes a purge. So all the evil in the area is destroyed, but so is a vast majority of everything else. Only the most sinless left over, in much smaller numbers. Death of nations. And Bard wanted it because she knew shed be on the chopping block after all she's done

Laguz24

The real question is what does the angel corpse of judgment do? When judgment is blocked? Kairos Theodosian.

Tom

> The Rogue Sorcerer was pretty tricky sort, for a man who went around in a leather coat shooting fire at people.

Put it that way and Harry Dresden comes to mind.

Big Brother

Little bit of hidden foreshadowing I haven't seen anyone mention. When Cat's thinking about Juniper, she brings up that Jun will have plenty of time to heal as the First is currently more beneficial, spread out as they are in noncombative roles, but that would quickly change if they had to march on the Hainaut in the summer.

spencer

> the respectable form of theft that was burglary on rooftops for the organized form of theft that was taxation from a palace

Is a libertarian queen a self-contradiction?

[Mental Mouse](#)

>Is a libertarian queen a self-contradiction?

Oh, no. Per Chesterson: "The poor have sometimes objected to being governed badly, but aristocrats always object to being governed at all".

[sivarajan](#)

Thinking taxation is basically theft doesn't mean she's a libertarian, just than she thinks. She also needs to be against it, which she isn't.

[sengachi](#)

Honestly I'm guessing Catherine's opinion on the matter would be:

"Oh yeah, taxation is absolutely theft. It's very necessary theft however, which benefits people if done for the right reasons and is the cornerstone of any working civilization. Of course the existing incentive structures of nobility typically ensure that the benefits of taxation are only marginally returned to the working class insofar as it maintains their taxable productivity and levy capabilities..." and that's where she launches into an hour-long lecture at Cardinal.

The lecture series is called: Taxation, Theft, Trade, and Tyranny – A Helpful How-To.

[sivarajan](#)

"Taxation, Theft, and Tyranny – A Helpful How-To," aka "A Practical Guide to Evil."

Chapter 35: Portents

"One who rears a tiger should not complain of stripes."
– Soninke saying

The Painted Knife's band had been one of the first we'd assembled, back in the first days under the Truce and Terms.

I'd been a given that a hero would have to lead it, as even with Hanno and the Pilgrim backing the Terms there would have been desertions if a villain had been put in charge of Above's precious little bastards. The Painted Knife, whose name was Kallia, was a tall woman who wore elaborate red face paint and had been Tariq's personal recommendation for the task. A heroine but not from one of the Dominion's great lines, and one who tended to be more comfortable on the prowl than standing shoulder to shoulder in a shield wall. I'd wedged in a Proceran villain I'd thought it best to keep out of sight for a while, the Poisoner, since amnesty or not she'd killed a lot of nobles. She was a decent alchemist besides, which tended to be useful in all sorts of ways, though naturally to keep an eye on her the heroes had pushed for a Proceran hardcase known as the Relentless Magistrate to be added to the band.

The man was deeply unpleasant to anyone he considered to be a criminal but obsessed with respecting the letter of the law and a prodigious investigator, so I'd made my peace with it. To add a bit of bite to the band we'd rustled up the Grizzled Fantassin, though we'd had to appropriately pad her retirement fund to get her on board, and since I wasn't sending anyone hunting for old secrets without a dedicated mage I'd reluctantly parted with the Royal Conjurer. The Helikean mage was an escapee from Kairos' rise to power and remarkably flexible in ability – he was a more than decent combat mage as well as capable of subtler touches – so it'd been a real loss sending him out. He would have been a good fit at the Arsenal, or any of the fronts for that matter, but in my experience sending a band of five digging into ancient mysteries without some sort of magical support tended to result mostly in corpses.

Yet they'd returned, at long last, and all five of them were alive. Not without some missing parts – I saw with dismay that the Grizzled Fantassin was missing a finger, and from what I remembered of her contract that was going to put a dent in someone's savings – but the way they held themselves as they strolled out onto the expanse of stone caught my eye. Wary, yes, but that wariness was aimed outwards. The Poisoner, a plump and smiling middle-aged woman, stood close to the skinny and permanently stubbled Relentless Magistrate whose gaze was sweeping their surroundings without an eye being kept on the criminal he'd once been so scathing about. The Royal Conjurer was trusted to stand at the back without anyone feeling nervous, and the Grizzled Fantassin was standing next to the Painted Knife instead of slightly behind so that she'd be the one to eat an arrow if they got ambushed.

I knew that look, that way of standing together. How could I not, when the mere presence of three of the Woe at my side had me feeling lighter on my feet than I'd had in months? Those five gone through the crucible and come out on the other side changed. Bound to each other in some intangible way, and though it wouldn't make them like each other it had brought trust with it. A lot more precious a thing, that, in my opinion.

I liked a lot of people, after all, but trusted only a handful.

I wasn't the only one to see it. Vivienne had turned when I did, but it wasn't her who let out a low whistle. Archer, ever more perceptive than she seemed, was watching the five Named with narrowed eyes.

"Those five have had an interesting year, I bet," Indrani murmured.

I'd expected the Royal Conjurer would be eager for a different assignment, after this, but now I doubted it. A proper debrief would be needed, at some point, but I was personally more

inclined to find something else important to send a proper band of five at than try to break it up. Practical considerations aside, my heart clenched in excitement. A band, a *real* band, with villains in it. That was... there were precedents for temporary truces, even the occasional cooperation, but never anything like this. Not that I knew of, anyway, and I'd made it my business to know.

"Catherine's associate is making his way here," Masego noted.

I flicked a glance upwards and found him at the top of the stairs, burning glass eyes staring at the unseen through the walls of the Arsenal.

"Which one?" I asked.

"The tolerable Ashuran one," Hierophant said, then added, "By which I do not meant the Blessed Artificer, to be clear."

Three amused looks were turned onto Zeze. His continuing feud with Adanna of Smyrna, now drained of the dangerous underlying tensions, had resumed being entertainingly petty. He meant Hanno, presumably, who I really should have expected to turn up the moment the Painted Knife's band came through. The White Knight had a general knack for being in the right place at the right time, even more so than most heroes. Mind you, providence was not absolute. It could be gamed, if you knew the right tricks. I looked down at the gathering Named, speaking with the mages who'd spelled them through, and grimaced as I realized it'd be rude not to greet them down there and instead continue up and wait there. Which meant I was going to have to go up and down these fucking stairs *again*.

Forget the Dead King: if I didn't get to take a sledgehammer to these... tyrannical stones before I died, I might just have to come back as a vengeful spectre.

"Drani, go tell him to get a move on," I said. "Vivienne, do you remember their Names?"

Blue-grey eyes turned to me and she grimaced the slightest bit.

"All but one," she admitted. "The smiling one who looks like the village baker?"

"The Poisoner," I said, enjoying her slight wince. "One of mine."

"You don't say," Vivienne drily replied.

Admittedly the Name was not one that, uh, invited nuanced interpretation. The

"I don't know any of them," Masego informed us.

Neither of us bothered to pretend we were surprised. Painted Knife and her companions had begun the walk across the floor but we got to the bottom of the stairs before they did. The red-painted heroine offered me a salute, a fist against the chest, that I vaguely remembered being a gesture of respectful acknowledgement among Levantines.

"Black Queen," the Painted Knife greeted me. "We return."

"And I am glad of it," I replied, offering her a nod before turning my gaze on the others. "What you have found is eagerly awaited."

Especially since they'd refused to commit it to either scrying or letters, which would have gotten it to us months ago.

"Ah," a voice came from above. "I had been wondering why I was here."

Hanno looked pleased but not entirely surprised as he came down, Indrani idling at his side and only parting ways at the bottom to throw an arm around a tolerant Hierophant's shoulder.

"White Knight," the Painted Knife greeted, significantly warmer.

Still the same salute, though, so I decided not to feel too insulted. The Grizzled Fantassin cleared her throat, freeing her grey hair by removing her helm.

"This is all lovely, but after this long on the road I'd knife an angel for bed and a warm meal," she said, her Arlesite accent light and pleasant.

"Contrition's your choir," Archer advised. "Steer clear of Mercy, though, they're a little..."

I cleared my throat. The old soldier looked mostly amused, and Hanno patiently forgiving, but the Painted Knife was waiting to see if the Peregrine's own Choir was about to get insulted. Would a Levantine fight an honour duel over an angelic choir's reputation? It said a lot about the Dominion that I could not reply with an immediate and definitive no, to be honest.

"We'll get you settled in," I said. "But for a few hours at most. There will be a council to receive your findings by Afternoon Bell at the latest."

Considering how the First Prince tended to pack her hours even more tightly than I did, I suspected she'd have trouble shaking loose the time for a proper debriefing before then anyway.

"Will Kallia speak for all of you?" Hanno asked. "Or will the report be given as a group?"

"As a group," the Painted Knife said, and there were nods all around.

I caught the Royal Conjuror's eye, cocking an eyebrow in question, but the tanned old man discreetly shook his head. No need for a separate talk between us, then.

"Good, it will simplify matters," I said. "Messengers will be sent to your rooms to inform you of when the council will take place."

I paused for a moment.

"Water's rationed in the Arsenal, but feel free to ask to be drawn a hot bath anyway," I said. "Under my authority, if need be,"

Groans of anticipatory pleasure were my answer.

"Many are temptations of Evil," the Relentless Magistrate gravely said.

His tone was serious, but the slight quirk of his lips gave the humour away.

"I assure you," the Poisoner said, "evil paid *much* better than the Grand Alliance."

Fair, I admitted even as the band let out the kind of small chuckles a fond but worn joke would get after a few months or a year of being bandied about. Exhausted as they were, we didn't linger around for small talk.

Ultimately my pride was my downfall, as I decided that asking Masego to levitate me over those fucking stairs would be too undignified.

—

I'd either overestimated how full Cordelia Hasenbach's schedule was or I'd underestimated how much she wanted to hear the report from the Painted Knife's band, because as soon as an hour past Noon Bell our little council was seated in one of the formal halls of the Arsenal.

We'd kept the numbers relatively low, since this was unlikely to be the sort of thing we wanted spread around and numbers were always the death of secrecy. There were three seats filled as a given — mine, Hanno's and Hasenbach's — but after that it'd been on strict basis of need. Vivienne, while tired and fresh off her own travels, was my heiress-designate so she'd naturally been brought in. Masego was as well, as my advisor on sorcery and the eldritch, and he'd not even needed to be talked into it. Hierophant had no interest in politics, but he'd always been like

a magpie when it came to secrets. Hanno had brought in Roland and the Blessed Artificer, both of which had been hard to argue with. The Rogue Sorcerer was a generalist, when it came to magic, and Adanna of Smyrna understood Light in ways few others could.

I was pretty sure that the only reason she and Masego weren't trying to stare each other down was that the Artificer knew he didn't blink.

The First Prince had brought in Frederic, and I'd had a hard time placing why at first. The Prince of Brus was popular and a Hasenbach loyalist, but he wasn't exactly in the running for the throne even if she stepped down from it. Malanza was all but certain to get the chair, if it came to that. I liked Frederic, our little affair aside, but as far as I knew he didn't bring much to the table. Except, I realized after a moment, security. He was a Named that the First Prince knew would be on her side, if anything went wrong in this room where no guards would be allowed in. Given that he was a prince it was hard to argue with his presence, regardless, and one might argue that anyhow I'd already put my faith in the... discretion of the Kingfisher Prince. Hasenbach's other seat had been given to a middle-aged man by the name of Alvaro Corrales, who was introduced as a scholar and one of her secretaries.

He'd be taking the formal notes for the session, though Vivienne would be taking notes for my side as well.

Since Lord Yannu Marave had yet to arrive, the Dominion would go without a representative today. It wasn't ideal, but to be honest there simply wasn't anyone high-ranking enough from Levant on the premises. Anyone brought in – one of the few captains, most likely – would be lost for most of the conversation and require access to several more well-kept secrets just to understand most of what was going on. It wasn't going to be happening, Hasenbach and I had agreed. We'd keep the Painted Knife and her band here long enough that the Lord of Alava could hear the same report we had, if a little later, and maybe offer a polite apology for the haste. Not a very sincere one, though. No one had been particularly inclined to delay until Marave got here, given the potential importance of the report and how long we'd been waiting for it. Sparse small talk was had as a courtesy for the short while we waited after the coming Named, but it'd barely gotten past greetings by the time the five were brought in.

A few hours of rest had visibly done them some good, I thought. Months on the road couldn't be cured with a catnap, but at least it'd taken the edge off and allowed them to change into clean clothes. By habit my eye sought weapons and found none, not that Named could ever truly be harmless. After the attendants escorted them down to the lower table – ours was up on platform, in a bit of pageantry – and the Painted Knife offered greetings for the

band as a whole. Hasenbach took the lead in answering, even as I studied the five Named. The Poisoner looked uncomfortable, which was only to be expected since she'd once accepted a tidy sum to kill the First Prince even if she'd ultimately failed, but that the Relentless Magistrate looked the same caught my attention.

Whatever it was they'd found, it didn't sit well with the man.

"- if my fellow high officers have no objection?"

I'd kept half an ear on the talk, so I wasn't caught unawares. Cordelia was trying to move this along.

"None," I said.

"Agreed," Hanno replied.

The Painted Knife breathed out, and I wondered how much nervousness the thick face paint was actually hiding. The people in this room, the people she'd be addressing, were not without power or influence in the wider world.

"The mandate given us by the White Knight and the Black Queen was to find the truth of what took place long ago in the place known as the Verdant Hollow," Kallia of the Knife's Blood began.

It was Neshamah himself, during the conference in Salia, who'd suggested we should look into a place where the first Grey Pilgrim would have 'slain many men'. Paired with the insinuation that we owed Kairos Theodosian all our lives and that the Wandering Bard had been playing us for fools, it'd warranted investigation. Tariq himself had known of the existence of the hidden valley, this Verdant Hollow, and even negotiated with the Holy Seljun on our behalf to access the records of the secret records Isbili when it turned out that the White Knight could not see a single thing that'd taken place within the valley grounds through his aspect. After a look through the records the band of five had chased after the trail like bloodhounds, but I'd heard very little of how they'd gone about it.

"We first tried the Verdant Hollow ourselves, using sorcery to try to bring forth a shade from those ancient days," the Painted Knife said. "It did not succeed."

She glanced at the Royal Conjurer, who cleared his throat and asked for permission to speak.

"Granted," I said.

"Old battlefields and sites of slaughter usually have stray spirits even when shades have faded, as the former often feed on the latter," the old man said, offering a grandfatherly smile. "There was not a trace of either, however, and my attempts to

conjure up the dead failed in a manner that can only be called absolute."

At my left, I saw Masego lean forward in his seat.

"*Tabula rasa*?" Hierophant asked.

The wrinkled old mage nodded.

"Indeed, Lord Hierophant," he replied. "I drew the obvious conclusion."

"Angelic intervention," Roland said, voice quiet and troubled.

I sagely nodded, as if I'd known that all along. Although, the *tabula rasa* thing *did* vaguely ring a bell. Akua had once mentioned that the touch of angels on Creation tended to 'renew' the fabric of the Pattern, often erasing old damage, which was why even though Callow had been subjected to more than a few rituals it wasn't up to its neck in fae and devils all the time. Still, this was hardly a great revelation. If the first Pilgrim had called on an angel to tip the scales against a villain, it wasn't exactly unprecedented.

"It was clear there would be no shortcut, so we followed our other lead," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said. "The records of the Pilgrim's Blood spoke of survivors that fled north, into the Alavan hills, carrying wounded with them. We looked for graves along that path, combing the countryside."

A sideways look at the Grizzled Fantassin saw the older woman salute – towards Cordelia in particular, I noted – and speak out in a cadenced tone I recognized from my own years on campaign.

"There weren't any Dominion graves, Your Highness, but I recognized old markers in the tradition of the southern companies," she said. "It was my kind that got butchered in that valley, and they buried their own as best they could while running away."

I'd not guessed it would be *fantassins* that'd gotten killed by the first Pilgrim, but that it would be Procerans had been something of a given. The founders of the Blood, immortalized in the epic poetry of the Anthem of Smoke, had been rebels against Proceran occupation.

"We attempted to summon forth the spirits from the graves, but there was a complication," the Painted Knife said.

"Someone had beaten us to it," the Royal Conjuror said, sounding amused. "Necromancy had already been used there, and recently."

"How recently?" Masego asked. "For how many corpses?"

"A month, five corpses," the old Helikean mage replied.

Zeze scoffed, and I let out a low whistle myself.

"That's a hell of a bleed," I said.

From the corner of my eye I saw Roland lean to the side to explain to the First Prince in a whisper what I'd learned from my own lessons in the Art. Usually the turn of the moon dispersed weak magical residue, so for it to still have been detectable after a month when there'd only been five corpses to raise meant that the caster had grossly overcast their spell. Usually either the mark of the incompetent and ignorant – Masego's own conclusion, obviously – or of people with a lot of power but little control.

"Fortunately, we were able to track the risen dead through the gift Bestowed upon of one of our own," the Painted Knife said.

The Relentless Magistrate, who I could not help but not had yet to shave, rose to offer us all a stiff bow.

"We followed the trail to a fishing village south of Malaga before it went cold," the man said, his strong Alamans accent showing even when speaking Chantant. "Upon investigation, Your Highness and Majesty, it turned out that villages in the region all had a few missing individuals. While the locals were disinclined to answer the questions of a Proceran magistrate, Lady Kallia's stature as one of the Blood bridged the gap and we figured out the common link was access to boats."

My brow rose.

"The Royal Conjurer and my humble self meanwhile found out that graves were being robbed in the area," the Poisoner tittered. "Which painted a damning picture, yes?"

Considering I'd heard that poisonous things tended to grow around Dominion barrows, I decided not to ask exactly *what* they'd been doing when finding that out.

"When another young man was abducted we followed," the Painted Knife said, "and after borrowing a boat and sailing across the Pond we made shore south of the Brocelian."

Which was, from what I recalled, one of the last largely unexplored stretches of Calernia by virtue of most people going into it dying ugly deaths. Ventures in there were profitable if you could handle yourself, though, given the amount of magical creatures and rare resources. The city of Tartessos should be an impoverished hole in the ground, going by simple geography, but trading in Brocelian goods had instead made it one of the great cities of Levant.

"Didn't even get to find our way before we got ambushed by undead," the Grizzled Fantassin sighed. "Although that was still better than the damned boat reeking of fish."

"It was clear we were on the right path, if the enemy was attempting to obstruct us," the Relentless Magistrate smiled, a small slice of teeth and malice.

"The Brocelian is not a forest to be tried without preparations," Hanno said. "Did you seek a guide?"

"One of the ambushers was a living man," the Painted Knife said. "And though terrified of his 'master' he agreed to serve as our guide after some convincing."

The Poisoner tittered, smiling girlishly.

"It is easier to bargain when one has the only antidote to be found for a thousand miles," she said.

That'd been an *impressively* creepy titter, I mulled to myself. The woman was talented.

"Ten silvers it was some Named undead trying to gather an army on the sly," I muttered under my breath.

"I will take that," Masego decided. "No one with that much bleed could possibly be competent enough to lead an army."

Ha, the sucker. Although it'd better not come out of the Arsenal budget, since that'd just be cycling my own coin around.

"Twenty it was trying to take over Levant," Vivienne offered under her own breath.

The White Knight turned a steady gaze onto us, and I felt vaguely ashamed at having been caught betting on this.

"I'll take the bet on the twenty," Hanno softly said, leaning towards us. "And thirty it has Barrow in the Name."

It was probably some sort of heresy to gamble with the White Knight, I thought, but then I *had* been Arch-heretic of the East. They couldn't reasonably expect me not to dabble at least a little.

"I'll take that bet," I snorted. "We've already got a Barrow Sword, the Gods Below wouldn't be that uninspired."

"It's Levant," Hanno drily replied, "there's always a barrow involved somehow."

A few gazes had turned towards us at the continued whispers, so I painted a solemn look onto my face. It'd been a serious,

professional conversation we'd be having and there was no reason to even suspect otherwise.

"We pushed on into the woods, meeting little opposition as we went," the Painted Knife said.

"About a hundred zombies and just the most *horrid* manticore," the Grizzled Fantassin corrected.

"It was unusually unpleasant even by manticore standards," the Royal Conjuror agreed.

"We then found an army of the dead being gathered in the depths of the Brocelian, thousands of corpses being armed in the shade of the trees," the Painted Knife continued.

I cocked an eyebrow at Masego who looked mightily disgruntled at the revelation. Ten silvers for me, that was.

"We knocked out the prisoner and infiltrated the camp, where we learned that it was one of the Bestowed who was gathering a host," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said. "Though long dead, it had once been of the Tanja and wanted to claim rule of Malaga once more – Lord Razin Tanja was only titled through a loophole, it argued, and so it would rise the same."

It made me feel a little dirty inside to refer to Praes laws on anything, but for once the Dread Empire might just be the leading light there: it had pretty strict laws cutting out the undead of both inheritance and holding titles at all. It'd only taken like three civil wars to get there, too, which by Praesi standards was basically unanimous consent. Hanno glanced at Vivienne, who was to embarrassed to curse in front of the Sword of Judgement but looked like she very much wanted to. Malaga wasn't all of Levant, after all.

"He had proclaimed himself to be lord of the dead," the Relentless Magistrate said, sounding offended by the pretension.

"She," the Poisoner corrected.

"They named themselves the Barrow Lord," the Painted Knife cut in.

I cursed in Kharsum, which drew some gazes. Including the First Prince's. *Really*, Below? That was why Good kept winning, because they were such shits about it all. Now the White Knight was the one who'd won the most out of this whole blasphemous sidebar, and let that be a lesson: Above would always win so long as Below wasn't willing to spring for some proper Names. *Barrow Lord*, I scathingly thought. They might as well have just named the poor bastard 'Grave Noble', it was about as clever in the greater

scheme of things. People were still looking at me, so I cleared my throat.

"I grieve for the people of Levant," I said, which strictly speaking wasn't a lie.

"I thank you for your kindness," the Painted Knife said, sounding surprised. "But the five of us were able to defeat the old dead. Though it refused to rest even when broken, the Poisoner was able to find a way to destroy it."

"Manticore venom is a powerful acid, when mixed with blood and rhododendron," the Poisoner smiled.

Well, that was an image. Masego and Roland both looked interested but were aware enough not to indulge their curiosity just now.

"And the corpses you had come there to find?" the First Prince calmly asked.

"We had destroyed several without knowing it," the Painted Knife admitted, "but the fifth made itself known."

"It proclaimed itself the new Barrow Lord," the Grizzled Fantassin snorted. "Which several other undead saw fit to argue with. It was all very Highest Ass-"

The older woman paled.

"-League of Free Cities," she hastily corrected, glancing sideways at the First Prince of Procer.

I was rather amused she did not so much as glance at Frederic, who was a sitting member of the Assembly as well.

"You captured your corpse, however, I take it?" Hanno asked.

Subtle laughter rippled through most of the band.

"I arrested him," the Relentless Magistrate defiantly said. "For false arrogation of noble title, which is a crime under Proceran law."

I choked at the bold assertion and was not alone in my surprise.

"Dead or not, he was a Proceran subject," the man insisted.

I was a little disturbed to see that Cordelia Hasenbach was *beaming* down at him, or at least as close to that as her face would allow.

"Is it actually illegal to be undead under Proceran law?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"It would fall under the heresy laws, in most cases," the First Prince told me. "Though in the four northern principalities undeath is considered high treason and acted upon as such."

"It's illegal for undead to do manual labour under the Accords, by the latest draft," Vivienne noted.

"We're going to need to make sure I don't accidentally qualify under the wording, given how often I've died," I told her under my breath.

"The ancient dead was convinced to surrender to the authority of the magistrate," the Painted Knife said. "After some aggressive persuasion. And after we ran away with him tied to the Grizzled Fantassin's back, we finally had our answers."

That caught everyone's attention.

"The mercenary companies were led by the White Knight of the time, a woman of Procer," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said, "and had been hunting the Grey Pilgrim for some time. They caught up to him and his fellow rebels in the Verdant Hollow."

Wait, it was a *heroine* he'd been fighting? I'd known that in the past the Principate had fielded the occasional hero when taking a swing at its neighbours, but I'd not expected a damned White Knight to end up serving as a bloodhound for insurgents. By the look on Hanno's face, he was less than happy to hear this but not outright surprised. I supposed he'd seen too many of the lives of his predecessors to hold any illusions about their infallibility.

"The fight went in the favour of the Pilgrim," the Painted Knife said. "Yet the White Knight would not have it. When defeat seemed to be looming, she called on the help of a Choir."

Oh, *fuck*. I did not like where this was headed. I did not like it at all.

"Which one?" Hanno calmly asked.

"Mercy," the Relentless Magistrate quietly said. "I... glimpsed, and it must have been Mercy."

Considering how brutal Tariq could get in the pursuit of greater goods, I could actually believe the ancient White Knight had been backed by the Ophanim in her quest. Suppress the rebellion and reform from the inside, maybe? It was an uncomfortably familiar refrain, and it might just be I was painting my own history on a blank canvas there. But she'd led fantassins instead of regulars, so perhaps it had been unkind to assume she'd been with the rapacious princes occupying Levant back then.

"And what happened after that?"

"Angels came," Kallia of the Knife's Blood said. "But a woman stepped in, and then the angels left."

[*tkjarrah*](#)

> the Relentless Magistrate

do not forget my Name!
do not forget me!
Two four six oh oooooone...

caoimhinh

When the Relentless Magistrate said "I arrested him" my first thought was "That's actually his Aspect, isn't it? This guy went and **Arrested** the undead. This is a guy that is physically empowered by the laws he enforces."

Nairne .01

I like it.

ATRDCI

Unstoppable Force vs Immovable Object: Relentless Magistrate arresting Mirror Knight the next time he tries some B.S.

Mirror Knight will already be disgusted by and/or think the Heroes of the band have been tainted given they trust their Villain members

caoimhinh

Ah, now that I read the chapter again, I noticed another thing.

"Mercy," the Relentless Magistrate quietly said. "I... glimpsed, and it must have been Mercy."

Is **Glimpse** one of his Aspects?

If the Conjuror had been the one to glimpse at the Choir it wouldn't be strange, but it was the Magistrate who did it.

Catherine called him "a prodigious investigator" and he wasn't described as a Mage, so how did he "glimpse" at the Choir of Mercy from hundreds of years ago? It must have been an Aspect. Which further reinforces my hypothesis of this guy being a Named supercop.

Salt

An incredibly legalistic supercop, apparently.

I'm not actually sure if he'd be best friends or worst enemies with Masego. On one hand they apparently have a shared love of completely frivolous technicalities, but on the other hand the sets of technicalities they follow are likely completely different.

The dude may actually be able to subject Masego to petty punishments for breaches of obscure bylaw, given how much Masego hates to be technically incorrect about anything. Hierophant could probably be convinced to arrest himself for several minutes, followed by subsequently spending several evenings angrily reading volumes on Proceran law for the sake of equally petty revenge.

KLAH

That would actually be quite the hilarious plot thread to read

NerfContessa

Agreed.

And shit, the bard can make a. Choir back down?

And mercy, wasn't the pilgrims choir back then?

Doubly interesting.

Darius Drake

I doubt that Glimpse is the name of his aspect, though "Investigate", "Perceive", "Confirm", "Review" or something else along those lines might be. That pause seems to be him about to use the Aspect's Name, and deciding it was a stupid thing to do at the moment, and thus purposefully avoiding it.

tynam

I have to agree. "Don't tell Catherine your aspect for free" is pretty much smart hero behaviour 101, and the magistrate definitely seems to understand that.

Edward Kim

That's gotta be Ranger, right?!

Corrections

"even the Lady of the Lake doesn't mess around with angels"

-Archer, book 3

StormCow

Ranger's not that old, it's most likely Bard

Dave

My guess is the Bard tbh

Megaprr

Or the Bard. My gut reaction was Triumphant, but she would be dead by this point.

Hellspirit

Didn't she march her armies into hell? Rather than being killed?

[Javvies](#)

No, it's just that she went down with a bunch of her Legions at the same time, presumably all ending up in the same afterlife-Hell, which would then be at risk of her taking the place over.

Also, she dropped a lot of demons and devils on the Crusaders on her doorstep at about the same time.

[Liliet](#)

notably Hells are also not actually afterlife, which people who actually work with them (or talk to people who work with them) know, but common parlance doesn't

[Javvies](#)

Well ... there is apparently an afterlife for Heroes (if not necessarily anybody else) that gets called the Heavens, or part of them.

It's not an unreasonable extrapolation that Villains would go to a place that gets called part of or one of the Hells, no matter what the actual truth is.

Especially since I'm pretty sure that the immediately post-Triumphant Praes was occupied and turned into Crusader kingdoms, and that lasted until Terribilis the First came along and kicked them out.

So the entire "may she never return" thing could be a legacy of the Crusaders.

[Liliet](#)

> Well ... there is apparently an afterlife for Heroes (if not necessarily anybody else) that gets called the Heavens

That's what people say, but it's not actually known for certain, we have multiple instances of WoG confirming that. Hells are more... physically accessible than Heavens so that part of "the dead go to Heavens or Hells" is disconfirmed while the other one isn't, but Masego and the like use different terms for where souls go after death.

Javvies

Back when Pilgrim could resurrect people, he said that they didn't come back quite the same because he was pulling them from the glories and perfection of Heaven back to the flawed and tarnished realm of Creation.

Whether or not that is actually what's going on is entirely irrelevant to what he thinks and says is going on, and this what everybody else thinks it's going on. Though, since he's got a direct line to the Choir of Mercy, he's either accurately informed or being fed Above's official stance on the afterlife.

Also, I'm pretty sure that the House of Light doctrine and holy books claims that there's an afterlife associated with the Heavens for Heroes and good people, and one associated with the Hells for Villains and evil people/sinners.

Point is, it doesn't actually need to be true, just what Above has told people to say or write down.

Liliet

> Though, since he's got a direct line to the Choir of Mercy, he's either accurately informed or being fed Above's official stance on the afterlife.

Or the Choir just never answered this question. They're known to do this.

People generally make things they believe are Above's word wholesale, as multiple heroes have called out.

Javvies

Well, I would expect that Tariq asked what happened when the first person he resurrected

didn't come back the same.

So ... presumably the Ophanim either gave him an answer or pointed him to preexisting House of Light doctrine. Which means that's the official line from Above ... or at least the version that the Choir of Mercy endorses.

And if he didn't ask the Choir, his belief must be based on information he received from elsewhere, which would presumably be House of Light doctrine and/or writings by prior Heroes and/or other holy texts.

Point is, it doesn't need to be objectively true ... the worshipers of Above need only believe it to be true.

[Liliet](#)

...or on "everyone knows that's just common sense"
lol

Also I'm not sure what they need to believe it for?

[Javvies](#)

I suspect that any case of "everybody thinks that way" would have its origins in House of Light doctrine, the writings of Choir-backed Heroes and/or other holy texts.

That is, the beliefs about the afterlife are not simply spontaneous, but one or more of the Choirs started it in purpose.

I floated the hypothesis that the "may she never return" thing could, at least in part, be a legacy of the immediately post-Triumphant Crusader occupations and Crusader kingdoms.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree because that's not how I see Choirs. They're not the origin of the Book of All Things, they're not teachers and leaders. They're force multipliers for the heroes they choose to back, and that's pretty much all they're... programmed to do.

Note that conspicuously similar beliefs about afterlife also exist in our world, where as far as anyone's aware there aren't Choirs for them to originate from. It's almost like they are

naturally generated by human psychology or something :3

Javvies

""
In a world where Above literally and provably exists and is demonstrably and historically active, and can and does semi-regularly step in to express its opinion on some things, including literally granting power to (some of) its followers, I would not call it a stretch to suggest that any beliefs about the afterlife that the followers of its faith may have are likely inspired by the explicit actions and/or statements made by Above or its duly authorized and empowered representatives, and have, at minimum, been explicitly or implicitly condoned and endorsed by Above and its fully authorized and empowered representatives.
Whether or not they're actually objectively true is irrelevant.

Liliet

> is demonstrably and historically active, and can and does semi-regularly step in to express its opinion on some things, including literally granting power to (some of) its followers

Not... exactly.

Granting power to some of its followers is literally the only thing it does is the thing. And the opinions it purportedly expresses thought this frequently contradict themselves, see: priests on both sides of the Crusade and see: the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim at the founding of Levant.

Above's "statements" are clear as mud, and Hanno and Laurence both dunked on the clergy for "speaking for the silent Heavens" – among followers of Above, one with millenia of heroic memories to draw on and the other with a lifetime of personal experience, it's a known fact that the House of Light mostly just makes things up.

sivarajan

From the Book of All Things (fifth verse of the second hymn), "beyond the veil of death lies a land of always plenty, which will only be open to the just."

therealgridlock

Hold on. Hold on hold on hold on.

Do we have confirmed evidence of when the Bard became a thing? Triumphant's been a thing for 1000 years, I forget the rough chronology of events...

No, triumphant did some dealing/fighting/talking with the dead king, and since that means dead king is older than triumphant, and bard is older than dead king, triumphant can't possibly be bard.

But damn, if that wouldn't be the biggest ABSOLUTE plot twist.

Pethrai D'arkos

Ranger is old, but she isn't that old.

[onedollargum](#)

I don't know if our Ranger's that old, but she wasn't able to beat Summer by herself. I don't see her turning back a choir.

The Intercessor's more likely I think.

Zggt

Or it could be a villain too stubborn to lose who actually managed to disconnect angels from reality, like Heirarch did

wec

Given context, almost certainly the Wandering Bard.

vin_kaos

I'm guessing the Wandering Bard...

Matthew Wells

Too early, I think. It's the Bard.

[TeK](#)

Obviously crossdressing Traitorous.

Nairne .01

Or a disguised man-eating tapir?

[sengachi](#)

The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Insanenoodlyguy

In a suppressed bit of Prasei history, Traitorous did name an heir: a man eating Tapir trained to dress in his clothes and to target the fanciest looking person in the room. This actually allowed him to technically hold the throne for 2 and a half weeks, as eating the fanciest person in the room allowed it to successfully thwart the first 5 usurpation attempts.

Hellspirit

I literally can't tell whether that's genuine or you just made that up =D

Caerulea

The woman who stepped in? No, it's the Intercessor guaranteed.

Nordvegr

Wait, so you're saying the woman... Interceded?

Miles

Bard

Laguz24

I want to know when those five manage to find out about the mirror knight and severance. The impression of outsiders on this mess would be rather interesting.

Salt

They might achieve the rare condition of being incredibly impressed and incredibly disappointed at the same time.

Impressed that someone could wield that thing without it beheading you for daring to try wielding it, as well as simultaneously slaughtering an entire court of Fae and seven demons.

Disappointed at the colossal bout of stupidity that followed, especially since he also shot himself in the foot by making it impossible for the GA to let him keep the sword at the moment, even if they wanted to.

Although Hanno might end up taking the spotlight for some of them. It's ridiculously impressive that he could turn aside the sword barehanded, followed by thrashing the Mirror Knight without even drawing his own sword. It's ridiculous to a degree that would invite complete disbelief, and could propel him into

"what the fuck" levels of admiration in the eyes of many, on par with the kind of fear/intimidation that Catherine commands.

Zach

The notable thing about the whole Mirror Knight situation is that, in the end, I don't think any of the heroes aside from Blade of Mercy sided with him (and Blade of Mercy isn't really a bad guy; he's just a dumb kid who has spent most of his time around Mirror Knight, and he's likely starting to have some cognitive dissonance due to stuff like Mirror Knight lying about what happened with Repentant Magister).

While some heroes might approve of Mirror Knight having the Severance or dislike Catherine, it appears that very few are actually okay with directly rebelling against the Truce and Terms.

JJR

"“Angels came,” Kallia of the Knife’s Blood said. “But a woman stepped in, and then the angels left.””

Time traveling Cat confirmed.

Corrections

Finally! Someone gets it!

[onedollargum](#)

She ate part of the Bard’s echo, so she was sort of there, I guess?

Hitogami

This is the best comment.

[onedollargum](#)

Bards wander where angels fear to tread.

dadycoool

Oh, shit! Cat’s got a precedent for smacking down Choirs! It’s not just her treading new ground! Sure, she’s having to retread a smoothed-over path, but the path is still there.

I bet it was so satisfying for Cat to see the camaraderie between that Band of Five.

And that’s what you get for being such a Heretic, Cat. You knew better than to make a bet with a White Knight, yet you made it anyway.

Gibborim

I doubt the Bard fought the choir. Probably told them they were interfering with the greater good and to piss off.

Konstantin von Karstein

Which makes her even more terrifying.

dadycoool

Cat's never fought a Choir either. She dictated Mercy twice in the last book, once to get Tariq resurrected and once at the Trial. Come to think of it, "told them they were interfering with the greater good and to piss off" is exactly what she did at the Trial. "Yeah, sure, this guy needs to die, but don't kill the leaders of half the continent to do it " It would explain why they folded so fast: they've done so before.

NanoMecha

I mean, she did also bully Contrition into giving her a resurrection whiost they tried to crush her under the weight of her sins, and said "Fuck off, you bottom feeders" to Endurance as they tried to claim the Stalwart Paladin. So she has fought a couple in her time.

Salt

Not so much fight in the conventional sense, as hiding behind story technicalities and alliances of convenience. Past-Catherine likely would've been smited into the finest ash if she ever truly exchanged blows with a choir – she won against them by avoiding the need to fight the battle at all.

Contrition and Endurance weren't even allowed to fight back because the story rules said Catherine technically already won, and Angels aren't allowed to break the rules. Mercy just let it go both times because she made her own goals roughly align with theirs – resurrecting the Pilgrim with no strings attached, as well as protecting innocent bystanders while only delaying their deep-frying of Kairos long enough to get said bystanders out of the way.

It was less of an "oh no, we've been felled on the field of battle" from the Choirs, so much as "ugh, fine, I guess we'll to do it your way this time"

dadycoool

Kairos' opinion on that was kinda foreboding. "The more you let her get away with dictating terms to you, the

more she can do it"? I half expect her to start calling down plagues at some point. She's already experienced with Miracles, like freezing the water so her troops can cross, so that wouldn't be throwing her in the deep end.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I'd been a given > It'd been a given
A heroine but > A heroine, but
Magistrate whose > Magistrate, whose
five gone > five had gone
added, "By > added, "by
do not meant > do not mean
interpretation. The (missing words or extraneous the)
for bed > for a bed
to you rooms > to your rooms
if need be," > if need be."
are temptations > are the temptations
Prince even > Prince, even
records of the secret records Isbili (something wrong here)
spirits form > spirits from
upon of one > upon one
help but not had > help but notice had
us," the > us." The
we'd be having > we'd been having
rhododendron," the > rhododendron." The

Unnamed Goose

Gods Above I just about fell to my death over that huge cliff there.

LizAris

Urgh tell me about it I kept scrolling down in disbelief for a few seconds after finishing cuz that was damnably unfair

Incrya

Just claim to be a Hero, you'll survive guaranteed!

erebus42

Doublely so if someone claims how "no one could have possibly survived that" or "that's the last we'll be seeing of them"

Salt

What happens if one bystander comments "no one could possibly have survived that" and another comments "he's invincible, there's no way he could be killed by that"

Do they become schrodinger's hero or something?
Simultaneously dead and alive until someone triggers the
next flag to decide the tiebreaker?

[TeK](#)

They probably cancel each other out. But it's funny how
pessimism actually saves lives in Guideverse. I wish in
real world I was like "she is out of my league, there is
no way it'll work out" and then it would work out. I would
be, like, a god or something.

Jworks

So whoever it was, probably Bard, they have the authority to
command Choirs. I don't think we've ever been provided with the
hierarchy of Above, but someone that can command Choirs must be
pretty high up in it.

caoimhinh

Hmm, maybe not *command*, but rather persuade.
Angels can be made to do things by exploiting their rules, and
they can be beaten too. So to make them leave you don't
necessarily need to have command over them.

dadycool

Cat basically said to Contrition "Hey, fuck off and rez me!"
when she was a teenager, then a few years later said to Mercy
"Excuse me, but I think you should bring your Champion back,
or step aside and let me do it." and "Hey, cool it! the rest
of us are here, too!"

[TeK](#)

And she also said to Endurance "lol no"

Big Brother

Small nitpick: Fortitude, not Endurance. The Stalwart
Paladin served the Choir of Fortitude

Andrew Smith

The white knight referred to that choir as endurance
during the wicked chapter

flashburn283

Ok, seriously, ANGELS listen to the damn bard. Am I missing
something here? Because from what we have seen she is a bit of a
schemer and a shitload of petty, but nowhere near powerful enough
to dictate terms to A CHOIR.

Gods it is going to take a 3 layer hellegg to seal her away isn't it.

RoflCat

Assuming that Bard's desire is her retirement/death and her latest failure in doing so with that attack on Arsenal...

It'll take Heaven's Fall for her to be gone.

Because at this point the Gods themselves are keeping her around.

c_b

It's not about power. The Bard never does anything by being powerful enough. She does stuff by ensuring that narrative convention guarantees that she will get her way. Y'know, like Cat coercing the Choir of Mercy to resurrect her by manipulating events such that she was a princess pulling a sword from a stone to make war on Callow's enemies.

If this was the Bard, she was able to dictate terms on that kind of basis, not by winning a slugging match.

caoimhinh

True. Story is what matters the most when dealing with the great powers in Creation.

P.S: it was Contrition who resurrected Catherine, not Mercy.

c_b

Whups >.<

[TeK](#)

... Choir of Contrition, not Mercy. She bullied Mercy on arguably two other occasions.

Shveiran

Argued 😊

She definitely did during the trial, but raising Tariq was not really bullying anyone.

She just went and said: "look you want to do a thing and I want to do that thing, but you can't do the thing yourself because of the rules and I can't do it unless you agree because it's your turf. So let me step in your turf and I'll get the thing done, 'k?"

It was an important milestone, but it was one of cooperation, not strength.

wabbitking

Really? It's going to be illegal for undead to do manual labor. That's about half the use for regular zombies and skeletons besides arrow-fodder.

A travesty I say!

On the other hand I can see some future undead villain being a real smart-ass about it.

Undead villain: Really dear I'd love to help you dig your friends out of that rubble but sadly its against the law Oho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!

[TeK](#)

Agreed. It is a sad to see necromancy so unjustly oppressed in every fantasy I've read. Undead workers can be so useful, but nooo, let's make peasants work themselves half to death over our dubious moral grandstanding. It's not like they are real people anyway.

[Decius](#)

It's protection for the living. When laborers' wages are more expensive than raising them as undead, the laborers get worried.

Salt

This is also the Guideverse, so it's literal protection for the living too. If a Villain usurping control over common undead workers could cause a catastrophe, it's virtually guaranteed to happen eventually.

[Decius](#)

That Villain would just kill the peasants and raise their corpses for the army anyway. But villains raising armies of the undead merely cut swathes through the peasantry once a generation or so. If undead were cheaper than living labor everyone would end up undead.

Salt

It has nothing to do with logistics, it has to do with the narrative. The latter is everything in the Guideverse.

Having magically-controlled undead workers everywhere is a potentially extremely large danger with a single point of vulnerability. That narrative itself means that

Creation will essentially bend over backwards to eventually allow some Villain specialized in usurpation to grant themselves widespread control over such. It becomes more dangerous simply because stealing control of such tools is such a common story trope.

Much like Heroes in common fantasy stories being virtually guaranteed to destroy weapons that have a single point of failure, Villains tend to be virtually guaranteed to exploit beneficial systems that have a single point of vulnerability. Disaster caused by the failing of a system that people were over-reliant on, or some horror committed by a wide-scale beneficial work that was twisted to nefarious purposes, are two of the most common tropes in the book.

If you're living in a universe where tropes are power, you definitely should avoid things like undead labor especially if they become more common. There's more than half a chance that you'll become the sole survivor that gives the Heroic band of five convenient background context, having coincidentally avoided said disaster due to petty paranoia.

[TeK](#)

By this point metal tools is a way to bring forward the apocalypse. I mean if you use the wheel, eventually someone will try use it's power for nefarious designs. Really, we shouldn't even use sharp rocks – the narrative will ensure they will be used to bash people's had in!

Of course someone will weaponise it. But this level of fun-police reminds me of dwarves. You argue that (well you don't really, but it's a nice turn of phrase, let me have it, please?) people will die more because of undead cheap labor, I'll argue people will die less. On average prosperity will massively overshadow any damage from occasional catastrophe, and every loophole used by a Villain will be plugged, making it harder to create said catastrophes, and make them lesser in scope when they do

Salt

You can't exactly conflate metal tools and rocks with literal magic, in a story-trope sense. The whole argument you're making falls apart when we examine one key difference:

There are TONS of stories and tropes about well-intentioned magic or necromancy gone wrong. Magical

devices or sorceries getting corrupted is one of the most common fantasy themes that exist. Not so much for sharp rocks and shovels.

You could call it fun-police if you want, but that argument applies exactly the same way to Black replacing blood sacrifices and flying fortresses with bureaucracy and mundane institutions, or Catherine trying to replace demon summoning and angelic intervention with an international diplomatic treaty and geopolitical deterrents.

The entire point trying to orchestrate the death of the age of wonders is that while large scale works of magic or necromancy tend to be worth it on paper, disaster by fiction tropes get in the way so often that in practice the most down-to-earth, mundane methodologies tend to be the most stable for the general populace.

[TeK](#)

There are tons of stories about average non-magical inventions gone wrong. Because the key trope here is not "magic bad", but "progress bad". You will find that one of the most common tropes in sci-fi is "tech gone Wong". Why? Well, because some people try to justify "we want to live in stone age" whatever way they want. So if we follow that principle to the logical end, anything more advanced than unclipped nails should be feared because "don't play god".

I mean let's be real, magic is technology we don't understand, and widespread undead labor is exactly widespread automatisations. Now, I do understand that it will backfire. Duh. I argue that the benefit to the society as a whole would outdo any damage by orders of magnitude. Think about everything good Industrial Revolution brought, but add to that not getting glassed by some paranoid aliens for developing it.

Your other examples do not bring anywhere near the same level of long-term benefit as this. Blood sacrifice? Literally sacrificing long-term for short-term. Obviously get rid of it the moment you can. Flying fortress? Inefficient. Angelic intervention? Literally mass murder *at best*. Demons? Irreparable damage to the fabric of reality is as long-term as it gets.

Devils though? As long as you stick to minor breaches and some general restraint, they can drastically reduce amount of human (and inhuman) casualties in warfare. Which again, makes everyone's life better.

Again, down-to-earth doesn't mean "no magic" it means "no overambitious grand projects with a single point of failure". Introduction of undead labor is not that, because you can only use it on the most basic and hazardous jobs, and split them in small groups to ensure no way for all of them to be corrupted at once.

They just need to get over their bias and instead of blanket ban on everything that is "unorthodox" try and address all the practical problems, and I bet that the end result, no matter how tame would be ways better than "no necromancy because bad".

Salt

I mean we can go back and forth all day coming up with a thousand predictions about the technical details of how necromancy works, but at the end of the day this is a setting where metagaming story tropes matters a lot.

You're seeing it as senseless bias against necromancy. I'm seeing it as it being historically justified in the setting. That's the difference, at the end of the day.

I argue that allowing openings for those catastrophes won't be worth it. The risk is too high and it's a senseless one besides, when the same thing can be done with slow, mundane economic development. Progress doesn't just mean that everything new is good – the large majority of attempted innovations were absolute failures. You can't just paint undead labor as somehow progress, as if it's a given that it'll end up beneficial in the end, simply by being new.

Progress just means learning from your past mistakes, and not putting enough importance on narrative patterns is a huge mistake in this setting. We can't just write off story trope related problems as things that can probably be dealt with. They're by definition impossible coincidences or an outright bending of reality that causes specific patterns to repeat; and wide-

scale necromancy often inviting disaster is one of the most common patterns there is.

[TeK](#)

And I would argue that the bias against necromancy is a very cultural basis for the story enforcing evil necromancers. This is the world where the narrative matters. I'd argue that working on changing the narrative instead of adhering to it would be more productive. Otherwise it is very much "thought changes reality". By blanket banning necromancy you ensure that the only use for it would be evil.

Secondly is that the Guideverse has hard cap on it's technological level: which means, that without changes taken, things will not go anywhere. Any amount of ecological growth will be stopped cold at that particular wall.

In the end I think that narrative matters, but can be and have to be changed. I personally think that this is what Black and Cat had been doing. Not bowing to stories of old because they always had been here, but with a rational eye judge which parts of the past should be left, and which ones should be carved out. Callow and Praes always fight, so making peace between them would surely end up in disaster. Right?

[sivarajan](#)

You might like this comic about caveman science fiction: dresdencodak.com/2009/09/22/caveman-science-fiction/

[TeK](#)

I know it, don't worry 😊

But thanks anyway.

Salt

I think the core issue we are disagreeing on is that you believe the narrative is driven by a cultural idea of necromancy being unethical. I think the narrative is driven by the folly of widespread use of semi-autonomous constructs.

My argument for the risk being too high, narratively, actually has nothing to do with the

level of magical technology or the ethics of necromancy, is what I'm (apparently poorly) trying to get across. The level of magical technology used in this could be described as just a reapplication of the basics, nothing groundbreaking

However I would say it is still undoubtedly a huge folly regardless, because the objection has nothing to do with ethics or technology. It wouldn't matter if it was a relatively simple golem made with trismegistan sorcery instead a zombie with dark rituals, it would be far too risky.

The problem is that you have wide scale use of semi-autonomous constructs, which are narratively far far FAR more prone to being usurped in control than your previous comparison of, say, a sharp rock. It is a specific risk associated with the specific trope of becoming overly dependent on uniform constructs or enchantments where an issue with one unit could be replicated broadly, combined with semi-autonomous constructs having a very frequent tendency to become twisted away from their intended function.

It is an incredibly strong story trope driven by it being a theme that's wildly popular with fantasy writers for the virtue of being an interesting premise in and of itself, not some high-handed moral argument.

Specific uses by major characters or one offs tend to come with little risk, as competent supervision can be ensured, but wide scale applications will result in eventual catastrophe by incompetence or catastrophe by circumventing of intended use, so often that it's ridiculous.

You're still getting hung up on the technical logistics when that's not the objection that's being pointed out. I'm saying that in a story setting where failure can be guaranteed simply by not metagaming the story tropes hard enough, leaning into a story trope that typically invites disaster 9/10 times is insanely risky, despite whatever technical protections you put into place.

What you need isn't an assumption that catastrophic narrative consequences can be averted by way of technical protections. What you need is narrative protections to make sure the story of your undead

labor force can never fall into one that invites disaster in the first place, and I'm not seeing a reasonable way for that to happen in the current setting.

It isn't bowing to authority to avoid common historic pitfalls, and it isn't some cowardly shying away from a challenge to avoid introducing new risks if you can help it. It's just application of less-proud, less-grand, and more-sensible practicality. Sometimes what you need isn't some glorious ambition to overthrow the old yoke of Above-oriented bias, so much as just a mundane, common sense compromise if an ideal solution isn't currently on the table.

Javvies

Hell, semi-autonomous automated labor (or other usage) forces don't have to be actively subverted by a hostile third party to have Story issues. They can go rogue.

AI and/or robotic forces developing intelligence and wanting their independence and freedom is a classic Story trope all by itself. And undead are basically magic robots using a corpse for their body instead of a constructed one.

TeK

I do believe that narrative is established culturally, from people's beliefs, not from outside by Gods. The reason why Calernia (specifically) has Western fantasy tropes, is not because they are hardwired into the fabric of Creation to be prevalent, but out of sheer accident and the fact that Calernia is, um, pretty Western.

From my first assumption comes another: if narrative is cultural, then it can be changed. It takes centuries and is a hard work, but it can be done. If you are clever about it, you can avoid disaster by taking things slowly enough the very concept of disaster coming from this is erased from popular subconscious.

That being said, ugh, I concede another points. The tropes at hand have little to do with necromancy itself, so removing cultural bias against it would not remove the core problem.

Arguably, even if necromancy was perfectly acceptable and ethical, such wide-scale project would still be extremely dangerous because it's basically stealing Callow's weather, or, in more recent examples, using angels corpse. It doesn't matter if it's wicked or righteous thing to do, it still has a very high chance of backfiring.

But I think that since this problem touches every magical solution to problems, and since noone had much objection against Arsenal, which would be spitting out such projects if not in the field of necromancy with alarming consistency even after the war (or at least I bet it will), there is no reason to exclude particularly necromancy from the array of considered projects.

Because, as far as I see it, there is no other alternative. Automation through pure technology is out of the window, and if golemmaking was useful, it would already see widespread use. As things stand, necromancy is the only thing that will say roughly 80% of population from working themselves half to death from dawn till dusk just so that they won't starve.

[TeK](#)

It is argument for education of peasantry for more skill-intence labor, not mass genocide. Dead can't breed, so appeasing populace is still necessary. Even Dead Kind does it in a roundabout way.

Andrew Smith

Except as show undead can do any job that a human can.

Of course while you teach them where are they earning money to live from and build the schools and pay the teachers

Like in the long run it might work but you need a good start up cost and well any necromancer can steal control of the dead see how cat and thee crows were able to steal control of the dead kings undead from him

[TeK](#)

I am talking specifically long term, but my main argument is against "no undead labor ever" without even some small-scale tryouts. Like who cares, the peasants are the ones suffering anyway, so let's be righteous, we are not paying the price.

beleester

In a setting where disembodied souls and restless dead exist, desecrating a corpse is not necessarily a victimless crime – the previous owner of the body might be very upset about being ripped from their grave.

I also suspect it's being banned on storyline grounds – “an army of undead slaves” is the sort of thing that tends to attract disaster, as a giant force of evil centered around a few powerful mages. E.g., the necromancer dies and all his undead slaves go out of control and start eating people.

[TeK](#)

The attitude towards posthumanous use of your body is entirely cultural, and hence, can be changed. But educating peasants would be too expensive, right? This is where cheap undead labor comes in.

Also, viewing necromancy as evil, in the world so heavily driven by narrative essentially makes all necromancy evil. Change of perspective would go a long way to change reality there.

[Liliet](#)

Deoraithe already do non-Evil necromancy.

[TeK](#)

Also Drow, before the whole Undying Ponzi Scheme, but really, the one who is truly at fault there was centralisation of power without internal checks for it.

Salt

The Deoraithe had their gestalt stolen and bound by Akua to power up the biggest genocide/doomsday weapon the continent has seen since Triumphant.

The Drow nearly caused the extinction of their entire race, followed by millennia of cannibalism and the total ruin of their civilization.

Necromancy being unethical can be debated – neither of those events had to do with moral issues – but those two aren't exactly good arguments for considering widescale application of necromancy as low-risk.

If anything, the deoraithe and the drow reinforce the old trope that relying heavily on necromancy will invite disaster sooner or later.

[TeK](#)

It's not necessary for necromancy to be some grand large scale ritual to be implemented, although I see your point. But that is again, not a point against necromancy, but against any grand overambitious project. Tower of Babel, but like, again and again, cause we can.

[TeK](#)

But I concede one thing. I do underestimate what you call "narrative forces" because of my personal bias. I utterly despise any "hubris" tragedies. So my natural instinct when someone says "no, you be playing god" is to, er, play god. So I have some massive bias over here and I apologize for it's influence on our discussion.

Salt

For my part, I haven't taken any offense. I think it's been about equal intense on both sides, and it isn't as if you haven't made good points. So any apology you'd make is reciprocated.

That being said, I don't think your logic for why it could work is wrong – I never really disagreed on the methodology being sound in theory.

My argument is that contrary to the logic of it, story tropes enforcing themselves are by definition completely illogical. Impossible coincidences, skewed laws of physics, ridiculous statistical outliers, and every coinflip coming up tails. In most other fiction settings the logistics could govern, but in this setting if you're not using story elements to balance out story-risk, no amount of logical preparation is going to be enough.

[TeK](#)

And I argue that not only my methodology is applicable inverse, it, in fact, had been done already by protagonist no less. I would even go so far as to argue that necromancy was forbidden out of purely political reasons – sheer populism. You can't really have the truce enforced by the opposition to Dead King allowing necromancy, can you? Procer will surely riot. Again.

Salt

My objection is that specifically, semi autonomous constructs like undead carry inherent story-related risks, no different than a Flying Fortress sometimes succeeding but still in general having inherent risks. Mass use of uniform ones only amplifies said risk, and not by just a little.

It isn't an objection to technology in general or some moralistic objection, I don't personally have any real concern on either front, and in general basic skeletons are pretty low on the magical complexity scale anyway. I won't buy an argument saying it's good just because it's new, but I also won't object just because it's new, and that isn't the point I'm trying to (badly) get across anyway.

No, my objection is related specifically to undead as a type of story device that mimics life or mimics sentience, combined with the wide scale uniform application of it. It doesn't matter if it's a stone golem, or a skeleton, or an artificial spirit, or whatever, if it's magical and in some way semi-sentiently resembling life (especially human life), there's gonna be a thousand fiction tropes related to it backfiring horribly on their makers. Either by oversight or by sabotage. That makes it inherently risky as heck unless you have a very good exception in play.

If I was a player playing in a D&D setting with the same rules as the guideverse, I'd probably object to a party member proposing a wide scale permanent application of such in most cases; mostly because it's a setting where it's mandatory to metagame fiction tropes, and I'm not seeing a meta solution that more or less guarantees that the campaign setting wouldn't find a way to completely screw us for being on the wrong side of a very commonly ruinous fiction trope.

I'm saying there's a high chance that it'd be akin to casting lightning bolt on a large black pudding, not that paladins are correct about lawful neutral necromancy.

Salt

I guess a good analogy in hindsight would be like discussing whether a plan would work in D&D. Your necromancer would be – in many campaigns – correct to say that undead used for neutral purposes could arguably be no different than any other application

of magic, and it's not uncommon for savvy players to debate if the ethics of necromancy are innately evil in the first place. Good GMs in most settings would entertain that kind of thing no problem.

But this all changes if your GM has made it a point that this is a genre-savvy campaign setting that gives large bonuses on rolls for RP that follows common fantasy tropes, and large penalties for being on the wrong side of those tropes. Even moreso if he's intentionally encouraging players to metagame this mechanic as hard as they wish for an advantage, or warning them to ignore it at their own peril.

At that point, it's more that you just have a unique campaign setting for considering "is this a good plan or not". The necromancer then needs to RP accordingly so that his plans fit into the setting for those fat bonuses instead of suffering from horrible penalties. Which is probably going to be quite challenging, if it really goes against the grain in the first place.

It's a factor that could shift a plan from "usually reasonable" to "I'm not so sure about this, dude", unless said player is very VERY good at this kind of RP.

[TeK](#)

The problem with this analogy (and our debate to lesser extent) that unlike with GM, we can only guess at how the narrative rules would work in this case. I think the danger is overestimated, you evidently think not, and unless EE will personally break the tie, I don't think we can move forward with this 😊

Salt

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Salt

Wow ok apparently I managed to double post and incorrectly type my email into the box in one fell swoop. Whoops.

[TeK](#)

And now I wonder if you have seen my reply which was addressed to a different Salt apparently.

[TeK](#)

And exclusion of undead from offices of power is straight up discrimination.

#DeadLivesMatter

Nairne .01

Think about Zombie...

[Casey Glick](#)

I don't know that it is permanent here. It is almost certainly a war-based rule, as it's pretty clear Neshemah can commandeer basically anyone's undead. Having unsupervised undead doing work seems...ill-advised.

[vernal.ancient](#)

They mentioned it was part of the Accords, which are intended for after the Dead King's defeat

LizAris

Well that's great—more Bard to deal with, it looks like. She better not touch another hair on any of the woe

On the other hand, Knife's band is such a cute combo of heroes and villains, and Hanno joining in on the bet made me cackle. The (former) Black and White are so well written...I love that Cat's continually surrounded by Knights as her strongest allies/most annoying enemies even though she's long lost name of Squire

Konstantin von Karstein

Except for the Poisoner, are they any other Villain in that band?

[TeK](#)

Fantassin arguably fits the bill.

LizAris

Hmm I might be totally off but I somehow got the idea the Royal Conjuror was? Cat spoke about "parting with him" and did send him a glance to silently ask if they needed to talk. Also he escaped from Helike/Kairos which is primarily an Evil city, but that could also be interpreted that he's a hero... yeah idk

Earl of Purple

Helike is a Good city, on the whole. He was the Royal Conjuror, which means he probably predated Kairos. The Tyrant did not use the style King of Helike. He's a Hero, I think.

She didn't part with him because he's one of hers, but possibly because he served alongside the Army of Callow. And would have been useful just about anywhere the Grand Alliance could put him.

erebus42

Helike flips like the coin. It could easily be either a heroic or villainous name. Honestly it could be like Archer or Ranger and fulfill either or ambiguous roles.

Cicero

The Royal Conjurer – came from The Tyrant’s Court. Clearly a villain, note that Cat checked with him to see if there was a need for a private word (villain to villain).

Grizzled Fantassin sounds like a neutral name, but probably passes as a hero.

Adrian_V

Oh this journey i bet it was full of tears, laughs and noodles!!!

Cat may as well had said “they grow so fast” when seeing the band, even if at least one is twice or even more her age xD

Loved the little bet too, and can’t wait for the enxt chapter to finish the tale.

Also i ship the poisoner and the magistrate, because i am horrible like that xD

TeK

The unfortunate implication here is twofold: Bard wanted Levant to appear (probably as a counterweight to Procer) and persuaded Gigantes to help them, and asecond is that apparently we missee another agent Bard can act through – angels.

Nairne .01

Why? The White Knight was there and so was the Gray Pilgrim...

TeK

I don’t understand what you mean.

framfrit

bard seems to be limited so that she can only mainly interact around named there were a few hints like her second shown body appearing and being sure that the white knight was nearby but main evidence being from the dead king himself if i remember right he basically implied procer serves as a battlefield between the two where he tries to keep named out of key roles and the bard pushes for it ala plot for hasenbach to get a name

Salt

The Bard only being able to act through Named was the Black Knight’s hypothesis, and it was proven to be wrong. She showed up after Amadeus fully lost the mantle of Black Knight, as well as to the sisters when they were mortals instead of the capital-S Sisters.

> "It was my theory that you could only work through Named," Amadeus said. "I find it rather horrifying that you are evidently not so restricted."

The prevailing story-theory is Catherine's own, which by latest account during her chat with Kairos is that the Bard simply appears whenever there is sufficient narrative weight warrant it

> "She was not sent for," I said. "She was sent. Audience was bought and paid: desperation, blood and need."

>His good eye narrowed. "And?" he pressed.

>"There was a lot to lose," I said. "You could call it weight."

I interpreted what Tek was saying as it's a new confirmation that the Bard can interact directly with Angels, where previously we only had confirmation that she could interact with mortals (Named or not)

Snappy

He saying that we were neglecting another agent of the wandering bards – angels. If she can act through angels she has even more influence on all angel people/things.

While she can talk to white knight and grey pilgrim, she still needs to convince them or catch them in a story. But if she can to to them through angels, she can effectively dictate to them what she wants.

Burlyraven

Frederic's story is throwing its weight around, getting him invited to this meeting and all. He'd be right on the edge anyway, as far as invites go, but his presence definitely feels... placed.

I'm also unreasonably happy to see a literal mercenary Name with the Grizzled Fantassin, although I do have to wonder if the Name has any tradition behind it, or if she's the first. If she's not the first, then I wonder how many people become Fantassins with the goal of obtaining that Name (and her devotion to Cordelia is almost cute).

WuseMajor

I think they're trying to attain the position of Old Soldier, even if they're not actually trying for the Name. Since, well, if you're not going to become an Old Soldier, there's really only one other option.

John

There are Old Soldiers, and there are Bold Soldiers, but I'm not sure we've ever seen any three-word Names.

[Burlyraven](#)

All soldiers are trying to be old soldiers, but the Grizzled Fantassin is **the** old soldier.

Black Spiral Dancer

The name reminded me of Solid Snake and The Boss from Metal Gear...

MrMaturity

I don't get it. Why does this mean that Kairos saved everyone or that the Bard is playing everyone?

[TeK](#)

Well obviously the thing you need to understand is...

TO BE CONTINUED

Bakkasama

Kairos stopped the choir of Mercy from intervening against Hierarch during the trial and this story shows that the Bard can influence Mercy. So presumably he stopped her from using it against them there.

Big I

Makes me wonder if the original Pilgrim was a Villain, if Mercy was backing the other side.

ninegardens

He is, after all, the GREY pilgrim.

Konstantin von Karstein

The Grey Pilgrim is basically Gandalf on steroids, and a Villain using the Morningstar as theme seems unlikely.

[Javvies](#)

The Shine Aspect was said to be a universal Grey Pilgrim Aspect – one that every iteration of the Name had, and it's quite clearly an expression of Light.

Besides, the first Grey Pilgrim being a Hero wouldn't preclude a Proceran Hero from fighting him.

After all, we know that Procer has had a historical habit of calling every Named who opposed their expansive and imperialist tendencies a Villain.

Plus, just look at the history with Callow – plenty of Callowan Named have fought Procer and vice versa. Hell, excepting the last 20 or so years (since the Conquest), the Crown of Callow usually came with a Heroic Name, and basically always had allied quasi-subordinate Heroic Named as well, but that never stopped the Procerans from trying to conquer and annex Callow over their dead bodies.

Although, I remember Cat quietly speculating that not all the Founders of the Dominion were Heroes, and not all of their successors were Heroes either, and thinking about asking Hanno to use his Recall Aspect to discreetly investigate the matter ... it would be a useful precedent that Barrow Sword could benefit from, among other things.

Salt

Uh wait hold on. Hold on. Super wild theory here. Are the Grey Pilgrim and the Choir of Mercy potentially traitors? Is Tariq Isbili setting off the Judgement Corpse weapon right now, even as this meeting is happening? Who the hell is available to stop him right now if he is?

All the Woe are in the Arsenal meeting. Cordelia, Vivienne, the White Knight, Mirror Knight, Kingfisher Prince, basically every single Named or Major Character in the Grand Alliance that has the clout or experience to stop the Pilgrim from doing what he wants is currently INSIDE the Arsenal.

The Drow are all on the front lines against the Dead King. Black and Malicia are tied up in their civil war, the Tyrant is dead. Juniper is partially incapacitated, Basilia is preoccupied.

We know the Pilgrim heeds the Bard's orders (when she made him pause just long enough for Saint to cut into the Twilight Crown, intentionally not stopping her in time), and that he has a strangely high opinion of her. We found out just now that the Bard offered Mercy such a convincing argument that they feasibly left one of their own champions to perish at the hands of the original Grey Pilgrim, which might feasibly mean that they judged the Bards big plan merciful enough to have a long-term working relationship with her. We know that, if "tabula rasa" was done by Mercy that the choir actively covered their association with the Bard up and that Tariq also covered it up – there's no way he wouldn't have known considering he's the Grey Pilgrim and Mercy is his choir. We know that Tariq is also better at navigating the Twilight ways than almost anyone currently alive, and would this have no issue being in just the right place at just the right time whenever he so wishes. We know that Tariq will commit

whatever evils he needs to if he thinks a much greater good will come of it.

So we know that Tariq and Mercy are both extremely positive towards the Bard, who wants the weapon set off, and to an extent will heed her orders, and are some of the least likely to be bothered by crossing lines if there is a reason for it. We know that every character that could feasibly stop them right now is currently far away or in the Arsenal listening to this report at this very instant. We know that the Pilgrim could navigate anywhere necessary through the twilight ways which he forged with his own crown. We know that between the Bard and Mercy, he has enough Above-oriented power and knowledge to know exactly where the weapon is and how to set it off.

They have the motive, the tools, and the perfect circumstance right now.

What if the real important secret here is that the entire Choir of Mercy and the Grey Pilgrim are potentially traitors, but by taking the time to be briefed on it all at once, it's already too late?

MrMaturity

Big oofs here. That has the feel of being right.....

Daltos

This, this right here. 100 silver, on the table. Any takers?

ninegardens

I'd bet against it. Tariq's character development arc wouldn't feel right with this level of treachery; I'm expecting to see a positive payoff for Cat ressurecting him. And not expecting to see direct trouble from the Bard again until she's had a chance to recuperate and set up. Also, Auger would parry this.

While the theory is cool it is SUPER specific; I'll happily bet against most things this specific.

Salt

Note the Augur likely doesn't have the ability to parry this, it was mentioned that the Pilgrim is shielded from oracular vision similarly to Catherine, back when they were fighting the Skein in Liesse. He mentioned that both he and Cat would hinder oracles, while the Saint was outright immune to them. The Pilgrim being muddled in the Augur's sight wouldn't even be a cause for alarm, it would just be par for the course.

In my opinion I think it'd be rather in character for him – considering his characterization is centered around lesser evils for the greater good, he's a habitual oath-breaker if he sees the need for it, and he generally takes the direction of Mercy as the be-all and end-all of knowing if the lesser evil is worth it or not. If it was him alone, chances are he'd be one of the more trustworthy members of the GA. If the choir of Mercy truly is compromised though, he'll likely take their direction as law, even over his own personal judgement.

But hey it is just a theory, could very easily be wrong.

I'm just (personally speaking) a bit suspicious of Mercy specifically, right now, because it feels like there's a reason for them being the choir mentioned here. Judgement would've made more sense otherwise as it's use of a corpse from Judgement that the revelation is supposed to be about, or it could've been made unclear which choir it was if it didn't matter – but it was Mercy that was specified.

Ninestrings

I got ten silver on The Relentless Magistrate and The Poisoner knocking boots by the end of this.

ninegardens

I've got ten silvers on them having already done so.

talenel

Ten The Poisoner has been secretly sleeping with the whole band without any of the other knowing.

Tom

50 silver on them having done so right before this scene:

> The Relentless Magistrate, who I could not help but not had yet to shave, rose to offer us all a stiff bow.

ninegardens

Gotta say, I'm really loving hearing the hijinx of this off-screen band of five. It's like... totally familiar, but also condensed enough that it doesn't feel like a drag... in any other story it would feel silly and/or cheap, but given the way PGtE rolls, it just works.

ninegardens

So, is the big secret that Nessie was referring to the fact that no matter who pulled the trigger, Bard was going to be the one who got to aim the weapon?

[Javvies](#)

Bard.
As expected.

We already knew that she was responsible for the creation of the League.

Now she's deeply involved with the creation of the Dominion. Though, considering the Dominion was founded by a Band of Five, that shouldn't really be a surprise. Although the nature of her involvement is troubling.

I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Bard was responsible for pushing the betrayal and usurpation of the first, original Dread Emperor of Praes, establishing the cycle of betrayal and murder that has ruled Praes for its entire existence. Also, I suspect that she's been involved in the problems every Dread Emperor/ Empress who tried to create an internal solution to the Praesi overpopulation/insufficient food production problems.

mamm0nn

So, a lot of expectation that the woman that stepped in might be the Bard, but it might just be one of the Gigantes that stepped in and began their aid to Levant in earnest at that point. Or Treacherous in a wig, of course, seducing the angels with his luscious melons.

Bellaco

It was probably Traitorous. It's always Traitorous.

erebus42

Except when it's Irritant

JJR

I've never seen Traitorous and Irritant in the same room together before, have you?

Andrew Smith

but we have seen Traitorous and Traitorous in a room so that proves nothing

Xinci

Well, I am glad to finally get a confirmation that Angels being of Creation would have them reinforce its effects. It's also

rather amusing to me to also get a that Fantassins death counts are possibly so prolific that one being able to retire is standard for a Name. Or at least indicates a Fantassin that has gone through so much stuff and is capable of retirement is able to beNamed, kinda reminds me of the Horned Lords.

Tom

This feels too simple to be correct, but I think there's enough overlap between the roles that Cat and WB play for Cat to end up stealing WB's Name... Or something along those lines. Plus Cat has precedents for that kind of stealing, and WB clearly doesn't want to be doing it anymore.

But! That then begs the question of how Cat would deal with the despair that WB has sunk into over the millenia. So maybe instead of stealing the Name for herself, Cat would steal it and imbue it into Cardinal in some way with Masego's help, sort of like how they crafted the Severity. But in this case the entire capacity of the Name would be tied to an institution that fills the role that the Bard previously did, rather than a simple magic sword.

I think there are also precedents for binding such things into lasting institutions, like with that goofy bunch north of Callow that bound a bunch of souls into a thing that Akua ended up stealing. Bellerephon also comes to mind, though I suppose that was a more organic origin.

[Liliet](#)

This was already a whole thing: "thief, rival, successor". Wandering Bard was trying to slot Catherine into a Role mirror/parallel/directly opposed/similar to hers (arguably all of these can be the same thing), that would possibly then straight up usurp hers. Probably because she wants to be done with her job, though any number of other reasons are possible (it would lock Catherine down in gods' rules, it would lock Catherine's Accords in reliably through her being their eternal guardian, there is a secret quest that must be done that's unlocked by having a new person take the position, literally whatever).

Catherine was opposed to the idea, though the question is whether it's (1) because of general caution about other people picking things for her, (2) contrariness 'whatever the Bard wants must be bad', (3) specific understanding of what the Role is and wanting nothing to do with it. Well, probably some combination of the three, really.

But there is a definite parallel in Bard getting a Choir to back off and what Catherine has been able to do.

Frivolous

I agree with the parallel of WB having an aspect that allows her to intercede with Choirs, and Cat having gotten angels to back off. That's one of the strongest parallels I've seen between the 2 women so far.

If my vote counted, I'd vote for #2 as being the most relevant. Cat is just horribly contrary. She never satisfies the expectations of others.

Dominic Corbin

So I was struck by a thought, but I haven't gone to check at all if this makes sense. Apologies if this has already been mooted about.

Could the Bard BE Triumphant?

Triumphant comes up all the time as one of the most successful villains until her mysterious disappearance, and has never been confirmed as dead. "May she never return" is uttered almost always in conjunction with her name, and I have to think that sets up a story that practically guarantees her return at some point. It's a shoe that's been waiting to drop for several books at least.

Where it may break down is timeline. I'm not sure if the Dead King was established before or after Triumphant, I just can't recall all the history we've learned. I suppose it's also possible Triumphant could be one of the roles the Intercessor has played over the centuries.

Any thoughts?

[Javvies](#)

The Dead King predated Triumphant. By a lot.

She was the last person to come close to achieving a true apotheosis, before Cat.

He was cautiously hopeful that Triumphant would succeed, and disappointed when she failed.

IIRC, anyways.

The Dead King predated the first Dread Emperor of Praes. He's been around a long damned time.

And I'm quite confident that Bard did not play the role of Triumphant, though I would not be surprised in the slightest to learn that Bard played some kind of a role in both Triumphant's rise and in her fall.

Shveiran

This.

Also, while the Bard is obviously very powerful, her mastery is over indirect power.

Triumphant was as much of a blunt instrument as a magic wielder can be; she was an overwhelming force, not a careful schemer. I seriously doubt the Bard has the personal power to enact Triumphant's specific deeds, mostly because if she had the Empress Most Dread ability to nuke and summon as well as her own experience and aptitude for plots and narrative, well, there is no point to even try taking her on.

Triumphant required a Calernia-wide rebellion and two other superpowers to be brought down, and if that was Bard having fun acting as a blunt instrument, that means she never really lost.

Salt

Yep. Even if the Bard wanted to try playacting as something that isn't the Intercessor, it likely wouldn't work since:

A) that's the kind of juicy secret that just screams "uncover me by Heroic coincidence at the worst possible time" and

B) if the Tyrant is correct, two of the three things "she always flees" is direct touch and promised death

I think it would've been rather comical and impossible to cover up if Triumphant had a habit of popping out of existence every time her life was remotely threatened.

[308924810a](#)

Soo hey, @Erraticerrata why is the Fortress Morgentor at twilight's pass relevant? If the Dead King holds Rhenia and Hannoven can't he just march troops into the Lycaonese lowlands underwater along the bottom of Lake Pavin from Hannoven, or underwater along the coast from Rhenia? Is it all a multi-century deception by the Dead King to ensure he can defeat the Lycaonese whenever he wants to?

And on that note it sort of feels like a fleet on the lakes being used to intercept undead turtle ships, or as platforms to cast spells/create holy water against subsurface undead could be useful to the war effort. And it might be possible to just shift the Proceran navy through the Twilight Paths or Faerie into the lakes. And countering such ships would almost require that the Dead King to invest in specialized forces that, should they gain superiority in the Lakes, the Grand alliance could afford to just bypass, with their lines of supply and march running through the Twilight Paths and the underground routes of the Dwarves.

Earl of Purple

Same reason he's building a bridge- water is corrosive. If not to the undead armies, certainly to their gear. He could equip them with bronze swords and armour (which wouldn't rust), but then they'd be at a disadvantage against troops with modern steel weaponry. Also they wouldn't be able to bring any bows or crossbows with them; the wood would rot, but more importantly the bowstrings would get soaked and stretch, losing their tautness. He can and he does march forces over the lake's bed, but those forces rely on surprise- and there's other forts on the lake's banks as well.

Chapter 36: Trepidation

"It is traditional to kill to preserve your secrets, but I have found it more efficient to instead kill everyone who would be offended by the revelation."

– Dread Empress Massacre

A claim like that required elaboration and it was had. The long-dead fantassin had apparently been quite the chatty fellow once he got talking, so even though the Relentless Magistrate had only been cut into a few of his memories a fairly complete picture of the events could be had. None of us were all that concerned with the history of it all, though, not right now. So when the floor was opened for questions, it began with Hasenbach asking for more details about the intervention by the 'unknown woman'.

It was the Bard. *Of course* it was the fucking Bard, and I wasn't sure why any of us were wasting our time pretending otherwise.

"The White Knight called on the Brighteyed Lords," the Painted Knife said. "Those you know as the *Ophanim*. And they came down in a wave of burning light, to strike down the Grey Pilgrim, but even among the blinding radiance a silhouette could be seen to have appeared."

That had Intercessor written all over it, as far as I was concerned. There weren't a lot of people who could take a hit from an angel – I certainly couldn't, at least not without Sve Noc and the right story behind me – but the Wandering Bard was certain to be one of them. Even if it killed her, it wasn't like she'd *stay* dead.

"Was the woman ever identified, by either your prisoner or any others in the valley?" Hanno asked.

I snorted, ignoring the looks I got from some in the room.

"We all know who that is," I said, "and faces don't matter a whit to her. She'd had more of those than we've had meals."

"If I can hear even a fake name, I can search through old lives for a connection," the White Knight reminded me.

"I think you underestimate how good the old bird is at hiding her tracks," I bluntly replied. "But be my guest."

I'd have to remember to ask if they still had the dead fantassin about, though, since I could probably take those memories through Night and make of them something that could be seen by multiple people. Could be useful. The Painted Knife had patiently waited for us to finish speaking, but it was actually the Magistrate that she bid to answer Hanno's question.

"The prisoner never saw a face, though the silhouette was definitely a woman's and the timbre of her voice supports this," the Relentless Magistrate seriously said. "The Grey Pilgrim was not in the field of vision of the prisoner when this took place, as he was looking at the White Knight, which leaves us instead with an impression of her face as she reacted."

My brow rose. They'd been very thorough, I noted appreciatively, and they weren't hiding the imperfections of their results as some might be tempted to in front of such an influential audience.

"She looked surprised," the Relentless Magistrate said. "And she spoke, though the noise of Mercy's descent drowned it out. I believe, however, that by reading her lips I have pieced together what the word was. It is not, however, a certainty."

"Your work has been exemplary so far," the First Prince said, "and certainty is a rare thing indeed, in these matters."

"Agreed," I said, drumming my fingers against the tabletop. "On both counts."

The Royal Conjurer looked pleased, though the Poisoner was harder to read. My approval was something of a mixed bag for the rest, not unexpectedly.

"It was in Chantant," the Relentless Magistrate said. "*Trouveur*."

Which meant 'finder'. Huh, not exactly something I'd associate with the Bard. Not all at the high table seemed to share my opinion, though. At a glance both Proceran royals, Roland and the White Knight all seemed to be varying between grimness and understanding.

"I'm guessing I missed something," I noted.

Considering only the native speakers and Hanno – a filthy cheating cheater who cheated, because his aspect was bullshit – seemed to have caught it, I'd guess it was something Proceran. Probably specifically Alamans, as the scholar with the Arlesite name didn't seem to know about it either.

"In older Alamans traditions, a *trouveur* was something like a troubadour," the Rogue Sorcerer told me.

Oh, Roland. Both reliably competent and socially skilled, why hadn't Zeze figured out a way to make more of him yet? Still, would you just look at that. It might be a few centuries late but we'd caught the tail of the Wandering Bard at last. Whatever it was that'd gone down in the Verdant Hollow, she'd clearly not wanted anyone to know about it.

"I will attempt to confirm this independently," the White Knight said. "It may take some time, but it should not be impossible to learn more. Until then, however..."

"I am willing to operate on the assumption that it is the Intercessor we are dealing with," Cordelia agreed. "Queen Catherine?"

"I was sold the moment someone stepped in on Mercy in smiting mood," I drily replied. "But consider me formally in agreement, if that's what you're after."

It was, so we moved on with little ceremony. Masego had questions but no burning desire to ask them himself – at least not right now – so I did on his behalf.

"On the subject of the Ophanim being made to 'leave'," I said. "I've inquiries about some of the details."

It was the Magistrate who fielded answers once more, and he began by striking a cautious tone.

"The prisoner saw nothing of what took place after that, not until the light had dispersed and the soldiers fled," the dark-haired hero said.

Which their report had made clear enough. The fantassins led by the White Knight had skirmished with the warrior band led by the Grey Pilgrim over the span of an afternoon before it turned into a proper battle over a grassy slope. The battle had turned in the favour of the Levantines. Their training and equipment were both flatly inferior but they were *much* better at skirmishing than the mercenaries, so they'd softened up the fantassins over the afternoon.

When the fight had gone south for the Procerans, the White Knight had stepped back from the frontline and called on Mercy, which

was when our old friend had stepped in. Our sole witness had gone temporarily blind and only got his bearings later, running away with the survivors and wounded after they found the Levantines had not taken the opportunity to slaughter them while they were blind. Hierophant didn't want me to fill in the blanks in the history, though, he was after something else.

"I understand that," I said. "But, to be clear, even after the silhouette was seen the light *did* intensify?"

The man frowned, collecting his thoughts for a moment.

"That is correct, Your Majesty," the Relentless Magistrate said.

Masego let out what someone who loved him less than I did might have called a cackle.

"A limitation," Zeze said in Mtethwa. "Finally."

A surprising amount of people spoke that tongue, considering the side of the Whitecaps we were on, but it was still far from a full roster. I cleared my throat.

"Lord Hierophant has deduced something of import from the detail," I said. "Which he will now share with us."

Masego's Chantant was significantly better when listening than speaking, so it was in Lower Miezana he addressed the high table.

"The Choir of Mercy did strike at the valley," Hierophant said. "It explains the presence *tabula rasa* effect observed in the valley by the Royal Conjuror, which would not have been there if the Ophanim had not fully aligned with Creation."

Hanno was fairly learned in matters of sorcery, at least as much as someone without the Gift could be, but unlike me he didn't have the benefit of being familiar with the Praesi parlance in the art.

"If I understand correctly, Hierophant," the White Knight slowly said, "you are stating that Mercy did smite the Grey Pilgrim?"

"Yes," Masego bluntly replied.

Surprise flickered across half a dozen faces and from the corner of my eye I found that the Painted Knife was grinning, muttering *honour to the Blood* with an awed look on her face. Must have been nice for the national pride that the original Pilgrim had walked off Mercy's attentions – and where Procerans would have considered it an indication of virtue, with the Dominion it was a flip of the coin if they'd decide it'd been about pure strength instead. I was pretty sure we were about to get into the specifics of being smote by angels, which should run afoul of at least one Proceran heresy law, so I decided to give a warning.

"Deeper explanation will require drawing on learning that some deem to be blasphemous," I said. "I tend to find the academic tone there refreshing, but I'm not unaware that others differ in opinion."

Cordelia flicked a discreet glance at her secretary, who ceased writing.

"Given the situation, I believe such objections can be set aside," the First Prince of Procer mildly said. "Lord White?"

"I've no objection," Hanno said, sounding faintly amused.

Considering he'd once told me his own mother had kept to Below, I suspected he'd be harder to shock theologically than people would expect of him.

"Try to keep it concise," I told Masego in Kharsum. "And please don't talk about dissecting anything someone prays to."

"My children will eat your goats," he replied in the same, sounding a little miffed.

I threw him an offended look. There'd been no need for that sort of language, I was just giving advice. Given how important cattle was to the Tribes, that was actually a pretty brutal putdown for them – I'd seen orcs brawl over less. I bet it was Robber who'd taught him that one, though. The malevolent imp had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of taunts and insults in every tongue he was even slightly proficient in. I caught Hanno covering his mouth as if to hide a yawn – or a chuckle, I realized, since I'd forgotten he actually knew Kharsum.

"Angelic power is fundamentally like any other," Masego told everyone. "It has fixed rules and properties, however esoteric, which allows it to be measured and predicted. In this case, the *tabula rasa* observed means that there was a strike in the valley. That it does not seem to have caused any deaths means a property of that power was amended."

The First Prince of Procer observed him carefully.

"And that is... feasible, even for one who is Named?" she probed.

"I cannot think of another who could do this," Hanno admitted.

The Fallen Monk had been able to screw with Light, from what I recalled, but having fought him my opinion was that a scrap between him and an angel would have begun and ended with the sound 'splat'. The Intercessor wasn't some second-stringer with a grudge against priests, though.

"She's not like other Named," I said. "We've known that for some time. It's the reason we're tugging at threads that are literally centuries old."

Mind you, if it wasn't an aspect that let her do that I'd eat my own fingers. The Intercessor might be in a class of her own in some regards, but she wasn't beyond the constraints of being Named. Beating her thrice forced her away, she'd avoided the Hierarch like the plague and my money was on her having only three aspects just like the rest of us. One was the wandering trick, coming and going everywhere, and another had to be her sight for stories. That left whatever the Hells *this* was to look out for.

"Yet it is telling that the strike *did* land," Masego continued. "As she clearly did not want it to. It implies she does not have the ability to outright command angelic entities."

Which was the good news. So now came the bad ones.

"It does seem, however, that she is able to affect the properties of angelic power," Hierophant continued. "Be it directly or indirectly. Which property in particular was tinkered with I cannot say, as there are too many possibilities. Reduced potency, different parameters for harm, different *manners* of harm..."

He trailed off, shrugging, as he'd made his point. The specifics didn't actually matter all that much when it came down to it. Whatever the form it was a problem, to say the least, that if a metaphorical angelic arrow got shot the Bard could decide what *kind* of an arrow it became.

"Are you saying that the Intercessor has the ability to... reforge angels as she wills?" the First Prince said, sounding appalled.

"No," Masego said. "In a sense it is impossible to affect an angel directly – even those that are said to be 'dead' and have left behind a corpse remain in their Choir and unchanged. The Choirs are fixed entities. As befitting the way that she has been named an *intercessor*, I would theorize that what she affects are the 'senses' of angels. Not unlike coloured glass tinting one's perception of the world when that world itself remains objectively unchanged."

"So Mercy struck," I said. "But it didn't kill anyone, because simultaneously it saw that there was no one it should be killing."

"In essence," Hierophant agreed.

If the lever could be pulled down on that, though, it could also be pulled up. Which would be something of an issue if someone had, say, an angel corpse lying around that they'd unwisely made

a weapon out of, *Cordelia*. That wasn't a conversation that needed to be had in front of the Painted Knife and her fellows, though, so instead I asked if anyone still had questions for the band. The First Prince apparently shared my curiosity as to the fate of the dead fantassin, but we were both to be disappointed: it'd been the sorceries of the Barrow Lord that kept him moving and aware, so within a few days of the villains' destruction the corpse had begun breaking down. The aftermath of necromancy tended to be rough on bodies, from what I recalled. Made sense. You could only shove so much magic into even a living body before things started going south and corpses were even less flexible.

"He was given a marked grave in the way of the southern companies," the Grizzled Fantassin said, almost challengingly. "He kept his contract to the end, and deserves the long peace same as any of us."

It might have been possible to extract a few things out of the remains of the remains, in practice, but it honestly wasn't worth the effort considering it'd require either myself, Akua or one of few oldest Mighty in Cleves to see to that extraction in person. Being halfway decent people, the rest of the high table weren't inclined to argue in favour of graverobbing anyway. Hanno made plain to the three heroes that he'd want a more in-depth talk about their investigation at some point, and I casually informed my pair of the same, but aside from that we were done here. With the questions, anyway. They were released to rest and recreation, and within moments of the door closing we were dealing in state secrets.

"The crown of Callow has already made known its concerns regarding Procer's continued custody of the corpse of an angel," Vivienne said, leading the offensive. "After today, the dangers of continuing down that path should be even clearer."

Not what Hasenbach wanted to hear, I saw on her face – practiced a diplomat as she was, she'd spent too much time around me. Enough I'd learned some of her tricks, and that pleasant yet distant smile on her face tended to come out when she was feeling pressed.

"Secretary Corrales," the First Prince said, "if you would speak the appropriate part from the transcript of the Dead King's words at the end of the Salian conference?"

The tanned man sharply nodded. Idly I noted that Hasenbach had not said read and that the man was not looking at any papers. She was fond of precision, the First Prince.

"-and it will tell you, should you be clever enough, of the doom you all so narrowly escaped by the grace of Kairos Theodosian," the secretary quoted.

"Thank you," Cordelia smiled. "Now, should we take the Hidden Horror at his word then there seems to be different trouble here than the risks inherent to the Principate's possession of a large-scale defensive weapon."

Hasenbach wasn't a fool, much as her insistence to keep the corpse still angered me. It wasn't like I didn't understand the temptation of keeping the angelic weapon around. She'd only seriously consider using it if the Grand Alliance were already collapsing, anyhow, so from her perspective there really wasn't anything to lose in keeping it except some unease from my camp. It was a card up her sleeve in case the night got too dark for the dawn to pierce through, and unlike Named and coalition armies it was also something she had complete control over. No one would be pulling that trigger without her say-so, at least in theory. That had to be reassuring, considering that in practice Cordelia Hasenbach was sharing the reins over the war that would decide the survival of her nation with more people than any ruler would like.

My issue with this whole blunder had previously been that doomsday weapons were disaster magnets no one could ever really control – and were prone to backfiring massively – but with Zeze's words there was fresh unease to add to the brew. A weapon that answered to someone else first was best snapped over your knee.

"The Dead King implied that Kairos spared us something," I agreed, "which fits with the end of the Salian Peace. The angelic remains dredged up are allegedly from one of the Seraphim-"

"They are," Hanno flatly said. "You may take my word on it."

This might be a tad of a sensitive subject for the Sword of Judgement, I thought, but there weren't ways to tiptoe around it that I could see.

"I will," I agreeably replied. "So we've got a Seraphim corpse and a confirmation that the Intercessor can affect angels. The Tyrant of Helike then masterminds the Hierarch rising to... obstruct the Choir of Judgement, so to speak, and in the wake of that the Dead King speaks of us being spared doom by Kairos Theodosian's actions. The picture there is pretty clear, as far as I'm concerned."

If Cordelia had pulled the trigger on the Judgement corpse before Judgement got walled off by Bellerophon's maddest son, the Bard would have had a degree of control over what happened. Now, though, the corpse could have no tie to the Choir – even Hanno, its champion on Creation, could not get a peep out of them as far as I knew. If Masego was right and the Bard worked over angels by screwing with their 'senses', then the current state of the weapon was a dead end for her. She couldn't trick an inanimate

object, after all. The Tyrant of Helike had, true to form, solved an old headache by leaving us with a fresh one: right now, no one had any fucking idea what would actually happen if Cordelia pulled the trigger. Gods, but sometimes I wished I'd killed the little bastard myself. It'd at least give me something to look back to fondly when still dealing with the fallout of his actions *several years after his death*.

"By the Dead King's own admission, the danger has been averted," the First Prince noted.

"Are we now to take the word of the Hidden Horror for truth, Your Highness?" Roland politely asked. "Let us not pretend the creature will not serve its own interests above all."

"If the weapon is a threat to the Dead King, his interest is in discrediting it," the Kingfisher Prince pointed out. "Which he has not, strictly speaking, accomplished here."

In the sense that the Bard wouldn't currently be holding the reins, he had a point. On the other hand, Neshamah had neatly soured us on the Bard with this and further deepened my already deep objections to Hasenbach keeping that looming disaster of a weapon around. He'd gotten his gains, as he tended to.

"He hates the Intercessor like poison," I said. "Insofar as he's damaging her in our eyes, I'd tend to take him at his word. He's too canny of an old thing to try a lie there, there's too many Named in play for one of those to actually work for long."

The Intercessor herself would delight in revealing the inaccuracies, if only to further establish herself as the Dead King's ancient sworn enemy that we should all be listening to. After all, if the Hidden Horror was going out of his way to discredit her then she *must* be a threat. Truth be told, I did believe her to be that. Only to more than just Neshamah.

"Adanna," Hanno said, voice clear and calm. "If the remains of the Seraphim were used in a ritual and the Wandering Bard amplified the effects as much as she could, what sort of a scale would we be looking at?"

"I am uncertain," the Blessed Artificer reluctantly admitted. "Though as a rule, the greater the quantity of Light the simpler the purpose it can carry. At a greater than regional scale, harm is likely the sole effect that could reliably be had. I do not have the proper references to hazard a guess at the scale of propagation."

From the corner of my eye I saw Masego finishing a flourish of the wrist with a wooden stylus that's somehow written in dark letters over the tabletop. I leaned in closer, glancing at equations that were giving me a headache just to try to parse.

"Masego?" I asked.

He breathed out a little noise of triumph.

"The Whitecaps are the limiting factor," Hierophant called out. "Assuming there is a hard limit to the power a Choir can wield and the source would be in central Procer, we are looking at an estimated two thirds of Calernia being affected. Rhenia and parts of Hannover would be untouched, up north, while the eastern limit would be the Whitecaps down to the Stygian border with Delos. Assuming a dilution effect by large bodies of water-"

"At such a scale, there would not be," the Blessed Artificer told him. "A higher threshold of propagation, but that's all."

Masego let out a noise of grudging appreciation.

"In that case," he continued, "the city of Levante might be unaffected, and the mountainous parts of the Titanomachy would certainly be. Everything else would be within range."

"Ashur?" I faintly asked.

He shrugged.

"Fifty-fifty odds," he admitted. "The sea is an unpredictable boundary."

Utter silence followed in the aftermath of his words. Putting together the words of Masego and the Artificer, the picture painted was... horrifying, for lack of a stronger word. More than nine tenths of Procer and Levant dead, the better part of the Free Cities – including its two largest cities, Helike and Nicae – and *even odds* on the complete annihilation of the Thalassocracy. An end to the ratlings, and at the moment the Firstborn as well. Callow and Praes would get to hide behind the mountains and four of the Free Cities were far enough east to be spared, but the sheer loss of life... *Fuck*.

"It would end the armies of the Dead King as well," the Blessed Artificer quietly said. "And most likely destroy the Hellgate in Keter."

At the cost of what, two thirds of the population of Calernia? The Dominion wasn't densely populated, but Procer sure as Hells was and the Free *Cities* were aptly named. No wonder the Hidden Horror had believed everyone would turn on the Bard after learning this.

"Removing the hard limit in power, the Whitecaps will eventually be vaporized and we're looking at full saturation of the continent," Masego noted. "Including through the ground into the Kingdom Under, though that will take up to days longer."

"Even under your limited model the crater in central Procer is likely to touch dwarven tunnels," the Blessed Artificer condescendingly said, "and they'd be looking at the loss of a few principalities' worth of territory as well."

Ah, I thought with fixed smile on my face, would you look at that. They'd actually made it worse, which I'd doubted was possible. Now we also had to worry about the dwarves considering the weapon a threat and deciding to strike first.

"Merciless Gods, Hasenbach," I feelingly said. "How much more will it take to convince you to drop that fucking thing at the bottom of the Skiron Ocean?"

"The Kingdom of Callow has *grave* concerns about the keeping of such a potentially calamitous weapon," Vivienne said, translating my words into something more diplomatic.

"Much of what was said here is speculation," the First Prince mildly replied. "And even this speculation points to the risk having passed."

"If a proper method to wield the remains is created, it is the sort of weapon that could win us this war," the Blessed Artificer agreed.

"Or it could kill us all," the Rogue Sorcerer gently reminded her.

"You have personally patronized the Quartered Seasons weapon, Queen Catherine," Cordelia reminded me. "Which carries great risks as well, to my recollection."

"I've limited information on it, but it's ultimately a Grand Alliance initiative and not a purely Callowan one," I replied. "I've been preparing the results for perusal, as a matter of fact, now that tangible progress has been made. I can't say the same about that corpse you're dragging around."

"Then your issue is the lack of Callowan observers, not the weapon itself," the First Prince said.

My brow rose. This kind of wordplay might be useful in a place like the Highest Assembly, where appearances were everything and such little victories counted, but she ought to know better than to try to finagle me. I was in no way above using a bloody hatchet where a stiletto failed to get the point across.

"No," I bluntly said. "My issue is with anyone's possession of a weapon that could potentially wipe out two thirds of Calernia. There's no equivalence to be drawn there, First Prince. If Quartered Seasons goes wrong it'll be a disaster, but a *survivable* one. Your 'large-scale defensive weapon' is a blade

put to the throat of millions, and I did not torch such a weapon in Praesi hands only to meekly accept your keeping the same."

A bit of an exaggeration there, since Black had been the one to destroy Liesse while I'd actually been inclined to side with Malicia in the heat of the moment, but it wasn't like anyone else here *knew* that. Blue eyes stayed on me as Hasenbach attempted to gauge how serious I was being, and I hid nothing: this was genuinely unacceptable. It'd been a liability before, but now it was something a lot worse.

"We have gone far beyond the remit of this council," the First Prince eventually said. "If there are grievances to be had, there are mechanisms to address them under the treaties binding the Grand Alliance."

My eyes narrowed. The diplomatic thing here would have been implying it was up for negotiation before brushing me off, opening the path for later private talks if she wasn't willing to hash this out in the open here. The First Prince had *not* done that. She was sending the message there wasn't room for compromise there, and coming from a diplomat of her calibre that surprised me. What was driving her to keep her finger on that trigger at all costs? I glanced at the White Knight and found him looking remote, almost absent-minded. Whether it was because Judgement had been spoken of or because he saw the disputes of crown as beyond him, I could not be certain. Either way it was less than helpful.

"It might allay some unease if specialists were allowed to take a look at this weapon and ascertain its possible effects," Vivienne suggested.

A fair suggestion, I thought, but not a tempting one for Procer. In our case said specialist would be Masego, which I somehow doubted they would go for. They weren't idiots, they had to know that letting the Hierophant riffle through anything miraculous was as good as allowing him to shut it down at will.

"Something to discuss under different circumstances, Lady Dartwick," the First Prince politely replied.

Huh. Really not giving even the shadow of an inch, was she?

"White Knight?" I tried.

If he wasn't going to step in by himself, I'd drag him into the melee by the scruff of the neck.

"It would be unwise to further debate this without having sought more information," Hanno eventually said. "This council has served its purpose, I believe, and need not be further prolonged."

I hid my displeasure. Not what I'd wanted to hear, though I supposed it was much like him to keep silent until he'd dug through enough memories he had a better idea of what he was dealing with. The White Knight disliked rushing to decision when there were still cards yet to be revealed. Though he didn't show it, I suspected he was a lot warier of making mistakes now that the Seraphim were no longer looking over his shoulder. With both Hasenbach and Hanno supporting this all coming to an end there was little point in pursuing the opposite, so I folded and we called the meeting to an end. The First Prince caught my eye as we began to disperse, however, and her secretary passed along an invitation to walk with her a span. Before long we were sharing a stretch of hallway between my limp and her measured stride, Vivienne and the Kingfisher Prince trailing behind us.

"I have concerns," the First Prince told me with unusual forthrightness.

For her to drop the more elegant methods she preferred, they had to be some pretty dire fucking concerns.

"You've heard mine," I said, frowning. "I'm all ears for yours."

"The Truce and Terms are proving to be highly unstable," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "An uncomfortable number of collaborators were found by the Intercessor among both Chosen and Damned, and now the White Knight himself was mutilated by one of his subordinates. I am forced to wonder if these trials are not simply the act of gilding a sinking boat."

Fuck, I thought. All this time I'd been worried about keeping my villains in line and Hanno's lot from stepping on mine, but I'd not stopped to think about how the Principate would see it all. Hasenbach was still being asked to ignore attempted regicide of one of her princes so that the authority of increasingly bloodied Terms might be preserved. The more their credibility was damaged by little things like the Mirror Knight cutting up a high officer of the Grand Alliance, the less she'd be inclined to bend her neck. I studied her from the corner of my eye. Given how useful Named still were to the fronts, she was exaggerating to some extent there. Even if the Terms had been much worse, from a pragmatic perspective they'd still be a net advantage when it came to survival – and that was the way Hasenbach had to think, right now. She was drawing my attention to this to make a point elsewhere.

Considering what we'd just finished having a council about, it was not hard to guess.

"There are some matters that can be gambled with," I slowly said. "There are others where the simple act of implying a gaming mood loses trust in a way that cannot be mended."

I would not haggle over the custody of the doomsday corpse, not when it'd been made clear that there might be millions of lives hanging in the balance.

"I will not allow policy to be dictated by pissing matches among Named, Queen Catherine," Cordelia Hasenbach coolly said.

It was the crudest thing I'd ever heard come out of her mouth, and that was enough to give me pause.

"The coming trials will clarify whether Chosen and Damned can be trusted to oversee themselves," the First Prince of Procer warned. "And if your kind proves to be running wild unchecked, Black Queen, if they cannot be counted on?"

She met my eyes.

"Then the Principate will do what it must to survive, no matter whose feathers it ruffles. On that point there can be no negotiation."

Anomandris

It's like reading a Domsday game of chickens, isn't it?

"Both reliably competent and socially skilled, why hadn't Zeze figured out a way to make more of him yet? "

I wonder that all the time too, Cat....

Adrian

Wow, Cordelia. I know Catherine won't just up and leave, bringing all of Callow and destroying the framework that has allowed them to gather so many Named, but I almost wish she could just out of spite. Striking at the Terms (from which she has massively benefitted, btw) to negotiate custody of the WMD is a direct slap to Catherine's face, and I'd argue is almost to the point of acting in bad faith.

agesbe

Cordelia tries to strike a strong stance... but if she comes down too hard on Named, no matter how morally justified she is or at least thinks she is, they'll bail and the entirety of Procer will be up a creek without a paddle.

Oh sure a lot of Named will stay, particularly though not exclusively the heroes. It's still the Dead King after all. But a

lot, mostly villains but probably a handful of heroes too, will leave. And if that happens, the front which is already barely hanging on will get worse.

Also why is she holding onto the doomsday device with both hands as hard as she can?

Anomandris

I think the answer to your question is kinda the point you are making in the first para.

hakureireimu

I think she's saying that she'll yield on the trial question but keep the Doomsday weapon.

[Decius](#)

She's received an offer from the Intercessor.

DrMajesticPhD

The Intercessor can't directly interact with un-Named or non Name claimants. That's why she was trying to get Cordelia to claim the Name "First Prince" in the last book, and why Cat doesn't like Named royalty.

Dredcor

The Name was Warden of the West actually, iirc.

masterofbones

If there's one thing that heroes are good at, its stopping lunatics with doomsday devices. Catherine and Hanno have an *army* of heroes, and Cordelia thinks she has any sort of power on this front?

But this is how I've always felt about her. She has no real power, but assumes that her throne makes her a true peer of the people she speaks to, and that her petty concerns are equal to those of the rest of the world.

TLDR: Procer needs to burn, the Dead King has the right idea.

Lox

"Power resides where men believe it resides," eh?

ByVectron!

Especially when, from the sounds of it, that Doomsday weapon would vaporize HER people and lands, while leaving Callow and the Dread Empire untouched.

[Liliet](#)

Would have, had it been used with Judgement active.

just some dude

More likely outcome than Named abandoning Procer, is that they will take down Hasenbach herself if she proves to be a threat to the country.

imagesbe

Also is Cordelia trying to say, "if Named can't be counted on, then I'll use this definitely more reliable and controllable superweapon that I know at least one ancient powerful being wants to turn into a freakin' doomsday device." Because that just doesn't line up.

The only explanation behind her holding onto it so hard is that she's convinced she can control it or at least wield it reliably. But I can't think of any reason this would actually be the case.

hakureireimu

She doesn't know storyfu; so she doesn't know that the very existence of the weapon makes it more likely for it to be needed.

M0och123

It is surprisising that someone of her intelligence would believe that introducing a literal continent destroying weapon to the equation will actually help though...

I mean I understand the reasoning of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) that she is using but that only works when you know exactly what your superweapon is going to do. If there is even a chance of it not working the way you want (i.e. Bard) it becomes a fatal liability.

[TeK](#)

To be fair, I think it's more of spite. If we fall, we are dragging the D(ic)K with us.

Salt

Cordelia's intelligence I suspect IS what's causing her to fail to understand the gravity of the problem.

She isn't Catherine. Catherine's roots were burned into her by a man who lives and breathes story tropes as his own personal arsenal of weapons.

Cordelia is an incredibly intelligent schemer who is used to nearly every problem she's ever faced being overcome in the end by her own brilliant schemes. She has no roots and no formal training in stories. She's never experienced ripping resurrection from the hands of Angels by pulling a sword from a stone, but she has experienced avoiding lots of outcomes that other people said were unavoidable disasters, by being just clever enough.

Catherine is basically trying to convince one of the greatest schemers who ever lived that her latest scheme is sure to blow up in her face, because of some esoteric semi-magical laws of fictional tropes that said schemer understands little of and believes in even less.

[sivarajan](#)

You're implying she's Malicia to Cat's Black.

Daltos

That fits so well, actually!

NerfContessa

Has been stated before, and it still fits,. Sadly.

I mean honestly, Cordelia. Ask augur, ask Hanno, and Act on the result, before all that remains of the continent is a wasteland. So dead not even a fallout game can happen in it...

Cpt. Obvious

OK, two years late to the discussion and all, but doesn't it appear that the Wandering Bard isn't really out to destroy Calernia or even the Dead King? Well at least not primarily?

Look back at the aftermath of that little game of Tarot Catherine, no in this case The Black Queen and The Wandering Bard played recently.

It was all orchestrated, the attack on everything and especially the one person that Cat loves. It was a planned set of events that guaranteed Catherine would do her outmost to really kill the Bard once and for all.

And she tried. She had Masego ward the place all the way to hell to stop the Bard from escaping death, which is one of

her aspects or powers, but also trying to catch or destroy the bard's essence as Catherine slit the bard's throat.

The wards might have worked at least partially, as the Bard didn't escape the knife. But if this power is an aspect then it's not sure she even tried to use it. However they failed to catch or destroy the essence of the Bard.

Now comes the interesting part. When the Bard opened her eyes again she was disappointed. Not in having her body slain again, but in surviving it yet again.

Face it, she's been arranging this war to unleash some power or powers that are able to kill her once and for all. She's been wandering Creation for who knows how many millenia. She's seen every single person she's learned to know die. Heroes, Villains, they all die. Entire civilizations has come and gone, and yet she's still here. Her oldest acquaintance is the Dead King, and he is only a few millenia old, and dead.

She's tiered. She's seen it all. Heroes being heroic, Villains being villainous and the mundane going about living their short lives, loving, hating, building families, fighting wars, helping the unfortunate and preying on the weak. And she is tired of it all. She wants to die, and if all of Creation has to be destroyed to achieve this then so be it. If it's just the major part of Calernia that's destroyed why would she care? She doesn't just want to die, but be totally destroyed or some clever necromancer like the Dead King might bring her back. Which is probably why she chose to set him up as the big bad.

RoflCat

AND will likely breakdown/backfire to create 'darkest hour' for Heroes to save the day. Cordelia rejecting becoming the Warden pretty much guarantee that the Story will make it that way.

She is basically the general/president ordering a nuke to be fired and now the (super)Heroes has to stop it from exploding whatever it was aimed at to avoid the catastrophic collateral damage.

[TeK](#)

Avengers intensifies

mamm0nn

Which would make it all the more terrible if it turns out she didn't have an angel's corpse and this is all an elaborate

bluff against the Dead King to not make Procer a cornered animal. We haven't actually seen it yet, after all, only hearing of dredging operations.

Tom

I like this, but it would have to be a pretty spectacular bluff to have fooled so many for so long.

Rey d'Tutto

Hanno says it's an Judgement corpse, so it's an Judgement corpse.

Salt

It's disturbing how the details of Cordelia and Catherine's stances are beginning to mirror Black and Malicia's old arguments over the Second Liesse doomsday weapon. Which is horrifying considering Catherine is also playing a similar Role in the GA that the Black Knight did in Praes, while Cordelia is playing a similar Role to Malicia in the same.

Malicia argued for the creation and keeping of the doomsday device as a deterrent, because she was convinced that Black's mundane methods were "insufficient". "The Legions will fail, the Calamities will fail. Your ramshackle attempts at successors will fail." "The only way to survive is to not fight at all, and for that I needed a tool."

Black argued against, because stories dictate that this is always a bad idea, no matter how sound it seems on the surface. That it's "Some godsdamned throwback from the Age of Wonders that will go down in flames and take the Empire with it.". He made his case from a Narrative perspective that Malicia simply doesn't put as much stock in.

Right now, Cordelia is arguing for keeping the doomsday device as a deterrent, because she's beginning to believe Catherine's mundane methods are insufficient. The Terms will fail, the Woe will fail. Her ramshackle attempts and binding together Named will fail. The only way to survive may be to not fight at all, and for that she needs a tool.

Cat just made the same argument as Black did for the same reasons to the same kind of person who somewhat understands but doesn't truly appreciate how narratively terrible this actually is, and got nowhere with it just like he did.

The trial over the Red Axe is going to be a climax to top them all so far, I'm betting. If Catherine doesn't tread lightly here and straight up do better than even her old teacher did,

then it might be a lot more than a single city and partnership that'll be a smoking hole in the ground by the end of it.

[TeK](#)

I think it is actually worse, because this corpse pretty clearly did NOT work as a deterrent. The only use for it that I can see is some kind of suicidal "take him down with us" position.

Also this analogy fills me with hope instead. Like, ok, we all *know* that the, uhm, arguable Good will triumph at the end, but the fact that Cat is playing Black in the exact situation where Black had failed is **good**, because she is his successor and she learnt on his mistakes and she already did better than him. So the situation is kind of narratively obligated to end happily. More or less...

Salt

I... want? To believe that is true?

But I'm almost scared to make an optimistic prediction about it (or believe one), because half the time I do this story ends up with a surprise plot twist in which everything completely goes to shit before very arguably getting better.

Maybe it's better for this to be more than just Catherine's victory in the end though, so it could be a good thing that other characters are pushing back at her. Catherine's personal story tends to have her personal victories come at equally ruinous personal cost, and what the cost of winning against the Dead King or the Intercessor would be is something that's depressing to imagine. This pattern might be mitigated a lot if it's a shared victory with as much of capital-G Good as possible, which is the side that's narratively supposed to win and live happily ever after anyway.

[TeK](#)

Well to be fair, Cat will most likely die or be forced to something equal to death (banishment from continent). Or she could take WB place for an eternity of nothingness and loss and schemes.

If you think about it, the Woe has pretty amazing narrative potential roles they can fill. Archer is Ranger's star pupil and is already called the Lady. Hierophant came as close as one can to the Neshie's personal apprentice. And Cat had shaped up to be Bard's rival/successor too. So if we assume that DK and Bard will die or be gone from Calernia, and Ranger will somehow

vanish due to Praesi fuckery, it's pretty obvious who will step up to fill each shoe of immortal superpeople of Calernia.

Like Woe do not have just a potential to be some regional power, they can be THE power. Of course, Vivi is future queen of Callow, and Hakram will probably take Cat's place at realising her Accords, and Cardinal and other shit. Archer is pretty clearly going to leave Calernia too, Masego will become god and possibly accompany Archer (though doubtful, he will probably stay on Calernia, anchoring Indrani) and there is also interesting parallel between somewhat cordial relationship between Neshamah and Ranger.

Or, well, Hakram will die, Cat will die, Archer will die, Masego will realise his divine ambition only to realise that he wants his friends back more, and, well, two-thirds of Calernia will end up glassed, with Vivi scrambling to fight Amadeus everything admirable about whom was stripped by the demands of the crown.

Or something in between.

Salt

Actually, the two extremes of "rocks fall, everyone dies" and "they all lived happily ever after" is exactly what I think is on the table right now.

As in the Intercessor really did create a way to turn the continent into a smoking hole in the ground, and that it's exactly as horribly awful as it seems on the surface, because that's the entire point. I think she's counting on Above and Below getting so pissed off at how terrible the outcome is, that they have no choice but to destroy her and finally let her Rest In Peace.

Clearly, they didn't decide to replace her with Catherine as her successor/rival/thief, despite her best efforts at being nice about it. So she resorts to doing it the "hard way", by playing genocidal chicken with the lives of most of the continent, to blackmail them into letting her die for good.

You flinch first, you pieces of shit, or I really am going to turn your Above/Below pissing match that is Calernia into a flaming sheet of glass.

[TeK](#)

For me, one of the main morals of the story was "compromise". So I actually fully expect the ending to

reflect it. To be good... But not perfect. Realistic. Somewhere you win, somewhere you lose. A compromise between a Downer Ending and Happy Ending, to create something bittersweet. A Practical Ending, if you will.

Konstantin von Karstein

Well, shit.

Laguz24

I think one of the problems is the fact that Cordelia doesn't know how to make it a victory for others as well. Seriously, this crusade idea was hers and that backfired due to the story groove that crusades usually fail, since they are goods way of pushing past the balance point. I also don't see a single enemy or adversary she turned into an ally or at least none that weren't on her side to begin with. She needs to learn how not just how to manage Procer but to gain allies in the wider world.

[Liliet](#)

Actually, Levant was high key NOT Procer's ally. Like, there was a low key border feud going on that she diplomanced into an alliance. Also, literally nobody except the Lycaonese wanted a Lycaonese on the throne at the start of her involvement in the civil war. And I don't get the impression Ashur and Procer were all buddy-buddy before her Grand Alliance either, with Ashur being Levant's (second) patron against Procer usually.

[Javvies](#)

It won't be the trial over Red Axe that causes critical problems.

Remember, Hanno has already told the Heroes that he was going to convict and kill Red Axe himself. Then Mirror Knight objected and got his ass beaten into unconsciousness by Hanno.

There's no ground to stand on over anybody getting upset about the Heroic representative for the Truce and Terms deciding one of his fellow Heroes, specifically Red Axe, heads committed acts that require her to die.

The problem is going to come from two places – the first is Mirror Knight, his actions while at the Arsenal (and his presence at the Arsenal in the first place), and the fact that almost nobody likes him (except perhaps for those using/manipulating him for personal gain), plus his intimate relationship with Proceran Nobles plotting treason and betrayal. And Hanno's determination to keep him alive might not have stopped Mirror Knight before he went too far for

Cat, Cordelia, and others to readily tolerate without significant repercussions. Mirror Knight's probably going to be whiny and want the sword back, too.

The second place we can expect problems is people (probably mostly Heroes) who object to how Cat handles Hunted Magician in light of his substantive assistance to the extremely classified and need to know secret project that is Quartered Seasons.

Salt

Ok the contrary I think the problem with the Principiate and the Red Axe is THE central critical problem. It's a problem that is not dependent on whether the Red Axe actually gets executed or not, so much as who has the right to decide whether she should be executed her or not.

The White Knight being determined to kill her does nothing to resolve it, because the entire issue is a debate on whether it should be the White Knight's decision or the highest assembly's.

The thing is that if the Principiate folds, it essentially undermines its own sovereignty. Having your own royalty nearly murdered and not even having the ability to try and sentence the criminal under your own legal system is about as politically terrible as it gets.

The Terms also can't fold, because they're built on the foundation of absolute political immunity. If said immunity is actually not immunity, and the Terms are seen to allow Proceran courts are allowed to try and hang Named, they'll balk. The terms fall apart, because what sensible Villain would agree to binding terms that could allow the gods-damned Principiate to hang them?

It's even worse because it has the potential to open up a schism between the Principiate and the Terms, when the Principiate was just revealed to have a continent-killing bomb in hand. One that Cordelia is considering keeping precisely because she is losing faith in the Terms.

The Red Axe is now, indirectly, a landmine that could result in the death of most of the life on the entire continent. As much of an annoying pissant as the Mirror Knight currently is, he's not quite on the level of a problem that could result in a legendary mistake that no one walks away from.

Javvies

Hanno executing the Red Axe for her Truce and Terms violations shortstops the Proceran desire to have her tried and executed by Proceran court – it demonstrates

that Hanno is serious about enforcing the rules on the Heroes and is capable of doing so. Also, since nobody is going to resurrect Red Axe or turn her into an undead, she can only be executed once.

Remember, Cordelia wanted Red Axe in front of a Proceran prosecution to drive a wedge between Mirror Knight and the Proceran nobles he's involved with.

Mirror Knight is the larger problem because the Grand Alliance has an interest in him being hammered harder than Hanno apparently wants to.

Also, Mirror Knight is intimately involved with Proceran nobles plotting betrayal and treason. Though it's not clear that Cordelia or Cat has enough concrete evidence of that or of sufficiently serious actions other than just talk in order to convince Hanno to take Mirror Knight to task over that involvement and plotting.

Salt

It was actually stated outright in "Convenience" that because it entailed the attempted murder of a proper Prince, just having her executed under the terms was specifically not good enough for Cordelia, or for Procer as a whole. She needed a trial and sentence under Proceran Law, whereas Catherine specifically could not allow a trial and sentence under Proceran law. It actually doesn't matter even if both trials call for the exact same verdict, Cordelia needs a trial by Procer regardless and Catherine cannot allow a trial by anything other than the Terms.

Wanting a way to strike against Langevins was a nice side benefit, but the crux of it was whether she faced a Proceran Sentence/Execution or a Sentence/Execution under the Terms.

Ironically enough, the White Knight would likely understand better than most of the Named why it matters so much whose sentence it is, rather than what the sentence is. His answer to the Seraphim's riddle of fault was to refuse to answer what the sentence should be, and focusing entirely on who should have the authority to determine justice in the first place, after all.

Cordelia on wanting a trial under Proceran law, regardless what happens under the terms:

> "If I were to concede that a trial could be held under the Terms before the sentence to the Principate's own was applied, would that remedy your objection?" the blonde princess asked.

>That was already a better look for the whole affair, but it was also strictly that: a look. In substance, we'd still be establishing the jurisdiction of Proceran law over the Named serving under the Terms.

Cordelia on the key being the Red Axe seeing Proceran Justice, not just Justice or Justice under the terms, because the problem is the optics of it for the people of Procer:

> "That reluctance is not unearned," Cordelia said, "yet it, too, must have limits. Minor crimes such as theft and assault I will not balk at leaving to the Terms, in the same way that an army in the field is subject to military justice and not that of a prince. Yet I cannot allow attempted regicide on Proceran soil without having it face Proceran justice. It would undermine the peace of the entire realm, establishing for all to see that Chosen and Damned live under different laws than the rest."

Catherine on understanding this but still disagreeing that any trial by Procer can't be allowed, because it's a question of authority, not the punishment itself:

> "I understand why you want your trial, I really do," I admitted. "In your place, I'd be pushing for the same thing."

>"Yet you are not in my place," the blue-eyed woman said, smiling thinly.

>"No, I'm not," I said. "I'm speaking as the representative for Below's champions. And Procer simply isn't trusted enough for them to be comfortable with it having the authority to hang them."

Jago

> As much of an annoying pissant as the Mirror Knight currently is, he's not quite on the level of a problem that could result in a legendary mistake that no one walks away from.

Till his allies help him and the Red Axe escape from prison, steal the Severance, all that while killing several Heroes and Villains. Then they will go and get the WMD to kill the DK and trigger a continent killing disaster (and no one has taken into account the effect of the nuclear winter following the use of WMD, so probably an extinction level event) .

Decius

The only way I see Red Axe's sentencing going well is for the Truce and Terms sentence to be that RA forfeits the protection of T&T and is to be turned over to regular authorities for attempted regicide.

[Liliet](#)

ooooo. That sounds like it might work, especially when it comes up that Red Axe signed on to the T&T in bad faith in the first place.

Pandacrator

I don't think it is about reliability. I interpret it as "Named are a good defense but they threaten my authority so I need a plan B that only I control in case they turn against the nobility of Procer" which puts her in a position of not being entirely reliant on Heroes. This way they can't claim they should be excused for everything, because they are no longer irreplaceable.

[Liliet](#)

> The only explanation behind her holding onto it so hard is that she's convinced she can control it or at least wield it reliably. But I can't think of any reason this would actually be the case.

I can't think of a specific reason it wouldn't.

We just found out about one, which is clearly extraordinary and fairly unique in scope – Intercessor influencing a Choir is pretty exotic.

That one is no longer active. Leaving her with a cadre of mages and priests working on figuring it out and answering to her.

danh3107

Fucking hells

Tenthyr

The Bards attacks are still unwinding, even if Catherine drove her off for a time. Looks like they'll come to a head with whatever this trials result is.

[Liliet](#)

Welp, this is getting *fun*.

Aaand everyone who guessed this guessed it right: full nuke for Procer. Although that's a bit... further than I'd been guessing myself 0.0

[TeK](#)

Didn't they just established that the Procer would be wiped out if they use it? How is that survival?

Anomandris

It's more of a Mutually Assured Destruction kinda thing in my view for her. It would make the Alliance help Procer (otherwise Boom), probably make DK wary of pushing the fight too much to Procer (otherwise Boom).

[TeK](#)

Drawing on parallels with Malicia! Good!

Ugh, small problem: Dead King knows about that weapon and is still attacking. MAD failed before it had started.

Nairne .01

Also it won't be functional until the business with Hierarch is resolved.

[TeK](#)

It would be, that was rather *the point*

WuseMajor

I believe that the main point of the above story is that it won't be controllable until the business with Hierarch is concluded. If set off now, it will either have no connection to heaven and do nothing or the connection to heaven will apparently act like opening the plug in the bottom of a lake and wash this continent away.

Hellspirit

Either that or that lack of control will mean that the Dead King will be able to hijack it instead of the Bard.

2xMachina

Dead king, and a dead angel eh.

[Liliet](#)

> If set off now, it will either have no connection to heaven and do nothing or the connection to heaven will apparently act like opening the plug in the bottom of a lake and wash this continent away.

I don't see any indication of the latter. The 'wash away the continent' scenario was if Bard exploited its link with the Seraphim (which is no longer there) to turn the crank all the way up. It's not a guess as to what will happen now, only a potential hypothetical what-if worst case scenario.

Liliet

Actually, it was said nobody knows how it'd function now. "Opening a plug at the bottom of a lake" was in case Intercessor cranked up the intensity through the Seraphim which is no longer doable.

mamm0nn

That's probably why Tyrant saved the day: Bard might've been able to use it to destroy DK the moment it was dredged up otherwise, using the massive power of the Choir and a more refined form of Light rather than just the corpse. Without it, DK will too likely survive the blast.

caoimhinh

Also, let's not forget that the Dead King's real body is another freaking dimension A.K.A the Serenity, which is in Hell.

That's why he is pretty chill about it. No matter how freaking destructive that nuke can be, it's still doubtful it will harm his real domains. The only way for it to happen is for them to first go through the hordes of Undead that have been ravaging over Procer for years.

That weapon poses more danger for Procer than the rest of Calernia, and even less danger to Neshamah.

agumentic

I think it's been mentioned that if the Dead King loses Keter, it's essentially the end for him. He goes from immortal First Monster in the north to evil in a can – and those get smashed to hell and back by the story the moment they try to do anything.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's true, but is it possible to open a Greater Breach from the infernal side of the fence? Because if it is the case, Neshamah has no reason to care about the Angel weapon, at least in its present state. Especially because he knew about the weapon for a long time and have prepared countermeasures.

Insanenoodlyguy

Doesn't matter. Once Keter is lost, he's evil in a can. Even if he's evil in a can with a large force, that's an established flavor of evil in a can. "Once I open a new breach, my armies will march in creation and I shall rule again!?" As stated, the sorts of people with that as a plan die all the time to teenagers who haven't even finished their full heroic journey yet.

[ayon96](#)

Speculation! They don't know for sure and First prince is willing to gamble.

[TeK](#)

She is willing to gamble that nuke strong enough to evaporate the whole of Keter, Dead King and his armies will spare Procer because... why?

caoimhinh

Cordelia has always been desperate to hold on to her power, for all that she pretends otherwise. She has at every chapter from her POV being worried about being revoked from the position of First Prince by the Highest Assembly.

Sure, her strongest **wish** is duty, but let's not forget that she sees herself as the only one capable of fulfilling that duty. And she is always afraid of losing control of Procer. She is not thinking things through but rather is now attempting to force Catherine into backing her keeping of the weapon by threatening the Truce and Terms (which is a mistake), willfully ignoring the undeniable fact that Named have *always* regulated themselves. Heroes kill Villains and Villains kill Heroes, the pretense that the nations actually held control over them is just Proceran Bullshit on Cordelia's part. Heroes can be moved into action by a cause or a story, but not because a Head of State commanded it.

Named can control countries but countries can't control Named.

Cordelia should have learned that already after the Tenth Crusade got out of her control. But her emotions are getting the best of her here.

In a sense, the way Cordelia is acting is similar to the Mirror Knight holding unto the Severance as it gave him security, power and a sense of importance. Cordelia will not let go of the Angel Corpse Weapon because it is ultimately a Proceran weapon under her control, it doesn't matter how dangerous it could be if it went out of hand or malfunction.

It's a similar policy with every country in our world that has Nuclear Weapons, they are simply not going to get rid of them because that's a deterrent weapon for their nation.

Konstantin von Karstein

She doesn't hope it will spare Procer. She plan to use it only if Procer is dead anyway.

caoimhinh

I also believe she plans to hold onto that weapon even after the war is over. It's a powerful weapon to have, and it's a mighty deterrent.

Also, if it can be further refined into something more stable and controllable...

Well, that will keep Procer safe and Cordelia at its head, the way she has always intended.

[TeK](#)

Wouldn't she be forced to scrap it under Accords?

caoimhinh

Maybe. But the Accords are still under discussion.

Cordelia seems to be working on a big amount of wishful thinking right now. Along with her own desperation and control-issues, this will make her come up with all kinds of excuses to not give up on the weapon for as long as possible.

She is acting on emotions, not on logic. She might perform a lot of mental gymnastics to justify her actions, but that's fear talking.

[TeK](#)

Well, she could've make that more clear. Why can't she speak straight?

[Liliet](#)

This. The discussion is not about using it, it's about keeping it. Even Catherine immediately thinks Cordelia would only turn to it as an absolute last resort.

Also, angel strikes ARE normaly aimed. The 'nuke everything' option is if the power lever is cranked all the way up and they no longer can.

[ayon96](#)

Dead king's armies is also gonna be nuked and the hellgate is gonna get destroyed in it.

[Liliet](#)

Because it's not a nuke.

It'll function as one above a certain threshold of power but it's not meant to reach that and it's certainly not meant to go off at the source point.

imagesbe

Cordelia's argument is that if used as the Bard intended it would be a doomsday weapon for a good portion of the continent, but with Judgement out of the picture the Bard [i]presumably[/i] can't control it anymore. Thus it simply becomes a powerful weapon that can be controlled to not doom the entire continent. Supposedly. Catherine is shrieking internally and a little externally that a weapon capable of wiping out most of a continent should just flat out not be used.

M0och123

It would almost be impossible for the story to allow a doomsday weapon like this is to actually be used. Especially considering that there exists a type of people (Named) whose sole purpose is to prevent such a thing from happening.

While I don't doubt that Bard could create such a scenario, I am fairly certain even she doesn't want the annihilation of the continent.

[TeK](#)

>I am fairly certain even she doesn't want the annihilation of the continent

Oh, you sweet summer child.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's so cute! 😊 You really think Bard would balk at sacrificing 2/3 of Calernia if it could kill the DK?

caoimhinh

Yep, she wouldn't want that. But might as well attempt it on the hopes of getting killed.

It may be her way to get into a Story where she is the villain attempting to destroy the world, such guys don't often get to survive.

And Bard *really* wants to die. So...

John Pratt

Nah, she definitely wants the annihilation of a continent. Especially an angel driven annihilation that will leave that actual lands essentially untouched, or even cleansed of previous taint via the tabula rasa effect. That leaves Praes and Callow to expand into continental superpowers, which gives her the narrative juice to weld the rest of the world into a broad coalition of Above against the nascent Evil Empire. The author already as much as spelled out that the Bard already tried a variation of this plan by sponsoring the rise of Triumphant.

[Liliet](#)

> The author already as much as spelled out that the Bard already tried a variation of this plan by sponsoring the rise of Triumphant.

I'm sorry, what?

Can you provide... any citation for this?

Last I recall, Bard was pretty miffed at the elves' non-interference in the Triumphant situation, and the Dead King used her rise to manipulate the formation of Procer, a non-Named led disunited counry at his border.

Triumphant was a successful ANTI-Bard operation.

LarsBlitzer

Like TeK implied, the Bard would be rather uniquely disposed to be perfectly okay with annihilating 2/3rds of the continent. They're just people and cities and kingdoms. Nothing terribly important to a being who has lived for thousands of years and has seen countless civilizations rise and fall. She's not even terribly attached to any of her incarnations except for the most shallow of reasons such as looks. As long as DK and Keter is wiped off the map she'll gladly roll the dice and buff the SHIT out of the Angelic MacGuffin.

Thing is, to Cordelia it hasn't been confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was the Bard who did the Whammy, nor is she convinced that anyone could do it either, and certainly not to the extent where she's willing to stop the Manhattan Project. She'll be under pressure from her fellow nobles to get it done. To stop would undermine her support to stay First Prince and she'd be out on her ear.

No, this is inevitable.

Liliet

> She'll be under pressure from her fellow nobles to get it done.

Pretty sure it's a secret project her nobles don't know about, for reasons including but not limited to the potential of this.

Laguz24

I think that the Cordelia is currently holding on to the superweapon to regain a sense of control over the situation, she dislikes having to deal with named that make mockeries of rules wherever they go. This is also coming from the place where she refused a name in the highest assembly chamber.

Frivolous

I agree that that is probably Hasenbach's motivation. She's a control freak; she wants to feel like she has a lever to use.

I think she is overestimating the danger from Catherine's villains, though. She should worry far more about Hanno's heroes.

I mean, although Catherine has tender feelings about the situation, most villains and Callowans would probably be quite okay with Procer annihilating itself.

On the other hand, the Grey Pilgrim and the Ophanim might decide to assassinate Hasenbach or steal the Judgement-corpse. Tariq and his angelic patrons have a history of murdering people to save others. And all Levantine heroes would agree with him.

Also, if there is any risk at all of genocide to the Firstborn? Sve Noc will simply snuff Hasenbach out. I don't think Hasenbach has a realistic chance of surviving Sve Noc.

In other news: I wonder what the Augur would make out of all this.

M0och123

Hasenbach could only be eliminated with the proper story behind her, and such stories that involve the assassination of the First Prince that end well are very few and far in between. I think that is another thing Bard may be going for is for such an attempt to play out and for it to fail miserably.

Frivolous

Why would you say that Hasenbach can only be eliminated with a proper story?

People die all the time. She's not even a hero (yet).

The Augur might protect her from the heroes, but the Augur cannot see Sve Noc.

[Tek](#)

Nah, Cordelia has guaranteed survival until her hand is on trigger and she has to make a choice. Like how Bard couldn't die because she had a horrifying contingency of a back-up plan, and well, it wouldn't make for a good and climactic ending if she just died in the beginning of the book.

Salt

Yep. Killing off of important, beloved major characters that have been developed over many many arcs, is only done for a good reason and only if there's some sort of impactful payoff. Something on the level of a Fitting End or a huge Plot Twist.

Doing so for little reason other than just subverting expectations is a Weiss and Benioff folly, and it tends to result in a massively unhappy and angry fanbase. It should only be applied in moderation for minor characters, like the old Exiled Prince.

EE has thus far shown to be too competent of a writer to do something as silly as having a plot-critical character randomly perish by tripping and breaking their neck on an exposed brick, to be replaced by some minor side character that isn't properly fleshed out/one the audience is not invested or interested in.

[sivarajan](#)

A plot-critical character "randomly" perishing by tripping and breaking her neck is EXACTLY Assassin's M.O.

Salt

What I'm trying to get at is that this is a very intentionally meta setting where literary devices and literary purposes are often noticed by characters in the story, or even outright interacted with.

A huge change in the story like removing an old major character should always have a purpose, not "just because". Subverting expectations is for adding to

the story, not something to be done at all costs even if it detracts instead.

In a case where the major premise is partially breaking the 4th wall by having tropes be actual plot devices – to be noticed and interacted with by the characters – means that any event THAT significant is likely going to have some visible tropes or meta plot hooks leading up to it, not a meteor out of a clear blue sky because lol random.

M0och123

Ahem

Last Jedi anyone?

(Leah AND Ackbar being replaced by a complete unknown...)

[TeK](#)

Subverting expectations based on an assumption that author us competent is not something you would want to do.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, Cordy's making noises about Cat's Villains getting out of line... but she's projecting so hard she could invent the movie theater for Calernia!

At nearly every step since Cat got to the Arsenal, the Heroes have been making at least as much trouble as the Villains.

Okay, during the big fight there were Bard-betrayals by villains along with heroes – Fallen Monk, Concocter, Maddened Keeper, along with Exalted Poet (actually I forget, was he H or V?) and Blessed Artificer. But that whole mess *started* with Red Axe, whose behavior has been just damn weird.

And Mirror Knight showed up spoiling for a fight – when he got one, he may have half-saved Hakram from Keeper's betrayal, but he also opened her can of worms in the process. And having won the field against the demons he went on to challenge the White Knight, if not the Terms themselves.

[Liliet](#)

Is she making noise about villains? I'm pretty sure she's making noise about Named as a whole.

[TeK](#)

"Then the Principate will do what it must to survive, no matter whose feathers it ruffles. On that point there can be no negotiation."

Also, feathers. Get it? Cause, cause...

I'll see myself out.

Indignantpup

I like how she says for the survival of the Principate after being told that the weapon she's holding would wipe it from the face of Calernia. Wait is Calernia the whole world or is it just the continent that they're on?

[TeK](#)

Just the continent, and it won't be wiped out entirely, just meager two thirds of it. Really, pretty worth it in the end.

I mean, ethics aside, doesn't nuking the continent sounds like *fun*?

[Javvies](#)

That is all kinds of bad news.

How the fuck does she even get an Aspect like that?
And, even worse, since it works on Angels, and if Bard/
Intercessor is truly nominally unaligned, would it have
theoretical applications on demons?

Cordelia ... Angel corpses are bad news at the best of times. When Bard can control Angelic manifestations they're even worse. When Bard wants the Angel corpse to be your only option ... that's incredibly bad.

When the Angel corpse can blow up two thirds of Calernia, including blasting a massive crater into the dwarven realms, in the optimistic assessment ...

Secure the Angel corpse so that Bard cannot use it ... but work on figuring out how to safely dispose of it.

Maybe toss it through the Hellgate, or park it right in front of the Hellgate ... but don't even think about actually actively using it.

The trials are going to be critically important. We all saw that coming.

caoimhinh

Well, we know the Bard has the power to affect perception of time, at the very least. She has used that on Amadeus, Catherine, and I'm willing to say that's what she used to talk with the Dead King *inside Masego's head*.

What do you think would be the Aspects of the Intercessor.
My nominated 3 are **Wander**, **Read**, and **Interfere**.

For the teleportation, story prediction, and manipulation of perception, respectively.

About the nuke, I wonder if they will ever find a way to use the Twilight Ways to get to Keter. Kairos mentioned he had originally been looking into the practicalities of throwing the whole shard of Arcadia into the Serenity, maybe they can do something along those lines?

I mean, the only way to use that thing in any measure of safety is by activating the weapon on the other side of the Hellgate. And even then we don't know if the destruction could spread into Creation through that portal.

[TeK](#)

I think it would be **Intercede** instead, but the rest checks out.

[Liliet](#)

Wander, Listen, Tell.

I think it's fairly likely the Keeper of Stories hails from a time of oral tradition, nominating Listen as the Aspect about knowing stories – see also how a same name one allowed Saint to “hear the beat of the universe” in a way that gave her heightened story sense according to Pilgrim – and Tell as the Aspect about imposing them on reality.

It'd fit an intercessor's aspects as well – a negotiator listens, then talks.

Tell would cover the in-a-span-of-a-second discussion she had with Catherine in her mind, the Speaking-Lite Amadeus speculated was a property of bardic Names (making people stop and listen even when it's a terrible idea conceptually), the ability to impose perception filters on angels.

aurikdomi

Would her immortality the park of wander? Should the word be something different to encompass that?

aurikdomi

Be part of*

caoimhinh

Well, her soul transfers from one body to another, so I think **wander** covers it.

robertctaylorfamfrit

Even worse since this aspect seems to be along the lines of can even affect angels rather than only effect angels that makes a lot of past scenes where she's been in the background but only noticed by a single character like the Pilgrim or Cat suddenly a lot more ominous.

M0och123

Here's a lesson for you all kids...

DON'T F*CK AROUND WITH DOOMSDAY WEAPONS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD. ESPECIALLY WHEN THERE EXISTS PEOPLE WHO ARE LITERALLY DRIVEN BY FATE AND DESTINY TO SCREW AROUND WITH YOUR SCREWING AROUND.

That about sums it up.

Also, I just had a few unpleasant thoughts about the Gnomes and the various innovations happening in the Arsenal. Not saying a visit by the Gnomes is likely at this stage in the game but considering literally every single other power on Calernia is now involved in this struggle in some way (excluding the rats, they don't really get involved in anything except eating.).

I am surprised that someone as smart as Hasenbach is actually considering such a doomsday weapon a serious option. The story pattern for Doomsday weapons always end the same way and yet she insists on keeping one of the only things that will ensure that Procer is entirely destroyed. Even more than the Dead King due to the fact that at least some Procerans will be able to escape to the Kingdom and Dominion and Free Cities. With such a weapon there is literally no where to run.

caoimhinh

At this point, I'm expecting Procer to get a Red Letter like the one Praes got.

Surely if a Tribe of Goblins experimenting to make gunpowder got them one, then a Weapon of Mass Destruction should earn it?

[Javvies](#)

Gunpowder is science.
Angel corpses are magic.

Gnomes don't seem to care about magical developments, they only seem to care about mundane scientific advancement. They objected to an improvement in mundane farming equipment – that was the Dread Empire's first Red Letter in the past century.

WuseMajor

The Gnomes don't seem to care about magic derived weapons, only technology advancing beyond a certain point.

This implies that the Gnomes think that their Science can defeat any Magic, but that Science might enable them to fight on the Gnome's level.

Given the crazy shit we've seen magic do and presumably the Gnomes have been watching that too, this honestly scares me as to the kinds of things the Gnomes might be able to accomplish. I kind of wonder if the reason Heaven and Hell fight so hard here is because they've been kicked out of everywhere else on the planet.

Liliet

I expect Gnomes to have magitec – nothing about this setting so much as remotely suggests magic and technology being non-synergistic paths of development. Mass education of mages, mass production of artefacts, *be scared*.

Also I'm pretty sure they're still subject to the Gods' wager and have their own internal heroes and villains. Powerful NPCs don't get to kick out the programmers. Even if their power is over 9000, to the programmer it's still just zeros and ones arranged in a pattern on their hard drive.

Aotrs Commander

I'm pretty convinced that the gnomes are there solely to ensure that the god's little playground stay in status quo. The big difference between science and magic is that the latter remains in the hands of a finite number of people who the narrative can deal with. But technological advancement is a buff for EVERYONE and will fundamentally change the way things work that WILL break the status quo. Was not one of the Red Letters because someone developed a new piece of a farming machinery or something? That? Could solve the Praesi starvation problems and so THAT needed to be stomped on hard.

Wiping 2/3 of Calernia doesn't matter to the gnomes; if anything it would definitely keep the status quo going, as Callow becoming the New Procer, presumably (after an appropriate Story of breaking free from evil tyanny, once it is the only underdog with no allies...) and then it would naturally ease back to status quo over the centuries, depending on how long it took for Procer et al to become habitable again (I mean, it might be immediately, but it would still take time to be occupied).

(Metanarrativily, the gnomes allow EE to have a plausible reason why technology has not advanced in the thousands of years when it otherwise would have. It's a lampshade hanging, maybe, but it's one with more credibility than basically almost every other fantasy world I've seen had.)

Liliet

I'm personally in favor of the more mundane explanation that gnomes just genuinely non-meta aim to maintain their own technological supremacy, and the Gods don't give a shit one way or the other.

Jago

> (Metanarratively, the gnomes allow EE to have a plausible reason why technology has not advanced in the thousands of years when it otherwise would have. It's a lampshade hanging, maybe, but it's one with more credibility than basically almost every other fantasy world I've seen had.)

Another good one is "widespread technology makes people less reliant on gods, so we (the gods) will get less faith energy, and that is needed to protect the world from the horrors from outer space".

Big I

So the Bard's plan was to nuke Procer and the Free Cities, and I guess let the Dominion settle the ruins in the following centuries? Since protecting the first Pilgrim meant there would BE a Dominion? That's definitely got a D&D vibe to it, ancient ruins and fallen civilisations, and the Dominion is already all about killing monsters from blighted wilderness and undead from barrows.

Callow and Praes stay in their bucket, the dwarves get served a big "eff you", any survivors from the border region with Keter become mountain barbarians, and the League ends or becomes irrelevant. How diabolical.

Salt

On the contrary, I think the entire point of the Bard's plan is that it has zero redeeming qualities. The continent will never recover, no matter what anyone tries – the Bard intentionally gave it the most atrociously awful outcome possible.

Above and Below won't let her die and Rest In Peace, so I think she's planning to force them to, by blackmailing them in a continental game of chicken.

If she can't convince them that Catherine Foundling is a good enough rival/thief/successor to take her place? Fine, let's do it the hard way.

Let's make myself such a horrible liability to creation itself, with such a horrible liability of a plan, that it forces Above

and Below to boot my ass out the door and end this miserable existence.

Which would be, uh, bad news bears for everyone else. If neither the Intercessor nor the Gods actually flinch in this little game of chicken, it basically means the continent actually does get turned into a sheet of glass.

Insanenoodlyguy

That, or there's a huge but still finite range of her influence/resurrection. If there's no life on the continent, there's no reason for a bard on the continent, so she dies and stays dead. It's the sort of thing we'd expect of her. "If you let me do this, it means I win, which means I die. So I need to be stopped, which means I die, which means I win."

Ninestrings

I wonder who they've got tinkering with the angel corpse?

There must be some Oppenheimer equivalent in there, perhaps the Hierophant's Shadow Archetype?

[TeK](#)

I'd argue that Hierophant is probably the Shadow.

Ninestrings

Hierophant isn't planning to nuke the continent thought.

Well not anytime soon at least.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, but I doubt that it's out of any strong moral objection towards continent-nuking.

Decius

Most of his friends live on the continent, and lots of interesting things to study would be destroyed.

[TeK](#)

"I don't condone mass genocide because some people I like will die" is not the most, er, admirable position to take.

Shveiran

It isn't, yet it is several steps removed on the admirable scale from "Mass genocide you say? I probably

have to hold on at least one way to cause it, just in case". Not to mention "Oh, that sounds like a good thursday to me."

TeK

Well, I feel uncomfortable with this conversation, when I live in the country that bases a significant part of it's foreign diplomacy on "we're gonna hold onto this method of mass genocide just in case".

sivarajan

THE country? There are at least eight countries with that foreign policy.

TeK

Mine boasts the biggest amount of mass genocide tools and boasts the policy of "if anyone nukes us, we nuke everybody". But yeah, it's not particularly original.

caoimhinh

Yeah, I have been wondering the same.

Procer doesn't have the mages for it. It has strong Priests, but they did not obey Cordelia so who did she get to modify the Seraph's corpse? She already had that thing before the failed coup.

Such a thing must require quite a degree of knowledge, power, and skill. So it's highly suspicious. Who made that weapon?

caoimhinh

Upon more thought, I remembered that it might not even be an actual weapon or artifact, but rather it could very well be a ritual that makes use of the corpse of the Seraph.

It was summoned by some priests before Triumphant killed it, so it might be Cordelia is planning to use some priests from that branch of Faith to perform the ritual.

From Book 5 Interlude: A Hundred Battles.

"In glorious old days," Kairos Theodosian wistfully said, "there was once a woman who broke in Evil as one would break in a stallion. From triumph to triumph did she march, west and ever pursuing, until by the shores of a great lake she met in strife a hundred priests-elect of the Hallowed. And these holy souls did scour themselves to bring forth the great spirit they worshipped, one that cast judgement upon

all it beheld, and behold her it did.”

Ah, what he would not have done for a glimpse of that grand moment. Truly, there never had been nor ever would be a match to Dread Empress Triumphant.

“For that presumption she slew it,” The Tyrant ferally grinned, sharp teeth bared, “bearing tall banner, and wrote her rage in blood across a hundred trembling tribes. That which was not a corpse sunk into deep waters, turning into bones that dreamt, and there was left to slumber. Some across the years learned of this, and of the great works that might wrought from such a thing, but none were so bold as to attempt to make a sword out hallowing petrified.”

Ah, but heroes lacked for such beautiful ambitions. The living kin of that dreaming thing came too easily to their help, he’d always thought, and so there was no need for ingenuity unleashed.

“That hoped-for boldness still escapes our kind,” he mourned, “but a lesser manner of soul did grow desperate enough.”

Kairos called it a “sword” but that might be a metaphor, much like Catherine has always referred to that Angel’s corpse as an “arrow”. In this chapter they discussed using it as a ritual (with the consequences being akin to a nuke from Earth) but not as an artifact.

A priestly ritual by some secluded tradition on central Procer would make sense and be more consistent with the fact that Procer lacks mages capable of creating such OP artifact and Cordelia lacked control of the House of Light. She might just be planning to use priests from that region (Priest-elect of the Hallowed, Kairos called them).

[Liliet](#)

That’s what I’ve always assumed.

flashburn283

Hasenbach is going for the Fulda Gap gambit, nuke yourself to fuck the enemy. THIS IS NOT GOING TO END WELL SOMEBODY IS GOING TO DIE WITH THEIR FINGER ON THE TRIGGER.

[Liliet](#)

With Judgement and their ability to direct the result personally – which can then be hijacked by the Bard – out of the picture, this actually shouldn’t inevitably nuke Procer.

[Burlyraven](#)

Great, so Cordelia has a holy hydrogen bomb, and she's not even letting the others read the warning labels. I wonder if we'll hear anything from the gnomes, or if they're content to let the backwater continent purge itself.

I really need to know what had Hanno so quiet, though. I'm kind of concerned he might be so desperate for his choir to speak to him again, that he might try to speak to the "dead" angel. While he is a hero, that's a tragedy in the making, from what I can tell.

[TeK](#)

Magical nuke is a-ok. As long as it's not an actual A-bomb, it can be more powerful than it, and they won't care.

caoimhinh

Now that I think about it, it might not even be that Cordelia had an actual artifact made out of the Angel's corpse. That was Catherine's metaphor for it.

It's more likely to be a ritual that uses the corpse.

caoimhinh

I think Hanno was **Recalling** things right there. He might have left immediately to keep digging for info on the matter and more specifically on the Intercessor.

Also, Hanno doesn't seem to be in much despair, he seems to have made his peace with the silence of the Seraphim.

Razorfloss razor

Jesus Christ they have a fucking nuke!!!! If the dwaves find out porcer is fucking done along with this war.

Jworks

I just had this thought, someone tell me why it's wrong: If chapters have spelling errors in them, does that mean Erratica writes a single draft for each chapter and it's consistently this good? That's incredible if so, my first drafts of anything make me question whether or not english is my first language while editing.

[TeK](#)

Practice makes perfect. It is pretty established that he did redact earlier chapters. And how many did he wrote of just PGtE already?

Juff

Typo Thread:

She'd had > She's had
The battled > The battle
less that I > less than I
presence tabula > presence of the tabula
which should run afoul > which would run afoul
villains' destruction > villain's destruction
favour graverobbing > favour of graverobbing
that' pleasant > that 'pleasant
you," Cordelia > you." Cordelia
that's somehow written > that had somehow written
anyone' possession > anyone's possession

ChronoMager

sill dealing > still dealing
to walk with her a span > to walk with her for a span (?)

Frivolous

I have thought it over some more, and I think Cordelia is bluffing about using the angel corpse.

I think her main motivation is to bully the heroes and the villains into behaving. That's all. I don't think she has any intention of actually using it. This is the same woman who only 2 years ago knelt to Catherine in order to get her to support Procer against the DK and prevent Proceran genocide.

Why would she now try to genocide most Procerans herself? It makes no sense. Also, Hasenbach must know that if she uses the angel corpse, its neighbors will invade and probably kill all Procerans anyway.

One more thought, that I don't think has been mentioned yet in this comments section: Remember that Catherine's new Name is coming, and soon. It may come with the trials, or it may come in a confrontation with Hasenbach.

Catherine's new Name -started- to come, as you may recall, when she declared that Praes would be put in order. Hasenbach is now proving to be a danger, just like Malicia has been. The new Name will probably have something to do with that.

I don't know if Hasenbach has ever been subjected to a Named with the aspect of Rule before. Has she?

I mention this because I strongly suspect that one of Catherine's aspects will be Rule. In which case Catherine may simply Speak to Cordelia and tell her not to do it.

Frivolous

On second thought, maybe Catherine's aspect will not be Rule. Instead it might be Order. After all, the new age will be the Age of Order, yes? So Order would be appropriate.

[Liliet](#)

Her paperwork will never be buried under nut shells again!...

...Yeah, I don't think that's an Aspect she has the narrative chops for -_-

Nairne .01

While I don't see that aspect part, I think your observation of when her name started to sprout is interesting.

hakureireimu

The Angel corpse is a secret weapon, so the only one she could bully with it are the people in that room.

[marillius](#)

I'm getting tired and bored of Hasenbach. Once again she proves she's learned nothing. Distrust of Callow's Queen has turned now to distrust of Cat's work, instead. And rather than pay attention like a smart politician, 'the bard wanted the accords to be destroyed', 'the bard wanted me to use the angel corpse', 'ergo the bard thinks the accords can win this fight', 'plus these trials are literally the bards latest attacks but I'm going to use them to politically attack my ally who has forgiven me of horrible things I did to her people thus teaching her she shouldn't have.'

She's supposed to be smart, right? When do we get to see that again?

agesbe

Firstly, smart people are not immune from stupid decisions. Look at Malacia who despite her vast intellect also created pretty much every problem she's had to scheme her way out of.

Secondly Frivolous had a theory that I like, about how this angel corpse is mostly planned as a tool to try and get the Named to get their act together. Can't be sure of course, but even Cat noted that Cordelia was being unusually immovable on the issue.

[Liliet](#)

> 'the bard wanted the accords to be destroyed', 'the bard wanted me to use the angel corpse', 'ergo the bard thinks the accords can win this fight'

Doesn't necessarily follow, unfortunately.

Quite Possibly A Cat

I wonder if she is keeping the Angel corpse around as a sort of MAD? If the Dead King is about to eat everyone she pops the angel corpse. Therefore simply having that option means the Dead King will never try and eat everyone.

[Liliet](#)

A general pointing out to the comment section: the function of the Judgement corpse that could potentially nuke the continent is predicated on Bard screwing with the Seraphim, who now cannot be reached, presumably even for this.

Putting aside story concerns (because that's not how Cordelia thinks), consider the situation. You have this potentially incredibly powerful artefact that you've already sunk quite a bit of cost and effort into securing, which importantly means you cannot really get another like it in time if it turns out you need one. You don't actually know what it'll do, which means it needs research and a lot of careful tinkering before activating in any way, which is exactly what you intend to do. It's impossible to actually destroy it, what you're being asked to do is put it out of reach – for yourself and probably the next couple of generations. Sooner or later someone will find it again, and it might just regain the currently disabled continent-
nuke functionality you just learned about by then...

What part of this sounds like a good idea?

Now, letting Hierophant examine it would be the best option from the point of workplace safety, but the Black Queen is known for bullying her way through problems if she gets it in her head something is one and this is the, like, *one* thing you have that you can use as a threat/deterrent if need be. Giving her the "off" button might as well be handing her keys to the kingdom.

Now the protagonist-loving comment section doesn't see the problem with that, and honestly Catherine has already proven herself benevolent enough for it to not be a completely stupid suicidal move, but Procer is trying to be a superpower, and superpowers don't hand other nations activation codes for their nukes. Keep in mind Procer isn't Cordelia's lump of clay to shape as she wills the way Catherine thinks about Callow and Amadeus about Praes. She's already gone pretty far in reforming it and curtailing its ambitions going forward, willingly giving away what few fangs it still can scrounge up might just count as betrayal at this point.

It's the crab bucket problem, and there isn't really any nice way out of it. If Cordelia tries to climb out, someone else from her

own nation will pull her down. She has to play the game to stay at the table.

I hope Catherine doesn't do something rash in response, because there are good reasons for the harshness of *her* stance on this too =x

[TeK](#)

Oh, I can definitely see why Cordelia would do it, but you'd think the revelation that the artifact can potentially glass two thirds of Calernia will make er more cooperative, not less.

But I'll admit that protagonist-centered morality had been a scary thing in this novel. I never quite noticed it before in such effect.

[Liliet](#)

Keep in mind she's already looking at the potential of two thirds of Calernia being made into a very bustling graveyard. While the hypothetical of "this is a worst case scenario of malicious misdirection and unlimited power" is something she'd see as a hypothetical theoretical, not a near-guarantee the way Catherine-schooled-by-her-paranoid-father does.

[TeK](#)

Why exactly is he attacking though? Like what is his endgame? Cordelia seems perfectly fine believing that he attacks "cuse mah ivil", but that seems rather shallow. The one weapon he feared was broken, is it because he fears progress as speculated? Seems to shallow for such a monster. I would be banking on integrating myself back into the system, not setting myself up to be a corpse out of which the system is carved.

What does he gain? Maybe he wants Cordelia to use the corpse while Judgement is blocked to rid Intercessor of her weapon? Not enough. It is probably a side-goal, but this is war on arguably unprecedented scale. He must be after some real change on Calernian scene, but he can't possibly want to make it all his, this would be setting himself up for failure. Why now? Why war?

[Liliet](#)

> but he can't possibly want to make it all his, this would be setting himself up for failure

You're taking the genre savviness of "everything except the protagonist's course of action is doomed to failure

while the protagonist is guaranteed to succeed" too far, I think.

Neshamah had established himself as a threat to all living (any at a time, if not all at once necessarily) by being willing and able to kill off an entire kingdom at once. *Regardless of his long-term next step goal* (regardless of if he has one or if he's fine where he is and just wants to keep going like that), he needs to be too tough to take down, because the living will take the first opportunity they have to do just that (particularly with Intercessor in the picture ensuring he won't wriggle his way out of it diplomatically).

This opportunity is coming at an increasing pace, and his one option for overcoming it and jumping up to where that kind is no longer a threat to him, is taking over the continent. Both story-wise (setting precedent for how powerful he is and how it's hubristic to try and go against him) and practically (that's how many dead he can now have, that's how far he can now spread his isolated loyal population, and that's how many resources he now has access to).

The weapon is a specific focused threat, but while he might believe that this particular alliance is not yet dangerous enough to seriously imperil him, he knows that the next one will be closer, and the next one after that will be closer still, if he allows them to happen.

TeK

Uhm, I hadn't actually used the "protag always wins" logic. I used regular old "Villains who are too powerful to be defeated don't have long life-expectancy". Even DK himself acknowledged it, when Cat answered his speech about how futile struggle is with "so you are saying you are invincible and can't possibly fail" with "ha, good catch, but no, I wouldn't be caught dead doing something like this".

There is a difference between "an evil in a can" and "holy shit this is a world-class threat". One gets you practical narrative invincibility because you are a stage prop, not an actor. Second, well, it is a nice tale of the world uniting despite it's differences to annihilate a threat to all.

On the other hand, what if he used Triumphant to iron out all the design flaws in his continent conquering plan? Scary thought. If EE manages to enter a passage about how the world powers outside Calernia are currently in some major squabble and can't look around

for now, I'd be shitting my pants, uh, metaphorically speaking.

I am not saying he doesn't have a long-term plan, I am wondering what is it. He had seen firsthand how conquering the continent plays out, I don't think he is willing to risk so much for just being a target for some bigger threats.

[Liliet](#)

You have a good point about world powers having come in to nuke Triumphant. I think though that that scenario can be avoided without them necessarily being in a larger squabble, just by being more low-key than she was (I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out she antagonized them actively through the Ashuran naval access); and in any case, that's problem # next.

[Tek](#)

You don't just "hope world powers will not notice your attempt to conquer Australia". That's bad craftsmanship.

[vernal.ancient](#)

... this might be my new favorite comment

[Liliet](#)

Eh. Worked for the Golden Bloom elves.

[Mental Mouse](#)

ITSR that in fact she did in fact get pushy overseas, which led directly to hew downfall.

[Liliet](#)

(Also, "villains too powerful to be defeated don't have a long life expectancy" is only separate from "the protagonist always wins" through guide's meta-filter. At its origin, it's a derivative of the same rule)

[Tek](#)

Not necessarily, because Heroes aren't always protagonists, or rather, well, in the world of Guideverse there is either no protagonist or everyone is a potential protagonist, with Named becoming those.

Catherine aside of course, that is a little too meta. The point is that this connection works only if you conclude that only Heroes can be protagonists, which, well, that's what they want you to think.

[Liliet](#)

I'm talking about the IRL origin of tropes.

[TeK](#)

I doubt IRL exists in Guideverse 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yes it does, cause it's the actual origin of the tropes involved 😊

[TeK](#)

That's blasphemy, not proven, and may as well be the other way around besides.

agumentic

Triumphant became a target of empires from beyond the sea because she was actively planning to go and conquer the rest of the world. From the moment she decided that, coalitions of other countries would inevitably form for both the story and practical reasons. But if the Dead King doesn't decide to conquer the world, I think he may well get away with conquering Calernia – Gods will just update the setting and mark Calernia as "Continent of Death", and it will become new status quo. It might face resistance from other continents, but it wouldn't be nearly as hopeless of a story as "Villain on the way to conquer the world".

[Liliet](#)

This.

It's like how the rest of Calernia didn't really band together to defeat the Kingdom of the Dead until a powerful and ambitious alliance-builder-on-the-rise decided it would be a convenient step towards her long-term goals. While he was already actively attacking.

SpeckofStardust

The dead king wants to win. This has been his first possible chance to make progress on his end goal of

winning, he might lose but the thing is he might win.
Which is why he is doing this.

[TeK](#)

Win what? That is what I was asking. Like he obviously trying to imitate the Gods and Creation in the Serenity, is he trying to achieve "true" godhood? Join the Below as newly minted God of Death?

[Liliet](#)

So far I'm going with the default of "live forever" as a simple, convenient and ongoing goal.

[TeK](#)

He doesn't have to war on people to achieve that.

[Liliet](#)

At this point he does.

[TeK](#)

I thought he had "living forever" pretty much in hand

[Liliet](#)

Not with as many enemies as he's got.

In particular note the dwarves who went fighting the drow just to encircle him and the drow who straight up want his stuff.

SpeckofStardust

He. kinda does at this point.

their are 3/2 steps to never dying.

1. Don't die due to old age.
2. Don't die due to people trying to kill you.
3. Don't die due by removing the ability to die.
(Considering how magic seems to work 3 isn't really in the cards)

The Dead king can no longer die due to old age, however he can still die due to someone killing him.

He has 3 ways to deal with this.

1. Have no one remember him.
2. Have no one want to kill him.
3. Kill everyone that might want to kill him.

Bard has made it impossible for him to be forgotten, And every major power that we have seen

in story wants him to be removed from being. Even the Kingdom-Under has apparently been in an forever war with him at all times the dead king isn't fighting a war on the surface. the fact that he is currently busy is why they had such timing for attacking the Drow that Cat went to the underdark.

[TeK](#)

Isn't it theorised that he can't die because he is now the knowledge rather than a person?

alele

To be fair Cat has been playing Cassandra for a while, her secession and peace offers and the Angel Trial come to mind. But Political Expedience in the High Assembly(your crab bucket) has consistently royally(ha-ha) fucked everyone over. Remember that the Crusade and Dead King reappearance was essentially the result of a political ploy to solidify the Good Alliance with a common enemy, quell banditry by employing the excessive number of Fantassins after the Civil War ("A good sword will find a use, or make one.") and riding that success into maintaining Hasenbach in power and passing reforms. Of course, it comes as a response to Malicia's meddling but calling the "Crusade" seems to be the tipping point into permitting Dead King resurgence, by upping the Story scale of the conflict into "Good vs Evil". The Story keeps screwing Hasenbach over and she still hasn't learned how to operate while treating it as a factor.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

[Liliet](#)

Ideally for Catherine, Cordelia's last statement means "okay, if the trials work out to my satisfaction I'll throw it away." Optimistically but slightly more realistically, this means "okay, if the trials work out to my satisfaction, I'll give you the off button".

Worst case scenario, it means "if the trials work out to my satisfaction I'm keepign the status quo, if they don't I'm despairing and pushing the red button." Which is very stupid and unlikely tho.

Most realistically, it means "I'm not committing to anything, and I will revisit my stance in the future depending on where the chips fall from here". That's... most definitely what it means, alas for the drama of the declaration.

hakureireimu

Considering the epigraph, is it saying that the secret will get out and fuck them over?

[Liliet](#)

I see it as more of a meditation on omnicide as a political stance.

[TeK](#)

Well, the best way to solve politics is to kill all politicians.

[Liliet](#)

That's exactly Massacre's point!

mamm0nn

Oh, the sass from EE that 'Of course it's the fucking Bard.' on last chapter's discussions. You don't fool me, I know it was Traitorous in a wig seeding deception and ruses to mess with people that won't even be born for centuries to fight an ancient monster in a war that he could only glimpse would rock Creation.

[TeK](#)

That is totally Erratic's fault though. He trained us to think "well obviously it's X, therefore it's literally anything but X"

[vernal.ancient](#)

Ah, but that was his plan all along! Once your readers expect the twist, the real twist is that there is no twist!
– Dread EEmperor Irritant the Oddly Successful, on his little-known stint as a novelist

WuseMajor

I'm honestly starting to wonder if she hasn't decommissioned it already and is just using it as a scare tactic. Because...I don't see how she can think of herself as a servant of her people otherwise. Activating that weapon presumably needs several people, likely powerful Priests, and any of them might well get ideas above their station at any time. I find it difficult to buy that Cordy could trust anyone else with this.

Alternately, there's actually some reason she can't decommission it. Like it's tied to her life force or something.

I suppose there's also the option where she thinks that Callow is trying for an advantage here, instead of just not wanting anyone to have a continent destroying superweapon and has basically stopped listening to anyone but the advisers who are telling her "no, no, this will work." However, that seems unlike her.

Ultimately, I think there's something weird going on here. Possibly it is just her using her last big bargaining chip to try to feel like she has some control over things. But...I dunno, I think it's more than that

ninegardens

So... Is it just me or is our boy Hanno planning to steal an angel?

Cause he seriously seems like he is planning to intercept the problem at the source.

[Liliet](#)

I... don't think he'd go for that before trying to side with Catherine and pressure Cordelia that way.

I suspect a coordinated assault of "ALL Named who know their shit think it's a terrible idea" would be a more persuasive argument than just Catherine with her mixed allegiances and motivations and like 5 roles she's trying to play at the same time.

ninegardens

I ain't saying "Steal the angel" is going to be his FIRST port of call... but he is a hero, and its a doomsday weapon, and his personal connection to the Serephim in particular has been called out in this chapter. I ain't saying he won't try other things first, I'm just... story wise, he is much better placed to deal with this challenge than say... Cat and Sve Noc.

Probably the only one better placed for this is Zeze.

[Liliet](#)

That would be breaking the Truce and Terms, though.

pagesbe

But how would it do that? Like, using angels is of course against the Liesse Accords, but those aren't in effect yet, and the Truce and Terms don't have provisions against using that kind of stuff.

[Liliet](#)

I mean stealing from Cordelia.

pagesbe

While stealing from Cordelia is probably a crime in Procer, it is not a violation of the Truce and Terms (unless it is, in which case I'm gonna need a quote). It is also not something either Heroes or Villains would hesitate to do if they thought she was going to activate a Doomsday weapon.

[Liliet](#)

One of the Grand Alliance members getting ready to activate a doomsday weapon without consent of the rest and provoking heroes and villains into going after them is already presumably a violation of the T&T on their part.

The Truce & Terms is a wartime let's-work-together agreement. I fail to see how doing a break and enter on your ally would be permitted by it, and I'm going to turn the request for citations right back on you – what makes you think respect for each other's property is not baked in?

pagesbe

To my knowledge, the Truce and Terms basically state this: Both Heroes and Villains will be pardoned from all past sins. They will only be subject to their leader, either the White Knight or the Black Queen. Said leader will be responsible for their actions and will hold them responsible for them. Acts of violence between members of the Truce and Terms is forbidden on punishment from their leader.

The Truce and Terms is a Named thing. It's not a general alliance, it's a policy of how to treat Named. It is very pointedly not the Accords, it's a limited prototype based on regulating Named behavior. Why WOULD the Truce and Terms have provisions for stealing from an outside sovereign power?

I mean... stealing is a crime. You don't need that baked into a Named accord, it's illegal on its own merits. If the Truce and Terms were disbanded, do you think it'd suddenly be legal to steal from Cordelia? Of course not, that'd be stupid.

pagesbe

Honestly a Named committing crimes under the terms, including but not limited to theft, would result in the respective leader providing punishment under most cases. If the leader was the one who committed the crime, then it would be the other leader and the leaders of the Grand Alliance who would judge them. If both leaders were in on it, the Truce and Terms are probably fucked anyways.

[Liliet](#)

The Truce and Terms specifically state that Named are not subject to mundane laws for the duration. That's the point of contention between Cordelia and Cat&Hanno right now: she wants to prosecute treason, they cannot allow her to do so because the Truce & Terms give immunity from everything that isn't themselves.

[Liliet](#)

> Honestly a Named committing crimes under the terms, including but not limited to theft, would result in the respective leader providing punishment under most cases. If the leader was the one who committed the crime, then it would be the other leader and the leaders of the Grand Alliance who would judge them.

Yes? That's what I'm saying?

Hanno would not go for stealing because it'd upset the fragile unity that the First Prince was talking about – the idea that Named can be trusted to govern themselves and cooperate with earthly authorities (the Grand Alliance) in an orderly manner.

Such an action on his part, even more so than on the part of any Named under him, would be sticking a sack of dynamite under that and lighting it up.

pagesbe

And I'm saying that in the face of a doomsday device being activated, both the White Knight and the Black Queen would push through that. And if they could get the support of the other major players of the Grand Alliance, which is mostly Levant to be honest, the Truce and Terms might even survive it. A Cordelia who just had her doomsday device stolen/broken and whose nation is

currently being chomped on by the Dead King would not be able to stand politically or otherwise against a united front of every other leader.

Frivolous

Magesbe is correct. Stealing from Cordelia won't break the Truce and Terms, except in that it would cause Procer to cease granting immunity to heroes and villains.

But that would hardly matter. If Catherine and Hanno, not even counting yet the other nations, were united in denying Procer the angel corpse? Cordelia could scream a lot, and maybe refuse to accede to the later Liesse Accords, but she could do nothing about it.

Ironically, the Liesse Accords might benefit if Cordelia used the angel corpse and detonated Procer. Catherine wouldn't have to sweet-talk the First Prince if there was no Procer to be ruler of.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Wiping out 2/3 of the continent to take out the Dead King? That's got to be a cheap price to pay in the Bard eyes. I don't see it happening though.

Sanctvs obscvrvvm

So... the fantasy Americans now have a fantasy nuke. And a teleporting immortal intercessor may plan to use it to destroy millions.

Daniel E

Just adding my conspiracy theory to the pile: Hasenbach uses the Angel nuke at the very end, and that is the catalyst for Catherine's Name, with her first Aspect being something that will change the nuke into a 'does not destroy the world' effect.

Frivolous

I think Catherine's Name emerges long before the end. Less than a week from the current time is my conservative guess.

superkeaton

Cordelia still doesn't seem to grasp the importance of Stories

Konstantin von Karstein

Cat and Tariq should have had a serious conversation with her when they were at Salia after the peace conference, and give her an lesson in Story-fu

Frivolous

Can't be Tariq. Remember, Cordelia hates him for seeding a plague in Proceran territory.

Unfortunately, I don't believe there are any other heroes with serious story-fu left, I don't recall Hanno showing expertise in the matter yet.

Catherine does have serious story-fu, but Cordelia doesn't trust her opinion on the matter.

The ideal opinion would come from the Augur, Agnes Hasenbach, but Augur is so cuckoo that I'm not sure she can really teach Cordelia what she needs to know.

Siobhan

Look at how Hanno handled the Council of Chosen.

The issue isn't his "story-fu"

He just has different priorities than Cat has when it comes to managing the Patterns involved.

Liliet

Hanno is very good at story-fu. See: the "danger just proves we'll be unharmed" against Kairos, wielding providence to get Amadeus to fight him (sure, it was clumsy and didn't work, but the approach was there), sending comic relief team members into danger first because they'll trip over everything dangerous while remaining unharmed (how many people can effectively use a Fortunate Fool on a team?!)... and most interestingly, grasping the long-term narrative shift implications of Catherine's designs for the Accords where even Amadeus didn't.

Also, y'know, the memories of a thousand heroes studied for insight, for where all that's *coming from*.

I think Cat should listen to him more.

Frivolous

On the other hand, Hanno is also the guy who walked into Kairos's trap for Judgement and lost completely, despite Catherine's warning that his smugness was a non-verbal form of "I am invincible!"..

So I'm not nearly as certain about Hanno's story-fu. He has definite blind spots.

Salt

He is, I suspect, strong in typical or historically prevalent story tropes, and all-but-blind to new stories or tropes.

Recall gives him the ability to avoid any mistake that any previous Hero has made – it really a bit of a cheat – but the fact that it is so strong of an aspect means that it necessarily takes up more capacity. Nothing comes without a price, and it seems fitting that near-omniscient hindsight would be paired with cripplingly deficient foresight.

It would explain why he's a borderline Mary Sue in terms of typical engagements, but fell flat on his face with the Hierarch. There was no Hierarch-equivalent experience for him to draw on with Recall.

Frivolous

Interesting analysis, and I suspect also shrewd. Thank you, Salt.

ninegardens

I'd almost go so far as to say, WK has TOO MUCH story-fu. He leans on it a lot, and is very aware and careful about it... which means that when he is dealing with opponents who are Story savvy (Black), he can get out maneuvered by the actual physical non-story-related reality.

And yeah, Kiaros slammed him by pretending to be a text book villain, while also janking up his chances by rolling 5 stories concurrently etc.

The fact that Kiaros was aiming for a POTENTIAL victory, as opposed to WK and BK who often aim for the "certain" victory also probably tilted the the fates in his favour- the story more willing to lend a hand to someone who rolled the dice.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has pointed out back during the Summer campaign that it was only for villains that gloating was a form of suicide. She commented that was how she could tell Archer wasn't a villain.

And everyone has blind spots.

Mental Mouse

Adding to Liliet's "Hanno does have story-fu" catalogue, there was the whole debate and fight against the Mirror Knight, where he essentially took on and prevailed against the Bard's final affray.

Necarion

And don't forget everything he did with Mirror Knight, where he knew he had to beat MK by physical force to (a) preserve his authority, and (b) keep MK from dying or becoming a fallen hero. Those two chapters were all about Hanno observing and managing the flow of the story to keep everyone alive.

Jarandhel Dreamsinger

If only there was someone whose Name was fueled by (Self)-Righteous Anger whose person and Kingdom were directly endangered by the existence of the Weapon, and who had it within their Aspects and abilities to solve the problem with a simple "Yoink!"

Cicero

There is another way to interpret Cordelia's position:

"Prove the Terms will work in controlling Named, and I will surrender the the doomsday weapon."

Liliet

"Or at least consider it. I'm a diplomat, I never promise anything if I can help it."

LizAris

Well, all this political conflict and angel-corpsing aside, the sheer amount of snark in this chapter was incredibly refreshing.

Daniel E

My children will eat your goats, you flat-toothed mongrel.

Tom

Cat says here that she thinks one of the Bard's aspects is her sight for stories: "my money was on her having only three aspects just like the rest of us. One was the wandering trick, coming and going everywhere, and another had to be her sight for stories."

I was wondering if that was distinct from what Cat shoved into her soul (with Masego's help) from the Arcadian echo of the Intercessor, but then I read it again: "The shape of a thousand

stories, the tune of the song if not the words. An instinct, one that'd sharpened something already existing into a blade capable of upending old monsters and empires." (from <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/03/10/chapter-16-divine/>)

The key part being "An instinct, one that'd sharpened something already existing..." where the "something" is presumably WB's aspect for stories.

Anyway, nice 😊

Liliet

I think the "something" refers to Cat's pre-existing knack for using the story as a blunt weapon.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Ok, we have to be missing something here. Cordelia wanting to keep her hands on Fantasy Nuke on Crack is understandable, but the blunt and rigid measures are OOC. She's not giving an inch even when she knows the weapon is superly unreliable and the entire Alliance is standing on thin ice. There's got to be some other factor we're not seeing, which is terrifying b/c it's already such a massive clusterfuck.

Necarion

Why would the Wandering Bard want to wipe out 90% of the continent? If the Judgment Corpse is sufficient to kill the Dead King, why would she amplify its power to catastrophic levels? Or is it a way to ensure that there is enough narrative weight to kill the Dead King?

One possibility: if the Judgment Corpse by itself has a 20-30% chance of killing DK, then WB might want to amplify it. If there is a collective sacrifice of everyone on Calernia, then the Story would accept that as sufficient to make the odds 100%.

One question that has been bugging me for a while. Does the Wandering Bard actually want the Dead King destroyed? Obviously she's been fighting against him for at least 1000 years, but nothing has been sufficient to stop him, and has actually dragged Calernia down in the process. The scene that bothers me most is from the end of "Interludes: Empires" at the end of Book IV. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/24/interlude-empires/>

After talking about their past interactions ("Lines had to be drawn, we were still establishing the rules," the Intercessor smiled. "Both of us played rougher back then") (note the comments about "playing"), the Bard tells the joke about the Dead King eating the baby:

""

"So you do know it," she said. "Should have told me at the start, I got way into it."

"I assume," the Dead King said, "that this atrocity – and I do not use this word lightly, believe me – of a story had a purpose?"

The Intercessor grinned.

"Of course," she said, wine red as blood trickling down her chin. "Eat the baby, King of Death. Just this once, I'll allow it."
""

This doesn't sound like implacable foes. What is her game?

[Jarandhel Dreamsinger](#)

>This doesn't sound like implacable foes. What is her game?

These are foes who have been at war for at least a thousand years. Arguably at this point they are closer to each other than to any other living being, because the rise and fall of whole generations have become as the ebb and flow of the tides to them. Only with each other do they have stability.

[wadeingintheriver](#)

Anybody else getting Black Company vibes from the Grizzled Fantassin? Between her insistence on the honorable treatment of the body of the long-dead mercenary (especially the phrase "buried in the manner of the southern companies") and the way she said that she'd "honored the contract and earned the long peace", as well as her competence in the previous chapter, I'm strongly reminded of the Company in the days when they were in the service of the Lady.

Dread Emperor Traitorous

Spoiler: The Bard's weakness is the musical instrument. Destroying the instrument first removes the invulnerability and perhaps name because you need the instrument to be a bard.

Chapter 37: Trying

"A man should beware of praying for justice when he truly wants vindication. He might just get what he asked for, and it is never

a pretty thing when we all get exactly what we deserve."

– King Pater of Callow, the Unheeding

There were too many parts in motion for me to keep track of them all, and I did not like the feeling in the slightest.

Late in the night Lord Yannu Marave arrived in the Arsenal, though given the hour I elected not to reach out to him until morning. Now that the representative for the Dominion was there, the right amount of high officer for the Grand Alliance had gathered and the trials could begin. A round of messengers sent to all involved saw me get answers as I broke my fast with Vivienne just before Morning Bell, the two of us catching up over warm pastries by Hakram's bedside. The necessary official talk we'd gotten out of the way the day before, at least when it came to getting me up to speed about all she'd been up to, so we'd allowed ourselves the luxury of an hour or two for ourselves. It ended up being less than that, inevitably, as the last messages came while she was on the tail end of a rant about living so close to the seat of Proceran power.

"If I receive another subtle yet suggestive poem from a secret admirer, I'm going to start setting the Jacks after them," Vivienne told me, at least halfway seriously. "I'm actually pretty sure two of them actually hired the same poet to write for them because the rhymes were *suspiciously* similar."

I answered with an amused snort.

"Any fish work hooking in there?" I teased.

"Please," she dismissed. "Like taking a Proceran to bed wouldn't be horrible politics even if those trying their hands weren't either ambitious fools or spies."

"Terrible politics," I agreed, without the faintest hint of irony.

I'd been taught by some very fine liars, after all. And it had truly been that to dally with Frederic, admittedly. Terrible, delightful politics that did that delicious thing with their hips. I seemed to have gotten away with it, though, so I'd not get greedy and ruin it by dallying again even if the thought was occasionally tempting. A knock at the door was followed by another messenger being allowed in, passing along a written response. Hanno had been the last to answer, not by lack of punctuality but by being the hardest to find. His agreement to the first trial – the Hunted Magician's – being held half past Noon Bell was dropped by Cordelia's impressively prompt one and the Lord of Malaga's slightly slower answer.

"So?" Vivienne asked. "Are we starting today?"

"This afternoon," I replied. "All agreed."

In the wake of wrapping this up, I'd spring on them the Concocter's own punishment. None of this was supporting Hasenbach outright, but prompt and severe consequences for my Named who'd stepped out of line ought to make it clear the reins were still being held. As long as the trials for Above's didn't end up spoiling the brew, anyway. The Mirror Knight had not tried to escape imprisonment and the Severance was back under seal, but my polite inquiries had made it clear that Hanno did not see a trial as something to discuss in advance. I'd expected as much, honestly, given that I was dealing with the Sword of Judgement. I still didn't like that I'd be going in blind there, but there wasn't really anything I could do there – under the Terms this was the White Knight's show, and no trespass of mine there would go without swift and severe answer.

"Yannu Marave's considered a pragmatist by his countrymen," my dark-haired heiress said. "Not aggressive by nature, though he'll be extremely thorough in answering slights. So long as you don't end up touching the Dominion's bottom line, though, I don't see him being trouble."

Hasenbach had intimated as much, but it was good to hear the same talk coming from a source I could trust wholeheartedly.

"The crowns do matter," I admitted, "but it's the White Knight that'll be the keystone."

The Terms were, ultimately, a treaty between Named. The nations that'd signed on did so mostly as guarantors of rights and privileges, not legal authorities – Procer, Callow and Levant all had a seat in the tribunals but in the end it was the White Knight and the Black Queen that passed sentences. It'd have a lot more of an impact if Hanno had issues with my rulings than if nation did.

"True as that is," Vivienne calmly said, "what is left to do now, save pulling the trigger?"

I'd never won much arguing with the truth, so I let the conversation end on that.

—

Putting the staff together for this hadn't been all that difficult, since the members of the Arsenal could serve as a 'neutral' entity to draw people from. Not the Named, of course, but the scholars and mages and priests. I'd decided to avoid any trouble by drawing on scholars for the scribing work, and from Vivienne's own staff for the rest. The ever-useful Lady Henrietta Morley – these days no mere landless aristocrat but instead Viv's own private secretary – was recommended to me as someone capable

of handling details and timing, so I put her in charge of handling transcripts and evidence.

For all that this was a formal trial under the Terms, it appeared somewhat haphazard at first glance. At the high table the tribunal sat, with Vivienne representing Callow and the rest as expected: Cordelia Hasenbach for Procer, Yannu Marave for Levant and Hanno for the heroes. They'd all been provided with a list of the accusations laid at the Hunted Magician's feet earlier today, which weren't actually all that numerous. 'Aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance' on one count, for having cooperated with the Bard against the Arsenal, then one count of 'unprovoked assault on allies' for the gas canisters he'd opened in the Stacks and one count of 'accessory to attempted murder' for the illusions he'd woven when attempting to help the Red Axe get Frederic killed.

I'd spoken with the Concocter, who would have had a right to lodge a complain considering the gas in those canisters had been her work in the first place, but she'd declined to pursue the matter. Through me, anyway. No doubt she'd be making a deal of her own with the Magician without my being involved. Of those charges the 'aid to an enemy' was the most severe, the deceptively mild wording mostly a result of it not being possible to call it treason when there were so many different crowns and jurisdictions involved. It was still considered just as severe, though, and it'd be the driving force behind the harshest part of his sentence.

The Hunted Magician had come dressed soberly but smartly, having put on an embroidered pale green vest over a white long-sleeved shirt and loose dark trousers. Like most the times I'd seen him, he looked more like a wealthy nobleman in casual clothes than any sort of mage. It was all well-cut without being ostentatious, which was halfway clever of him: it was a shallow thing, but people tended to favour those who looked well. Look too rich, though, and pretty or not that appreciation tended to turn to antipathy with some. He'd straddled the line well, which only had me further convinced that he was highborn and not from a lesser line. In Procer in particular, the difference between those who dressed well but subtly and those who were garish with their wealth was one of the ways to tell apart those whose 'nobility' was an old thing, often preceding the Principate itself, from those who'd risen to higher station more recently by sword or coin.

I'd already been on my feet when the Hunted Magician had been escorted in, made to stand on bare stone as behind a set of wards and guards the assembled high officers of the Grand Alliance sat and watched him approach, so I only needed to limp a bit before I stood by his side. The man turned dark eyes on me, face blank, and I leaned in a little closer.

"Keep your head," I murmured. "They're not out to get you but no one here wants you to wiggle out either, least of all me, so take your lumps and walk away."

"I helped your man," the Magician murmured back. "Do not forget it."

"I forget little, Hunted Magician," I coldly replied. "And never aid given to my enemies. Best you don't forget that either, yes?"

He'd been well-taught enough not to grimace at the reminder that even the help he'd given Masego when it came to Quartered Seasons hardly made up for the hand he'd had in the storm that'd swept over the Arsenal. A great deal could have been mitigated, if he'd not decided it would be the height of cleverness to make a deal with the Wandering Bard. Mind you, if Tariq hadn't insisted we hedge our bets when it came to her such a deal might have smelled of the noose enough the Magician wouldn't have dared. Past a certain point, fault became such a many-faceted thing there was little practical point in pondering it. I turned away from my charged and faced the tribunal. Cordelia was unreadable, Hanno lightly frowning and Yannu Marave looked already bored. Vivienne, clever thing that she was, was spending more time looking at the other members of the tribunal than anything else.

"I'll not trouble you with an excess off ceremony," I said. "You've all already been made aware of the breaches of the Terms the Hunted Magician has been accused of. For the sake of formality, I will list them once more: aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance, unprovoked assault on allies and accessory to attempted murder. As representative for the villains under the Terms, these are the charges I will lay against him. Do any of you intend to present further charges, or contest those I have laid down?"

"I do not," the First Prince calmly said.

"No," the Lord of Alava bluntly said.

Vivienne silently shook her head, but like me her eyes were on the White Knight.

"Yes," the White Knight said.

My fingers clenched around the length of dead yew in my hand.

"Elaborate, White Knight," I said.

"Your charge of 'accessory to attempted murder' would attain the Red Axe of said attempted murder before she's stood trial of her own," Hanno said.

Which was, I grimly though, actually a good point. Sure any idiot could tell I was right to call it that – there wasn't a lot of room for interpretation in the act of hacking a sword at Frederic's neck – but the Terms functioned because I passed judgement for villains and Hanno for the heroes. Neither of us could or should trespass beyond that boundary.

"I'll not withdraw the charge," I said, "but I would offer assurances that I would not consider the Red Axe in away attainted by it."

"Callow agrees with such a compromise," Vivienne calmly said.

It was a cheap trick, agreeing with me quickly to put the pressure on others, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be effective.

"Levant agrees as well," Lord Yannu dismissed.

Cordelia's cool blue eyes were slightest bit narrowed in thought, but she did not hesitate as soon as she was satisfied she'd parsed out the implications.

"The Principate is in agreement," she flatly stated.

Eyes went to Hanno, whose frown has deepened ever so slightly.

"I am wary of influencing opinion in another trial even with such a compromise," the White Knight said. "Yet I can recognize that opinion is not bound to be settled by law, and so it should not be objected to on such grounds. Under such an assurance, I withdraw my objection."

Well, first hurdle passed. From there, it was mostly a matter of presenting to the tribunal what I was making my own judgement on. By Henrietta Morley's practiced hand my witnesses were brought in one after the other, those made to present in person at least. Unprovoked assault was the easiest to prove, so I started with that: two scholars who'd been made unconscious by the gas, a healer to certify none of those affected had any lasting consequences – which would have made it more than mere unprovoked assault – and the Magician confessed to the theft of the canisters and their use when pressed.

"If the canisters were stolen, why is theft not being laid as a charge?" the First Prince asked. "I believe those were property of the Principate, as well."

The Concocter had made those as a possible tool for Cordelia to quell riots bloodlessly, apparently, and created them using Proceran coin. But I'd known about this in advance and prepared for it.

"The canisters remained the Concocter's property so long as they were in the Arsenal, and she's declined to lodge any grievances," I said. "Lady Morley?"

The noblewoman had a signed statement by said Concocter backing up my words brought forward, and after it was made clear that the loss of the canisters and their content would be folded into the repair budget for the Arsenal after the raid instead of forcing Procer to pay for the same goods twice she had no further objection. We moved on to the slightly trickier one, accessory to attempted murder. Two officers – one Levantine and one Callowan – were brought to describe the illusion woven, which had been of the Prince of Brus acting and speaking aggressively. Marave spoke up for the first time, just to make sure his countrymen would face no retribution for baring steel on a prince of the blood, and lost interest as soon as he was reassured this was the case.

My case for this was weaker, and in truth some would have folded it into 'aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance', but I was actually doing the Magician a favour here. By making him part of someone else's attempted murder, in this case the Red Axe's, I was preventing him from being accused of having tried the same thing only on the Bard's behalf. Trying to get a prince of the blood – and hero – killed for the Intercessor would warrant steep consequences, while helping a heroine in her own fumbled attempt was not quite so grave. He wasn't a fool, and he obviously knew the Terms in and out, it was almost eagerly that the Hunted Magician confessed to an act I had only moderate proof of him having carried out. After Yannu Marave watching out for his fellow Levantines I got no interruption, and we swiftly went on to the last of the charges.

"First, I want to remind you that even at this very moment the Wandering Bard has yet to be designated an enemy of the Grand Alliance," I said. "It was not a breach of the Terms to have dealings with her when the Hunted Magician did. What was a breach, however, was how information like the location and inner dealings of the Arsenal – a secret location – were revealed to an outsider. It was when the Bard then masterminded an assault here that the Magician's actions became 'aid to an enemy'. In this light, it seems appropriate to water my wine."

"Traitors should only know one kind of mercy," Yannu Marave replied.

Most people in the room knew enough about the Dominion that he didn't have to slide a finger across his throat to actually spell out what he meant. That he didn't bother to do it anyway made him a fairly subtle man, by Levantine standards.

"It is not appropriate to speak of the sentencing before the trial is finished," the White Knight cut in, tone even. "Is there a reason for it, Black Queen?"

"Informing deliberation is part of her responsibilities as representative for Below's champions," Vivienne coolly replied. "Failing in *that* duty would truly be inappropriate, unlike what you're currently fretting about."

The Lord of Alava let out a chuckle, looking more interested than he'd been in the better part of an hour.

"Fighting words," he approvingly said.

I cleared my throat.

"I spoke to this to make clear that I believe the Hunted Magician's breach of the Terms was done not out of malice but out of ignorance and incompetence," I said.

The man stiffened behind me but had enough sense not to argue my words.

"Indeed?" the First Prince of Procer said, eyebrow quirking.

I suspected that, after the last few weeks, Cordelia was rather enjoying watching one of we troublesome Named squirm in discomfort.

"Absolutely," I told her. "The Magician's fault came as a result of wildly overestimating himself, when in fact his arrogance and simplicity allowed a genuinely malicious entity to make use of him as a tool."

The Magician twitched at my words but kept his mouth shut. Maybe he wasn't entirely beyond salvaging, then. Evidence over his conspiracy with the Bard was sparse as wheat fields in the Hungering Sands, but that was seen to by the simple magic of having told him in advance that if he took his fucking lumps and confessed I wouldn't need to treat him as a liability. Through gritted teeth, the Proceran confessed to having had dealings with the Bard. He left out as much as he could, as I'd expected, but even the bare bones were damning enough. His saving grace here would be that he hadn't actually killed anyone here directly, which hadn't actually been all that difficult to prove: all our dead and wounded were accounted for, the reasons for their state more or less clear. His responsibility there was indirect, which left me some wiggling room even with the gravity of the aid charge.

I'd finished making my case, so without further ado I asked the tribunal if they wanted to deliberate before recommendations were made to me. Hanno did, but no one else was in favour so he conceded and we went on straight to the tribunal offering its recommendations.

"I trust in the judgement of the Black Queen," Cordelia said, opening the game with a measured smile, "and I expect that her sentencing will be fitting."

Easier to say, I supposed, when you already knew what that sentence was. Still, she'd left herself some room to manoeuvre just in case what I'd told her I'd pass as a sentence wasn't what I'd actually say now.

"We should be fitting his head for a pike," Lord Yannu said. "But if he's just an idiot, as you say, it'd be a waste. Levant will settle for flesh instead of a skull, Black Queen."

I nodded. Not exactly a push for moderation, that, but it was signaling that the Dominion would be satisfied so long as the punishment stung. The details of that punishment, though, they hardly cared about. Vivienne did not speak, since it would have been quite the empty game if she'd pretended she had the right to speak with Callow over me, so it was Hanno that spoke next – but only after a long silence spent carefully choosing his words.

"There must be visible consequence to aiding a common enemy," the White Knight eventually said. "And given that the breaches seems to have been committed on personal grounds, the consequences should be personal as well."

Mhm. He'd been careful not to actually suggest a sentence – knowing that whether I then followed his suggestion or ignored it there'd still be trouble from some quarters – but it was clear he wanted a few metaphorical fingers broken. Nothing permanent, I meant, but at the very least lasting pain. The tribunal would have the right to comment once more once I'd offered the 'draft' of my sentence, and I suspected he was keeping his comments limited until we got there. Nothing I'd heard now went against what I'd planned, so it was a simple thing from there: I simply shared the sentence I'd already told Hasenbach I planned to hand down. Loss of the right to refuse assignments, then a fine equivalent to the sum of the damages done to the Arsenal repeated for every signatory member. Pensions for the families of the dead got a grunt of approval from Lord Marave, but otherwise he seemed skeptical of the punishment until I specified the fine could be repaid in work.

The prospect of Levant having access to a highly-skilled Named enchanter brightened his eyes, especially considering that with the established debt there wouldn't be a need to *pay* that enchanter.

The Hunted Magician himself looked appalled, at first, but as the initial surprise passed he looked thoughtful. He'd figured out the advantages for him, then – ties to three crowns, and good reason for each to ensure he stayed alive after the Truce and Terms ended and the Accords replaced them. Satisfied he wouldn't

be a stick in my wheel going forward, I returned my attention to the tribunal. The First Prince, content I had kept to my word, gave her seal of approval promptly. The Lord of Alava was not far behind, and mostly symbolically Vivienne agreed for Callow. The last to speak was once more Hanno, and he was studying the Hunted Magician closely.

"It is a measured punishment," the White Knight said, "but it lacks consequence."

My brow rose. I'd been pretty severe already, so I wasn't exactly inclined to bite there.

"Coin is coin," Hanno said. "But such a failing should not be kept under wraps. Let his breaches be made known to all Named. Let sunlight burn out the rot, so that something wiser might replace it."

Mhm. Well, it'd be a humiliation for the Magician but it wasn't like the specifics of the assault on the Arsenal were going to stay secret forever. He couldn't lose respect the heroes already didn't give him, and my own lot would be more inclined to mock a failed plot that condemn it on moral grounds. I could actually kind of see what Hanno was going for, there: if the Named under the Terms became a community, then reputation would start being worth a lot more more. It'd become something worth taking small losses to preserve, if it was actually useful, and serve as an incentive to keep one's word. It was worth encouraging, and not unreasonable to ask.

"Agreed," I said. "The breaches and sentence will be made known to all Named under the Terms, if not the details of the trial."

He nodded in thanks, and another round of consultations got me the unanimous seal of approval from the tribunal that I did not need but had definitely wanted. This had, to my surprise, actually gone pretty well. The Concocter's own punishment wouldn't require a trial like this, but I'd wait until later to make it known to the high officers seated in the room – there was no need to muddle the waters by doing too much at once. A semi-formal occasion sometime this week would do just as well, with an opportunity to voice issues should there be any. This wasn't like hitting a tavern with friends, so when the business was done we all parted ways after the proper courtesies were offered. I'd intended on thanking the staff I'd borrowed personally, including Vivienne's own, but the White Knight lingered long enough to catch my eye so I passed that duty along to Vivs and accepted the implied invitation to go on a walk.

Considering Hanno had made it clear he wasn't going to be discussing the trials in advance, I was pretty curious about what it was he actually wanted. I was doing a lot of limping in hallways with important people these days, I mused, to discuss

all sorts of concerns. I was going to have to see about getting some of this done seated, or else I'd need to arrange for more of the brew that made my leg sufferable without drawing on Night.

"Your leg is paining you," Hanno said, eyes narrowing as he studied me.

Not the start I'd expected, but true enough.

"That's what legs do," I dismissed.

"I will refrain from small talk," the White Knight told me. "We can slow, if you prefer."

"Thought you said we wouldn't be doing small talk," I grunted back.

I'd never learned to take pity all that well, even when it was kindly meant, and I was starting to feel too old to try. The dark-skinned hero didn't even blink at my bite. I supposed he was used to it, by now.

"The First Prince has approached me several times now," Hanno said. "She has several intentions, but foremost among them is securing agreement for the Red Axe being tried under Proceran law instead of the Terms."

I didn't bother to fake surprise. Even odds he'd be able to tell even if I did, and we were largely on the same side besides.

"I've heard the speech as well," I said, then after mulling it over threw him a bone, "from both her and the Kingfisher Prince."

The White Knight did not look all that surprised, but he nodded in thanks anyway. Yeah, I wasn't surprised that the First Prince hadn't tried to win him over through Frederic. The Kingfisher Prince was his subordinate, in a sense, and it would have tripped a lot of those Proceran unspoken laws to bring attention so clumsily to the divided loyalties of Prince Frederic of Brus.

"I would not impugn your character," Hanno delicately said, "yet I imagine a diplomat of Cordelia Hasenbach's skill would have not prepared an offer easy to refuse."

I decided to be amused instead of insulted, after a beat. He was asking whether or not I'd been bought by whatever it was Hasenbach had offered me for my agreement, in this case Procer's seal of approval on the Liesse Accords as they currently stood. Hanno had been right in both suspecting an offer would be made to me and that it'd be a very tempting one, so I'd forgive him on account of that and the delicacy of inquiry.

"I didn't bite," I bluntly told him. "My priorities haven't shifted, White Knight. First is winning this war, second is establishing the Liesse Accords. Most everything else is noise."

Not entirely true, since my neck would bend some when it came to the preservation of Callow, but in essence I stood by my words. I'd rather fight this war in Procer now, even if it got ruinous to my kingdom's treasury, than on Callowan borders in a decade with fewer allies and resources to call on. It wasn't going to make me popular, but I could live with that: there was a reason my abdication was set in stone.

"I believed this would be the case," Hanno admitted, "but I had to ask. The intensity of Procer's overtures over this worries me. It smells of desperation, and despair makes for a poor councillor."

"She has reason to be worried," I admitted. "We both had traitors, White. If it'd been only my lot she might have been able to write it off as Below's usual perfidy, but yours have arguably been making more trouble with her. Add to that the three fingers calling the Mirror Knight to heel cost you, and it doesn't paint a pretty picture. We're not looking all that reliable."

And, in an ironic twist, for once it was the *heroes* who were looking like the problem child. Between killing villains, bleeding princes and dabbling in coups, it had to be said that Above's champions had not come out of the last month looking pristine. My lot looked better in comparison, amusingly enough, but much as it pained me to admit it that might not necessarily be a good thing. Villains weren't the ones bringing the trust to the table, when it came to nations backing the Terms. A risk had been taken on Below's folk in large part because I was riding herd of them and I'd shown a lot of goodwill to the leaders of Levant and Procer. That and I'd established early on that I was perfectly willing to kill villains if they stepped out of line. In the end, though, it was the heroes that brought trustworthiness to the Truce and Terms. It was their reputations, their record, that justified all the twists and turns and compromises that were being had to keep Named mustered and pointed at Keter.

If they were no longer trusted, we had a problem.

"I have worries myself," Hanno frankly replied. "Most urgent among them the First Prince keeping the remains of one of the Seraphim. Even were she not attempting to make some sort of sordid weapon out of it, I would be troubled: such a thing is *not* to be trifled with."

I grimaced. Glad as I was that the White Knight shared my misgivings there, there were risks to making common front. We

were already refusing Hasenbach over the Red Axe, and then we'd be trying to pry what she probably saw as her weapon of last resort from her hands. I was pretty sure Levant could be convinced to back us over this, through Tariq if nothing else, but I was wary of going through with this. Like Hanno had said, Procer was starting to smell of desperation. I'd heard in Frederic's voice and seen it on Hasenbach's face, so I was wary of pushing the Principate when it already felt cornered.

People did *stupid* things, when they felt cornered.

The hardest lesson I'd learned since putting on the fancy hat and eating a season had been that just because you could win a fight didn't mean you should be fighting it. There was already too much fighting going on among people who should all be on the same side, and it was like the assault on the Arsenal had shone down a light on every fracture that lay at the heart of the Grand Alliance. They were growing bigger, I could feel it, and yet caution was stilling my hand: a hasty move, now, could do untold damage. *And yet waiting too long will do just the same*, I thought. We needed to finish those trials as soon as possible, then tie up Mercantis and the Gigantes. Gods, all this trouble and we'd yet to even begin the godsdamned war council for the actual fucking war we were fighting.

"Give her time," I said. "She's a pragmatic creature, there's only so many bridges she'll be willing to burn over this."

"It will have to be addressed before our time at the Arsenal ends," Hanno said.

"Agreed," I reluctantly said, then cast him a dark look. "And you need to get your house in order, quick, before we lost more trust. I doubt Procer will try to outright axe the Terms, but there's lesser measures it can take. They could restrict access to cities, assign escorts – Hells they could just begin funding Named on their good side and *only* them. This isn't a flip of the coin, White Knight, they have more than two options."

Poor choice of words there, I realized a heartbeat later with a wince, but he did not comment on it.

"Then the Mirror Knight can stand trial tomorrow," Hanno offered instead.

"Good," I nodded. "Once that's out of the way, we can sit down with the First Prince and find a way to settle the trouble over the Red Axe."

"I will not discuss sentencing, Black Queen," the dark-eyed man flatly said. "I have already told you this."

Gods save me from heroes, all prickly as cats and half as sensible.

"Then don't," I sharply said. "Talk about how we arrange this so she doesn't have to deal with a revolt in the Highest Assembly, something that we *cannot afford*. I'm not great admirer of her princes, White, but your girl cut a prince of the blood that was trying to protect her from harm. They're right to be on pins and needles about it: nobody wants a young Regicide walking around, only this one protected by treaty. I won't argue to throw her to the wolves, we have to clean our own houses, but we have to give them *something*."

The White Knight considered me for a long moment.

"I do not see what we can, Black," he finally said.

"Then pray, hero," I said, baring my teeth. "And I'll see what I can get done down in the mud."

Insanenoodlyguy

Gods, all this trouble and we'd yet to even begin the godsdamned vote council for the actual fucking webnovel we were supporting.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

TeK

"I won't argue to vote on the webfiction, we have to spread the word about this novel, but we have to give EE something."

The White Knight considered me for a long moment.

"I do not see what we can, Black," he finally said.

"Then pray, hero," I said, baring my teeth. "And I'll see what I can get done down in the Patreon."

Ahad Mahmood

This was beautiful

Ninestrings

If we're talking patterns (And in this story we always are) we know that these trials should form counterpoints to each other.

So this trial going well, as expected, with a plaintiff who takes his lumps with relative grace and humour....

Obviously the Mirror Knights will also go totally fine with absolutely no clusterfucks at all.

dadycool

And to think, since he's second, he'll probably be the neutral/draw/tie of the three big ones.

Ninestrings

Oh interesting point.

I was assuming this was just going to be a contrast between Hanno and Cat's management styles but it very well could be a patter of three trials.

KageLupus

Not really how that pattern of three thing works. It has to be a part of direct conflict between Named, and specifically Named that have a narrative link with each other. Cat and Tariq danced around it in the last book, but there is nothing like that going on there with the trials.

Cat and Hanno are both on the same page. Named broke the rules of the Terms and need to stand trial for it. Cordelia is pushing for the Red Axe to be tried under Proceran law, but since she rejected her Name she doesn't count when it comes to patterns of three.

You could maybe say this is all a plot by the Bard, but I don't see the trials as counting in that fight either. If you look at direct conflict then the events in the Arsenal are more likely to be part of the pattern, where Cat and the Bard put their scheming skills against one another. I would even say that Cat won that round since the Bard got killed and the Terms are still standing so far. But that is part of the trap, since getting caught up in a pattern by someone like the Bard means you are dancing to their tune. More likely Cat sidesteps that pattern altogether same way she did with the Pilgrim.

[Liliet](#)

There are other threes than the rivalry pattern, and importantly the rule works on the meta level too. It's just a tidy way to arrange the story, like picking a protagonist who doesn't die halfway through and following a cause-effect chain for plot instead of a string of unconnected random events.

Salt

In this case, less of a rule of three and more of a rule of “the readers might be pretty exhausted on legal calamities after the climax”, which means that the least contentious trials likely come first to just avoid really disjointed flow in terms of storytelling.

It’s also very convenient to set up background/remind readers about old critical details relevant to the main trial by using the simple ones to show-not-tell how the proceedings are supposed to work.

Which means that these sort of buildup chapters are actually rather interesting, after realizing how much this story loves to throw innocuous-seeming foreshadowing out there so you can have a “why didn’t I see that coming” moment later on.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

Miles

Like sending Axe on a suicide mission as punishment under the terms, and she’s to leave immediately after her proceran trial, with the proceran punishment to be carried out upon her return.

Nah this will never work but if the proceran executioner-assassin kills her with fire then the punishment will have been done by Cat by default, so everyone can just shut the fridge up and be happy with the result.

flashburn283

So, who will the MK try to murder, Hanno, Cat, or Yannu? The Bard has to be going to set off the holy nuke, I can’t think of anything else that will fuck over the world as much besides reviving the Saint.

mamm0nn

Saint died by old age, and Heroes cannot be revived from that. Even if revival after several years were possible, Cat killed Saint specifically in a manner that Pilgrim couldn’t undo. So the same probably goes for Bard and all Revivers out there.

Miles

I still suspect he'll be back to his old self and plead being under the influence of Saint's personality bleeding through her aspect sword sword aspect.

Miles

Saint's aspect sword's sword aspect.

Also Saint forged herself into a sword that cuts all who don't share her hard line stance against Evil long before the story started. The fact that the piece of her that was turned into an actual sword continues to do so is fitting, but not necessarily a coincidence.

What I'm saying is that Saint's strength of will was so strong that her aspect is able to influence at least the weaker-willed individuals who wield the sword.

Salt

It's especially possible since "No truce with the Enemy" isn't even something unique to the Saint. Free Willy had that as one of his catchphrases back when he was playing the gritty Heroic rival to the Squire, all the way at the beginning of the story. It's a very popular sentiment for particularly angry or hardline character types.

These things tend to be much easier, narratively, if it's amplifying or pushing along an existing tendency, rather than being something new. Especially true if you're the kind of semi-sentient artifact sword that chooses its wielder and still actively holds a grudge against Catherine.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Even "his old self" isn't smart enough for that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm, While the trials are certainly interconnected, I'm not so sure the Pattern of Three fits in well here given we don't really have a single rivalry spanning the trials. Also, all three of them are likely to represent convictions, the question is just a degree of severity and negotiation over the jurisdictions.

'Ladi Williams

Looool. OBVIOUSLY.

Salt

The Mirror Knight's I think will be pretty interesting. It was mentioned via internal monologue that his power is "the reflection of Evil against Evil, the conception of the snake biting its own tail." way back during the kaleidoscope chapters in the Tenth Crusade. I've had a personal theory for a while that some of the Mirror Knight's personality issues are partly Name-powered in the "reflection of Evil upon Evil" sense, which would mean that the MK's cooperation in settling this peacefully will largely hinge on how well each representative in the trial holds themselves back from letting their personal flaws/agenda get in the way of a fair trial in the first place.

IE everything hinges on how much or how little Evil you show for him to "mirror" at all.

If that is the case, the trial will likely proceed fairly smoothly if each representative shows total impartiality and avoids attempting to use it to further their own ends. Otherwise, any attempt at subverting Justice for their own ends will likely be mirrored via equal and opposite hostility from the Mirror Knight, and it could become a shitstorm very quickly.

I'm most worried about Cordelia fucking it up by pushing too far, with Christophe deciding that the best response is "an eye for an eye".

Floppy

Also, Hanno has started to call Cat "Black", similar to how she refers to Amadeus.

Cicero

Nice, White and Black make such a great pair.

Together they provide both pragmatism and idealism working together instead of at odds.

[impolitic](#)

There's a wonderful joke about "seeing the world in Black and White" in there somewhere, but the exact language of it is eluding me.

[Casey Glick](#)

Well, as Tariq is still alive, there aren't any shades of Grey

ohJohN

this slew me; I am slain

Salt

What's black and white and red all over?

The trial of the Red Axe

Laguz24

I love the return of black and white's banter and conversations. Though seriously this red axe bit is not getting solved. Or why couldn't the sentence for the truce and terms be to be tried by proceran law? She still ends up dead or gone either way.

Salt

National sovereignty and jurisdiction of authority, mostly.

If she's sentenced to death under Proceran law, for the crime of attempting to kill a prince, that means that the Terms don't truly protect Named from political circumstance outside the Terms. It sets a precedent where future crimes under Proceran law could be grounds to overrule the terms and hang a Named, even if the representatives under the Terms object. It makes the Terms essentially toothless when signatories are involved, making them far less lucrative to sign up for, and for anyone who doesn't trust the Principiate (read: nearly everyone), it's like a hanging sword above your head.

If she's sentenced to death under the terms, it means Procer is giving up its right to hold people accountable for trying to murder its own royalty. Imagine someone killing a congress member in the US, and the US having to let him potentially walk without punishment just because some European council said so. Now just replace US Congress with "prince of Procer" and "European council" with "the Truce and Terms". The key isn't that the Red Axe is likely to get executed here so much as once again setting a precedent where it could happen – frequently – down the line.

Tl;dr:

a Proceran trial = Proceran laws override the Terms, thus the Terms are effectively worthless, and Named desert.

Terms trial = Procer allows the Terms to override their own legal system, and the whole country implodes on itself in rioting/potential civil war.

caoimhin

Yeah, that's the gist of it. Nice explanation, by the way.

My problem with Cordelia's demand is that she knew it would be like this and it is something she signed for. She is now

trying to back off from it not because of the “creating a precedent of Procer’s laws losing strength” but rather because she wants to use the Red Axe’s trial in Procer as a political tool to secure her reign. She is in the wrong here and she knows it.

P.S: Another way to see it, though using a bit of a tortured metaphor, would be to say it’s a U.S woman, more exactly an agent of the Interpol (Truce & Terms are an international force, after all), who tried to kill a U.S Congressman while collaborating with a terrorist attack on a UN Headquarters, and she is not being tried by a European Council, but rather an International Court. The U.S President is now making demands to have the traitorous agent on trial in U.S Courts, but the international treaty already states how the trial must be carried out and the U.S is a signatory of it. The President simply wants to execute the criminal through U.S laws to earn popularity for the incoming elections.

[TeK](#)

Can’t they still try this agent in the US Court and then argue about how to apply the punishment they decided on?

Salt

It wouldn’t work if the point of the treaty is that agents would only be tried by the Terms of the treaty, not by potentially any set of laws of any nation that signed them. Trying them under US law at all all, instead of only the terms of the treaty, will show the world that the treaty is toothless the moment a powerful signatory gets annoyed.

As for why said signatory even signed the damned thing when they knew this is a potential problem? Probably some combination of desperation, arrogance, and oversight from too many nights without sleep Who knows.

[TeK](#)

But if in practice none of the charges made by US court would be carried out, would it not be a legal fiction that appeases both sides? Or is the point is inability to trial at all, not just to carry out the charge? I thought that T&T acted as a temporary diplomatic immunity, not as some kind of legal invincibility. So the trial can be held, and charges passed, just they won’t be active until/unless the person loses their immunity, either due to leaving the Terms or through not being qualified to participate under them.

Salt

Not sure if that would make sense, since the Terms are meant to be temporary, while the legal immunity for actions carried out during the duration of the terms is not temporary.

It wouldn't be very appealing of a call to arms if it was "the Terms will protect you until the dead king is slain, after which you will be swiftly executed for previous crimes that weren't crimes up until the point the Terms expired".

You might make an argument for the "held" charges under Proceran law being considered null and void if the Named doesn't run afoul of the terms until they come to a natural end by the end of the war on Keter, but the optics of that would still have Proceran Law being superseded by the Terms. If they keep to the Terms until the Dead King is beaten, they're still essentially untouchable by Proceran Law in any way that matters, putting us back at square one and not actually resolving the problem.

[TeK](#)

Well I assume that the protections will carry over into the Accords, and become another reason for Named to follow those from the Terms.

I agree with the rest though.

[Liliet](#)

They cannot, because they are ridiculous in scope and untenable long term. Making Named exempt from earthly laws is the opposite of the point of the Accords, that the Terms do that is a gesture of desperation more than anything.

The amnesty is going to carry over. That's tense enough already.

caoimhinh

That would work if it were the Truce&Terms as initially described to us: a cease of hostilities between Named, stopping of criminal activities, and amnesty for previous crimes in exchange for service in the war against Keter, with Catherine and Hanno as supervisors responsible of keeping their respective sides in line and reining them in to obey the agreement.

But more recent chapters expanded on the T&T and showed it as having its own court of law where Catherine and

Hanno are judge, jury, and executioner for Villains and Heroes that breach the agreement.

As initially shown, Cat's responsibility would be to watch over the Villains to make sure they didn't step out of line, but would handle them to the legal authorities of a nation if they were to break its laws after they joined the T&T. But as it currently stands, Catherine is the only one who can cast judgment and carry a sentence over a Villain, *and the Grand Alliance knew that and signed for it.*

So Cordelia can't come now to judge the Red Axe through different means that what was established in the agreement, doing so would weaken the T&T and show all Named that Procer can break the treaty, which would cast doubts over if the T&T can really protect them from their previous crimes. That would make lots of Villains walk away, and it's why Catherine can't back down on this.

caoimhinh

No, because there is political bullshit on the way.

If they were acting like mature and practical people, the Red Axe would be killed and that would be the end of it. But they aren't just people operating in a vacuum, they are institutions and representatives of nations, so there are bureaucracy and legislation to consider, settling of precedents, and a dozen other things that ripple out of this.

There is ambition and greed at play too, with political repercussions depending on how it is handled.

Continuing with the metaphor, the legislation and treaty that applies is quite clear. Obeying the signed agreement of where the trial must be held enforces the treaty and gives legitimacy to the institution.

The T&T are in the right, because Cordelia already signed for this, she is trying to back off now and it is too late to be trying to pull that off.

It is only her selfish reasons that are causing trouble here. This is not for Procer, this is for Cordelia. She can't come to pretend now that Named had been accountable to nations before. Named have always been dealt with by Named.

Anyways, she needs to just swallow her objections as they are nothing more than her wish to get out of

responsibility to use this for political gains. But you don't get to simply back off of a treaty once the time to enforce it arrives. She is just pushing now because she wants to use the trial to strengthen her own reign (like every single other thing she gets her hands on). The trouble is that she is growing desperate, or rather, has been increasingly going that path for quite a few years actually (if you check her POV Interludes, it shows).

[TeK](#)

I don't think it's just Cordelia being selfish, she isn't, period. If she and Cat think Assembly might revolt and back out of the treaty, that is not some paranoid delusion.

In the international court, the US would have a say in the fate of the Interpol agent, but under the T&T they have no legal power to do anything. That is a perception that they need to avoid like plague.

I think...

caoimhinh

I wonder why Cordelia sees that guy as such a huge threat, she seems quite paranoid. She wants to kill the Red Axe through Proceran Law to show him that the Mirror Knight can also be killed through Proceran Law. But that seems like an unnecessary worry, since other Named would rein MK in and stop him if he were to start acting out in a irregular manner like supporting a revolt.

Plus, how is that Prince supposed to overthrow Cordelia? Did he somehow gather the support that Amadis and Malanza couldn't get? That seems unlikely.

And if he did, he doesn't need the Mirror Knight to get the votes to overthrow Cordelia, right? And also executing the Red Axe wouldn't stop him from getting the votes in his favor.

Asserting Proceran power lets Cordelia earn political points in the Assembly, but that's hardly what sways them.

[TeK](#)

You are getting really hung up on the idea that there is only one prince opposing Cordelia in the Assembly. And how is Mirror Knight is involved? The issue seems pretty self-contained to me.

caoimhinh

I'm not hung up on being only one guy opposing Cordelia. I just pointed out my surprise on him doing what Amadis and Malanza, couldn't manage (that in itself implies the power block that opposed Cordelia). And I mentioned the necessary support being gathered.

I know it is not just one guy. What I'm saying is that for Cordelia to be worried about him, that means the guy has assembled huge influence behind him. It's strange that he managed what other big players couldn't (well, Amadis already gave up his crown, so he can be counted out, but still the point stands).

The Mirror Knight involved was mentioned and implied by Cordelia and Frederic when they were talking to Catherine chapters ago, when trying to convince her to let the Red Axe be tried through Procer's Court.

Javvies

Malanza heads what is basically the wartime loyal opposition party.

That is, people who realize that while they have policy differences with Cordelia, the middle of an existential war with the Dead King is not the time to have a struggle over power, and that the deals Cordelia makes in Procer's name in order to survive and win the war need to be honored and kept afterwards, even if/when Cordelia loses power.

The group of assholes that Mirror Knight is in bed with do not believe in keeping the deals that Cordelia makes.

In addition, they have a joker in the deck in the form of one of the most prominent Proceran Heroes – Mirror Knight – being onboard with their plans and agenda. Malanza and her faction do not.

Plus, I got the impression that one part of their plan, or a relevant contingency, might be to secretly attack the drow and drag the rest of Procer in behind them and their goals when they call the drow retaliation “an unprovoked attack that must be responded to”.

Also, they're pulling that out that classic and ever popular Proceran tradition – expansionism at the expense of their neighbors.

Liliet

> This is not for Procer, this is for Cordelia.

Mmm, no. Cordelia's at the point where her interests = interests of the state, because all others she discards the moment they contradict those.

Yes, she's fighting to stay in power, *because her staying in power is the necessary condition of Procer's survival*. Her faction, anyway – I'm sure she'd abdicate to Rozala if necessary, which, it's no coincidence Rozala isn't pushing for that despite personal grievances: any kind of power shift would destabilise the system, and now is super not the time for that.

The people who ARE pushing Cordelia right now are the arrogant idiots who don't understand that, and also that they shouldn't plot against the goddamn Black Queen in the middle of the war she's fighting for them, on their territory. That drow episode wasn't just worldbuilding fluff.

This is an actual problem for the Grand Alliance as a whole, and it's only personally Cordelia's in that she's expected to deal with it without inconveniencing the rest of them.

Salt

Pretty much this. We have to remember that if Cordelia gets overthrown by anyone stupid enough to do so in the middle of a war on Keter, the replacement we're getting won't be Cordelia 2: electric boogaloo. It'll be the live action remake of Amadis Milenan that no one wanted but the highest assembly decided to produce anyways.

Frivolous

Yep, agree. Cordellia's strongest wish is Duty, specifically to Procer, although her understanding of the big picture and of nuances may be limited because she has no Name lore and little story-fu.

I think that if Cordelia loses her position as First Prince, her successor will act in such a way as to cause Callow and the Firstborn, as well as many heroes and most villains, to stop supporting Procer. In which case the DK wins and Procer dies.

The angel corpse might be a last resort weapon in that case. It may also be a bludgeon to threaten and frighten the Highest Assembly with, as in "If you screw up by usurping me, I'll give the order to destroy the Dead King myself. Oh, and Salia and most of your

principalities will go up in a mushroom cloud, too, but you've doomed them anyway."

Liliet

For the record: that's still not an option available to deliberately choose! The overcharge that would blast everything and also DK is what Bard could possibly have done had the plan gone off as originally intended with the Seraphim around. Now she cannot do that, and it's unclear what the weapon even CAN do.

Salt

To be fair, it could still be a pretty effective stick to threaten people with, even if the exact effects are unknown. The properties of the effects were tied to the Seraphim, but the actual capacity of an angel corpse is likely inherent to the corpse itself. It's still a huge bundle of power – potentially on the order of a continent-killing bomb – regardless of whether the tie to the Seraphim exists.

If someone threatens to drop a lake on you, that's an effective threat. If what's inside the lake becomes a mystery, it's still a giant threat, on account of still having the capacity of a lake. It could be a lake of feathers or a lake of cupcakes, sure, but it could just as easily be a lake of anvils, a lake of acid, or a lake of goblinfire. Regardless, someone threatening to drop it on you still raises hairs on the back of your neck because a lake is a lake, and it makes you reconsider provoking them.

Liliet

Yeah, it just bugs me that everyone is taking Masego's calculations as "this is what Cordelia intends to set off".

Miles

Considering US politics is 90% just lies held up by the fact that the people about to vote aren't interested in the truth so much as validation of prior beliefs (seeded by more lies) the best move for Procer is to just tell everyone at home that the trial under international treaty is the US exerting power to bring a criminal to justice, and not worry about what actually happens.

Salt

The trial of the Red Axe is FAKE NEWS

The great nation of Procer has brought THE BEST justice to the terrorist axe

We are going to KEEP WINNING, by building a wall and making Keter pay for it

nimelennar

What they should have done is included a provision for extradition in the Terms. Red Axe would then get two trials: one, under the Terms, to determine whether she should be extradited to Procer for attempted regicide, and another, by Procer, for the regicide itself. Thus, neither the Terms nor Procer gets destabilized.

[Sugar Roll](#)

I don't think named would agree to that. Only named deals with named. Simple as that.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, there should be a "her sentence under the Terms is to lose the protection of the Terms, because that is the exact manner in which she fucked up".

It does unpleasantly soften the protection the Terms provide, but Red Axe didn't just fuck up real bad, she also signed on in bad faith in the first place. Not the worst of precedents to set

Abrakadabra

Which is the heart of the matter. The arrogance of procer/ USA, that their laws are more important, Than that of other nations or even whole alliances of nations which they themselves are part of. In the case of Procer, they already agreed to the truce and terms, and NOW after the fact they want to renege on their Words. Because they are fucking procer and they presume too much.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I don't think it's too unreasonable for the T&T sentence to include "since she has violated our terms, we rule that she has forfeited our protection and should additionally be tried by Procer". The question is whether Cat & Hanno can get away with it wrt their respective crowds.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Not just “violated the Terms” but “deliberately acted to sabotage them”.

You don’t like these? Well have it your way then!

[sivarajan](#)

This analogy makes me worry that the Angel-corpse/nuke will be deployed.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Chekhov ‘s Angel of Judgement Corpse?

Cory

If they try her under Proceran Law, it sets a clear precedent that the Truce and Terms (and, likely, the Accords to follow) are subordinate to Procer. This creates a big issue, because the Truce and Terms and Accords are meant to govern the behavior of Named across the whole of Calernia. They can’t be subordinate to the laws of any individual country, or they have no purpose.

Frivolous

I love it when Catherine and Hanno call each other White and Black in private conversation. I wonder if they will ever do so in public, too, and what the reaction from their audience would be.

I may have made a mistake in the comments section of Trepidation when I speculated that Cordelia threatened to use the angel corpse to bully the Named into behaving.

I suspect now that the reason for the angel corpse is banal Proceran politics. The Highest Assembly may be agitating to replace her with someone who wants to do away with the current agreements.

The angel corpse is a weapon she can show Highest Assembly to make them believe that she is strong, and thus keep them cooperating with Cordelia and the Truce and Terms. That is the only reason I can currently think of that would explain why both Cordelia and Frederic seem desperate while Catherine and Hanno are unaware of the reason.

I don’t think the leader of the contrary princes is Rozala. Rozala is too aware of the current perils to try to unseat Cordelia at this time. It might be Gaspard.

dadycoool

I think Rozala has shifty eyes at Cordelia, but respects her and probably Cat enough to keep her head down and her eye on the bigger picture.

caoimhinh

The current problematic Proceran Prince is the guy whose daughter slept with Mirror Knight.

Sun Dog

Like there's ever just one problem child in the highest assembly.

caoimhinh

True.

I don't mean it's just that one guy alone. But they *do* need to gather under one banner to overthrow Cordelia.

After all, removal of the First Prince is not simply "you are no longer the First Prince" but rather "you are getting replaced by this person here". Procer must have a ruler.

[Sugar Roll](#)

From Cordelia's perspective, the angel corpse serves to ensure Procer's survival. It's not for show. It's misguided from Cath's point of view but Procer is about to collapse and they're grasping for anything that might help them make it through this calamity. Take the weapon away and they just might break. She might be persuaded though after the results of quartered seasons are presented to her.

[Liliet](#)

Rozala straight up reported to Cordelia last time she got approached with traitorous talks. That corner seems... fine.

It's not her 😡

Salt


Rozala has no love of Cordelia considering they have some serious personal enmities, but she's at the top of the list for "princes who are LEAST likely to stage a coup during the war on Keter".

The girl basically showed serious PTSD about the war on Keter during the princes graveyard, and was the only one of the seven who willingly threw in her crown without bothering to haggle. She actually considered the permanent loss of her own right to rule a bargain, if it meant getting Named on the caliber of Catherine on her side. "cheap at twice the price." was her exact wording on the subject

No, it's definitely not Rozala that Cordelia needs to be concerned about. Rozala would likely have a physically violent fit of rage at the prospect of some idiot starting a war of succession in the Principiate's hour of desperation.

[Liliet](#)

Y u p

Love her 

[Mental Mouse](#)

> both Cordelia and Frederic seem desperate while Catherine and Hanno are unaware of the reason.

Oh, they know Procer's reasons for desperation, they just recognize the larger-scale reasons why it's still a Bad Idea.

devildragon777

Hrm. The Judgement corpse bit really does have to be handled carefully, it's Bard's unseen affray after all. I wonder if they should be reaching out to Auger, she's not exactly a friend of WB and is someone who'd understand and might be willing to share with White and Cat why Cordelia's keeping an unusually tight grip over it.

Finangling the Red Axe's trial to preserve the T&T, Cordelia's grip on the Highest Assembly/Procer, and deal with the pressing issue of Judgement Nuke is...unlikely to be pretty.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Unfortunately, Auger doesn't have a place at the trials, which is probably a good deal of why Bard chose the Arsenal as the venue for this fight..

dadycool

I like seeing how the Tribunals work. "Here's the charge. Any debates? Let's haggle. Here's the punishment. Any debates? Let's haggle." With Cat or Hanno being both the prosecutor and defense for the one being charged. It could very well be done in private, maybe with a dagger in the dead of night, but it's public to give it transparency and legitimacy.

Interesting continuation of their discussion way back in the beginning of the book, with her "Then pray, hero. And I'll see what my I can get done down in the mud."

thearpox23

It's the beauty of leaning on a trusted authority figure to pass the sentences instead of the bureaucratic legalistic structures we use in the modern world. And it only works because the T&T are obviously temporary, and the cases where the trial is held rare.

I've enjoyed the tribunals in action as well. It's unique enough that I can't immediately point to any parallels I've encountered before.

Konstantin von Karstein

Hanno is being difficult here. He could just sentence her to death, and it would be resolved easily.

[Liliet](#)

Nope. He's already told the heroes he probably will, and pretty much everyone already assumes that. It solves nothing, the problem is jurisdiction.

[Casey Glick](#)

I wonder if there is an option that the punishment of the trial could be stripping the Red Axe of her protection under the T&T to stand civilian trial. It establishes a precedent of Named voluntarily submitting to national-authorities, especially since many of the general crimes for the future will be against civilians more than Named.

caoimhinh

Supposedly they can't do that because the punishment for treason must be death. So they can't leave the precedent of a traitor being given a light punishment, even if it's ultimately to handle her to another court that's guaranteed to execute her.

There's political bullshit at play that they need to be careful of, since future schemers can exploit such precedents.

WuseMajor

See, I think it could work. By her own admission, she entered the Terms under bad faith for understandable reasons. Allowing a measure of sympathy for her plight, it really feels like the "fitting" punishment should be that she be stripped of the rights and protections of the Terms...and the understanding that, without said protection, Procer will exercise its own legal rights to try her for her other crimes should temper anyone who thinks she should simply be executed.

The problem is going to be with anyone who wanted mercy for her. Since, well, by the same token, if you're going to hand her over to a government that's going to execute her, it's hard to say that not executing her now is merciful.

So...hmmm.... Possibly you could require that Procer give her a formal trial and allow the White Knight to be her advocate? The potential of a lesser sentence being found might be seen as merciful, even if she ends up being executed.

caoimhinh

But she can't play the "I was always an enemy agent so it's no treason" card here. If you join an institution and break the rules of it then you get the punishment of the institution, and if the deserved punishment is death, then just throwing her out leaves a precedent of someone walking away from the treason trial easy, even if it's done under the supposition that she will be killed in another trial.

The precedent within the institution is what matters.

The purpose of the Truce and Terms is to serve as foundation for the Liesse Accords, so they can't be weakened by bending over to Procer after Procer already signed them.

[Casey Glick](#)

The key is that she wouldn't be walking away freely. She would be explicitly handed over to civilian authorities who have asked to try her. Now, she might get let off there, but she would also forever be stripped of her protections under the T&T, assuming no Story was undertaken to make amends.

Remember that one of the major goals of the Liesse Accords is to allow groups of Named to work together to punish those who violate the rules. Merely being stripped of your rights under the Accords could be as good as death for most Named, and would deprive them of being able to rejoin civilized society. Being stripped of rights and then tried as an ordinary murderer would be even worse, but is arguably a precedent that Cat wants.

Salt

All in all not a bad solution at all, but it would need a LOT of work involved to avoid setting potentially troublesome precedents down the road. The legalities here would get messy the way legalities are always want to do. We can't treat the world of the Terms the same way as the world of the Accords, since the problem is the Terms granting legal amnesty from civilian

consequences in a far-reaching way that the Accords simply do not.

The problem that comes up, is that laws of the Terms and the laws of the Signatories – as well as the sentencing under each – are likely going to be very different. Meaning that the accused might be on trial for entirely different crimes of entirely different severity, and there may be cases where said crimes and punishments associated with the crimes aren't even commensurable in the first place.

At which point the obvious issue is potentially allowing for serious crimes to essentially be absolved in practice, or vice versa, by way of stripping protection of the Terms and allowing a civilian trial. It would also lend to possible corruption down the line, if a crown was to meddle with the civilian trial – directly or indirectly enough to avoid accusation – after the trial under the Terms was waived in favor of a civilian trial.

You would necessarily need to establish some sort of equivalence in terms of crimes under the Terms vs crimes under a civilian court, then base this potential compromise around a requirement for said equivalence being in play. You'd need to do this to stop potential issues before they arise at all, instead of trying to find reactionary solutions as Cat & co are trying to do now. It would be a very messy, very contentious, and time-consuming effort, if even possible.

For an example, what happens if a Named violates the Terms by killing a Villain simply for being overly vile, which is a severe violation of the Terms but a debatable violation of civilian law, depending on the signatory involved? What happens if they reanimate their dying body to stave off death, which is blasphemously illegal in certain countries, but not under the Terms?

You'd need to make sure that this solution you suggest does not leave openings for signatories using it as common-law precedent to petition for trying said Named under their own legal system, for far different conditions than a trial under the Terms. The only way I see this being possible is if you manage to establish equivalencies of severity between each legal system and the Terms themselves, and only allow this backdoor to be considered if said equivalence is satisfied

... which starts looking like a fairly convoluted legal system, not all that far off from the Principiate's own labyrinthine set of laws. But I suspect that it's how

their legal system became so messy in the first place, and it's hardly even a complex situation compared to real life courts.

robertctaylorfamfrit

Yeah pretty much this law and politics are incredibly complicated and messy things as its not just important what happens but how it happens, the appearance of both and what it may lead to due to public reaction, precedents etc. As an example in when i studied the American civil rights movement the first successful change from protesting was incredibly important because although it was pretty minor itself it set the precedent and became a source to build momentum from.

Mental Mouse

> the first successful change from protesting was incredibly important because although it was pretty minor itself it set the precedent and became a source to build momentum from.

And it's worth noting that the beginning was very much jug-and-sword diplomacy – MLK and friends offering a peaceful option, with Malcom X &co. pointing out that things didn't have to be peaceful.

WuseMajor

Hmmm... That actually could work as a solution... but the White Knight wants to actually have a fair trial, which means getting all the evidence out and all the speeches and everything, before sentencing is discussed. So, even if he's considering that sentence as an option, he's not going to allow the politics of the situation to sway what he considers the fair sentence to be and he's certainly not going to SELL the sentence beforehand, even if it might get a nuke out of the hands of an increasingly unstable government.

Possibly they could arrange things to have Cordy formally suggest that sentence (but that could be seen as bending to governmental pressure, so not doing it might be better).

Regardless, the White Knight tries very hard to be a decent person as well as a realist and he's pretty good at reading the room. I think he can thread the needle here, but he'll only actually do it if he thinks it's really the right thing to do. We can hope that Cordy will allow him the shot to do it and that he sticks the landing when he does.

Abrakadabra

I still Say the Red Axe will be sentenced to exile for life, to live among the drow in the kingdom of the dead. Under pain of death or something if she ever returns. Especially if she really turns out to be Constance.

[sivarajan](#)

Huh, I completely forgot about Cat's "won't kill Constance" promise. Her breaking it would be just typical Villainous Perfidy though, without any weight.

Juff

Typo Thread:

amount of high officer > amount of high officers
if nation > if a nation
a complain considering > a complaint considering
excess off ceremony > excess of ceremony
I grimly though > I grimly thought
Sure any idiot > Sure, any idiot
in away > in any way
were slightest bit > were the slightest bit
and hero > and a hero
one of we troublesome > one of us troublesome
plot that condemn > plot than condemn
muddle the waters > muddy the waters
Vivs > Viv
to old to > too old to
Proceran unspoken law > Proceran unspoken laws
would have not > would not have
had been taking on > had been taken on
I'd heard in > I'd heard it in
finish those trial > finish those trials
we lost more trust > we lose more trust
not great admirer > no great admirer (or not a)

Also, what a way to slip it in at the end

[Burlyraven](#)

If they put off Red Axe's trial much longer, they risk giving her the kind of story that starts in a jail cell, and any one of us that's played an Elder Scrolls game knows how crazy those can get. It's unlikely to happen, but she's already the right breed of vengeance hero that it's still a possibility.

Ninestrings

My favourite part of that story is when the hero stands in the cell without moving and shapeshifts between variations of race/species/gender/sex for two hours before going back to the default.

Anomandris

I imagine Hadvar suffers a lot from PTSD....

Raved Thrad

Makes you wonder what sort of indoctrination Nords go through while training to be part of the Imperial Army. It must take a LOT of willpower to resist going, "So, I think it's incredible that you're still on the side of the Empire even after we decided to cut off your head for no good reason." Especially for a Nord.

[TeK](#)

Imperial reason is always a good reason! Or do you disagree?

nick012000

The Stormcloaks were Thalmor puppets. If they won, they'd divide the Empire, and allow the Thalmor to conquer the continent and proceed with their plan to genocide humanity so thoroughly that they'd be erased from the Mythic. Regardless of the actions taken by individual Imperials, siding with the Imperials is the only sensible or moral course of action for the Dragonborn to take.

Raved Thrad

Lol on my last (partial) playthrough I played a Nord, and was all "Skyrim for the Nords!" I especially loved running into goose-stepping Thalmor patrols, which I would proceed to ambush.

I have yet to finish a full playthrough of Skyrim, though. So! Many! Side quests!

lauatagan

Only with perfect information, its not public knowledge.

Daniel E

Oh man, I'm having flashbacks of my addiction to modded Oblivion. Literally hundreds of hours.

Anomandris

Would Cordelia be backed into such a corner if she had taken the Name? I mean, yes, that would have potentially furthered the Bard's plans and had far graver consequences, but just from Proceran politics perspective, what would have been the result of all the shenanigans going on so far?

hakureireimu

She would have a lot stronger control over Procer at the very least. And then she would get 3 superpowers to help her out.

Salt

She and Catherine (with Callow following in tow) would have a far more hostile and distrustful relationship, considering the Accords are currently pushing for Named not holding positions of rule. It would mean that Catherine is a direct and hostile threat to her and her rule, the moment the threat of the Dead King wanes.

Levant would be outright hostile, in practice if not in name, at a Proceran Warden of the West making that country ever more powerful. Do remember that Procer is basically to Levant as Praes is to Callow – a pack of greedy invaders eyeing their people like cattle.

There would have been a fairly large mess over whether she would be the Heroic representative or the White Knight would – not even sure how Principiate law would take to their First Prince being put under a neutral authority, especially since the agreement that causes the situation is partially a Villainous one.

The Red Axe problem would be exactly the same, as it's a legal issue rather than a story fight

She may be more understanding of why a doomsaday bomb is so bad, if she had direct experience as Named.

Overall it would likely be a hell of a lot worse, politically, had she taken the Name.

matesbe

The issue of Names rulers has pretty much been dropped by Cat because Levantine point blank refuses to accept that condition.

Salt

Ah, I must have missed that part when I read it

[TeK](#)

I don't think it was written, I think what he meant is that conversation with Black, where he pointed out how unfeasible the concept was and advised to keep it in for additional concessions.

matesbe

No it was explicitly stated in this book. Admittedly I don't quite remember where exactly, but it's definitely not just Black from Book 5.

Liliet

Yeah, somewhere pre-Arsenal

Konstantin von Karstein

Named being rulers is the foundation of Levantine nobility, so the issue with Named rulers was dropped.

Javvies

The trial for Haunted Magician went more or less as planned. Of course, he decided to cooperate with the process. Plus, he did far less direct harm, and only got involved out of ignorance of the true nature of the threat that Bard is, and Cat gave a sentence that provided significant benefits to the rest of the Grand Alliance.

Mirror Knight is likely to be far less cooperative. In addition, Cordelia might well have an interest in adding to the charges against him, specifically his intimate involvement with those Proceran nobles plotting treason and betrayal. Plus, even if Cordelia doesn't escalate the charges, she, Yannu, Viv, and Cat all have some level of interest in making Mirror Knight an example. And Cat needs something that she can show to Sve Noc.

But the trial for Red Axe? On the one hand, Hanno said in the Hero meeting that he was planning to execute her for her crimes. I don't think there will be objections to that from the Grand Alliance.

Depending on how Hanno plays it, that might be enough to mollify most of the relevant concerns.

Also the fact that Red Axe lied about agreeing to the Truce and Terms might be a loophole used to exempt her from their protection ... but I don't know if Hanno knows that she confessed to lying about agreeing to them, always intending to violate them as her part of Bard's plan.

Honestly, though, I kind of think EE is head faking us that the problems will come with Red Axe's trial when they're really going to start with Mirror Knight's.

TeK

No Cordelia would not add charges of treason, lol. It is a question of appearances. Mirror Knight can be construed like HM, a poor, misunderstood victim of big bad Bard. The issue here is that the Truce needs to prove that it can enforce a

fair sentence on all it's participants. And while MK has many grievances, few of them are severe, and the most severe one is Hanno's fingers. The rest is not really serious, and both his accomplishments and a lack of malicious intent will prove the sentence to be mild.

Of course, everyone knows that MK's trial is also a tryout of Red Axe's one, so they would have to avoid a lax sentence, less they convince others that Heroes can get away with stuff under Terms. But I personally think that yeah, MK's trial would be a pivot for his personal development, and I hope it will go the right way.

Salt

Cordelia might actually try for a charge of treason tbh, if only to let her make some other gain elsewhere. She's definitely not above playing dirty.

I suspect Hanno wouldn't let it slide though. Justice boy is all about consistency and being unbiased. Letting the Hunted Magician off light as an "incompetent idiot" even though he willingly made a deal with the Bard, while screwing the Mirror Knight over by labeling him a "willing traitor" when he actually is just an incompetent idiot? That's about as inconsistent and biased as you could get. It would be comically out of character for Hanno to just sit there and allow for Justice to be twisted for political convenience, instead of putting his foot down on the first squeak of it.

robertctaylorfamfrit

Let's be real here how smoothly and well MK's trial goes is directly dependent how how well he can keep his mouth shut which he's not been good at so far as he tends to shoot himself in the foot during conversations

Frivolous

I wonder if Catherine or Hanno will ever mention that MK has been obstreperous towards Catherine and stated his intention to kill her.

Cat might not bother to mention it because she can be a bit butch; she might think tattling a verbal threat is beneath her. Hanno might not mention it because he might think speaking of MK's words is unjust.

On the other hand, Cordelia and Yannu would probably be very alarmed to learn that MK wants to kill the Black Queen. They might insist on Hanno executing MK for that alone.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah ... Mirror Knight's statements and actions in the Hero meeting are something that Cordelia and Yannu cannot allow to be ignored or swept under the carpet. Especially the part where Mirror Knight effectively said he wouldn't need to kill any other leaders if they agreed with him. Which is very easily reinterpreted as Mirror Knight implying that he was willing to kill any of the Grand Alliance leadership who didn't agree with him. Yannu is a Levantine and has plenty of preexisting reasons to dislike and mistrust Mirror Knight ... and Cordelia knows that Mirror Knight is intimately involved with some of her nobles who are plotting betrayal and treason.

It's not clear that Cat knows about those threats, but it's likely that Cordelia does (most likely via Kingfisher Prince, though one or more of the other Heroes could have informed her as well), and a distinct possibility that Yannu has been informed by one or more of the Levantine Heroes who were present.

And while Cat probably doesn't know all the details (yet) she definitely knows that something serious happened.

Frivolous

I had actually forgotten about the Kingfisher Prince. You're right, Javvies: KP is probably more loyal to Cordelia than he is to Hanno or any notion of the Union of Heroes. Which means Cordelia does know of every act and every word that happened in the Hero Meeting.

I'm less certain about Yannu knowing. Levantines are so honor-crazy that I have no idea whether the Vagrant Spear would tell Yannu about events.

On the other hand, Cordelia and Yannu can rest assured that Christophe won't target them first. He'll try to kill Catherine first, so until that happens, they're reasonably safe, hahaha.

Oh, they'll still be pretty mad that MK would try to kill the woman who is Queen of Callow and the First Under the Night, but at least they won't have to worry about being - murdered- until she has.

Javvies

As nothing was mentioned about secrecy, I don't think that Vagrant Spear or any other Levantine would necessarily feel that they were required to keep quiet about it, at least to Yannu.

Especially since it is likely that one or more of them was requested to be involved in bringing Yannu up to speed on recent events inside the Arsenal.

And I rather suspect that Yannu had questions about just what the fuck happened.

It is, after all, not a secret that something serious went down at the Hero meeting, and White Knight had to beat down Mirror Knight in the hallways after losing several fingers.

For that matter, it's just as likely, if not more so, that the Levantine Heroes have, or will feel, an obligation to inform/warn Yannu that Mirror Knight verbally de facto threatened to kill him and the Seljun if they didn't agree with Mirror Knight ... and more broadly the stability/existence of the Grand Alliance itself. Most of them realize that the current situation would be a helluva lot worse if Cat wasn't running the Villains in support of the Grand Alliance – better to share a room with a Villain than a Revenant, after all. Plus ... they mostly don't like Mirror Knight, and it's probably gotten around that he has a habit of defending and promoting past Proceran atrocities committed against the Dominion (and others), which isn't going to count in his favor when it comes to Yannu's opinion.

Salt

It's likely going to end up as most of the jury members arguing against Hanno, for more severity vs more moderation, respectively.

However, I think Yannu is actually the only one who is a coinflip on whether he's hostile to the Mirror Knight or not.

Cordelia has an ulterior motive for pushing for a harsher sentence, Catherine has an ulterior motive for appeasing Cordelia instead of pushing her into a corner (plus she hates the MK's guts), and Vivienne is more of less in Catherine's pocket.

Yannu depends on how informed he is about the Mirror Knight's association with the Langevins. The Principiate has historically been to Levant as Praes has been to Callow, meaning that encouraging destabilization of the Principiate is completely within the Levantines interests. If he's well informed enough and savvy enough, he would know that it's going to be a win for Levant no matter what – either a Proceran Hero gets some rather harsh restrictions and sullies their international reputation, or a Proceran Hero gets off easy and causes internal unrest in Procer to weaken them.

Meaning the game he's likely to play is how to squeeze the best long term benefit for Levant, which might be to initially push for a harsh sentence to get on the good side of Catherine, Vivienne, and Cordelia, after which he lets himself be "convinced" by the White Knight to settle on a compromise to also make inroads with Hanno, especially if said compromises happen to have some beneficial wording for Levant. This lets him paint himself as impartial and fair in the public eye, keeps him on the relative good side of everyone, and maximizes the benefit of the trial for Levant as a nation.

Javvies

No, I'm pretty sure Yannu is also firmly in the "fuck Mirror Knight" camp.

As for Yannu potentially seeing value in destabilizing Procer ... at almost any other time, under almost any other First Prince, I'd probably agree – I certainly expect that there was little to no concern or tears over Procer's long civil war in the Dominion.

However ... this is very much not the time and not the First Prince to be destabilizing Procer.

The timing issue is obvious – a destabilized Procer is going to be very bad development for the war effort against the Dead King.

As for not destabilizing Cordelia as First Prince, that's maybe a little less obvious, but still clear enough to someone like Yannu – Cordelia is Lycaonese, and has no interest in the traditional Proceran expansionism, which is good for the Dominion, and perhaps more importantly, Cordelia is going to keep her word on the deals she makes with the rest of the Grand Alliance and the drow, and isn't going to try to screw them over unless she thinks she has no other option; she's also not going to throw Procer's armies at the Dominion after the war, while the Dominion has exhausted itself. Pretty much any other First Prince is going to be a far less reliable partner ... especially if they're dumb enough and aggressive enough to be trying to take out Cordelia in the middle of fighting the Dead King, and are already explicitly planning on betraying at least one of their allies in that fight. That's not a faction Yannu wants to have power in Procer.

Salt

No, Yannu is in the “preserve the interests of Levant” camp, and his most likely course of action will stem almost entirely from that basis. I don’t think he personally cares half as much about the mirror knight as an individual as you seem to be implying. His station necessarily requires him to look into the future and mitigate the threat of the Principiate ahead of time – it’s too late once the threat has actually come.

There’s pretty much zero reason for Yannu to think that Procer under Cordelia would be any less expansionist than they have been for the last several centuries after the war on Keter. It wasn’t even a decade ago that Cordelia launched the Tenth Crusade for no other reason than political convenience, and one of the moves she made to prepare for it was bullying Levant into submission by a military show of force, so they wouldn’t be a threat at Procer’s back. It’d be rather illogical for him to assume she wouldn’t stab the dominion in the back at the first safe opportunity to expand her borders, after she quite literally stabbed the dominion in the back five or so years ago to wage an expansionist war on Callow.

I mean for heck’s sake, the guy comes from a country who was annexed by the Principiate longer than Callow was annexed by the Empire. Their five revered noble lines are Named who went borderline Villain in terms of viciousness, rebelling against Procer. He’s never going to trust a Proceran nationalist like Cordelia farther than his children could throw her.

To a Dominion ruler like Yannu, a ridiculously competent First Prince like Cordelia is an absolute nightmare. The best case scenario for Levant is having Cordelia outright overthrown by an incompetent, the moment the war on Keter is over.

Sowing seeds of discord in the long term for the Principiate? Yes please. His perfect-world scenario is a balancing act, where the Langevins remain just strong enough to launch a rebellion once the threat of the Dead King is bottled up – it’ll either cripple Cordelia for years, or outright get rid of her as a threat.

As far as the immediate war on Keter goes – if he truly is worried about the war on Keter, that’s all the more reason for him to not push the sentencing

too far. The Mirror Knight is still one of the most powerful Heroes currently alive, which they're in dire need of to begin with, and if Yannu is willing to accept literal murders, rapists, and a Hunted Magician who (out of "incompetence") made a willing deal with the Bard, then there's no reason for him to cripple a Hero who's having problems following orders.

In a purely war-on-Keter scenario, the best case is an appropriately severe punishment that puts the Mirror Knight back in line, rather than outright estranging him from the GA altogether with some ridiculously heavy sentence, for the sake of petty vengeance for the annoyance.

ltormblessed

I love how even though Hanno is shortening "Black Queen" when he talks to Cat, it is always delightful to see Catherine referred to as "Black". Does Catherine see the symbolism there? Taking Black's name but making it her own version – not the same thing but something new. Something inspired and raised by to be sure, but ultimately her own.

[Tek](#)

Ok, so I am a tad confused about legalities here. So the issue is that the victim is a Proceran prince, but the judgement isn't done under the Proceran law. And the reasoning for the Proceran law taking precedence is because they allegedly afraid a second Regicide would be walking around? But how would the precedence of Procer judging the princekillers by their own law will prevent a new Regicide walking around? Unless they are afraid that the precedent established may later see princekillers walk around unpunished for said murder.

But isn't the problem there then a murder, not a murder of a Prince? If any killer would be able to walk away from the common law by abusing Name immunity, would it not already be enough of an issue, without bringing some misplaced national pride into the mix?

And why Red Axe can't stand two trials? Since Frederic is two legal entities in one, well, first of all, does it mean that Cat had a threesome, an secondly, why Red Axe can't be judged as two separate legal entities? With the Proceran justice acting in effect in the area of Proceran jurisdiction?

Konstantin von Karstein

Frederic has 2 legal personalities, but it's a legal fiction. He is still one person. And it so would still mean that the RA is sentenced by a Proceran tribunal for killing a Named.

[TeK](#)

But not as a Named, as a regular person. Which she still technically is. The ones who are part of T&T are the Named, not the people they inhabit. If someone loses the Name, they lose the protection of the Terms. So, T&T can act as a temporary diplomatic immunity, that does not disqualify someone from being tried, but only from some parts of the charge being carried out.

[Liliet](#)

Truce and Terms are temporary indeed. If people are not protected by them from having a trial held, then the minute the war ends, all those hypothetical abusive sentences everyone's worried about are suddenly due to take effect.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Well, technically Cat is Queen of Callow, as well as First Under the Night, as well as Catherine Foundling. That bed was crowded...

jfstackhouse

Why hasn't MK nobly volunteered for some long-odds martyrdom by now? He's a weaponized redemption arc.

And a putz. Above's mirror really highlights the warts, huh.

(Also, hey all. Just binged my way to Now and loved the ride. One sin, one grace, happy to meet ya.)

[Liliet](#)

Because it's been all of one full day since his fuckup.

Also he's not that smart.

Also they need to hold a trial regardless.

jfstackhouse

I forgot the quotes around "volunteered", but fair point.

It would probably be more effective if he swore the oath at trial, too.

[Liliet](#)

Personally I expect AA level of courtroom drama out of this one, complete with dramatic counter-accusations and parrot testimony. What better time for Mirror Knight to make his worries heard than before a council of representatives of the Grand Alliance?

Dmitrii Suvorov

Here's a question: now that the Hunted Magician is no longer hunted by the Autumn Court (or will stop being hunted soon, when the Autumn Crown will be used for the Quartered Seasons), but is massively indebted to three major states, will his Name change to reflect that (Indentured or Indebted Magician, maybe)? Given that he is indebted to two definitely Good states, will he become more in-between when it comes to Good and Evil, like Ranger and Archer?

[aerhyce](#)

If he doesn't pay up, and instead tries to do something stupid, such as legging it, he's quickly going to become the Hunted Magician all over again.

When your bad decisions get enshrined into a Name, I don't think you can get rid of them that easily.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, remember that snaffling the Crown of Autumn to make a poisoned chalice for the DK is very far from a done deal. And even then, there can be many a slip between the poisoned chalice and the undead lips.

Captain Amazing

No one seems to have mentioned Hanno's addendum to the sentencing. He's loudly proclaiming to all of the fretting Named that Catherine doesn't just pardon villains under the Terms. He can directly tell the Mirror Knight about her forthright adherence to the law without stumbling over legal barriers. Hanno did her a major solid and Cat has no idea so it's never mentioned.

[aurikdomi](#)

good catch and good point.

[Liliet](#)

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masterofbones

I don't get White knight's aversion to talking about Red Axe's trial. Preparation beforehand is useful and important – in the US all evidence has to be shared between prosecution and defence.

[Liliet](#)

He's averse to talking about the sentence specifically, and he knows he WILL be pressured to speak on that. That's not the same thing as sharing evidence.

Salt

Yeah, Hanno is being quite reasonable lol, while Catherine is actually being unreasonable as far as a court of law is concerned. What she did with the Hunted Magician – taking steps to decide the sentence before the trial even occurs – is pretty much the same thing as rigging the trial and proceeding with more or less a farce. She literally had 2/4 members of the jury in her pocket before walking through the door, with a third jury member being influenced by Cordelia.

Convenient, and likely a solution in this particular case that everyone will be satisfied with, but it's not actually how any sane court of law is supposed to function. Especially for potentially very contentious issues, which the Hunted Magician's really was not.

Hanno is... literally obeying both the letter and the intent of the law, by avoiding deliberating on the sentence until all evidence and arguments have been formally presented at time of trial. It's exactly what he's supposed to do, and the only thing his character background allows him to do without breaking character to a suspension-of-disbelief-busting degree.

Granted, trials under the terms are more of a military tribunal than a proper established court, but it isn't unreasonable for the Hero who literally grew up working for a courthouse to uphold the principles of a proper court as best he can.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Cat's concerned with setting precedent for the result of a trial.

Hanno's concerned with setting precedent for the *process* of a trial.

...they're both right and doing good work, imho.

[Liliet](#)

...actually, rigging the trial has very little weight behind it as an idea when the judge, the defense and the prosecutor are ALL THE SAME PERSON and everyone else's role is purely advisory. There's just kind of nothing left to rig.

In light of that, my guess at Hanno's reluctance is:

1) he's not decided on the sentence because of missing some piece of information he believes might be key and that he expects to get either during the trial itself or right before it, and he actively doesn't want Catherine or Cordelia sticking their noses into whatever it is;

2) he's got a plan and he knows they WILL NOT like it, but will have to swallow it during the trial itself. IMHO unlikely, given the general dynamic here. Hanno's not the master politician and respects the ones who are;

3) he's got a plan that actually caters well to Catherine and Cordelia but he doesn't want to give even a shade of appearance of being pressured into it.

The trial is more of a thesis defense than an actual trial, and Hanno doesn't want to give spoilers. Why? Gotta be a reason.

...Alternatively, it's just his past as a court scribe rearing its head and he just really WANTS it to be as proper as possible, even when that hardly does anything practically speaking. Given how much personal psychological pressure he's under as the keystone of the Chosen... I could see that too tbh.

Aotrs Commander

So, when Cat was addressing the Haunted Magician, was I the only one thinking:

"Trust me, sir. My whole case hinges on proving you're a dork!"

...

Just me, then?

[vernal.ancient](#)

I might have thought that, had I ever seen what you're referencing 😊

[doominator10](#)

As an idea that can potentially satisfy both Procer and the Named for Red Axe's trial/execution. Allow Red Axe to be tried and executed under Proceran law, then have her soul be... requisitioned

by Catherine indefinitely or until the war with the hidden horror is over.

Procer gets to have their execution, and a traitorous hero gets a punishment befitting of a story.

Mental Mouse

Nasty... "death shall not release you". On the other hand, Cat's treatment of Akua is perhaps not the best precedent.

Laguz24

With her redemption? This might work for cat, easy redemption just remove the soul of someone and shut them in a box for a while.

Liliet

And Procer can do that to anyone who attacks a prince, now can they?

IDKWhoitis

Wouldn't have the Truce and Terms trial be fine if they just list "Attempted Murder (of some degree) of Allied Leaders" under the several charges they try the Red Axe under? It would still scrape a little sovereignty off of Procer, but hardly make it a precedent to allow a Regicide go free.

Ultimately, someone is going to have to cede jurisdiction. By making the punishment of the T&T that Red Axe is excommunicated from the T&T, and subject to mortal law, Procer can still get their trial done. It would set the precedent that while the T&T are above mortal law, Named can still be called into account if their deeds are detrimental to the war effort/damaging to friendly states. Some Heroes and Villains would balk at being potentially forced to face a mortal court, but it would be a restraining factor on their actions in the future, not of the past. This ruling should be explicitly non-retroactive. Procer will throw a bitch fit at the ceded sovereignty but if all member states agree on it, its not as if Procer is being singled out. The other member states already afford their Names some degree of special privileges in this regard.

Liliet

Notably, Procer DOES have a representative at the T&T trial. Oh sure their role is purely advisory, but that doesn't matter if the advice is followed every time.

Yeah, Cordelia is going to have to fold on this.

Now, the more she puts her back into trying for the other outcome first, the more she can later make puppy eyes over an unrelated issue and go "but i made such a biiiiiig concession earlier, can't you let me have this one?..."

(No, her dignity is 100% not above that)

Frivolous

I think I can predict what Cat will do to fix Cordelia's problems with the contrary princes of Procer.

We know that all the contrary princes are outside the Arsenal, yes? And they're probably far away and separated in Creation, too, so Cat can't just gate to them. It would take too long, given she is only one woman and the trial of the Red Axe happens shortly.

So what I think will happen is that Cat will delegate to Rumena and the Losara sigil, get those Peers and Firstborn to threaten the contrary princes into not being a problem. It will be tricky to do so without also ruining things for the Cordelia and the Truce and Terms now and the Liesse Accords later, but blackmail and extortion with plausible deniability are things Cat has experience with (see how she dealt with that High Lord and High Lady of Praes by threatening to remove the souls of their heirs and give them to the Black Knight).

I'm reasonably sure that Sve Noc and Rumena and the Losara already know the identities of most of the problematic princes. They've been spying on the Mirror Knight, Rozala, and Cordelia for a long time by now.

This action will reveal the existence of and some of the power and extent of the drow spy network, but it's necessary.

As for why Cordelia did not ask for Cat to do this all before, I believe Cordelia did not want to set the precedent of depending on Cat to deal with Proceran internal matters and to shore up Cordelia's position. To do so would make Cat, a foreigner, the de facto ruler of Procer.

Also Cordelia did not know of the drow spying on everyone and making the telepathic Night equivalent of celebrity sex videos.

Salt

If they wanted to deal with the Princes with force, they could just pretend the knowledge of the scheme was passed on from Cordelia, rather than the Sisters. No one is going to blink an eye if you claim that the first prince who has not one, but *three* major spy networks learned it from one of her spies, rather than a pair of psychic murder-goddesses. That way, the

scope of the Sisters abilities don't become public knowledge, and Cordelia gets a reputation for being unfathomably formidable in intelligence gathering, which works to her advantage.

I suspect it wouldn't work though, since Procer is such a land of laws that application of violence or unlawful threats are looked down upon, rather than looked up to like in Praes. If news of that kind of blunt strong-arming of the highest assembly – reminiscent of some authoritarian tyrant – got out, Procer may well riot on the spot.

To be honest I think the best solution might be the simplest one: talk to the Mirror Knight.

We all know he's a colossal dumbass, so what are the chances that he doesn't even properly understand the Langevins ambitions, or the potential international consequences to being in bed with them? Especially if this is a kid who just lost his virginity to one of their daughters, with said daughter intentionally showing him only one side of the picture as she whispers sweet nothings into his ear?

Has anyone actually sat him down and, like, made sure he understands how much of a problem the Langevins actually are for everyone? Maybe someone like a First Prince of Procer who would automatically have his respect for being Proceran Royalty as well as Good-aligned, not to mention a candidate for Warden of the West as a Name?

If she managed to convince his silly ass, it wouldn't be hard for her to frame his previous association with them as a foolish noble house trying to use holy Chosen for base political intrigue, and said Chosen wisely reconsidering their relationship once their treachery became clear. She hits the Langevins in losing the Mirror Knight's support, smudges their public image in the eyes of the highest assembly, and puts the Mirror Knight himself in her debt for saving his own reputation in the eyes of the greater Principiate.

[Liliet](#)

This.

Everyone's so worried about the Mirror Knight being involved with a plot, meanwhile dollars to donuts the man himself has no idea there's any kind of plot around and would be the first on the frontlines when he learned about it.

mavant

I wonder how Amadeus is doing. I miss him.

Barrendur

Personally, I'd really like to hear about how Amadeus of the Green Smirch has been stripped of all his illusions and driven to self-destruction by contemplating the extent of his failures and the wretched waste he's made of his life, and of everything that was ever important to him. I detest the character.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure that's canon as of pre-start of Book 1, considering taking a Squire was basically picking his future killer from his perspective, so... you already got your wish, technically?

Satan

Letting MK out of custody before Red Axe's trial will be interesting

Chapter 38: Tantamount

"A diplomat without a general at his back is just a polite man no one heeds."

– Exarch Acantha of Penthes

Within an hour I received a formal message asking for my agreement to hold the Mirror Knight's trial tomorrow. I sent back said agreement immediately and I must not have been the only one to be prompt, as within an hour of *that* the White Knight sent along the formal charges that Christophe de Pavanie would be accused of. I narrowed my eyes at the paucity of them: assault of an ally and insubordination. That was it. No mention of the fact that he'd kept the Severance at his hip long after the crisis had passed, though Hanno might make the case that since no formal demand to return it had been made of the Mirror Knight it hadn't actually been a breach of the Terms for him to keep it. It wasn't even *unprovoked* assault of an ally, I noted with distaste, but instead a lesser sister-charge.

I'd reserve judgement – no pun intended, Sisters preserve – until the trial took place, but I wouldn't consider this an auspicious beginning.

Intriguingly enough, I got a third message in the wake of the first two and not from someone I'd expected to be reaching out.

After I'd sat down with Vivienne to go over the possible outcomes of tomorrow with a cup of wine in hand, our talk was interrupted by a message from Lord Yannu Marave. He was overseeing the sparring of his sworn swords in the Revel's arena, and he'd invited me to come have a look. It was a threadbare excuse to have a private talk, but that he might want that talk at all surprised me. I shared the thought with Vivienne.

"They call him Careful Yannu, back home," she mused.

My brow rose.

"He did not strike me as all that careful a man, during the trial," I said. "Juniper has some respect for his skill as a general and I'll not argue there, but he's not particularly impressed me otherwise."

"The Dominion doesn't do politics like we do, Cat," Vivienne reminded me. "They often duel, when they disagree, and they're cautious with risking their honour. He didn't particularly care about the trial because by Levantine ways he shouldn't have been in the room – villains are yours to discipline, as your 'sworn men'."

My forehead creased in thought as I considered him again with fresh eyes. He'd spoken in favour of death, when the time came for recommendations, but to Levantines things like betrayals tended to be seen as matters of honour. Honour was usually settled by blood on the floor, back in Levant, so for a lord of the Dominion to express surprise this didn't start and end with putting the Magician's head on a pike made a brutal sort of sense.

"Careful Yannu, huh," I murmured.

I wasn't entirely convinced, but best to watch my step anyway. There were damned few situations where it wouldn't be a good idea to do that, so what was there to lose?

"There's an emerging pattern of the Dominion reaching out to us amicably," Vivienne thoughtfully continued. "When they suggested we arrange formal ambassadors I thought it might be leftover goodwill from your saving the Pilgrim, or perhaps courting your support in keeping their villains from making trouble, but now I'm not so sure."

"They've been wary of making deals with me," I slowly said, "but at the highest rungs of Dominion leadership they'll be aware of my eventual abdication. You're a lot more palatable, from their perspective."

A former heroine with some impressive deeds to her name, nobly born but not afraid to get her hands a little dirty? That sort of reputation would go over very well, down in Levant.

"They also remember how quickly Proceran gratitude fades," Vivienne murmured. "And how a First Prince can withdraw from the treaties signed by a predecessor. A treaty of mutual defence between our realms might appeal to their Majilis."

"I'd think it more likely they want an informal alignment within the bounds of the Grand Alliance," I told her. "They don't want it to become a vessel for Proceran interests any more than we do."

"They'll be in no hurry to seal a pact, regardless," Vivienne noted. "Bargaining done with an ally is expected to be gentler, and the negotiations over the Accords is the greatest leverage the Dominion has over us at the moment."

True enough. More than once I'd wondered if Procer and Levant were actually drawing those talks out so that they could bribe me with 'concessions' when they wanted something from me. Not a pleasant thought to entertain, but even if it turned out to be true there honestly wasn't much I could do about it.

"No reason not to take up Lord Marave on his invitation, then," I said, draining the rest of my cup before rising to my feet.

No reason to waste time, either, so I got to it.

—

I wasn't one to complain when offered up the sight of two dozen very fit men and women half-naked and laying hands on each other, but it lost some of the charm when they were doing their best to pummel each other unconscious. I'd been in a few brawls myself, back in the day, so I could tell that no one was taking it easy down there: those blows weren't being pulled in the slightest. If the personal sworn swords of Yannu of the Champion's Blood had been 'sparring' with blades instead of fists, there'd be corpses on the sand by now. As it was, I saw only blood and broken bones. A pair of young Levantine healers – who amusingly enough wouldn't be considered real priests in the Dominion even though they used Light, as unlike the Lanterns they did not battle against evil – mended the fighters during their breaks, but did not otherwise involve themselves.

Yannu Marave himself sat besides me on the rafters, drinking deeply from a waterskin. He'd been down there fighting with the others when I got there, and only come up after one of the healers set a broken finger and bathed it in Light. The Lord of Alava was still barefoot and clad in only loose trousers and a sweat-soaked tunic, neither of which hid the fact that the man

was a towering slab of muscle. He was tall, for a Levantine, and unusually for one of their men close-shaven instead of bearded. His colours were not currently on his face, but instead discreetly painted in intertwined threads around his wrist. After emptying what must have been half the skin, the Lord of Alava sighed in pleasure.

"I thank you for your patience," Lord Yannu said.

"I didn't send a messenger ahead to warn of my coming," I dismissed with a shrug.

There'd been others up here when I first came, who'd invited me to take a seat on the bench where I still was, but they'd withdrawn when their lord came up. Now he glanced back at them meaningfully and they reached within the leather bags at their side, fiddling with something within. A moment later the small tingle of a ward coming down over the area passed over my skin, and I eyed the men speculatively. They wore armour, both of them, which was rare in mages aside from those in my army and the Legions – and even there it was a lighter kit than that of the regulars. They might not be mages at all, though, or just practitioners with a meagre Gift: it did not take much to wake the wardstones the Blood used. Gifts from the Gigantes, they were a wonder to behold and one I remained deeply envious of.

"Hiding stones," the Lord of Alava said, noting my interest. "We will not be heard, not even by the men carrying them."

"Useful," I said.

Hopefully it wasn't too obvious on my face that I'd trade the Blessed Isle for a reliable way to get those. Not that I currently owned the Blessed Isle, but that'd never stopped me before.

"I will not waste our time with small talk," Lord Yannu said. "We both know what this is."

I hummed, inclining my head in unspoken agreement.

"We're not happy with Procer having an *ealamal*," the tall man said.

"I'm not familiar with the term," I said, "but I can guess what you're referring to."

"The angel-corpse, you have called it," Lord Yannu said. "That is the word for such a thing in Murcadan."

Ealamal, huh. It had a ring to it. Less ungainly to keep mentioning, too.

"Understood," I said. "I'm not happy about it either, as you already know."

"I do," he said. "And the heads of two lines of the Blood vouch that your word has weight, so now we speak. Procer is a great but dying beast, and I do not advise forcing its lair, yet for that same reason we must act. An animal bleeding out cannot be trusted with the likes of an ealamal."

He paused there, as if to invite me to speak.

"I'd prefer the weapon scrapped," I admitted, "but I agree that no good will come out of pushing the Principate too far. The reasonable compromise would be having people of our own near it, so that it can't be used without our agreement."

The tanned man nodded.

"I speak for the entire Majilis when I say this," Yannu Marave said. "We want the ealamal to be made a weapon of the Grand Alliance, like the Severance."

"I don't see Cordelia Hasenbach going for that without assurances," I said. "At a guess, Procer keeping the most boots on the ground around it and maybe even controlling who has access."

Rubies to piglets that the First Prince would cut off a finger before letting Masego anywhere near her angelic doomsday weapon.

"We'd agree to limiting Bestowed access," the Lord of Alava said, "by making it subject to a vote needing to be unanimous. But we want Binders and Lanterns there, so that we can know the nature of the threat. I will not accept our first warning being a tide of burning light on the horizon."

"Preaching to the choir there," I grunted back. "I'd agree to limiting Named under those terms as well, but I want your support in pushing for the Rogue Sorcerer to have a look."

Roland was in that narrow category of people who were both likely to understand what they were looking at and then share that information with me. The Lord of Alava studied me closely.

"Agreed, if you support the same for the Forsworn Healer," he replied.

I hid my surprise. The man was from Atalante from what I recalled, not Levant. And he served up in Twilight's Pass, where no Named from the Dominion had been assigned. There were Levantine troops up there, though, led by Itima of the Bandit's Blood. Might be there was a tie there that'd slipped me by: there

were few of my lot in Lycaonese lands, and none I was close to. Either way I had no reason to refuse his terms.

"Bargain struck," I replied, offering up my arm to clasp.

"On my honour," Yannu Marave agreed, taking the arm.

Good, that tended to be reliable in Levantines.

"All that's left is deciding how we approach her," I said. "It will have more of an impact coming from Levant, I'd say."

"If Callow is the one to approach her, she will sound us out and find the door closed," the Lord of Alava replied. "A softer creep, yes?"

"If she doesn't already know we're talking, I'll put up my crown for auction in Mercantis," I snorted. "Besides, soft won't get this done. It needs to be made clear to her she'd standing alone in this, and that her allies are not pleased."

"A common front, then," Lord Yannu said. "Wearied comrades coming to her together."

Interesting. He really didn't want to be the one to swing the sword on this, did he? Worried about the appearance of siding with a villain, or some of the undercurrents of the Dominion's own politics tying his hands? It was a shame that the Jacks knew so very little of the powers that moved Levant, but given the distance and the youth of their organization it would have been foolish to expect them to have spread their net that far.

"That could work," I conceded, sensing pushing for more would get me nowhere. "A dinner tomorrow, after the trial?"

"No point in letting her dig in," the Lord of Alava agreed, sounding amused. "I will make the arrangements, Black Queen, if you have no objection."

"I entrust my honour to your hands," I replied, nodding.

Surprise flickered across the man's face, and though he tried to hide it the courtesy had obviously flattered him.

Lord Yannu of the Champion's Blood would be less flattered if he knew I'd learned the words from the Barrow Sword, I suspected, but I had no intention of telling him.

—

I'd expected to derive some pleasure from this, to have to hide it, but when the time came I found that I got no joy from the sight of Christophe de Pavanie being pilloried.

Metaphorically so, that was. Aside from being unarmed and heavily guarded the Mirror Knight wasn't bound in any way. He still looked like a beaten dog as the Sword of Judgement briskly went through the charges laid against him, face bleak as he remained silent unless spoken to. No one wanted to drag more Named directly into this, so the testimony of heroes had been offered in written form instead and the entire affair took no more than a quarter hour. The White Knight made his case methodically, laying no accusation that could not be proven and justifying his charge of 'assault on an ally' instead of 'unprovoked assault on an ally' by specifying that there'd been some fighting between heroes and that he himself had not done as much as he could have to prevent violence from erupting.

It'd keep the Mirror Knight from more severe consequences, but even as I watched the First Prince's face subtly harden I decided it'd been a strategic mistake on Hanno's part. Admitting to heroes brawling amongst each other only helped make them seem less reliable in Hasenbach's eyes, damningly enough not without reason. That my own lot was looking better in comparison was darkly amusing, considering they tended to be significantly worse people. They were, however, *much* better at hiding their misdeeds. The most fire that was squeezed out of the Mirror Knight was when he was probed over his reasons to have acted in such a manner by the First Prince.

"I sought only to prevent the scapegoating and execution of a Chosen," Christophe said, voice defiant. "I took the wrong path in seeking this, I'll not deny it, but the intention itself I will not apologize for."

Cordelia warmly thanked him for his candor with a smile and he looked both surprised and rather charmed. I wasn't fooled, myself. I knew that glint in her eye, as it was cousin to one that'd often gleamed in my own. The First Prince of Procer was looking at a Heavens-ordained victor still insisting even now that his own half-baked sense of justice should trump laws and treaties, and finding indignation rising within her. I suppressed a wince. Those two sentences had probably done as much damage as the rest of this trial put together. Now she had to be asking herself how many heroes like Christophe de Pavanie there were, for each one like the White Knight.

I could only begin to imagine her horror at the thought of that sort of strength and ignorance bolstering the position of some Highest Assembly cutthroat.

With the charges fully presented and little doubt left as to the truthfulness of them, Hanno asked if the tribunal wanted to deliberate. I was still gauging the risk of being seen as overstepping if I pushed for that when the First Prince voted in favour. I quickly added my vote for to the tally and the Lord of

Alava belatedly voted that way as well, looking more curious than anything else. With a majority secured the Mirror Knight was sent out of the room to a nearby one where he could wait until deliberations were finished, and within moments of his departure Arsenal mages put a privacy ward over the room. Cordelia opened the dance without being coy about it, much to my pleasure.

"Before punishment is decided by the White Knight, I have relevant facts to present to the tribunal," the First Prince said.

"By our own rules of procedure, these cannot be charges," Hanno told her.

"They are not, Lord White," she calmly replied. "If I may?"

The dark-skinned knight nodded.

"Christophe de Pavanie has involved himself with the royal family of Cleves, the House of Langevin," Cordelia said. "He has taken for a lover the daughter of Prince Gaspard Langevin and become associated with the plots of that line, though his exact degree of awareness there has not been made clear."

The drow hadn't seen him backing the plot to knife them in the back, that much was true – if Sve Noc had that kind of leverage, they would have given it to me. But he'd not outright refused either.

"Neither taking a lover nor the plotting of others is something that the Mirror Knight can be castigated for," Hanno replied, just as calmly.

Yeah, no one was going to get anywhere trying to get the Sword of Judgement to spice up a sentence according to political necessities. You might as well ask Archer to settle down or the Pilgrim to deal in casual cruelty.

"Ignoring the full circumstances when passing the sentence would be dereliction of duty," I said instead. "You've clearly established the man to be lacking in judgement through your charges, his association with known schemers has to be taken into consideration when addressing the consequences of that lack of judgement."

"Well said," the First Prince of Procer added. "Justice dealt without thought to consequence is no more than the arithmetic of law."

A little rich coming from a woman famous for her mastery of using the Highest Assembly's procedural laws against her rivals, but I'd not answer wind in the sail by poking a hole in the damned

thing. Yannu Marave's face had gone cold, though I noticed only when he leaned forward.

"You both seem in agreement that Gaspard Langevin is scheming," the Lord of Alava. "What is the nature of this scheme?"

I cast a look at Cordelia, silently ceding her the right to speak. I was the closest thing the Firstborn had to a representative in this room, but the House of Langevin was *her* headache – and a little goodwill gift now and then helped grease the wheels of this relationship, anyway.

"Designs have made on lands that were promised to the Empire Ever Dark for its contributions to the war," the First Prince said. "Though the plans remained imprecise, and no concrete measures were ever taken."

If the Lord of Alava's expression had been cold before, it was now *freezing*.

"That such an honourless man still lives, much less still wears a crown, is repugnant," Lord Yannu spelled out with excruciating care. "With this scheming against allies he dishonours not only Procer but this entire alliance."

I said nothing, less than inclined to take that bolt for Procer when I pretty much agreed with the man.

"Measures are being taken," Cordelia evenly replied.

"Then let them be taken soon," Yannu of the Champion's Blood replied. "I will not lead my captains in the defence of such a man and his holdings, First Prince. We will not die by the hundreds so that your hungry princes can sink their teeth into new lands."

It would have been inappropriate to let out a whistle there, but I was tempted. The Lord of Alava was being heavy-handed, but given how much honour mattered to the Blood he might be genuinely offended by what he'd learned. Or, I mused with Vivienne's words in mind, Careful Yannu might just be preparing the grounds for our common offensive at dinner tonight. He was in full face paint today, which made reading his expression rather harder.

"We have strayed from the purpose of this deliberation," the White Knight said.

With that call to order we let the subject drop, though it would not soon be forgotten. I'd said what I'd wanted to and the First Prince had proved true to her word by actually addressing the Langevin troubles, so when the deliberations were called to an end I did not argue against. The Mirror Knight was brought back

in and Hanno called for recommendations to be made by the tribunal.

"A public lashing and four fingers," Lord Yannu flatly said.

The Mirror Knight paled but did not speak.

"Reassignment to Twilight's Pass until the end of the war, subordinate to another," the First Prince suggested instead. "After his deeds being made known among all Named and a month in a cell."

He made an uglier expression at that than the prospect of losing fingers, which I supposed said much about how other heroes would respond to his action. A month was a fairly specific length of time to ask for, though. I suspected that it would line up very well with a sentence under Procer law, by mere happenstance of course.

"I'll second Twilight's Pass and the subordination," I said. "As for the rest, I'll trust in your judgement."

A month in a cell would be a waste, so I'd not argue in favour of it, but I was actually in favour of making it known Christophe had tried his hand at a coup. It would bottom out his reputation while the way Hanno had handled him would gild his own. Given the silence of the Choir of Judgement, the occasional reminder that the White Knight was not someone to fuck with had its uses. I didn't want to be seen arguing for the public shaming of an opponent, though, so it was best for Cordelia to be the one doing that – not that I'd missed she was trying to send her inconvenient native hero up in Lycaonese lands, where her support ran strongest, and squarely under the Kingfisher Prince's military command.

My eyes stayed on the White Knight, though, whose serene face I found unreadable.

"Christophe de Pavanie's breaches of the Terms will be made known to all Named," Hanno said. "He will offer apology and restitution to all those harmed by his actions, after which he will be apprenticed to the Grey Pilgrim for the span of a year so that he might learn from his mistakes."

My brow rose. Was that all? I was relieved when he began talking again.

"After the year has passed, the Grey Pilgrim will give his opinion on whether further action is required," Hanno asked. "If he believes it to be so, this tribunal will be assembled again so that appropriate sanctions might be considered."

I breathed out shallowly. Fuck me, but he'd stepped in it there. From the corner of my eye I saw Hasenbach's back go straight as a spear, and the fact that her anger was that that visible meant she must be *furious*. From a Named perspective, Hanno's sentence was solid work: Tariq, for all his flaws, had mentored dozens of heroes over the years and had an aspect that would allow him unearthly insight into what needed to be mended in Christophe. Honestly, after a year under Tariq I fully expected the Mirror Knight to come out of the experience a better man. But the Grey Pilgrim had also butchered an entire village of Proceran civilians in order to catch Black, back before the Salian Peace, which Hasenbach still despised him for. Now a brewing threat to her authority was being sent to learn at the foot of the same Peregrine. It... wasn't a good look.

"Wisdom was shown," Lord Yannu commented.

Yeah, none of the Blood were going to argue with a sentence that put the Pilgrim in charge of a problem child. He had a steady hand with those. Was this enough for me, though? From the corner of my eye I watched Cordelia and saw clouds looming on that horizon. Time to throw her a bone, maybe.

"I give no objection to this, so long as the Principate is also satisfied," I mildly said.

The First Prince glanced at me, accepting the gesture for what it was – a largely symbolic one, but not entirely without meaning. If she wanted to fight this, I'd lend a hand. Within reason. A long moment of silence passed, the Mirror Knight visibly getting uncomfortable the longer it lasted, until the First Prince finally spoke.

"I will accept this sentence, if the Grey Pilgrim sends monthly reports to the high officers on the subject of this 'apprenticeship'," the fair-haired princess said.

Hanno mulled over that a moment, then nodded.

"That is reasonable," he replied. "It will be so."

And so the trial of the Mirror Knight came to a close, having lasted not even a half hour from beginning to end. It didn't take long afterwards to agree that the Red Axe's own should be tomorrow, though late in the evening.

And yet, for all the smoothness, I could not help but feel there was the scent of a storm in the air.

—

It was an amusing novelty to be more at ease in a diplomatic situation than Cordelia Hasenbach.

When the Lord of Alava had said he'd make the arrangements to receive us for dinner, I'd not expected him to actually throw what looked like a genuine Levantine meal. One of the nice halls put together in the Proceran manner had been stripped of its decorations, painted shields having been hung up in their stead. The heraldries had been skillfully painted, I found. My own Crown and Sword had been perfectly presented in black and silver, while the golden towers on blue of the House of Hasenbach drew the eye with their neat arrangement. The colours of the Valiant Champion's Blood were red and orange, but to my understanding the pattern changed from ruler to ruler. Yannu Marave's own was simple but elegant, bold strokes of orange evoking a helmet with a smiling slice beneath it.

The First Prince was clearly familiar with Levantine ways, so she'd come dressed in a fine brigandine of Rhenian colours with a sword at her hip and her hair pulled back in a long three-strand braid. I'd kept to a simple grey tunic myself, though paired with bracers and greaves, and brought a short blade at Vivienne's recommendation. Hasenbach was the first to hand over her sheathed sword to the Lord of Alava when he welcomed her, only to have it handed back as gesture of trust, and though she did not fumble handling the weapon I'd noticed she was not used to having it at her hip when she walked. My own blade was returned with the same formula of 'your honour is known under this roof', which while mostly symbolic was still nice to hear.

Unlike the elaborate affair of when the First Prince had entertained me over dinner, this was to be a simpler arrangement. Levantine ways in some ways reminded me of those of the Taghreb, in the sense that hospitality mattered a great deal to them and that courtesy was demonstrated personally instead of through formal etiquette. It was an honour, for example, that there would be only the three of us at the table and no servants to pour or serve. The Lord of Alava would do so for us himself, showing much more respect than if a stranger were doing it in his stead. The fare was simple but tasty: slices of dried pork ham, a mix of beans, chickpeas and eggs touched with spices and oil, good white bread with some sort of tomato paste.

Lord Yannu was generous in pouring wine, strong red stuff from southern Levant, which did wonders for my appreciation of the meal. Conversation started light and stayed there for some time as we dug in.

"Do you actually know how to use that?" I eventually asked Hasenbach, flicking a glance at her sword.

She'd kept drinking, bound by the rules of courtesy, so I believed the flush on her cheeks to be entirely genuine.

"I can hold a wall, if need be," the Lycaonese princess replied, "I *am* a Hasenbach. My skill is middling, however. I was always better with a bow."

Didn't have the callouses of someone who shot regularly, though, I couldn't help but notice. Probably didn't have the time with her duties in Salia.

"Good bowmen are always useful," the Lord of Alava said in approval. "It is unfortunate they are not as useful against the undead as the living."

"Swords for the Dead, arrows for the Plague," Hasenbach quoted. "There is a proper use for all things."

That was as good a segue as we were going to get, I suspected, and I wasn't the only one to figure that out.

"Some weapons are best left in the sheath," the Levantine lord said. "And there are some who even sheathed cause the wise to be wary."

The First Prince wasn't an idiot, and not interested in pretending otherwise, so instead of playing off the comment she dabbed her lips with the cloth and washed down the last of her pork with a small mouthful of wine. Only then did she answer.

"There are many wise in Levant, I imagine," she said.

"I have known this to be true," Yannu Marave said, face pleasant but eyes cool.

The First Prince glanced at me.

"I don't claim wisdom," I said, "but wariness is dear as a sister to me."

"It pains me to see my allies troubled," Hasenbach mildly replied. "Though I am wary, myself, of troubling the princes sworn to me."

"Your princes trouble *me*," the Lord of Alava replied, dispensing with the pretence. "I have broken bread with Gaspard Langevin, never knowing he was plotting betrayal of an ally. I will never share a table with any of that line again."

Godsdamn, I thought. While I was fairly sure he was feeding the flame some, the spark at the heart of it struck me as a genuine thing. The twist of those lips was just a little too tight for it to be otherwise.

"You've expressed concerns about the reliability of Bestowed," I said, "and perhaps not without reason. You can understand, then,

our concerns about an *ealamal* possibly falling in the hands of less honourable elements within Procer."

She didn't like it, I could tell, but she couldn't afford to antagonize Procer's only two allies by brushing us off. It must not have been a pleasant turn, I thought, to be the one on the outside for once. I was rather enjoying being the one with backing, though. I could get used to this.

"Let us discuss then," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "how all our concerns might be allayed."

After that, all that was left was bargaining over terms.

Beadsu Richar

This is off topic, and probably will never be relevant to the story, but what happened to Assassin? He was a cool character and i might be mistaken but I thought only a simulacrum of his was destroyed in Akua's Folly, and not really him. Anyway, an amazing chapter EE, Thanks,

[Javvies](#)

His last known location, was Ashur, roughly concurrent with Amadeus's invasion of Procer.

What Assassin has been up to since and where he's been is a complete unknown.

Laguz24

Yeah, last I heard he was in ashur. Though I think he will be making a return sometime, or he's already in the arsenal. Or he lost his name since he is no longer under the employ of the empress since that was his role (blade of the empire) and he no longer has it. Just like amadeus lost his name as the black knight after he stopped serving.

Anomandris

Imagine if he is working with Black. I mean, Ranger, Maddie AND Assassin? Malicia should just abdicate at that point....

Darkening

Black thinks to himself at one point on his trip through the twilight ways, "assassin was gone, if not from calernia than at least from his service." So I doubt assassin is still

around, but I suppose he could have come back during the time skip.

Liliet

Assassin is from the Free Cities, and had his Name before he served the Praesi court.

SMR

... Black didn't lose his name after he stopped serving. He lost his name when he was defeated by a hero. The Black Knight is the Breaker of Heroes.

Salt

The Black Knight losing his Name had nothing to do with his defeat at the hands of a Hero. He lost his Name because he was at the end of the Story of the Black Knight, and was transitioning into the Role of a Claimant for Dread Emperor. Ruler instead of Ruled.

This wasn't a natural part of his Role either. Turning him into a Claimant from a Black Knight was orchestrated directly by the Bard. She said it outright when she dropped by to gloat after manipulating him into accidentally kill Captain during the fight with the White Knight.

> The Wandering Bard leapt down from the rooftop, half-falling. She came close, kneeling at his side.

> "Go home," she said. "Murder your little friend in the Tower and reign until someone puts a knife in your back. You're not as good at this game as you thought you were."

After Black was captured by the Pilgrim, she once again intervened to push him into becoming Dread Emperor, by directly convincing him to become a Claimant.

> "I am," Amadeus said, "no longer the Black Knight."

> "You don't fit that groove anymore," Marguerite said. "Powerless you ain't, Maddie. You know what you are, deep down, you just think it's beneath you."

> His fingers tightened under the knuckles were white.

> "Claimant," the Wandering Bard said. "You can have your second shot at it, you're owed that."

Liliet

You are correct, and he was mentioned since. Black sent him to Ashur to assassinate their leadership, without contact and

specific plans to avoid detection by the Augur. This seems to have bitten everyone in the ass – the plot being finalized was mentioned in Cordelia's POV at the peace conference, where Augur had finally seen it and told her, but it was too late to do anything. And Black soon after – in the Epilogue, I think, it was his own POV – mentioned Assassin being either out of Calernia or at least out of his service.

No status updates since.

flashburn283

Oh, he is out there somewhere, biding his time till our dear Amadeus has need of his particular talents.

Big I

He was sent to assassinate the ruler of Ashur (Magon Hadast I think his name is?) so that his son, who has ties to the Tower, could take over. That was before Thallasinnia though. Since then the only mention is from an Amadeus POV where he thinks that "Assassin is gone, if not from this world then at least from his service".

[Liliet](#)

I think the name is right!

According to Cordelia circa peace conference, he did do that. Just when Amadeus no longer would have wanted him to...

[sengachi](#)

Oh I suspect it will be very, very important at the worst possible time. There is a character famous for nigh-impossible to survive, who is nigh-impossible to kill, who can be literally anywhere in the story, who had terrifying abilities hinted at yet not explicitly spelled out, who acts at the behest of someone known for picking the *worst* moments to twist the knife in, and whose Empress wants the Grand Alliance to hurt fighting the Dead King.

And the Grand Alliance is a house of cards barely keeping itself afloat.

The only case in which I can see the Assassin not busting in at the worst possible moment is if the Assassin already *has* and is the Red Axe somehow.

[Liliet](#)

> who acts at the behest of someone known for picking the *worst* moments to twist the knife in, and whose Empress

unconfirmed, which is the closest to a silver lining here

[The Rattle in the Book](#)

That's the point I think. If we knew where assassin was, he wouldn't be a very good assassin now would he?

Kakavorin

I wonder if he might be the Forlorn Paladin. The one that has lost his memory.

SpaceDorf

my thoughts as well.

It would fit Assassins sense of humor to join the Truce and Terms under some assumed Name just to reap the benefits after.

maybe the whatshername Poisoner

[Mental Mouse](#)

Heh heh heh...

Kazrael Azraelis

"Let us discuss then," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "how all our votes might be given."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Alexis

My own input was returned with the same formula of 'your votes are known under this roof', which while mostly symbolic was still nice to hear.

[Javvies](#)

I'm not sure Tariq is really the best person to oversee Mirror Knight's "rehabilitation", as I'm pretty sure Mirror Knight is also one of the people who thinks Tariq is under Cat's influence/sway, which would likely complicate Tariq's efforts.

Also ... Tariq needs to confront the fact that Bard isn't who he thought she was.

Plus ... Tariq is somebody who doesn't exactly have a promising perspective on the relative value of secular values and authorities relative to that of the Ophanim.

Mirror Knight's trial went more smoothly than I expected it would.

The lightness of the charges is a potential problem.

But now Yannu knows about the Langevin plotting and he is not pleased, as expected.

The question of the Angel corpse went surprisingly well.

Red Axe's trial is gonna be a mess. Or, rather ... the aftermath. Especially if she outright says that she lied about accepting the Truce and Terms. Major consequences for the reliability of Named, especially Heroes.

Also, if she lied, Cordelia could also try to use that as a lever to get her out from Hanno's jurisdiction and into hers, which might complicate things.

Huh. Hanno is going to need to be careful about what charges he lays against Red Axe. That's another potential problem.

Ninestrings

Very few Named have the patience to deal with his stupidity, and the power to slap him down if necessary.

Also The Blood really like that guy so denying him custody on the basis of distrust to The Grey Pilgrim may be taken as an insult to them.

Salt

Not to mention that the Mirror Knight's main problems is his stubbornness in defending a vague idea of virtue at all costs, lack of experience in worldly matters, and lack of any sort of nuance in matters of judgement.

Tariq as a person has strengths to match all of those three flaws, and has a Role/Story almost specifically designed for teaching young Heroes what they're lacking. He's nearly tailor made by Above for this kind of Role.

It probably won't hurt either that the Grey Pilgrim was one of the few people brutally principled enough to draw genuine respect for them Saint of Swords. You're never going to be held in such high esteem by Laurence de fucking Montfort without an ironclad set of virtuous principles that puts most Heroes to shame. Christophe will respect that about the "kindly" old grandfather, if nothing else.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, this. Tariq has the advantages of:

- his Role being that of a teacher, personally speaking if not necessarily that of his Name;
- knowing EXACTLY why people listen to the Black Queen and trust her personally speaking;

- understanding clearly the balance of power behind the Truce and Terms;
- having Behold to make up for Christophe's inability to communicate clearly;
- not being Proceran and so having the perspective Christophe lacks for how his people come across to everyone else, but also being old and wise and patient enough to not just end the conversation the first time Christophe blurts out something horrifically offensive;
- being, indeed, universally respected and personally more or less beyond reproach;
- having been friends with the Saint of Swords and so both having respect for uncompromising stances and being intimately familiar with their downsides.

(Though, honestly, I don't think Christophe is a lot like Laurence. Her uncompromising-ness came from an excess of practicality – she already knows what's best and what will happen if who does what, and listening to other people / giving villains a chance is a cute idealistic thought she's no longer into based on extensive life experience. What ideals she did hold once upon a time that got beaten out of her might just be the opposite of Christophe's to the degree them both being Above-bound allows.)

KageLupus

Of all of those points, Behold is the one that I think makes the most sense. We have seen Christophe's point of view, and so we know that his biggest hangup is that he sticks his foot in his mouth almost constantly. He is always feeling like his words and his intent don't line up, which makes him feel awkward, which leads to more poor interactions.

Having a kind old grandfather who can see your intent clearly is exactly what someone like that needs to start getting over their issues. Tariq has the Aspect that will let him act as a therapist and mentor, and the years of practice to make him a good one. More than anything that is what Mirror Knight needs to stop being a pain in everyone's ass.

[Liliet](#)

Y E A H

One of Cat's biggest issue with Tariq was that he tried to act like a kindly old mentor figure to her AND SHE ALREADY HAD ONE OF THOSE THANKS THE SLOT IS FILLED.

While Cristophe's entire problem is that it's not.

hakureireimu

Tariq is the only one with Behold.

[Liliet](#)

Well, Hanno worked at court before he was a Named, and under the Choir of Judgement after. I think "careful with the charges he lays" is not going to be a problem.

Salt

I don't know, I'm a little worried that Hanno is not the right *type* of careful, considering that the danger is primarily a politically related one instead of one that has to do with Justice and the Law. This chapter just showed that he is basically a perfect robot with the latter, but aggressively gives no shits about politics if they're not directly related to the trial at hand.

We got some... troubling foreshadowing here where Hanno perfectly dealt with the Mirror Knight's trial as far as the letter and the intent of the law went, but basically stomped on Cordelia's toes in the process by ignoring political ramifications/personal grudges, for the sake of the most lawful and Just resolution.

It'll have to be Cordelia who'll need to be very careful about how she pushes her agenda for a Proceran trial to prevent a riot in the highest assembly, because Hanno is basically going to plow ahead exactly as his view of legal correctness and "Justice" demands. If Hanno sees her as attempting to subvert the Law under the Terms here, she's going to find out exactly what Catherine was thinking about him being a sharp rock under water.

[Liliet](#)

LMAO true, very true.

That said, this is Cordelia's bread and butter. Dealing with... strong personalities and all.

Lord Haart

I think you may be misreading Hanno here somewhat. Recall his thoughts during the heroes' meeting, he is less concerned about Justice than about the best outcome. He

knows that few people could wield the Severance and he's trying to make sure that if they need to rely on MK for that (which no one else would like but which may be required in the end), that door remains open. Which is actually very pragmatic, really

Salt

Nah, I will have to disagree. While the law by itself isn't the only thing he looks at, at the end of the day there's absolutely nothing in all of Creation that Hanno is more concerned about than Justice. When the Tyrant viewed him with Wish, what he saw was "at her side that boring little thing the White Knight tread, all desires his own faded while that horrid thing intertwined with the Seraphim – I wish to be just – tainted everything."

Which is rather in-line with his character background, since Hanno's equivalent of Catherine taking up the knife for the sake of peace, was going to the temple to seek the Face of the Just. Actually his entire origin story – and the reason he's even named the White Knight at all – was about him realizing that mortals weren't capable of determining Justice in the first place. He was anointed by the Seraphim because he had such a fervent wish for Justice that he was willing to almost completely give up his own agency for the sake of being Just.

Hanno is not the Hero who cares mostly about outcomes. That's the Pilgrim, who is blatantly willing to commit lesser evils as long as it results in less suffering, let his Sister's killer live – fully admitting that it was the unjust thing to do – because it would result in less suffering, and killing his own adopted son because the outcome otherwise was an entire war worth of suffering.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno cares about justice AND about outcomes. If the outcome of justice done is disastrous, was it really justice in the first place? The Seraphim seemed to say "no" to that in Hanno's initiation vision.

Cpt. Obvious

Hano says he didn't judge, but left that up to the choir of judgement. But at the same time he did not toss the coin for everyone, and he specifically avoided doing that for people who he considered to be positive forces. Not necessarily good, but providing a net positive to the world around them.

He did that because he knows that even heroes like the Grey Pilgrim or the Mirror Knight will have broken some laws and would have been struck if judged by the choir of judgement.

Judgement isn't able to see beyond black and white. Either you are innocent, which is next to impossible for anyone but a infant, or you are guilty and will bear the full might of justice.

So though he claimed that he didn't judge, and that was technically true, Hano was effectively the one who chose whom the choir would judge. And I doubt he ever got surprised by the choir finding the accused not guilty.

And that's why I think he's a hypocrite when he claims not to have been the one to judge. On the other hand he has shown that he has a keen sense of justice and understands that sometimes what is right isn't necessarily the same as what is legal, or sometimes not even what is good. And that's why he can work with Catherine. She is technically evil, a priest of the evil gods Sve Noc, and she cheats at dice, cards, politics and warfare and fighting. But she doesn't kill for fun, tries to minimize deaths and suffering and fights FOR her people instead of oppressing them. That's more of a net positive than what a lot of the supposedly good rulers has shown.

LizAris

I actually feel pretty good about giving Mirror to ol Tariq- It's true he is fully in line with his choir and depends on them for judgment much in the same way Hanno used to (whispers in the ear etc), but as far as secular authorities he knows where he stands and where that power needs to be. He never wanted to rule Levant (even though they'd literally hand the crown to him); he's always been very open to careful consideration of enemies turned allies (he's one of the heroes most okay with joining forces with Cat, even happily sat down to talk to her when they first met, which is the kind of foresight and consideration Christophe wouldn't recognize even if it sat in his lap). He entrusted the safety of Aquiline and Razin to the Black Queen, which is definitely saying something about his respect for politics and power in Calernia, and how he didn't want his home to be left behind. All in all he's not a stupid guy and I think he's ESPECIALLY fitting for Christophe given how well he once dealt with Saint, and how much Mirror mirrors (ha) a more flawed version of her.

'Ladi Williams

"Sat down and happily talked to her".... Yeah. You do realise that was him trying to set her up for a redemption narrative where she loses her head at the end of it right? If not that Cat was story savvy...she wouldn't have dodged that bullet.

And he kept trying to off her even after that without batting an eyelid. He only gave up and truly listened when it became obvious he couldn't beat her story wise...

That said. I still agree with you that he's a good choice to put some sense into that hard head and has the required power to beat it into the said hard head.

Salt

To be fair, even after Catherine came back from the Everdark she still believed he was being genuine, despite his active attempts to kill her.

Not to mention that, if his argument with the Saint during the Princes graveyard is to be believed, Catherine was far from the first Villain to act like she had good intentions. As in he tried compromising with Villains similar to Catherine quite literally dozens of times and got burned for it every time without a single exception, before deciding to try again with Cat.

Tariq vs Laurence, from Concord:

> "Tariq, how many of these 'turnabouts' have you seen over the years?" the Saint hissed. "How many Damned made their apologies, swore they'd never meant to hurt anyone, said that they would help you keep the peace instead."

>"Dozens," the Pilgrim said.

>"And how many kept their word?"

>"None," the old man tiredly said.

> "And still you want to make bargain with her? The battle's not done, Tariq. It'll get ugly, true enough, and thousands will die. Likely one of us too. But we can still win, and though we'll be a ruin after we'll be a ruin that can recover," the Saint harshly asked. "But if we compromise, here and now? There'll never be any recovering from that. The taint will be in the cause until it runs its course. So why?"

>"Because we are not animals," Tariq softly replied. "Because we do not shy from compromise simply because it has burned us before. Because if we are willing to break armies for a point of theological purity, then that it is us that deserves the breaking. ...

Liliet

Oh, this meme that Catherine herself started in-universe when she did not believe there could possibly not be a catch. She asked the question of “how exactly could this be an assassination attempt?” and lo, it was possible.

That doesn’t mean it actually was one.

And Tariq’s first conversation with Catherine that’s being referred to here, the one at the campfire before any battles, was never referred to with anything like that, and was pretty civil and productive – they discussed what the fuck Crusaders were doing there and what Tariq could and could not do, and agreed on rules of engagement – no angels, no devils and demons, no sacking cities, no torturing prisoners, respecting surrender, etc.

LizAris

Oh there was all kinds of underhanded bullshit happening at that little talk, 100%. Perhaps “happily” was a bit sarcastic, but point being a lot of heroes wouldn’t even sit down. I’m sure saint would’ve been just as happy slicing off Cat’s head and walking away. The thing about Tariq weaving a story for her, is that she can still think her way out of it, and he leaves her room to prove herself. Tariq never WANTED to kill her as a first priority; it almost felt more like a test– if the villain can make her way out of this story, we will either definitely have to kill her or we will work with her. (on the other hand, if she can’t get out of it this kills her anyways.) Ultimately he was open to working with her if that ended up being the better choice.

ninegardens

>You do realise that was him trying to set her up for a redemption narrative where she loses her head at the end of it right?

I’m not sure how far I buy this argument.

For two reasons:

1) The only one who has the “Redemption=murder” in her head is Cat.

2) Cat is pretty much doing EXACTLY the same thing to Akua. And no ones complaining about that.

3) Pretty sure that for Pilgrim, Redemption is the GOAL. Redemption is dangerous and Risky, but he was never TRYING to hurt her. He was trying to redeem her. Even if the net result was the same (Redemption =death), the intention matters. In particular, if she had “redeemed” herself in his eyes, it seems likely that he would take great personal

risks to protect her. Its still kind of patronizing, but it is very different to attempted murder.

Frivolous

I don't agree with your idea that the -only- one who thinks "redemption = murder" is Cat. I think Tariq himself believes it.

Quotes here, from Interlude: Death They Cannot Steal and also Interlude: And Pay Your Toll:

It was a bitter irony that the deaths of soldiers had been the balance's harsh swing in his favour yet the true burden he must bear had been of no consequence at all. Catherine Foundling had given the slip to every story that could bind her to an ending, and so left herself only one path: reign eternal, consumed and consuming, a herald of long prices and hard measures having made mantle of the woes of Creation.

—

If there was even a single chance that Catherine Foundling would be the keystone to the death of Calernia, Tariq must ensure it would not come to be. And so now Tariq was forced to countenance this hour of barren deaths, lest a thousandfold worse might be allowed to pass.

—

It was a draw that would take Tariq where he needed to go, arm him with the only blade left that might still be capable of killing Catherine Foundling should it prove necessary.

Analysis: Note the phrasing of 'the only blade left that might still be capable of killing Catherine Foundling'.

To use the word 'left' implies that there have been other blades capable of killing Cat, but there are no more. Redemption is therefore clearly indicated to be the blade he tried to forge earlier, with the intention to kill her.

Therefore Tariq indeed tried to use Redemption = Murder on Cat before.

Agree?

[Liliet](#)

"Bind her to and ending" != "kill her", in this context. Remember that heroes die of old age and

villains are potentially immortal. A necessary thematic tie exists in-universe between morality and mortality.

And this was a “if I cannot get a way to kill her right now, no-one will ever be able to” situation. Normally “a blade that can kill a person” is anything from heroic sacrifice to time passing. Catherine becoming exempt from one after another was not about previous murder attempts, it was about her previously being mortal, period.

Grey Pilgrim didn't even necessarily need to kill her with the pattern of three, just *get a way to do it*. MAD doctrine and all.

(...and then Catherine was proven to be 100% not immune to heroic sacrifice after all and there went any residual worries lmao)

Liliet

> depends on them for judgment much in the same way Hanno used to

Actually absolutely not. They give him information, but they don't give him decisions, it's the opposite of Hanno's deal if anything. We have one instance of him actually trying to ask them for practical advice (Prince's Graveyard, when he got Catherine's letter of surrender), and all he got was “we trust in you!”

Mercy is Extremely Unhelpful in the way exactly proportionate to how active they are in his daily life. Balance and all.

(Hanno, on the other hand, did not have any communication with the Seraphim at all beyond the ‘kill/spare’ answers of his coin)

And yeah, Tariq's the embodiment of grim practicality to the point of being Amadeus's effective mirror in many ways.

mamm0nn

I agree, for all that Tariq might be a good mentor in the traditional sense, he's still a Bestowed that MK will likely defer to in judgement. Once the apprenticeship ends, MK will perhaps be less of an idiot or a defter hand but he'd still be a Bestowed with his ideals and shortsightedness fundamentally there.

He might even be more dangerous because of it, waiting until opportune moments to damn or trouble all evil perceived by him instead of blurting it out immediately. And doing the dance of

politics and hierarchy just a bit better to not step on everyone's toes when he makes accusations. However I don't see Pilgrim fix the issues that caused the problem to begin with; in the end MK will probably still be that idiot that sees his ideals and his own sense of justice above everything else with no sense of the broader picture.

If anything, Pilgrim might only make that worse, looking at his own history with Cat and Villains. Being mollified towards a single Villain does not mean being inherently changed in one's teachings.

'Ladi Williams

Especially after said villian beat you all around the continent...then saved your life when your best friends stupidity got you killed while on special ops...

[Liliet](#)

> in the end MK will probably still be that idiot that sees his ideals and his own sense of justice above everything else with no sense of the broader picture.

Extremely not seeing that.

Tariq is known among heroes as The Big Picture One, if anyone at all can teach Christophe what he needs to understand about cause and effect and long-term consequences of actions, it's him. It's basically what Mercy is the Choir of, at least at his side.

mamm0nn

Hm, him showing up to invade Callow with Procer after it was liberated from the Wasteland doesn't suggest he's idiot-proof. He would've known the precedent that set, and given his stubbornness afterwards his character as suggested should've waited for a different chance or politically pressured to change the invasion to not be a Proceran invasion under a thin guise.

My point however was that Pilgrim might teach MK a thing or two, but in the end I don't think MK's fundamental problem of being that hero that sees his own ideals and opinion over everyone else's and realistic rules and restrictions to be resolved. If anything, it may even flare up stronger if he no longer feels like an idiot in other areas that tell him he may not know the whole picture. When he encounters something that ruffles his feathers after a year of mentoring, he may just press for something heroic stupid again.

The very issues that led to MK being a problem, I don't see Pilgrim resolve. If not because he'll just teach MK more of the heroic fundamentals that are known to cause the very issues that we saw him cause here, then MK might just be mollified and deferring judgement for a year only to start thinking for himself again after a year. Which doesn't necessarily mean having improved anything during that time.

I know there's no suitable mentors available and Cat is way too busy to do it, but I think MK should've been mentored by a Villain or at least Neutral for a year instead. To hammer it in that his teachings of above are not the only thing out there and when they should be more malleable. A Villain teaching him that not all Villains are complete chaotic evil would be better than a goody Pilgrim trying to teach him rigid restraint.

[Liliet](#)

the thing is, even if MK will keep the ability to be a problem in the future, as far as t&t and this war go, Grey Pilgrim can just directly teach him these things. Like he might not be able to teach MK to think right in future complicated situations, but this one right here? Worst case scenario MK's inflexibility gets flipped into defending the t&t and the Black Queen with his life.

mamm0nn

Doubtful. Pilgrim even after all that happened still turned out to be a stubborn old fool that expected Above to get the whole cake at the end of the last book, and with but a single warning not to mess with her Cat set back their whole relationship again because he apparently didn't like 'We're people to, and don't defer to your expectations of Above getting everything, you old sod.'

Don't forget, Pilgrim isn't the wise and practical man that we may remember him as after not having seen him for a while. White Knight is, but Pilgrim is and has consistently remained a flawed fool favouring Above with little realism about the shades of grey.

[Liliet](#)

> still turned out to be a stubborn old fool that expected Above to get the whole cake at the end of the last book

Elaborate?

mamm0nn

Ah, last book halfway ending. Chapter 69: Repute. Read from "Well, they were certainly the easiest kind to live up to." onward, though reading the whole chapter may prove better to jog the memory of where you are. How the Pilgrim in his stubborn heroic ways that lay in him the same foundations as MK that led to him inevitably causing conflict with whatever Villain tries diplomacy without deference or subordination.

Liliet

I unfortunately cannot see Pilgrim's logic in that chapter as wrong in any way. I can follow Catherine's if I squint, but he's not *wrong*.

Cat's indignation over how self-claimed bad people are not treated with automatic trust and respect is...

Well, I didn't like the speech she gave in that chapter. Notably she's 100% not even thought of going through with that threat now that the condition has been triggered. Because it was stupid.

I mean she has a point about how Bard was being an asshole with that "test", but if she gets to say "yeah well they're MY assholes and I trust them even if they're occasionally turds" so does the Pilgrim?

mamm0nn

Much of the issues of this book lie in the way that Heroes do things. They rally people on empty platitudes without a plan for keeping the country or governing it, they strike at what they consider injustice or not good enough without coming up with an alternative themselves, and they allow a lot of evil to fester or even enforce it's continued existence, because it's not Evil but just human corruption or nepotism.

If the Heroes were actually able to carry their message into reality, then sure your argument wouldn't be wrong. But now, Heroes are fallible demigods that see fit to decide the faith of thousands or stick true to their ideals as seen by them even when these are in reality infeasible. Even if they have a Choir on their shoulder, they're still acting as a Judge and Executioner just like the Villains. But unlike the Villains,

they believe themselves righteous to keep preaching their own opinion in the name of something higher until they get what they want.

This issue is strong in Grey Pilgrim as well, and his insistence to snuff out or chain the Black Queen went on for much too long given Cat's actions, because of this. No, what made MK falter and be punished here, is present in Pilgrim too. As such, I don't see him teach MK to fix it.

Liliet

Heroes are correct in what they do 90 times out of 100.

The book is focused on the other 10, yes. That doesn't mean heroes are wrong as a whole.

At the time when the Pilgrim was worrying about having a way to kill the Black Queen, the last time he'd seen her (into her) was the time when she had given a killswitch to Vivienne with this exact worry. BECAUSE SHE WAS SLOWLY TURNING INTO AN ERRATIC FAE QUEEN OF ICE AND DEATH AND IT WAS A REASONABLE WORRY. (And she never told Pilgrim about the killswitch, so he didn't exactly have reason to think the issue was being handled already)

TeK

I disagree. Mirror Knight's core ideals and intentions are specifically NOT a problem.

His problem is how he goes about upholding those, as well as a consideration of what is and isn't an effective way to achieve it. I have exactly nothing against someone politely, diplomatically and legally arguing that (this is current MK picture of Red Axe atm) rape victim killing her rapist in the heat of the moment followed being manipulated and coerced into attempting to kill another person is not, in fact, someone deserving a death sentence.

Now is it a pain in the ass to deal with for the protagonist? Absolutely. But a polite, non-violent, diplomatic discussion adhering to the letter of law is ideal even if you vehemently disagree with your opponent.

Really, ironically, just like Saint, what Cristophe needs to learn most is to **Listen**. To others, to the world and to himself. If he will just get a correct and reasonably full picture in his head, it will solve half his problems. If he

will be taught how to address the issues without swinging his sword around, but twice as effectively, it will solve another half. Since Pilgrim is a walking definition of "bigger picture stuff" guy, I can't comprehend your objections. This is quite specifically what he did for his entire life.

I genuinely lold at a bit about putting your ideals above everyone's else's. This is something everyone does, otherwise they wouldn't be called ideals. God damn it dude. Now he will benefit from being more flexible and open-minded, but his ideals are ok. Quite a lot of his crimes is caused by misapplication of his ideals due to ignorance, not a failure of the ideals themselves. But I may be wrong. Can you provide an example of which of his ideals do you consider to be inherently bad? Also why do you think those are his ideals.

Thank you for reading my wall of text regardless.

Salt

> I genuinely lold at a bit about putting your ideals above everyone's else's. This is something everyone does, otherwise they wouldn't be called ideals.

This pretty much sums up my reaction exactly. I mean it's even established in the very first chapter that Named are people who have "The belief, deep down, that they know what is right and that they'll see it done."

Strongly believing that their ideals are more correct than anyone else's is the only defining characteristic of Named in the first place, meaning exact same accusation applies to every single person with a Name who ever existed. This includes the Villains, several of which have already attempted to murder Catherine for power or just reputation.

Its not as if some of the Heroic biases against Villains are actually unjustified either. Catherine outright admitted to herself in this very chapter that her own lot are generally terrible people compared to the Heroes, and that they're just better at hiding their crimes.

Cat hasn't somehow proven everyone wrong, over the years, that Villains are just a bunch of tortured misunderstood souls. It's rather the opposite – being put in charge of managing a bunch of them has made her realize that, yes, most of them actually are a pack of giant assholes. There's a good reason that Catherine has to manages most of Below's lot with fear and threats, while Hanno usually manages Above's by... sitting them all down around a table and reasoning with them, with his typical unsalted mozzarella levels of mildness.

Liliet

> I mean it's even established in the very first chapter that Named are people who have "The belief, deep down, that they know what is right and that they'll see it done."

> Strongly believing that their ideals are more correct than anyone else's is the only defining characteristic of Named in the first place, meaning exact same accusation applies to every single person with a Name who ever existed.

Yes, definitely, all Named ever, especially the babies.

-points finger at Sabah, unsubtly-

There is very specific category of Named who are all about believing they know what's right. It's wide, and yes it includes villains too (hello Fallen Monk, out of the latest set), but it is by no means ALL NAMED.

Amadeus was, er... overgeneralizing.

(I agree with everything you're saying, I just cannot help but nitpick this one)

mamm0nn

As written, neither the rape victim nor the ideals are like that for everyone thing apply to this story.

EE wrote from (White Knight's perspective no less) that MK saw Red more as a similarity to him and that her exoneration would resolve his guilt as well. As well as the whole 'She's a Bestowed, so while we should have the right to kill a dozen Villains you guys are evil for trying to kill a single Hero.' standpoint that MK almost directly preached. I don't recall him even mentioning the specifics of her act and motivation, just that she was a Bestowed and him seeing a plot to kill her with some narrative similarities to him.

Ideals are the most important for a lot of people, but I was talking about the issue that Cat mentioned bitterly before:

"Because that just wasn't how he saw the world in the end, was it? Heroes – the Chosen – were honourable and good, so even us wicked Damned must recognise these qualities and believe in their word when it was given. It was a shade of the same sentiment I'd so deeply despised in Tariq, that bedrock assumption that only the mad and the lost could ever choose anything but service to the Gods Above. It was a way to see the world that simply did not allow for disagreeing

equals.”

Chapter 26: Palaver

““I don’t want an apology,” the Red Axe said. “I want all these swords and oaths to be defending something worth defending. You spawned a monster that cares nothing for the past and looks hungrily at the future, Black Queen. Maybe it was the best you could, for all your famous cleverness.”

She laughed, the sound of it bleak to my ear.

“So think of me as the voice Creation uses to say that this is not good enough,” the prisoner said. “Your Truce and Terms will break, and you’ll either do better or be cast aside.”

Just another hero, lighting a torch and declaring it wasn’t enough without ever offering another way. There was an echo of so many I’d faced in that voice, in that castigation. The Lone Swordsman, willing to make our home a wasteland so land as it was our own banner flying above it. The Grey Pilgrim, willing to choose war over peace because it wasn’t the peace he’d wanted. The Saint of Swords, eyes hard as she decided to risk the death of all Iserre rather than compromise. I’d heard this refrain before, sung by different voices or with different words.”

Chapter 29: Conviction

Both of these fit MK to a tee. He is inherently flawed with both of the Guide’s issues regarding heroes: He considers Above to be absolutely good and therefore every shade of grey evil or to bend to his goodness if he speaks about change and morals. And he shouts about what’s wrong and needs to change, without offering a better alternative himself. Both of these lay at the foundations of his flaws and his folly during this book, and both are flaws that Pilgrim still has himself and likely cannot fix even if he didn’t have them. He didn’t fix them in Saint, and only begrudgingly changed his own for Cat and even that to only the mildest degree without doing so sufficiently or equally.

[Liliet](#)

The Mirror Knight has never *spoken* to the Red Axe. He has no idea she’s got ideology about this, he thinks she was tricked into attacking Frederic and killed the Wicked Enchanter in a fit of trauma induced panic or something like that. (That’s also what my first thought was when I heard about the murder, for the record, and the information contradicting that that I’ve received since, Mirror Knight didn’t) There’s no need to mention she’s a rape survivor every time she’s brought up, it’s already what everyone knows. It’s kind of the default background hum to the whole Red Axe thing.

And Catherine's own perspective is not perfectly unbiased, which she knows full well, what with periodically acknowledging that her 'flock' is by and large terrible people, where heroes, well, aren't. She complains periodically about there not being "equality" but well uh yeah there isn't. When one person has committed mass murder and the other hasn't you don't get to cry oppression when the first one is... passed by for opportunities. They aren't exactly discriminating by ethnic origin (admittedly, in the case of Praesi they occasionally might as well be, but that's pretty niche for Proceran and Levantine heroes). They're not even discriminating by religion, though at some point "my religion is Evil" maybe kind of does warrant a sideways look – they're not discriminating against orcs and non-Named Praesi, Catherine's complaining about them being oh so unfair to, uh, VILLAINS. "I've made a pact with dark powers that love murder and betrayal, what, why are you looking at me like that"

Disagreeing equals my ass, *and Catherine knows it*. She just doesn't care about always being 100% correct, unbiased and accurate in her inner monologue when she's annoyed.

[Liliet](#)

thissssss

Lord Haart

MK clearly puts Procerans ahead of others, and denigrates the other nations that are helping to defend Procter. He's not the only nationalist, but he's one of the few who also claim to be on the side of Above.

I have some limited sympathy for his stunted personality but ultimately his issues stem from seeing people as things. Even himself, for that matter.

Hopefully Tariq can cure that. He's probably one of the few who have a real chance to, but even there I have concerns. There's now a parallel with Cat mentoring Razin and the other Blood, and while her influence has been more useful than not, it's only had limited effect and so the same may happen with Tariq and MK.

[Liliet](#)

Cat hasn't really been mentoring them, just trying to keep them from getting themselves killed.

Miles

His sentence was a mirror of the prior trial's outcome.

A ruined reputation along with an opportunity most [villains or heroes, respectively] would happily give all their gonads for.

[*Liliet*](#)

lmao yeah

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Regarding the lightness of the charges against MK... Cat mentions his hanging onto the Severance after the crisis. But, considering his attitude during the trial, can you imagine what he'd have said if someone tried to call him out on *that*? I think Hanno dodged a bullet (or shoved Cat out of its way) there.

Ninestrings

I'd read a spin off that is just The Grey Pilgrim slowly and painfully beating sense into Christophe over the course of a year.

I doubt The Grey Pilgrim would have the patience that The White Knight has with that idiot.

Laguz24

I don't know, I think GP will go full trickster mentor and die heroically to give MK some needed character development.

dadycoool

That might be a hard sell, considering the Dominion wouldn't like their not-a-king sacrificing himself for a very Proceran Hero. Maybe if it was paired with or led up to a Final Battle or something that would end DK, Bard, or both.

Anomandris

He's already died once and had to be pulled back. Be a shame of a narrative if he dies again without any additional contribution to the story.

Big I

Nah, it'll be Vader vs Obi-Wan Death Star moment.

ninegardens

Yeah, I'm pretty sure that Old Peregrine could single handedly hold back Nessie.

Not **beat** Nessie, but just straight up hold him off for however long was needed.

Darkening

Especially if he'd already been mortally wounded.

[Liliet](#)

Oh any hero can do *that*.

[TeK](#)

Since he technically already had been mortally wounded, does that make him invincible?

[Liliet](#)

Factually, yes.

No, not in the villain way. Heroes get a lot of nice perks villains don't.

[TeK](#)

I believe Tariq exists in a kind of a Limbo of Heroic tropes. It's not exactly common for elder mentor Hero to survive his Heroic Sacrifice.

Salt

He's Schrodinger's hero. Simultaneously invincible and destined to die a tragic death, until EE decides one way or another.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm. Honestly at this point Tariq exists in like. MLP-like trope space where bad things just don't happen full stop and that's that. EVERYTHING is fixable and everything gets fixed.

Mirror Knight is taking a vacation into small children cartoon land and honestly I hope it works exactly the way it would in a kids' cartoon – i.e. he learns something new and internalizes it fully.

Also something something Tariq's regular reports letters to Princess Celestia.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Tariq is unkillable until it's the proper time for his Heroic Sacrifice, probably in the same story-

league as a Named waiting to finish a Pattern of Three.

Sir Nil

So far so good. Cat is furthering ties to Levant, MK gets a suitable slap on the hand while GP gets another Laurence to reminisce with, and Hasenbach is giving ground on the angel corpse. Unfortunately, this is all probably to contrast with when we finally get to the trial of the Red Axe.

'Ladi Williams

Unfortunately

Halinn

The first trial was a clear win for Cat. This one had a neutral outcome...

Miles

Not really.

First of all there was no fire.

Lord Haart

That would be a *good* outcome though, right?

dadycool

Gonna need a broom for the rubble that once was a bunch of pedestals, on Cordelia's part. It's just been thrown in her face that the Bestowed consider their own judgement to be higher than the laws of the land, to the point of ignoring/blowing off the law. I bet she's got a black eye from that.

It's cool how well Cat fits in with Yannu and the Dominion. The dinner was also a nice way to remind us that Cordelia is in fact a Warrior Queen of sorts, even if her hands are more used to silk than steel nowadays.

[Liliet](#)

Pretty sure she knew this already, Saint of Swords existing and all.

She just didn't love the reminder.

And hell yeah, the "I can hold a wall" moment was awesome.

The Lycaonese, the Levantines and the Callowans have a few things to bond over :3

Salt

Callowan and Levantine cultures are very, very complementary now that I think about it.

They're both traditionally good, culturally martial nations who have an isolationist national policy and have made a history of fighting off invasion from ridiculously expansionist neighbors. The Dominion has duels with giant monsters as a pastime, and Callow is so militarized in culture that they hardly have artwork of anything but war and hunting.

If anything, a Levantine and a Callowan would likely instantly bond over their mutual searing hatred of treacherous, backstabbing invaders.

Liliet

Meanwhile, Lycaonese and Callowans can instantly bond over the "yep, Evil is coming again, time to march to the wall protecting the backstabbing asshole neighbours who're ignoring it again".

Lycaonese and Levantines... have less in common, as their martial-ness is almost exactly opposite in nature (with Callowans somewhat in the middle – they have both glorious knight charges and 'down here in the mud' lionized in their culture). Still both martial though.

TeK

In a delicious twist of irony, those are also cultures that saw itself on different sides of Crusades IRL. Not that I would imply that Levantine culture was actually inspired by Levantine cultures. Since it is also heavily takes from Iberia to arrive somewhere about Al-Andalus. Which makes both of those cultures mutual invaders over the course of history. As well as invadees. Is that a word?

Liliet

It is now.

Anomandris

A Hero who is almost fanatical in dislike for Villains and working with/under the Pilgrim? Where have I heard that before??

Lord Haart

Oh, good point – MK might go off the rails when he hears more about what happened SoS.

Definitely not a low chance of him having a real go at Cat, if he continues to follow after Laurence. There's a good story backing him there too – hero coming back to kill the villain who killed their idol, amplified by the fact that the Severance was enabled and fashioned by Cat's directive – Villains always sow the seeds of their own destruction.

I'd go so far as to say that if Cat dies (again) in this story, it'll be after surviving beating Bard and DK only to wind up with Christophe turning the blade on her.

Salt

I think unlikely, since Mercy tossed around visions of the events to random people like a flower girl tossing petals at a wedding. One of the recurring visions was the climax, including Catherine killing the Saint, so I suspect pretty much everyone on the continent has a good idea of how she died. It was mentioned in Rozala's POV, when she was having a minor headache because the Ophanim apparently didn't give a shit about putting the visions in the right order before handing them out.

I suspect that part of the reason the Mirror Knight is so hostile to Cat in the first place is because he knows that she killed the Saint. If anything, it might mollify him a bit to learn that it was a lot more complicated than the initial portrayal of a treacherous villain slaying a great hero.

[Liliet](#)

The initial portrayal wasn't exactly that – the Ophanim didn't care about putting visions in the right order, but they did care about getting across the idea that the Black Queen did nothing wrong (on that particular morning).

[boballab](#)

Taking odds that the Mirror Knight does something stupid at the Red Axe's trial!

dadycool

Would he be there? He wasn't a witness in anything, nor can he provide evidence for anything. It's possible he'll gatecrash or something, but don't they have defenses against that sort of thing?

[boballab](#)

Go back and look at what it took for the White Knight to stop him, the Mirror Knight as explained is pretty much impervious to magic. You basically have to wear him down physically

which means that very few things can stop him...guards and wards ain't those things. So yes I do expect him to crash the trial because as shown in his own trial he still believes his judgement is better than everyone else's. He has a hair up his butt, planted there by his lover, that Cat and the villains are going to kill the Axe for killing her rapist.. which the villains were not going to do because they thought he had it coming to him. The problem is going to be that the Red Axe tried to kill the Kingfisher Prince and the Mirror Knight hasn't even let that penetrate his skull yet, let alone think on the consequences of that. His crashing the trial trying to "save" the Axe is going to push Cordelia over the edge since it will be the last straw in her mind that the Hero's can't be trusted.

hakureireimu

Without Severance his offensive power aren't that great to be honest.

[Liliet](#)

> a hair up his butt, planted there by his lover, that Cat and the villains are going to kill the Axe for killing her rapist

No, he received a letter supposedly from the Bitter Blacksmith, who didn't send it. His lover is not involved in this one.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also it's Cordelia (MK's national ruler) who actually wants to kill Red Axe. The thing is, the whole business with that confrontation in the hallway is fishy as hell. But Frederic and RA are at least going to get the chance to compare stories at the trial, and who know what might come out of that? (And of course, this installment, the climax of the arc, is late.... Arggh!)

'Ladi Williams

Nah. That bro is still under lock and key. He ain't gate crashing anything anytime soon.

[Liliet](#)

I expect he'll still be under arrest at that point.

[boballab](#)

He's not under arrest. Hanno didn't place him in a cell after the trial, he ordered that he has to apologize and serve an

apprenticeship, the 30 day confinement was turned down by Cat.

Liliet

Prison and arrest are not the same thing. He was kept under guard since Hanno beat him down, Cat was also thinking she's not sure whether she should trust the security of what guard Hanno would place him under – but ultimately she did decide to trust in it.

Not being required to serve a prison sentence and being free to go wherever you like are not the same thing. Christophe's going to have minders around him until he gets to the Pilgrim.

Burlyraven

If Yannu wasn't known to be extremely honorable, I'd almost find his cooperation to be suspicious. It makes a lot of sense, but the number of motivations they have in common or at least in parallel are surprisingly high.

Also, Grey Pilgrim mentoring Mirror Knight shares a lot of similarities to some very intriguing stories, and not all of them involve the Mirror Knight becoming a better man. Hell, with the power and arrogance he's shown, it could even involve him pulling an Anakin and falling to the dark side. It's be fascinating to see how Cat would handle that.

erebus42

Do you mean fall as in go rogue but still remain a Hero or fall as in become a Villain? The latter could potentially lead to some amusing scenarios like Cat just wanting nothing to do with him but now having to work closer with him or the MK just refusing to acknowledge that he wasn't a Hero anymore.

"Cristoph, you can't even summon Light anymore!"

"Shut up you filthy Damned! I haven't fallen, all of you have fallen!"

Burlyraven

I mean the go full Villain route when he realizes the Heavens have too many rules. And yes, all the resulting comedy you mentioned.

TeK

I am the Heavens!

IDKWhoitis

The blood flowed away from the body, soaking the wooden floors. Christophe felt so tired, he felt as if his spirit had fallen far beyond what should have been possible. It felt like that day he recieved his Bestowal by the Dames of the Lake. He could barely even remember that day.

His shield cracked, his face a ruin, Christoph despised the reflection of himself. He had failed. Even when the heavens should have seen fit to support his cause and lend their power, they had failed him.

No, the thought had sickened him, for he had failed his oaths prior to that. His face felt hot with indignation. Then cooled in a moment as that sinking feeling returned that left him a hollow thing. Had the heavens forsaken him? Was he truly alone in this world? He had done everything within his might to make the world a better place. Whether it be opposing the Dead King and all his works, or even striking at the worst within his own ranks. How could the heavens not see the necessity in striking at the grasping devils pretending to be Princes of Prócer? They had lied and betrayed, poison to all they touched. When it was revealed to him that he had been made a fool of, to be turned into some tool for Gaspard Langevin machinations, he could not stop himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of armored boots walking towards him, with a match being struck.

IDKWhoitis

I mean, if he falls, its likely that it's because he can't accept the will of heaven as the only reason to do things. This can still mean he is self centered and thinks very highly of what he thinks needs to be done.

Of which, might make him a liability in Cat's eyes, who will break him if she can't use him.

Lord Haart

Hm. Probably too extreme, but maybe Yannu thinks he can "hack" the Ealanel to destroy most of Procer (and Keter) but leave Levant untouched?

Still seems unlikely as he'd have to know Cat would likely figure it out and come after him.

Or maybe he's working WITH DK and his anger at treason is just projection?

[Liliet](#)

Actually he's just Malicia's necromantic puppet, duh.

Frivolous

I'm surprised that Yannu is clean shaven. I don't remember reading that before.

I wonder if Levantine men are hairy chested or smooth.

I'm truly shocked that the Murcadan language has a word for the angel corpse. The only way that could happen, I believe, is if angels have been killed before in or around Levant, or else why have a word for their corpses?

Traitorous and Triumphant may have been the only Praesi to have killed angels before, but maybe the Levantines have killed more angels than the Praesi.

Ending of MK's trial was rather anticlimactic, compared to Catherine's heatedly saying she'd get down in the mud to solve Cordelia's political problems with the princes. After mention was made of Cordy and Freddy's desperation, I thought that the crisis was a lot closer in time than this episode of Tantamount shows.

Either way, Hanno chose wisely the punishment for Christophe. Tariq will be good for him. Unless Christophe decides to kill Tariq for being an undead abomination, anyway, but Tariq will Behold any attack coming.

I'm very surprised Christophe didn't mouth off more than he did at the Hero meeting. He was bizarrely meek, compared to all the rest of the times. He didn't even declare Catherine a corrupt monster and the Grand Alliance disgusting for associating with her. Why did he pick this time of all times to be polite?

[Liliet](#)

> I'm truly shocked that the Murcadan language has a word for the angel corpse. The only way that could happen, I believe, is if angels have been killed before in or around Levant, or else why have a word for their corpses?

Or they could simply have word creation rules / traditions that play nice with combining 'dead angel' into one word without even thinking about it.

Honestly, considering their consistent and reliable necromantic troubles, I wouldn't be surprised if all three of their languages had a simple suffix/prefix for "-dead body of, being used for some purpose".

I also expect the connotation to be less than pleasant, for Hasenbach.

[Liliet](#)

As for how close the crisis is, keep in mind this is a setting where travel takes weeks or months – less than that through Twilight, but that's new, and everyone's thinking will be tuned to "if the crisis is looming in half a year, if you want to be in a specific place when it hits, you had better set out right now".

LizAris

Not sure if it was politeness so much as coming a little closer to the realization that

- 1) he done fucked up (even if he believes the intentions were still good) and
- 2) he's in the presence of his queen, and in that process
- 3) he lost THE sword, is prob feeling a little rough about that and what it means if he couldn't wield it well enough (aka he's not the hero that artifact needed) to not get his ass handed to him by White

Salt

Considering that his POV chapters showed a disturbing amount of self-hate for his own mistakes/failings, his latest monumental mistake is probably causing him to be too busy despising himself to work up any zeal.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

Bonus points if he picked up on how he was about to accidentally cause deaths of both Sidonia and Antoine if Hanno hadn't given up half his hand to stop that.

That's... a pretty significant narrative detail, too: Hanno did not lose his fingers to Christophe attacking him, he lost his fingers to stopping Christophe from accidentally causing damage to his own loved ones.

If Christophe realized what was going on, that's going to be a deeeeeep well he's down right now.

[TeK](#)

Judging by his reactions to the trial (or rather, a lack of those), I'd say he's pretty deep.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, at some point the difference between 20m deep and 80m deep just stops being visible...

erebus42

You know the late Exalted Poet and Tariq in less reasonable moments aside, I do rather enjoy the Levantines. Their whole honor thing can be a bit much sometimes, especially when they murder each other unnecessarily over it, but even it can be a bit charming in the right situations. Granted having the Procerans to contrast against certainly helps. Also, while a bit limited, their whole binding trick is super cool. I really kinda hope we get introduced to a cool named binder (preferably someone without their head too far up their own ass).

[Liliet](#)

Yeah it's really nice how both Procerans and Levantines can make each other's customs look better by contrast XD

[Liliet](#)

Well, this was pleasantly common-sense and quick. And looks like Mirror Knight 100% learned his lesson about himself being a fucking idiot who should not be trusted with sharp objects around other people.

I'm scared of the Red Axe trial already.

Really loved the Levantine politics bits. Yannu is still highly unpleasant to me, but he's definitely an excellent coworker for Catherine – straightforward enough to mean exactly what he says without the headaches she gets in decyphering reasons behind Cordelia's displays of emotion, tricky enough to understand and respect her methods, respects and trusts her personally thanks to Tariq, generally aligned on long-term political prospects...

And Cordelia the warrior princess, even if she's not had the time to practice in probably a looong time)=

Salt

Yeah, the cleaner the other two trials go the more worried I get about the last one

Not to mention that we're not getting any clearer foreshadowing of a shitstorm inbound, than Catherine literally commenting about how she senses a storm coming

[Liliet](#)

Of course we've got a lot of plot incoming and only so much screentime with this being the last book. The storm might be the war council / Gigantes negotiations / whatever the elves are up to, not the last trial per se?

Salt

Might be, not entirely sure. The Red Axe trial has been a focal point for so many chapters that I'm near certain it'll quite important, if not necessarily overly long, but aside from that I haven't picked up on enough hints to have ideas of how the stuff afterwards will go.

Then again, the books have been getting longer with every volume, so if the same trend continues, we're due another 60 or so chapter before the end anyhow. It's not as if anyone will complain about the volume being too long – anyone who's spent the kind of time needed to read five volumes is going to be so invested already that they'll care far more about the series being given a proper ending than the number of chapters a volume is supposed to have.

Oshi

I'm genuinely scared about how smoothly this is all going. Too much of this can turn on the Red Axe's trial.

LizAris

Already anxious about Red's trial (given Cat's luck these things have gone entirely too well so far), so instead for our next chapter, I propose that Hakram wakes up (damn do I miss orcs) and we get a play by play of our First Prince showing off her martial skill. Can you imagine Cat having "swords and a chat" with Cordy instead of Fred??

[Liliet](#)

That was 100% stuck in my head when I was reading – an idea of Catheirne offering to tutor Cordelia in swordsmanship.

She has pretty valuable skills to share, after all...

mamm0nn

Cat and Cordelia showing up on the Kingfisher's doorstep and invite him for some 'sword practice'

Kingfisher: Oh, we're actually practising with swords. And why is my queen holding a bow instead of a blade? Why are you two smiling at me so viciously? If I may excuse myself, I think I'll- Eep!

James Felling

Cat more or less won the first trial, drew the second, and now the third.

I am not optimistic about the third in that pattern.

Lord Haart

At this stage I'm pretty sure that Hanno will not allow Red Ace to be executed – maybe sent to the front lines as a more practical death sentence, but not outright killed for her acts.

The first two trials, he very clearly pushed for the precedent that breaking the T&T should result in the accused having their reputation tarnished, and then putting them in a position where they are both useful and no longer likely to be a threat. Both very PRACTICAL sentences, for a Knight of Judgement.

And he tells MK he will execute Red Axe not because he means it (he does not discuss sentencing, right?) but because he needs MK to understand that Hanno might very well “be in his way” and he needs to learn to accept that.

Salt

He did discuss specifically that he will sentence her, and that the sentence will almost certainly be death

“After a trial is held,” the White Knight calmly replied. “After I listen to the evidence, determine guilt, pass my sentence and carry it out. Which will be, almost certainly, death. That she killed the Wicked Enchanter and attempted to kill the Kingfisher Prince is not in doubt, it is established fact.”

“Almost certainly” as he’s deliberately refusing to decide on a sentence until he’s heard all the evidence and arguments during the actual proper trial.

There is some possibility of new evidence or argument that sways the sentence away from death – which is why he’s only speaking in likelihood’s about sentencing – but I think it’s a poor argument to assume that the character really means exactly the opposite of everything that he’s said, to be honest.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> There is some possibility of new evidence or argument ...

And that’s the possible bomb in the toilet. As I said upthread, that whole corridor scene was fishy as hell even allowing for the Hunted Magician’s illusions. And now Frederick and Red Axe get to compare stories.

Juff

Typo Thread:

she'd standing > she's standing
Designs have made > Designs have been made

[Adrian V](#)

Honestly i am not sure how to feel about MK sentence, on one hand i know he can grow up under Tariq, but on the other he already made a big mess and i feel liek this is coming too late (as in seriously they should have paired them together for some assignement or something).

Rest of the chapter was ok, is nice that at least the angel corpse problem is being handled so fast. Next is the last trial, so we know something is going to go FUBAR, seriously they should know to not let that one for last, is like asking fate to be dramatic!!

Oh and Cat still hasn't shared the visions from the Drow battlefront right? i want to see the general reaction to that one, like "We must stop that idiot prince from fucking us all up"

[Liliet](#)

Fate's going to be dramatic no matter what they do, they might as well hold the reins.

And I think everyone important already is thinking that. Yannu has very good reasons to be cross besides: Procer double crossing allies has rich and varied history, and LEVANT IS ONE OF THE ALLIES SUPPORTING IT RIGHT NOW. Not to be subtle about it, but he's got personal offense to take to that.

[Adrian V](#)

I think he is going to be more "Fuck subtle" about it xD, procer really needs to be slapped in the face about it so they stop and notice shit is real.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, Rozala and Cordelia have noticed.

Oshi

I'm really surprised at how pressed they are. Under normal circumstances I think Rozala or Cordelia would have just killed off the Prince or found a way to break him. This is the most unstable scheming I have ever seen...

[Liliet](#)

You cannot just kill a Prince in Procer. Unstable scheming is what its whole thing is, Ebb and Flow is called that for a reason.

Konstantin von Karstein

Hanno just sentenced the Grey Pilgrim to death. A difficult, impulsive and thoughtless pupil taught by an old mentor? The Mirror Knight will probably do something extremely stupid, Tariq will sacrifice himself to stop the catastrophe it caused and Christophe will learn his lessons while crying on the Pilgrim's corpse.

[Liliet](#)

...well, he definitely didn't help Tariq's odds for living through this war, yeah.

That said, Tariq was already not planning to, and he's 80+ at the very least...

[vernal.ancient](#)

Ordinarily, yes. But Tariq's whole thing is that he survives the mentor role where others would be killed. Personally, I think he'd pull a master Shifu: looks like he's dying, Christophe rushes to his side, begins to cry, and then... "I'm not dead, you idiot! Do you know how exhausting it is to use all my aspects at my age? Quit blubbering and let me sleep!"

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, but here it's a long-term mentorship, when before it was only small actions.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And what happens to the sentence when Pilgrim is dead?

Konstantin von Karstein

What?

Konstantin von Karstein

The death of the GP will probably be enough to make MK achieve his character growth, and anything that can kill Tariq is bound to be very bad news. So MK will destroy it in his righteous fury and grief, helping the GA very much. The sentence will probably be annulled.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> anything that can kill Tariq is bound to be very bad news.

Unfortunately, "MK's stupidity" is high on that list.

> The sentence will probably be annulled.

Even if Tariq's Mentor Sacrifice was for MK's sake in the first place?

Konstantin von Karstein

MK's stupidity alone could not kill Tariq, it would have to use a « proxy » to do it, and said proxy has to be quite dangerous.

MK will have been changed by Tariq's sacrifice, so the sentence will not be necessary (at least I think so).

Lord Haart

What if MK kills him as vengeance for SoS? Tariq was at least partly responsible there, remember Bard making him pause before he could stop her from damaging the crown?

[Liliet](#)

...where is this whole "MK is a fan of SoS" thing coming from? The only thing they have in common is being inconvenient for Catherine, and being somehow narratively related to the Severance.

kinghaart

Well, that (Severance) is a pretty strong link – magical swords (or items in general) pushing their owner's personalities into their wielders is a very, very old and established trope.

From the time he first sets foot in the Arsenal, MK acts and talks just like SoS. He may have no *personal* connection but a very strong ideological one.

I'm kind of thinking it's like Ben Solo looking at Vader's helmet. Never met the guy but the influence is profound.

[Liliet](#)

The only thing connecting their ideologies is "be a prick to villains", and not even in the same way. "Gets in the protagonist's way" is not an ideological link.

Saint was completely cynical and did not believe anything like this could work. MK is overwhelmingly idealistic and thinks of structures around him as

universally enduring that will hold no matter what he does.

Saint was mildly sympathetic towards Catherine and understood her increasingly well (the distrust was more towards her story and influences she was under than towards her personally), but had absolutely no intention of turning sympathy into politeness – with no intention of insult either, she just talks like that. MK sees Catherine as a mysteriously ominous blob of evil plans but makes an effort to be polite until he doesn't, which is fully intended as a deliberate insult.

Saint took practicality to matter above all, just had her own opinion of which means which lead to which ends. MK thinks things will sort themselves out as long as every individual decision is “the next right thing”.

Saint's whole problem was excessive experience with a particular class of problem making her set in her ways. MK's whole problem is overwhelming ignorance and inexperience.

They're more like opposites than anything.

Jack Reader

Wait, is it possible that wielding the Severance in the first place is what made Mirror Knight act so brashly? Not that he wasn't an opinionated idiot before, but he was self-aware enough that he tended not to challenge more experienced heroes over it. Sure, having a sword of infinite murder is probably enough to get MK feeling bold, but what if there is some sort of mental bleed effect with Laurence's personality when wielding the sword? Cat already told us that there's enough Laurence left in the blade for it to hate her, so maybe MK's insistence that the Black Queen needed to die and it needed to be now was Laurence metaphorically whispering in his ear. That might explain why he was so meek at the trial, after being striped off the blade.

Frivolous

The following is half serious, half facetious:

I do agree that the Severance might have been a factor in Christophe's personality change, but I think it's more primal and simple than Laurence's spirit altering said personality.

I think that wielding a mighty unstoppable expensive big sword made Christophe feel that his dick was bigger, and thus he

would win any dick-measuring contest. Which of course made him Alpha Hero.

In contrast, losing the Severance to another man, a man who never even drew his sword, may have caused him to feel his dick was really tiny, and thus he became meek and ready to wear an Alamans maid outfit and serve tea.

The above may sound amusing, and I meant to entertain, but it may truly be simple as that. If Christophe somehow got his hand on the sword again in the near future, I think he'd revert right back.

Salt

I think similarly, but that it had less to do with alpha masculinity so much as delusion that a magic sword was heavens-mandated proof that he was Worthy. I believe it was Hanno(?) who once called him "genuinely unambitious", but we all know he has a major boner for virtue and worthiness and all that jazz.

When he got the sword I wouldn't be surprised if he took it as some Above-gilded appointment that he's right about everything and is destined for greater things, while losing the sword was interpreted as some sort of proof/punishment from Above for being a total disappointment of a Chosen.

Mental Mouse

Also, the oath he did break came back to bite him hard in his next big battle.

Liliet

Note: Laurence did not die thinking Catherine needed to die. That's kind of how Catherine survived that fight, object level.

PinkUnik0rn

I am really starting to miss the time when Catherine approach on politics and diplomacy was a fucking arrow through the head or ripping soul out of somebody. I know characters evolve and shit.. But I still hold a tiny bit of hope that she will put a fucking blade on her staff and show them why she is the Black Queen. (First pin someone to the wall, than interrogate.) I am afraid that continuing by this path, her name will be some utopist bullshit like The Equalizer, the first hero/villain, and her first aspect will be Bore to death. No disrespect. I love the story, will support the author and keep on reading it, just fucking miss the "Cat vs. the World" action.

magesbe

One of the story's major themes is that no, power cannot solve all of your problems. There's a quote from Book 4 in one of the last chapters, when Sve Noc was putting Cat through illusions of her past to get a better read on her.

> "You have the power to make changes now," the orc said. "Real changes. Necessary ones."

"Do I?" I said. "I could drown bastion in ice with a snap of my fingers, but what does that accomplish? So few of our problems can be solved with strength."

That hasn't changed. This was one of Cat's most important moments of character development. Learning that Might does not make Right, that having a big stick often cannot solve your problems. That Justifications Matter Only to the Just was a terrible motto to have.

If you want Cat to start beating politicians up and taking names, I'm afraid that you're reading the wrong story, because that's not what this story is about anymore.

Catherine is hardly toothless of course. When violence is the right solution she will use it without hesitation. But often, even usually, it's not.

Salt

Very on-point analysis, especially since that kind of brute-force solution for every problem is the hallmark of people like the Saint and the current Mirror Knight – who are often criticized for rather justifiable reasons.

Where Cat is now as a character has actually been blatantly foreshadowed starting as far back as book 2. Building up to this has been a running theme since the very beginning, with one of her early lessons being that trying to kill every liability made for poor solutions.

Quote from the Squire during the battle of Marchford (ch 26, Seek), who at the time hadn't even popped her third Aspect yet:

> "And what's your solution?" I mocked. "Let's kill everything that looks like it could be a liability and hope it turns out for the best?"

> "I already told you how we stop the fires in our backyard," the spirit smiled. "We cross the Vales, with a torch in hand. If everyone else is running from the blaze they're not making trouble for us."

> This is why Evil loses, I realized. By overreaching, by thinking you could put all of Calernia on the the defensive and not be buried by the backlash. There had to be a middle way, one between fighting the Praesi and allowing them to plunder Callow. Black understood this, I knew. He'd marginalized the nobles of the former Kingdom and gone to work on the people themselves, tried to remove any reason for rebellion rather than crush those that formed. I couldn't change Callow, I knew that deep down. I wasn't sure I should. But I could change the system that ruled over it, one victory at a time.

Lord Haart

Wow, didn't realize how directly Black's rampage through Iserre was foreshadowed!

Which makes it even more interesting that she goes on to say that he understood why that wouldn't work. And he did, but he did it anyway – almost a mix of a heroic sacrifice to buy time for those he cared about (Cat and Malicia) and also because he was cut loose by the same people.

Does anyone else think that Black isn't in Praes at all? I feel like Ranger in particular wouldn't sit back for 2 years. IMO they are planning something bigger. Like going after the Elves, or maybe off-continent (though that'd be a bit of a cop-out since it's not really foreshadowed).

Salt

That bit about him sacrificing himself for Cat seems quite correct, although never explicitly admitted to. He thought he only had a year or two left to live, after his loss to the White Knight didn't start a pattern of three. He was (at the time) actively trying to clear away as many problems as possible before his "death".

We also know that Black outright admitted to Grem that it was suicide before going ahead with it – in Red the Flowers he commented that "No villain can survive the amount of heroic focus Bonfire would have brought. The initial stages would have been a success, but within a few months a band of heroes specifically geared towards killing her would have been grown or assembled."

Which is pretty much exactly what happened to him, with a few months of huge success before being utterly defeated and captured by the Pilgrim.

Of course we know now that what ended up happening was the death of the Amadeus as the Black Knight rather than Amadeus the person, but at the time it was quite likely he

stepped past the flower vases knowing he would probably return a corpse.

Liliet

Mhm. Amadeus's reaction to Captain's death and Malicia's revealed betrayal was to try to talk Cat into killing him, and I doubt that sentiment would have faded in half a year of stewing in a fortress when it'd been built up to by... since... well, he'd expected getting a Squire to kill him since he took one, so... yeah.

Obviously it'd take a form of heroic villainous sacrifice, Amadeus isn't so selfish as to try and take his own life without it bringing sizable benefits to people he cares about and also his people as a whole!

This whole post might sound like a joke, and yet this is 100% canon Guide text.

Liliet

Actually it was a thing as far as Book 1, where

- 1) Catherine did not intend to become a hero because a violent rebellion would accomplish zilch all useful
- 2) Catherine rejected her Evil Twin in the Name vision

PinkUnik0rn

I understand and I said that I'll keep trading it. I am not a total moron, but in last big battle our antihero just left the action. It was interesting, that battle of wits with intercessor, but my point is that it is like reading a comic but about Batman, who spends his time fighting crime by being diplomatic Bruce Wayne. I miss the action, love the story.

Mental Mouse

Sometimes Bruce Wayne or Clark Kent can solve problems that their costumed alter-egos simply can't fight. And the battle with Intercessor was a distillation of Cat's story-fu powers – we've seen those developing over the previous books – now they are fully developed, and the basis for Cat to be a badass on a level beyond any bruiser or sorcerer.

gingerlygrump

What if Cat is turning into The Practical Guide to Evil? We've watched her grow and mature into a brilliant, scheming tactician and leader who's bringing Villains to the table as true equals.

If you want flash and bang and evil Cat, you'll have to reread

the books of her teenaged years. She's an adult now, making adult decisions.

Mental Mouse

Well, she did end that card game by cutting her opponent's throat. 😊

ohJohN

In two sentences, Cat drops "Bestowed", "ealamal", and "honourable". Either she's become suddenly infatuated with Levantine culture, or she's rubbing Cordelia's nose in their alliance against her.

Yannu getting genuinely upset at the scheming prince eased some vague background plot tension in my head, and it took me a minute to place why: the Crows were, uh, *real* pissed, getting close to intervening (likely in a politically disastrous fashion), and starting to reconsider their general relationship with humans. If they can't see this scene directly through Cat (given the pocket dimension) she can play it for them later, and maybe some evidence that Levant genuinely respects their alliance and has their back will help mend that rift. It kinda got lost under the mountain of more immediate problems, but keeping the drow – the Alliance's advance force bearing the brunt of the casualties – and Sve Noc – the only godhead on their side and Cat's personal benefactors – happy is *really damn important*. For both the war itself, and any chance at continental stability afterwards. Hopefully this buys humans some goodwill, and buys Cat some time to mud-wrestle the House of Langevin into submission.

Liliet

> Either she's become suddenly infatuated with Levantine culture, or she's rubbing Cordelia's nose in their alliance against her.

Ooh nice, I only picked up on the 'ealamal' thing and assumed it was Catherine picking up the word because it's more convenient than two words.

Bless this code-switching nerd some evidence that Levant genuinely respects their alliance and has their back

Oh it's a bit more than that: Levant and the Empire Ever Dark are in the exact same situation right now. They're Procer's allies committing resources to help it out in its hour of need.

Red Ella has already demonstrated that Levantines don't see a big difference between giving one's word to a villain and to a hero as far as implications for one's honor go. And they're kind of... on the honor system here.

It's beautiful is what it is. Crows should be watching and learning how surface politics work!

Mental Mouse

> In two sentences, Cat drops "Bestowed", "ealamal", and "honourable". Either she's become suddenly infatuated with Levantine culture, or she's rubbing Cordelia's nose in their alliance against her.

On consideration, I suspect there's also a strong hint here of deferring to Yanno –or at least making it clear that this isn't just Cat recruiting Yanno to back her up, but both of them having a stake in the matter.

Letouriste

the lack of Black in this book is starting to pain me a little, i'm deadly curious about what is happening in Praes right now.

Lord Haart

Why do you think he's in Praes? That's where Bard wanted him, and he thought that story was a mistake.

beleester

We last saw him heading east while singing "The Girl who Climbed the Tower," which implies that he's a claimant for the name of Dread Emperor.

kinghaart

Definitely implied. But I also can't imagine that he'd be able to convince Ranger to keep a low profile for 2 years.

Could he have headed to the Golden Bloom to find the Elves for some reason?

What about the Free Cities, where he could cause chaos for Malicia and block her schemes?

Something still bugs me that it's not "the Boy who climbed the Tower" for him – if he grew into power alone, that's one thing, but for his whole life so far "the Girl" was Malicia, and recently perhaps Cat. Has that truly changed?

Also, I want to know where Scribe and Assassin are. I'm concerned that Assassin is loyal to Malicia, though I suspect that if Black isn't behind Sepulchral then Scribe is (who after all hates Malicia, presumably even after her dismissal).

Liliet

When a proper schemer wants someone somewhere, they make sure doing anything other than that is the worse mistake.

[onedollargum](#)

"The fare was simple but tasty: slices of dried pork ham, a mix of beans, chickpeas and eggs touched with spices and oil, good white bread with some sort of tomato paste"

That sounds sooo good!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh yes, a perfect summer meal.

Chapter 39: Transliteration

"A sinking ship knows no captain."
– Ashuran saying

I wondered if Hasenbach was getting as tired of this as I was.

Probably not. Ruling in Procer involved a lot more wrangling than it did in Callow, or at least the Callow I'd risen to rule – one where most great nobles had been stripped of their lands, and the armies of all but the crown had been severely curtailed. Outside her own Rhenia, the First Prince of Procer's authority had rarely ran further than what she could sway others to grant her. Which must have made it all the more galling that, after years of staying one step ahead of her opponents at home and abroad, she was now getting cornered again and again by a bunch of yokels with swords. I supposed if I'd been fuller of myself than I was I might have started to believe that Hasenbach was losing her touch, or that I was a fine schemer indeed.

I was not so deluded, thank the Gods. The First Prince was being forced to give ground again and again because the Principate was collapsing under her, not because she'd proved to be blind or a fool. The crushing pressures within her realm were simultaneously forcing her to take unwise stands – like trying to claim the Red Axe – while robbing her of the clout that a First Prince with Procer firmly behind her would be able to wield. It was a deathly downwards spiral I'd begun to glimpse, one where to keep her head above the water she had to risk ever taller waves and even one grave misstep might be enough to see her drown.

Still, she was not the only one who had demands made of her. There were matters I could not compromise over.

Trying to keep to that while preventing Procer from bursting open like an overripe fruit was why I'd sought Cordelia Hasenbach out for a private audience and insisted that the White Knight come along. Hanno's dedication to trials under the Terms being treated as genuine exercises of justice was laudable, if occasionally inconvenient, but even he knew that worrying too much about appearances when the hour of need was upon us could only be a recipe for disaster. And so the White Knight had agreed to discuss the upcoming trial of the Red Axe, if not her sentencing, and to try to find a compromise with the First Prince. He was a reasonable man; it'd not been hard to exact that promise from him.

But I also knew that, like all Named, Hanno of Arwad would have lines that his very nature would not let him cross. Hasenbach and I, ultimately, were practical creatures. Our lines were born of practical concerns, either the feasibility of the Liesse Accords or the salvation of the Principate. The White Knight, on the other hand, was a principled man. The lines he would refuse to cross were moral ones, and while I could not find it in me to look down on that neither would I pretend that it did not make him unpredictable to deal with.

"This is nostalgic," Hanno smilingly said, setting down his cup of tea. "I've not had this brew since I was a boy."

Oh, good. Then if I got lucky I might never again have to force a smile after having a sip of this stuff. Even the Firstborn made better tea, and their version of it involved no leaves as well as more fluorescent snails than anyone should be comfortable with.

"I have an appreciation for Ashuran leaves," the First Prince smiled back. "Though I will confess this particular sort was tricky to obtain."

"I don't doubt it," Hanno snorted. "Few Ashuran merchants would willingly sell copper tea. It's not a true leaf, you see. They make from the leftovers and low-quality batches of harvests that can be sold abroad."

"Even your copper tea would sell for more than its weight in gold, back home," I shrugged. "Luxury is in the eye of the beholder."

While by the look on his face I suspected that Hanno would have genuinely enjoyed a conversation about this, it wasn't what we'd come for and so after a few more courtesies the cups went down – mine only lightly touching my lips once more out of politeness, though I did not actually drink – and we got to business.

"Neither of us is blind to the damage the Red Axe's trial could wreak on the Principate," I calmly said. "And no one wants the situation to get out of hand. We're looking into way to mitigate the issue."

I wouldn't back giving the heroine to the Highest Assembly to try, even the series of recent diplomatic reverses Procer had suffered weren't enough to get me to consider such a thing, but I'd meant it when I'd told Hanno that Hasenbach needed to be given *something*. The question now was what she could safely be given, and while I had my own notion of what that compromise might look like it would be... contentious. I wasn't sure either Procer or the heroes would go for it. Better to let Hasenbach out one of the contingency plans I did not doubt she had up her sleeve. The First Prince's glance at the White Knight was measuring, in the heartbeat of silence that followed.

"The Terms cannot be twisted or turned aside," the dark-skinned knight said. "That would be a severe breach of faith. Yet, as the Black Queen has said, I am aware of the difficulties this trial poses to Procer. I would not cause undue harm if there is a way to avoid it."

There, what she'd wanted: confirmation that this wasn't just me dragging Hanno in by the ear so that he might go through the motions of making nice with her. Not that she'd been inclined to think poorly of him, I believed. I'd never deeply discussed either of them with the other, but to my understanding there'd always been a degree of mutual respect there. Not closeness, though. The White Knight encouraged heroes working with the authorities, but never to the extent of becoming part of them. Even the little I knew about the Thalassocracy told me where he might have gained a taste for that distinction. As for Hasenbach, she was understandably wary of the armed Heavens-blessed demigods traipsing around her realm that considered themselves only loosely bound to its laws – and so she must be wary of their leader as well, regardless of his general amiability.

"The trouble in in the primacy of the Terms over our laws," Cordelia said, "even when applying to individuals of Procer who committed crimes against other Procerans."

The Red Axe was from the southern outskirts of the Principate, it was true. The Wicked Enchanted had been Proceran as well, and Frederic still was. All three were also Named, though, which complicated things a great deal.

"The matter of the attempted regicide, in particular, will be a contentious matter," Cordelia continued. "If even rulers anointed by the House of Light can suffer assassination attempts without Procer being able to give answer, there are some who might argue that we have all been made subservient to the Chosen."

"The Highest Assembly approved of the treaties establishing this," the White Knight reminded her.

"Those treaties were approved when it was believed that the Chosen would not resort to attempting the murder of princes," the First Prince flatly said. "We have been... disappointed, in this regard."

Harsh but fair, I thought.

"Middle ground can be found, I expect," I intervened. "The Terms were not made to last, and we did not expect they would stumble into such challenges. It'll require everyone to bend a little more than they'd like, but that's the nature of compromise. I'm sure you have suggestions, Your Highness, as to what my ally the fears of the Highest Assembly. I'd be interested to hear them."

I found her hard to read, in the moments that followed, as she studied us both. Hesitating, or gauging how far she'd be able to push this?

"As the concerns come from the forced impotence of Proceran law, I would suggest that the Red Axe be made to stand trial before the Highest Assembly," she said.

My brow rose. She wasn't a fool, so that couldn't be all of it.

"The sentence passed would, undoubtedly, be death," Cordelia said. "Its application could be suspended, however, until she has also stood trial under the Terms."

Ah, there it was. If both Procer and the White Knight condemned the Red Axe to death, who was to say what sentence was being carried out when the blade was swung? If Hanno did the deed, or a Proceran executioner, then the balance would be made to swing either way. But there was a candidate to keep the weights even, as it were.

"You'd make Prince Frederic do it," I quietly said. "Since he straddles both worlds. That way everyone can go home with a win to tell their people about."

It'd eat up the man inside, though, I thought. He'd wanted to avoid taking her life. But while I liked Frederic Goethal, his peace of mind was not worth what it would cost.

"A compromise I could live with," I said.

Some of the more paranoid among my charges would smell a rat, but with the Red Axe dead at the hand of the same hero she'd tried to kill I shouldn't get too much pushback. There would be some who'd have wanted me to bleed the heroes dry over this, but they'd be few and not popular among our kind – the likes of the Headhunter

and the Red Knight were powerful, but usually without many allies.

"What is being suggested," the White Knight coldly said, "is not just."

My fingers clenched under the table. Hanno's face had gone hard as stone.

"I will not promise a sentence or an executioner before a trial has been held," the White Knight said. "This is not a compromise, it is a perversion of the oaths we all swore. It does not matter what the Red Axe has done: she has rights under the Terms, and among these is a fair trial."

A steady look was fixed onto the both of us.

"What you are speaking of," he slowly said, "is not a fair trial."

And that was that, wasn't it? As far as he was concerned that settled the matter. And for all that Hanno had gone cold, I thought, the look on Cordelia's face was no warmer.

"Compromise requires both sides to give, Lord White," the First Prince of Procer said, frigidly polite.

"There is no justice to be found in denying the rights of one to safeguard those of another," the Sword of Judgement evenly replied. "All that is accomplished is the shifting around of injustice."

"If a right is abused, then the abuser is no longer deserving of it," the First Prince said. "Else it becomes a tool of oppression."

A little rich coming from a princess of Procer, that, but most of the time I still liked that lot better than Above's so I'd let it slide. At nineteen the scene unfolding before me would have me giddy: the Principate and heroes, both bitter enemies of mine, were at each other's throat. But years had passed, and these days I had too much use for both to be glad of this.

"A mechanism has been established to deal with such abuses," the White Knight bluntly said. "It has yet to fail, in my eyes, and so your treatment of it strikes me as unwarranted."

He wasn't going to give an inch on this, I sensed. It just wasn't in his nature to give that inch over something like this, when he knew himself in the right and all those involved had taken the oaths with open eyes. And Gods, part of me agreed with him. The fucking Principate was quick to cry foul about the rights of its peoples being 'trampled' these days, but that conscience had been

nowhere in sight when it'd been Callowan freedoms on the line. And even now that half the continent had gathered to keep it from burning still it insisted on throwing tantrums over gift horses, never mind looking them in the mouth. Hanno was looking after his own, people whose calling and service he respected and honoured, and aside from all the greater considerations he simply wasn't going to dent his principles over something like princes being uneasy.

The White Knight did not believe it his charge to soothe princes, and so he'd not sacrifice things that he *did* consider his charge in order to do so. It was a fair way of looking at it, if you were a hero.

I wasn't, though. I'd been one of Below's since age sixteen and more importantly these days I was a queen. So while the White Knight wasn't wrong, I did not believe that the First Prince was either. She wasn't throwing a fit over this for pleasure, or even for principle – if Hasenbach's objections to this were personal in nature, she would have stowed them away by now. This wasn't a winning fight for her, and the fact that she was *still picking it anyway* meant that she was afraid of what would ensue if she didn't. More afraid than of the consequences of the mess before my eyes, too, which was more than a little worrying. If the First Prince was coming out swinging this hard, then at a guess I'd say word about Frederic being bled had already leaked to the Assembly. There'd be pressure at her back to do something about this, and while I doubted that unseating her was in the cards there were other ways this could all go to the Hells.

If southern principalities started ignoring her orders because they no longer believed her to be a worthy leader for Procer, the Grand Alliance was in trouble. Weakened as it was, the Principate was still the main source of coin and goods for the war effort and those sure as fuck weren't coming from the war-ravaged north. And while it might have been years since Black torched the heartlands, those lands had never truly been allowed to recover: continued conscription, high taxes and rationing meant some of the richest lands in Procer had never actually gotten back to their old prosperity. No, Hasenbach wasn't worrying about things like *authority* and *legitimacy* because she was some over-proud highborn twit. She was worried about those things because if she lost them then Procer might start coming apart at the seams.

If she didn't come through for her princes, if she damaged their privileges and all the while made heavy demands of them, then why should they keep listening to her? Especially if she lacked the means to force them to.

Sentimentality had me on Hanno's side, but sentiment had to be left a door in matters like these. The needs of the queen took the victory once more, as Akua might have said. And if these two

weren't going to reach a compromise by themselves, if there was no pretty stainless solution to be had, then all that was left was the cheap tricks that'd been my trade since long before I put on a crown.

"Procer could be allowed to dispose of the body as it wishes, at least," I said, and sighed when Hanno began to respond, "In the eventuality that there is a body, yes, not to make assurances either way. But if there is a corpse, White Knight, can it not at least be ceded to the Highest Assembly?"

"It would be a petty thing for a heroine's corpse to be parade like a trophy," the dark-skinned knight said, tight-lipped.

"Petty's not unlawful," I said. "So unless your feelings have become rules..."

His lips thinned even further. It'd been a hit below the belt, but then if the Gods Above had wanted me to fight clean they should have shelled out for another five inches at least.

"In principle, I would have no objection," Hanno eventually replied.

It would have been undiplomatic of Hasenbach to point out that this was such a paltry concession as to almost not be one at all, especially given that I'd secured it on her behalf, but from the cool serenity of her face I got the message anyway. She wasn't going to be appeased with a few metaphorical coppers flipped her way. If she didn't get meat to throw her princes, it would be on her they turned their fangs. I angled my face so that Hanno wouldn't see and cocked a brow at her.

"It appears we have reached the end of what can be settled today," the First Prince calmly said. "I thank you both for calling on me, but I believe there is nothing left to say on this matter."

"That seems to be correct," the White Knight said, tone regretful.

Not enough to bend his neck, though, so what did regret matter?

"While I have your ear, Your Highness, I had a few questions about the issues Mercantis," I idly said. "If you're willing, it shouldn't take too long."

Hasenbach considered it for a moment.

"I had anticipated a longer conversation," she said. "I have the time to spare if you do."

Hanno cast me a searching look and I shrugged. He and I had already talked about Mercantis some, and he'd made a suggestion I

was warming to – sending the Painted Knife’s band there to keep the merchants honest – but Named arm-twisting was only a small part of the matter and he had little to do with the rest. It wasn’t his wheelhouse, and if it grew to concern him I’d make it known.

Not that I actually intended to talk about Mercantis.

I gave him nothing to work with, so the White Knight made his courtesies and left. In the silence that followed his departure I glance at the cup of tea I’d barely sipped at, choosing my words as the First Prince’s expectant gaze found me.

“There’s a way for you to get what you want,” I said. “Though I expect you won’t like it.”

Blue eyes found mine, unblinking.

“Yet here I am,” the First Prince of Procer calmly said, “listening.”

—

Murder of an ally. Attempted murder of an ally. Aid to an enemy of the Grand Alliance.

The Red Axe would stand trial accused of those three breaches of the Terms, and that the equivalent of a treason charge was the least of the three meant the affair begged for a blood end. The Wicked Enchanter had been an unrepentant monster, but until he stepped out of line again he’d been under protection: his killing must be punished, and as the representative for the villains under the Terms there was only one punishment I was willing to accept. I still had the smoldering remnants of sympathy for the heroine on trial, but she’d known how this would end before she took her first step down this road.

The Red Axe herself seemed utterly unworried when she was brought in. Unlike the Mirror Knight when he’d stood in the same place her hands were bound by shackles and she was chained to a steel ring set in the ground. Masego and Roland had personally traced the wards that would keep her out of the back half of the room should she get free, though it was a lot more likely that the crossbowmen and armed guards surrounding her would get to it first. It would have been counterproductive to gag her, I knew, but as I looked at her calmly expectant expression I found I itched to have it done anyway. There were few things more dangerous in life than someone with nothing left to lose.

I’d expected some ceremony out of Hanno, given his years as the champion of the Choir of Judgement, but instead he was brisk and business-like.

"The charges against the Red Axe have been made known to you," the White Knight said. "Do any of you intend to lay further ones, or contest those I will pursue?"

Denials all around. Mine was barely more than a mutter, my eyes remaining on the heroine.

"Then I will proceed," Hanno calmly said.

The Red Axe laughed.

"Gods, but what a pretentious waste of time," she said, her Chantant lightly accented.

The White Knight looked unmoved.

"Do you understand the charges laid against you under the Terms?" he asked.

"To the Hells with your Terms," the Red Axe said. "They're expedience made law and just as ugly as that sounds. I renounce them, and for you *fine* people who think you have rights over me, I add this-

She spat on the stone, offering up a hard smile.

"Are you requesting that the protections of the Terms be withdrawn from you?" the First Prince calmly asked.

Not surprising. Hasenbach would definitely try to get her hands on the heroine outright, if she could at this late hour, regardless of any deal she and I had made. What I'd offered was barely palatable, while this would smack to her of a clean win. Wouldn't work, of course. I wasn't a fucking idiot, so I'd told Hanno of my conversation with the Red Axe and made sure he spoke with her as well.

"Whether she desires this now or not is irrelevant," the White Knight said. "She agreed to the Terms as made understood to her by the Archer and had not renounced them when she committed the breaches for which she is now being charged."

"Your rules never meant a thing to me, Sword of – sword of what, these days, I ask?" the Red Axe said. "Not Judgement, and nothing I see in this room makes for a good replacement."

"That your word means little does not mean you are exempt from holding it," Hanno replied without batting an eye.

Cordelia glanced at me, but there wasn't a lot of hope on her face and I didn't add any with my own bland expression. Procer would get no help from me if she made a play for snatching now, and Lord Yannu did not speak a word to deny the White Knight's

claim. Hasenbach let it go, and we moved on. The first hurdle had been passed.

"Given the number of eyewitnesses to the killing of the Wicked Enchanter, I saw no need for spoken testimony," Hanno continued. "I've selected and now provide thirty different written accounts, which should prove sufficient. If there are any doubts among the tribunal, there are more that can be sent for."

I'd already read some of those parchments and the facts were not in doubt, so I offered the writing only a few looks before setting it aside.

"I confess," the Red Axe said.

A moment of silence. Eyes went to the heroine, which only seemed to encourage her.

"I confess I put down a monster," she said. " That I killed a rapist, a murder and something worse. I *confess* I would have made it slower if I could, that-"

"Guards, please silence the accused until she is called on to speak again," Hanno said.

Spells wouldn't work on her, so it was a gag they had to use. She fought them, and the sight sickened my stomach – all those men in armour around a girl, alone and unarmed and tied up. Named, I reminded myself. One who'd done things that might yet kill thousands, in full knowledge of the risks. The White Knight continued to make his case, as if never interrupted. The Kingfisher Prince's personal testimony was a written one, as he'd decline to stand before the tribunal, but witnesses among my soldiers and the Levantines gave damning account of the attack on the Prince of Brus. The Sinister Physician came in to speak as to how dangerous the wound had been and was followed up by two priests who'd handled the later parts of Frederic's recovery.

With attempted murder of an ally solidly grounded in proof, it was 'aid to an enemy' that was approached. Proof was difficult to establish, when it came to the Bard, and while I recounted my conversation with the Red Axe it wouldn't be enough to damn her. Fortunately for Hanno, once relieved of her gag she was eager enough to handle that herself.

"You want to accuse me of working with the Wandering Bard," she said, amused. "It's a crime now, is it? I didn't. She worked with *me*."

The Red Axe shrugged.

"I wasn't tricked, if that's the story you want to spin," she said. "I knew what I wanted, and she wanted me to get it too."

None of what she told me was even a secret. It was just names and places, that's all."

"To be clear, you admit to collaboration with the Wandering Bard?" Hanno asked.

"She talked and I listened," she said. "Sometimes I talked too. Call that whatever you will. Not like it'll make a difference in your little puppet show, is it? You've already got what you need for blood."

Lord Yannu let out a harsh bark of laughter. Well, she wasn't wrong. In principle even just killing the Wicked Enchanter would be enough to get her executed, much less the rest. With yet another confession on the record, the trial was effectively at an end. Hanno asked us if we wanted to deliberate, but there were no takers. Recommendations followed.

"Death," the Lord of Alava said.

"Death," the First Prince of Procer said.

"Death," I echoed.

The Red Axe mockingly laughed. She'd not been gagged, I supposed because of discomfort at the idea of ordering this woman's death without letting her speak in answer to it.

"Half the world clamoured for her death," she said. "What an eulogy that will make."

She wanted, I felt, someone to answer her. To engage. This was the culmination of her story, wasn't it? The moment where she was sent to her death because of her principles, where defiant and dry-eyed she cursed the wicked kings doing her wrong. But no one answered. Because to the rest of us the Red Axe wasn't a righteous heroine about to shame us for our misdeeds, she was the woman who'd endangered one of the treaties keeping the Dead King from winning this war and sweeping over Calernia in a tide of death. No one here was enjoying this, I thought, but *ashamed*? No. We were a long way from that. So instead of a cruel jest or a justification, as she would have gotten in a story, the Red Axe got silence and then Hanno passing her sentence.

"Death," the White Knight echoed. "By beheading, to be carried out by my own hand tomorrow at Morning Bell. The accused will be granted a night to make her peace with the Gods Above, but kept detained until then."

"Pathetic," the Red Axe said. "You're all-"

Hanno called for her to be gagged again, and as soon as it was done asked for the comments from the tribunal. Lord Yannu agreed,

sounding largely indifferent, but when it was my turn to speak I had more to say.

"I am satisfied with death," I said, "but today's proceedings should be put under seal instead of made known."

"On what grounds?" Hanno frowned.

"On the grounds that the details of this will make it known to every Named that has issued with the Terms that they've got an ally they can plot with," I said.

"The Wandering Bard is to be declared an enemy of the Grand Alliance regardless," the White Knight said. "What is there to hide?"

"That the Bard is after the Terms themselves, instead of the ringleader of a plot against the Arsenal," I said. "If she just helped thrash the Arsenal, no one will see her as an ally. If this was all a plot against the Terms, though? That's a banner, and those always gather people."

The White Knight cast a look at the other two members of the tribunal, who did not seem to object. I could see him weigh the costs of refusal here and then decided it wasn't worth it.

"Agreed," the White Knight said.

"I am satisfied," the First Prince calmly said.

The Red Axe, even gagged, was laughing convulsively. People did get more perceptive, when standing in the shadow of their gallows. Had she figured it all out, or just that Cordelia and I were acting in concert? Didn't matter, I thought.

It was already too late.

—

I'd not slept well, even with Indrani sharing my bed, and rose early.

I left Archer to sleep and slipped on my clothes, learning when I limped to an early breakfast that it was just shortly past Early Bell – there were still about three hours left before the execution happened. I asked for porridge, the bland but filling kind that remained a Legion staple to this day, and silently sipped at an herbal infusion that'd soothe my leg. It was an odd mood that'd taken hold of me, but I did not fight it. It'd pass soon enough, I knew, and I owed it to the woman I was about to see killed to at least look what I was doing in the eye. I ended up wandering away afterwards, eventually coming up where the killing was to be done. These were not, I thought, awe-inspiring

grounds. More abattoir than gallows: a stretch of naked stone, an executioner's block and a few seats on raised platforms.

Yet for all the bare bone nature of the place I found it carried a sort of cold, impersonal dread to it. Not unlike the Terms themselves, if one chose to look at it that way. The Mantle of Woe pulled tight against me, hood up, I tucked myself away in a shadowed nook and lit a pipe. A stream of wakeleaf gently rose, and I allowed my thoughts to drift. I wasn't sure how long I stayed like that, absorbed in my silence, but when the sound of steel and leather boots came reached my ear I did not need to guess who it was that'd come. There were too many guards for it to be anyone but Cordelia Hasenbach. She approached me without escort and I flicked her a look from beneath the hood.

She'd dressed in dark colours today, if not outright black. They did not suit her well, but cosmetics and jewelry hid the fact decently enough. She came to stand by my side, reflecting my silence with her own. I'd worn no crown, and she only a simple circlet of white gold. My eyes were on the block, and without turning I somehow knew so were hers.

"She is right about one thing, at least," Hasenbach murmured. "It has been an *ugly* affair."

I breathed out smoke, letting it rise in curls. It was a calming sight, familiar.

"I've made a lot of ugly choices, over the years," I said. "I believed them necessary, when I made them. More often than not they truly were."

"It is the exceptions that stay with you," the First Prince said. "A hundred victories will fade, but that sole stinging defeat will sink its hooks."

I smiled bitterly.

"Can't save everyone," I said. "And if you try to, usually you don't even get to save most."

Nauk. Ratface. Farrier. Anne Kendall. There was always a price to trying to make a change. And keeping it standing, when it got done? Oh, that was even costlier.

"Duty is a bed of thorns," Cordelia quietly said, "but someone must lie in it."

"Oh, there's not enough kindness left in me to flinch at this I don't think," I mused. "I was just wondering at how things change, over the years."

"How so?"

"The first two lives I ever took were those of a rapist," I said, "and his accomplice."

She said nothing.

"I wonder if I'm still the one holding the knife," I murmured, "or if another role does not suit me better, these days."

There was a word, for those who protected the likes of the first man I'd ever killed. *Accomplice*.

The silence held until the room began to fill with the few dignitaries who needed to be there. The Red Axe was brought in after the White Knight had already stepped up to the block, a longsword at his hip. She wore only a brown shift, walking barefoot, and though escorted to the fore she went freely. Unafraid. The White Knight gestured for her to kneel, but she refused.

"On my feet," the Red Axe said. "To the end, on my feet."

The White Knight slowly nodded. The heroine turned towards us, gaze lingering on my hooded and smoking figure besides the First Prince's dark-clad paleness.

"I go with all my accounts settled," the Red Axe said. "And no regrets."

She did not close her eye, even when the blade went through her neck with a flash of light. A clean cut, made that way by the searing Light on the edge of the blade. She wouldn't have felt a thing. The head fell, neck burnt on both ends, and the body toppled. Hanno caught her and laid her down, unclasping his cloak and laying it over the corpse. His expression was tight as he rose to his feet, eyes searching for Hasenbach and finding her. His stride was quick.

"The corpse is now passed into the custody of the Principate, as was asked," he stiffly said.

"We thank you for the courtesy," the First Prince replied.

He grimaced.

"What will you do with it?" he asked.

"That is no longer your concern."

Hasenbach's tone was not harsh, but neither was it one that would suffer further questioning. The White Knight's eyes went to me, but I did not meet them. I breathed in the smoke, spewed it out, and waited until he'd left. The room slowly emptied, in the end leaving only the First Prince and her guards along with me. Leaning on my staff I limped up to the body veiled by the White

Knight's cloak, Hasenbach keeping pace with me. I laid down a hand on it and hummed. Yes, it could be done.

"Step back, if you don't want to leave the room," I said. "It won't be easy work raising her coherent enough to stand trial before the Highest Assembly."

Insanenoodlyguy

"I wasn't tricked, if that's the story you want to spin," she said. "I knew what I wanted, and she wanted me to vote. None of what she told me was even a secret. It was just links to places, that's all."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Javvies](#)

Hmm, reanimation as undead?
Presumably, anyways, since true Resurrection is supposedly restricted to Above.

That's ... an interesting approach.
And I'm not sure how bringing Red Axe back to execute her again is going to play with the Heroes.
Or, considering it's almost certainly going to be an undead Red Axe, not a living one, how it's going to play with the Princes/Princesses of Procer.

It'll probably play worse with the Heroes than the Procerans, though. And might well cause problems with some of the Heroes.

I admit, reanimation as undead in order to bring Red Axe to trial before a Proceran prosecution was not something I saw coming.

Sir Nil

They built it up as well. With the raising of the Wicked Enchanter and that bit about the Barrow Lord still being able to be tried under Procarian Laws. Also Cat specifically mentioned that the details of the Red Axe's trial be kept secret. So there's a good chance most heroes won't hear of this, well at least till one of the Princes slip up, which tbh probably means its definitely going to happen.

Oshi

That won't matter so much. It might actually help. The Princes can say they can get the Heroes even in death to bend

to the law of Pocer. The heroes will be quietly pissed, the villians will smirk and the Princes won't give a damn. They got what they wanted.

Javvies

I don't think the sentence is being kept secret.

Just ... the details of Red Axe's offense and involvement with Bard. That's what's being kept secret.

The sentence of death can't be kept a secret, not and be of any use – you violate the Truce and Terms, you die ... even if you're a Hero.

KageLupus

I think you are right. The play here is to keep things mysterious enough that there is some plausible deniability. I would imagine the Proceran trial happens very quickly and also has the details sealed.

At the end of the day you have two trials that only a very few people know about, and the number that know about both is even smaller. Both trials have the same outcome, the Red Axe being executed for her crimes. Most people who hear about it are going to hear that she was given a trial and executed. If Procer claims it was their trial and execution and the Named claimed it was theirs then you have some confusion. But that can all be played off as politics since everyone knows there really was a trial and the Red Axe really was executed.

Cicero

I think a big thing to remember is that the Procer Princes are the audience that needs to be appeased, not Procer as a whole. So even if the general populace doesn't believe that the Highest Assembly executed the Red axe, the fact that the Princes will be appeased is sufficient.

Miles

It just seems like such a bad idea. Every thing that can go wrong is another hook for Bard to use against the principiate and the terms.

Princes find out she's a zombie full of explosives? They'll throw a fit that they didn't get the trial they wanted and got played for fools twice. First with the trial and second with the green fire.

Heroes find out she's a zombie full of explosives? They'll separate into sides and have yet another hero on hero conflict. Also explosions and green fire.

Hanno finds out his executor was undone? He won't trust cat again, and probably won't find the explosions and green fire amusing.

Cat finds out about the explosives and goblin fire when they blow all around her? Well she's gonna survive but she really should have known the Bard would leave those there. After all, Bard helped that reputation get started.

Also this is the beginning of a proper villain story for Cat. Before, her powers came from wanting to protect people, this time they come from wanting to meet a personal ambition. Time to start counting the death flags.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Probably not goblinfire and explosives – that's Cat's own schtick. But making her undead could give her another round of agency... or worse, could open the door for the Dead King.

And they never did compare stories about the attempt on Frederick, which is worrisome.

NerfContessa

I joked about that.

And they are actually doing it.

No way this is going to go smoothly.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Oh shiiiiiiit.

Sir Nil

Oh. That is a smart compromise Cat.

Insanenoodlyguy

No. No it is not! This is the biggest mistake we've seen her make!

Oh the execution is clever to be sure, but consider it: This woman was beaten, her overall plan snuffed, and her death quickly and quietly dealt with, by her enemies amongst them a top villian.

And now, for purposes of prolonging her death and execution, the villian is RESURRECTING HER.

This is ANOTHER CHANCE. You never, ever give somebody like this another chance! Because it has to stay secret long enough to be pulled off, which means incredibly high risk of discovery! Puppetering her corpse would be one thing, but actually letting her come back? i'm sure Cat will have some control over her but that's just until she hits a full Heroic Resurrection, which again, she now has a shot at!

You never bring back your own enemies, ESPECIALY when "It's too late." Cat fucked up.

erebus42

It depends on how cognizant she is and how many openings are provided. This could very well end up as another trickster story depending on how things play out rather than a revenge/rebellion from beyond the grave.

erebus42

Depends on how cognizant she is, how on the ball Cat is, and how many openings are provided. This could very well end up as another trickster story as apposed to a revenge/rebellion from beyond the grave depending on how things shake out.

hakureireimu

Um...she's not being resurrected; that's well beyond Cat's power.

Salt

Funnily enough, the Priests would agree that this is just unholy mimicry of life by the echoes of a deceased spirit, rather than any resurrection; while the Praesi would argue that this is resurrection in every sense that truly matters, with the soul actually being pulled back from the afterlife and the soul being what really matters.

The point is that she's being raised to a semblance of agency and definitely to a point of sentience and cognition. That has some potentially ugly consequences, and not just from the Red Axe herself.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, the Praesi would 100% argue she's now undead which is a distinct state in which she's not entitled to [a long list, fought over through many bitter civil wars].

The problem here is, the Red Axe MIGHT cause trouble, but the trouble if this is not done is kind of MORE ASSURED.

Salt

They might if she was being raised as some sort of standard necromantic construct. But then there would be both no point and no question of whether it's possible or not, which is contradicted by Catherine commenting on whether or not it could be done. And warning people to back up, which is generally a story tell for doing something extreme or impressive.

What Cat is likely to try to do here is something that far surpasses making of a zombie and approaches what the Dead King does with his revenants – actually calling the soul (or the echoes of the spirit, if it offends the priests I guess), back and binding it so that the Red Axe is for all intents and purposes able to properly be tried by the highest assembly. Something approaching the kind of pseudo-avoidance of death that is the golden promise for aspiring necromancers everywhere.

... which is partially where the trouble comes from. If you do something that makes said zombie enough of a revenant that it is sentient and can be questioned in a trial, then said abomination is likely going to also come back with its sentience intact, including any malicious intents associated. Possibly even part of its power.

The other part is the actual accomplishment of raising a Named dead to a degree of completeness rarely ever seen. Rarely, with the exception of... the dead king. Not the best association to have at the moment for a Villain, especially if some malicious entity releases the truth that the hidden horror appears to be strangely fond of Cat, almost treating her as a very young peer rather than an Enemy.

[Liliet](#)

Oh that plot thread has been dangling in the background for a while 😊

mamm0nn

All this nonsense discussing what kind of dead she is and won't be any more, when really only one thing really matters: How many sharpeners will Cat shove into her?

beleester

It's not actually that rare – Catherine got herself raised as an undead at First Llesse, and this was portrayed as a fairly normal contingency for a villain to have. Akua also had a contingency to bind her soul if she died, which is how she ended up in Cat's cloak. It's not just something necromancers *aspire* to, it's something that Praesi necromancers do so often that they have laws about it.

The only unusual thing here is that Cat is reviving her without any prep work beforehand, but I guess Night is particularly good at this sort of thing.

Miles

If she manages that she might be coming into a name that let's her use her enemies' powers. Not just once like with ****Take****, but permanently and with powers. Done tight, she might even come out with a better set than ranger, learning-mastering-surpassing not skills but Nameds' abilities.

In short she could become a Power Ranger.

Sir Nil

Perhaps, but Cat made the point that while it might seem that way from her perspective, from the perspective of the wider world the Red Axe is a short-sighted fool who threatened the institution keeping Calernia from getting glomped by DK. Which story takes precedence really depends, but Cat has the Bard shard in her so she probably knows what she's doing.

TameCurtsy

Sounds like Catherine might've gotten herself an angel of a deal out of this...

Daltos

I can't tell if this is supposed to be ironic or a pun. Or worse, both.

Big I

Hahaha, that's hilarious. Didn't see that coming. So much for your death with dignity, Red Axe.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah that's ... that's not something to laugh about.

For all that the Red Axe has frustrated the protagonists of this story and for all the harm she could have done, let's not

forget who she is. She is a woman who killed her rapist in an attempt to bring down a system which protected that rapist and others like him, knowing the cost of that act would be her life.

Her death may be warranted under the oath she forswore and to forestall worse consequences, but who she is, what she did, and why are not things which deserve mockery.

masterofbones

That system exists to save the world. She intentionally chose her own petty revenge with the *gleeful* intent to cause the world to be overrun. That's a pretty unforgivable crime. Rape hurts one person. She tried to cause worse than rape to the entire world, leaving herself safely executed.

If she thinks 1 rape deserves execution, she deserves execution a million times over.

[Liliet](#)

> with the *gleeful* intent to cause the world to be overrun

Pretty sure that's not what she intended. She just didn't think the risk was all that great, which was stupid of her, not malicious.

> If she thinks 1 rape

One rape? Really?

Dude, the Wicked Enchanter had been... making his way through countryside village after village.

Miles

Burninating the countryside, burninating the peasants

Zggt

She thinks that a future founded on ugliness is not worth fighting for. The Red Axe knew from the start she deserved execution for this, she is not stupid. In her view, her not acting on this would have made her complicit, and she'd rather die. It is selfish of her, but her nature as a Hero was to fight to the death for what she believes in, similar to the other more extreme heroes. By any measure, I'd consider her just as much a culpable madwoman as the Tyrant was in his crimes, but there is a moral depth that separates them quite clearly.

We can assume that while something as personal as vengeance was involved, Above's influence subsumed that. They don't

seem to be nearly as keen on the whole “free will” thing as Below.

[Liliet](#)

Correction: Above does not override the free will of its Chosen in any case ever seen so far, though it does occasionally traumatize them into being more obsessed with what was already their core motivation than they would have otherwise been.

Red Axe is not noted to be associated with a Choir, so her desire for justice subsuming any urge for vengeance is all her, unaugmented.

mamm0nn

You don't need to take away one's free will if your priests and your people have made trust in the Above absolute and unquestionably by propaganda from birth. Also, Named are at least a quarter derived from their free will by their providence and such, we've seen them also mentally and in decision-making influenced by Story.

[Liliet](#)

Providence and story are a feedback mechanism echoing decisions made in the past. People have agency in SHAPING it for the future as much as they themselves are influenced by shapes from the past.

And I would dearly love to see the world you describe where everyone actually functionally follows their religion 100% of the time. Be it in-universe or IRL.

Oh, and all the religious doctrine is actually shaped by the priesthood, not the decrees of the Gods themselves, which priests have been repeatedly roasted for by heroes. Again, mortal agency.

mamm0nn

And yet here are heroes that are so consistently believing themselves and Above to be the absolute right and all those of Below being evil for being with Below at all.

[Liliet](#)

I mean. Above and Below's selection mechanisms work as overall very effective filters for who goes where. You get a scattering of exceptions, moreso in Evil nations than elsewhere (which

characteristically heroes from Good nations would have very little knowledge of), but overall the rule DOES hold.

Aotrs Commander

The moment she decided her desire for revenge was more important than other people's lives, she became every bit as bad as the villan she killed. Bad in a different way, but just as bad.

She deserves nothing BUT mockery.

Being a victim does not in ANY way excuse your for your own crimes, not at all.

If she wanted to wait until the immediate crisis was over and gut the dude like a fish, I'd have been right there beside, her holding the knife ready, having already pinned him to the floor by a spear through his genitals (and so, I think, would Cat), ready to set his screaming soul on fire for infinite pain forever.

But she **didn't** do that, and for that she deserves no sympathy, mercy or regard. Death is the very least she deserves.

[Liliet](#)

She did not directly kill people with her actions. She disturbed a delicate system in a way that would probably eventually lead to more deaths, but given how she was not privy to the intricacies of it – you know, NOT being part of the leadership of the Grand Alliance – I don't think it's quite equivalent.

Salt

Agreed. It's not as if Catherine herself had any conception of national level intricacies before sitting in that seat. Someone with zero experience ruling might wrongly assume that there IS a better way than the GA and the terms precisely because they have zero experience ruling. That's a failing of utter stupidity and inexperience, not a failing of malice towards life on the continent.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

Ultimately, what she's guilty of is oathbreaking. The oath was asked for for a reason, and just because she's

unaware of that reason doesn't mean she's not beholden to keeping her goddamn word.

Shveiran

Pardon, but that's a load of BS. The continent has been at war for years. Everyone and their aging aunts knows that. To realize that to break the coalition that is fighting the enemy to a stalemate is AT LEAST EXTREMELY LIKELY to cause the enemy to win, is not a revelation that requires a public office or a degree in history to achieve.

"Not privy to the intricacies of", come on. This isn't understanding how Mercantis could mess them in the money bag, that is someone nearly everyone cannot understand. This is pretty damn different.

She decided to throw a stick in the wheel of the cart treading on the edge of the slope, because she didn't care for the cart.

We want to say her personal history makes her sympathetic? All right.

But let's not pretend she didn't understand that trying to collapse the Terms would at the very least hamper the war effort, or that losing the war means death for all Calernia.

She got it. She just thought that's as no good reason to stay her hand.

[*Liliet*](#)

"break the coalition" is not an obvious necessary consequence of her actions. It's not obvious how necessary the villains are to it, it's not obvious what they even do at all, and it's not obvious how they'll react to something like this.

Pretty sure her idea was to change the Terms (phoenix rising from the ashes), not collapse them and anything like them for good.

Shveiran

Nearly half the coalition is led by murderous villains. How? Just... how could that possibly work without an amnesty. Because that is what she took a swing at.

Shveiran

edit, actually half. I keep forgetting the that the drow are a sovereign state.

[*Liliet*](#)

A more conditional amnesty? Amnesty decided on a case to case basis? That seems to be an obvious thought for someone who doesn't really have to organize the logistics for bringing villains in in the first place.

masterofbones

Gotta get villains to agree to that. Having a tenth, a quarter, or a half of their number get executed just to satiate the heroes isn't gonna fly with them, especially the ones who are borderline, and might be at risk in the future. Nah, if the two sides don't get treated as peers, the side treated as inferior isn't going to join at all.

[Liliet](#)

See, this is less obvious to a layperson than it is to us now that Cat's spelled it out in detail.

Shveiran

Is it though?

Who could possibly think "these guys were our enemies until yesterday, but now that we are fighting a common enemy, they should have no right to attack us but we should be able to decide who of them gets to live and who gets to die."

I mean, that's an angry revenge wet dream, not someone anyone expects to actually work. I fantasize about going to work, tell-off my boss and being put in charge in his stead, but I know it's not actually going to happen.

Agent J

You're arguing a lot in favour of ignorance where the woman in question has done everything to fight that stigma.

She had no intention of changing the Terms. She wanted them gone, said so herself. She told Cat that they had to do better.

If they don't, they all die. An ultimatum she is not too stupid to understand.

I don't believe it's stupidity or malice that are fuelling her. I believe it's fucking selfishness, but it doesn't matter.

Intent does not outweigh action. Her actions are atrocious and have the potential of destroying a content. And, as this argument seems to have started on the premise of "who she is, what she did, and why are not things which deserve mockery", I have to hard disagree.

[Liliet](#)

Actually I'm not arguing in favor of "don't deserve mockery". I'm always down for a good round of mockery of characters I have sympathy for.

But she IS ignorant no matter how much she wants to insist she's not. She believes a "better" is just around the corner, they just need to try. She doesn't KNOW the detailed strategic situation of the Grand Alliance. She has no way to.

hakureireimu

Delusional seems to be a better word here.

[Liliet](#)

Eh.

[Mental Mouse](#)

More like "fanatical". The Terms stand in the way of her revenge, so the Terms have to go.

Shveiran

I guess what the disagreement between us boils down to is that "she has no way to".

For you (I think?) she lacks information, she is not a head of state, she is likely not very educated (I think she comes from a village?) and so she has no way to know how impossible a solution is to the problem she poses. And thus while you may or may not excuse her action, you find that she herself is deserving of some sympathy.

(sorry if I got something wrong)

The thing is, I don't disagree too much: she had no way to know the details, at least. But I do believe everyone, no matter how poorly educated, has the means to understand that they do not, in fact, understand something.

All it takes is for you to stop for a few moments, think really hard about what you know, and sum it

up. That is something I believe everyone is physically capable of doing.

And so, I believe that not doing it is a choice.

Could the Red Axe understand the details? No. Could she realize she was hacking at the foundations of what was keeping the continent above the waterline, with no real understanding of what was load-bearing and what wasn't? Without a plan or a layman understanding of how the pieces were linked?

Yes. I do believe she could.

In my opinion, that is why she is undeserving of sympathy. Mine, at least. Because she either didn't bother to, or chose not to care, while playing with the lives of millions.

Javvies

There's another set of consequences that Red Axe ignored.

The Truce and Terms have put a stop to the further depredations of all of the Villains who signed on, at least for the minimum duration of the war effort, and now they're known to Heroes if they start crossing lines afterwards.

Without the Truce and Terms, all of the currently signed on Villains would be free to resume any/all of their malign activities, and the Heroes are going to be too busy with the war effort to stop them – and if you say the Heroes/Grand Alliance can try to pull an Order 66 on them ... they're Named, they're Villains, effectively none of them are going to go out quietly or without collateral damage, and almost all of them are at/near the front or at critically valuable installations such as the Arsenal, and any attempts to take them would have serious negative consequences for the Allied/Heroes forces they're stationed at.

In addition, without the Truce and Terms, the Heroes are going to be way too busy with the war to stop the depredations of any newly spawning Villains anytime soon.

Plus ... since Cat basically forced Procer and the Dominion into accepting the Truce and Terms along with her help, even if the details aren't known, it's got to be known that they happened more or less concurrently and since they didn't a lot of time and effort making sure Cat was known to be a Villain ruling Callow ... taking out the Truce and

Terms could easily cause her and thus Callow (and probably the Drow) to stop helping fight the Dead King.

In short, taking out the Truce and Terms has major negative consequences that are pretty straightforward and obvious, above and beyond the direct and immediate value of the various Villains towards the war effort. Consequences that Red Axe realistically had to have been at least partially aware of.

[Liliet](#)

Mm, yeah, you summed up my position well.

I understand yours, too. I just see not noticing what you don't notice as such a basic thing to human condition, it really doesn't turn off my sympathy.

Even as I agree with the sentence completely)=

Abrakadabra

She did not kill people directly with her actions, huh? So the Enchanter is not part of the people? What about The Kingfisher Prince? Well he lived, sure, then it is no problem if his neck is shanked by some steel.

[Liliet](#)

No, the Enchanter doesn't count.

Frederic is a good point, but he's a person, singular, not people plural.

Shveiran

Of course he counts, that no one cares is another thing entirely. She still murdered him in cool blood, and thus claimed there was no need for tribunals: everyone who doesn't like someone can bring an axe to their necks.

That is of course very far down the priority list right now, but that is a thing she did still.

Murder is murder. Saying "he was bad" doesn't change the fact that enforcing that reasoning means everyone with a grudge is entitled to act on it. And no one gets to judge whether or not they were "bad" but the people swinging their axes.

But seriously, she didn't kill anyone with her actions directly? My god, if one step removed is all it takes I

suppose Cordelia never killed anyone. She just gave orders, after all, people could have chosen not to follow them. And Tariq didn't kill the Legion detachment following Amadeus, he just created a plague in a village, it was them who decided to go there and get infected.

I suppose if you are in a lifeboat and I sink it, it's just destruction of property and not murder: it's the water and tiredness that drowns you, not me. If I tie someone in the woods and then set fire to the forest, well, it's the fire that did them in, I just caused the fire. If I cover a car in gasoline and it only ignites when someone throws a cigarette, is it their fault because the fuel wouldn't have caught fire without their intervention?

No, sorry, I can't agree with that. She decided to hack at the system. If the system breaks and drags everyone down with it, that's on her whether she thought it likely or not.

Javvies

Let's not forget that the Truce and Terms has stopped the further depredations of all of the Villains who have signed on, at least for the duration of the war (or until they die fighting).

And that without the Truce and Terms, they can resume their malign activities and the Heroes are going to be too busy with the war effort to stop them.

Also, the Heroes are largely going to be too busy with the war effort to stop any newly spawning Villains.

Liliet

Stupidity and malice are often indistinguishable in practice, and often call for the exact same response, I cannot argue with that in any way. Still different things.

mamm0nn

"She did not directly kill people with her actions."

I feel there's a certain Prince with a handsome neck-scar that questions your statement. If it were possible to kill him with his own sword, she would've struck down not just a person but a Named, a Hero, a hero and a Prince. All to take an axe to the Terms, not because of anything the Kingfisher himself did, only because his death would lend itself best to make it fall apart. That means she's

willing to kill a lot more people if that was what it took.

[Liliet](#)

True, but that's a different argument.

Salt

I think this is a bit too extremist. Being a victim doesn't excuse you for your crimes, no, but that knife cuts both ways. Being a criminal doesn't mean you no longer deserve the sympathy of a victim.

She was wrong and deserved her sentence, she fucked up pretty badly. She also was a tragedy on a level that makes the background stories of most Villains look like sunshine and rainbows.

It isn't some sort of "they're 100% terrible and bad" vs "they're 100% justified and good" dichotomy. She can be considered both fully deserving of death, and worthy of sympathy for being a victim at the same time.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, she doesn't.

You assume she's setting up the system for failure, but remember, this is a STORY. She honestly believes that a better way will be found, but it may well only be found at the darkest hour when no other options exist. It's the sort of thing that drives Cat nuts, but it drives her so nuts because it does keep happening.

Big I

The Red Axe becoming undead is the perfect ironic reversal. I think that's funny. Should I also not laugh at the absurd shenanigans of Irritant or Traitorous, or even Cat herself, because of the body counts involved?

Traitorous masterminded his own coup attempts. What do you think happened to the other people he was plotting with?

AbraKadabra

I call bullshit on that. Frederick has nothing to do with the rape, but was a convenient tool, to wchive her plans. So laughing at people WHO treat others as tools is Just fucking dandy as far as I am concerned.

Tenthyr

Oh dear.

Hanno isn't gonna like this.

erebus42

No he won't, but he ceded her remains to them fairly. Much as his very nature prevented compromise around the trial it will also no doubt keep him from making too much of a fuss about this.

Salt

Let's be honest though, the way she mislead him to allow for this is the furthest thing from fair. It's trickery borderlining an outright betrayal of Hanno's trust.

He thought he was handing over the remains for the sake of necessity – even if the desecration of her corpse was something he personally felt was utterly despicable – and for her part Catherine actively encouraged this implication. He didn't allow it so that the Red Axe would be made to suffer a second time after having already suffered the sentence that was demanded for justice to be done.

He might actually kick up a fuss about it, and he wouldn't even be in the wrong to if he did. Cat knows this herself, which is why she wasn't even able to look him in the eye. A technicality of the wording of their agreement doesn't somehow erase the reality that the White Knight extended both reasonability and cooperation as far as his bottom line would possibly allow – without hesitation and to a Villain, no less – and Cat is about to return that gesture by more or less spitting in his face.

For all the necessity of it, she knows full well that everything about what she's doing here is ugly, and it shows in her own behavior. This is going to be one of the ones she's not proud of, even if the needs of the queen demand it.

[*Liliet*](#)

It's still for the sake of necessity is the problem.

It's ugly, it's awful, it's pretty mean towards the Red Axe, but it's not unfair towards Hanno. He stood on the wording of law for this, not the spirit of kindness. That's what he got in turn. Is it horrifying? Yes. Is it an abuse of technicalities? Depending on what you consider the intent of the law to be.

One could argue that if he agreed to surrender the corpse, he agreed that the protection of the Terms is withdrawn upon

death. That would in fact be reasonable and logical as a legal ruling – if there's no sentence of "you're now an outlaw and we don't extend any legal protection to you anymore", death sentence serves as that in a pinch.

I think in the future it would be... reasonable to include the details of what will happen to the body after death right in the tribunal deliberation.

But this one time... yeah. I hope Hanno agrees he surrendered this one fair and square.

Salt

I don't think anyone can argue that she schemed her way into being technically lawful in this. The point is that this is a win that really feels like a loss, because it is the definition of unfair for Hanno, who we all know deserved better. He didn't surrender this outcome, because it was never brought up with him. A Villain he held in high esteem hid it in the fine print, when he was treating her as a decent enough person who could be trusted not to do such a thing to an ally.

You know what Hanno wasn't doing? Looking out for a scheme in the first place, because he was genuine in trying to negotiate with Cat in fully good faith. You know what he wasn't thinking? That Catherine should be seen as an enemy simply because of the color of her cloak. He doesn't somehow get redefined into someone who deserves to be sucker punched this way because his relatively flexible bottom line clashed with Catherine one time, especially in a complex situation where Cat herself partially agreed with him.

So yes, she got the drop on him, when he wasn't even on guard for this kind of a trap because he was negotiating in good faith from the start. Many cheers and celebrations.

I'm not seeing this as a glorious victory for Cat for being clever, though. I'm seeing it as a rather sad loss where she's forced to spit in the face of one of the few Heroes who ever really treated her with respect from the beginning. Something that results in a loss of trust from the kind of person that both Catherine and the comments section has been wishing for Heroes in the guideverse to actually be since forever.

This is the kind of bad-faith negotiation that justifies people like the Saint automatically distrusting everything Villains say, as if there's an inevitable scheme to be caught in for being stupid enough to fully trust Villains.

This is something that is sad to be forced to resort to, because that lost trust is going to take a hell of a long time to come back, if it ever does at all.

TeK

Yeah, that's what Cat meant by "down in the mud". Sometimes, there are no good outcomes. She exploited the trust Hanno gave her, and I am not even sure it will accomplish the original task. Like, it already sucks to be Hanno, but the trust was betrayed not even for the surefire win, just a chance of one. The fact that Red Axe is gonna be tried is gonna be public, no doubt about it, but that would just raise pointed questions. From Hanno for one, but also, from every Named who will naturally conclude that if Red Axe was tried under Assembly, she was either spared under the Terms, or, well, raised as an undead abomination of everything good and holy. And sure, the latter will appease Villanous Names, or at least amuse, but that's not gonna do any favors to the assembly itself.

My guess is the trials under the Procer will also be a subject to the seal, but such a thing is near guaranteed to missfire in the world run on tropes in the best worst moment possible. Not to mention the sheer logistics of 23 (?) backstabbing schemers keeping a secret. You might as well try to use pure air as a bucket.

Liliet

Yeah, I think this scheme has a lot of failure points.

I don't think Hanno considering Catherine his enemy forevermore is one. He'll be offended, upset, angry, but he won't think she's the new Dead King / Tyrant of Helike for this.

Shveiran

Personally, I hope he sucks it up and moves on. He doesn't have to like it, but he has to know that they stood on a precipice, was asked if he had a solution and said no, and then refused the solution others suggested. So someone found an ugly solution not to jump in the precipice that went around him.

I trust Hanno not to act on this, because to act on it is to say you take issues with everyone not jumping in the precipice.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

Hanno and Frederic acted in accordance with their own moral principles. Catherine and Cordelia let them, and if the actions they were forced to take as a result are worse than them breaking their principles would have been in the first place, well hey, they were warned and warned repeatedly.

And if it's not worth and sticking to their principles was still worth it, well then, everyone wins except for Red Axe, prince Langevin and the Dead King, don't they?

[Liliet](#)

Catherine isn't his enemy for doing this. She did her best to avoid infringing on his interests. She's still on his side. Her "scheme" is for a purpose he's perfectly aware of and agrees with and aware she's working towards.

Salt

She isn't the Enemy, but there is a big difference in being an ally and a trusted ally. Roland, the Grey Pilgrim, and the Blessed Artificer are all "allies", for example.

At the end of the day, this IS something that at the least pushes his bottom line, if not necessarily crossing it – in that he considered justice to be fully accomplished by the lawful execution, and she's pushing it beyond that.

I think that people are somewhat overestimating exactly how binding a technical difference is for Hanno, especially since his agreement with Catherine isn't some sort of general-purpose Truce and Terms law so much as just a one time concession based on circumstance.

He is someone who became a Hero by spurning the laws of his homeland as being lawful but not "Just". His view of justice is heavily intertwined with law, but it's hardly something simple enough to be fully satisfied by a technicality of it.

[Liliet](#)

And I think you might be overestimating how important it is for him that Red Axe not be tried twice.

Oh yes, they kept it secret from him. You know such a thing exists as 'plausible deniability'? He did not conspire with them and he did not agree that this would be done to Red Axe, he acted within the limits of his jurisdiction and those only. As is, it's true and no-one can dispute it. If he'd known he might have been compelled by the letter and spirit of the law he believes in to fight this outcome, but he was not obligated to know and they were not obligated to let him.

It's like how Frederic did not protest against Red Axe being executed in general but refused to do it personally because principles.

Catherine let Hanno play his role in accordance with how he believed he should act. She tried to push, he refused to bend, she backed off and let him have his perfect trial.

If he ALSO, SEPARATELY, wants to dispute the actions taken afterwards and the ultimate fate of the Red Axe, that's a very different question than whether he'll discuss sentencing ahead of time.

Not all withheld information is a betrayal.

Salt

In my eyes the fact that she had to hide it at all and the fact that she couldn't even look him in the eye is plenty proof that she knew full well that it was a severe betrayal of trust.

Not to mention that Hanno isn't a Proceran Prince. Justice isn't some shiny label that he wants to be viewed as upholding – it's something he believes in from the bottom of his heart. Catherine understands this, as she has similarly strong beliefs about other subjects, and for matters of the heart it's not about plausible deniability. The guy truly does want everything to be as Just as he can possibly make it.

I think Catherine the Queen will do what she needs to do, but Catherine the person is anything but OK with pulling this on someone who has been nothing but genuine and respectful to her

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but sometimes the point of justice is what happens to the other person at all, and sometimes it's what YOU do.

Justice is not a consequentialist framework, it's a deontological one. It's fine if a villain falls off a cliff to their death, but it's not fine if you push them. The result might be the same but your actions were not.

And yes, Catherine is highly disturbed by what she did and by pulling things behind Hanno's back. I believe that says more about what kind of person she wants to be than about her being terrible horrible no good as she is right now.

SpeckofStardust

Honestly Hanno has to publicly react in full disapproval of this, cause otherwise the heroes are going to think that he won't defend them from being thrashed via Black Queen, at the end of the day as long as the next trial doesn't go off the rails Catherine just loses some respect from the Heroes. And that's an acceptable cost.

[Liliet](#)

Very true!

That's why Catherine's going to keep this under wraps for as long as it takes for him to only be able to express disapproval and not actually sabotage it.

Decius

I don't think the protection of the T&T is withdrawn upon death, but I think that the protection can be repudiated by the protected. Hanno only claimed that repudiating it wouldn't stop that trial, because it was based on events that occurred while under T&T.

But that trial ended with an execution, and **only** an execution. It did not end with a ruling that prevented the use of necromancy on the corpse.

[sivarajan](#)

I think the Terms will continue to protect her, and having already served her sentence, she's free.

[Liliet](#)

Well, the problem is not so much the necromancy as that T&T seem to more or less explicitly include "and you will not be tried by the Highest Assembly for crimes against Procer as long as you're subject to these laws instead".

The necromancy is a separate problem lol

Shveiran

Honestly, if even Praesi don't consider undead an acceptable state of citizenship, I feel like it is a fair assumption to say that the Terms' protections end with death.

Pretty much all legal system do, after all. Crimes like graverobbing are not punished to protect dead people, but the mental ease and "sense of propriety" of their relatives and loved ones.

As the Terms are just the skeleton of a system born for war time, I doubt they include that kind of scope.

[Javvies](#)

Plus, they're fighting the Dead King.

Who is known to have a habit of reanimating Named as Revenants in his service.

I find it likely that the Truce and Terms explicitly not protect someone once they've been killed and reanimated as any kind of undead, otherwise, if the Dead King killed and reanimated someone, putting them back down would constitute a technical violation if death/undeath do not void the protections of the Truce and Terms.

Time1ock

I doubt Hanno would face much Narrative backlash if he were to break his word here, since this is a perversion of the sentence he dealt out to a Heroine. Especially since he did not make that promise with full knowledge of what she intended with the corpse aka he did not go into it with 'open eyes' .

Furthermore, Hanno is a representative of the Heroes in the GA. If he let this go without a word, it would establish the precedent that anyone with the political will can mess around with the corpses of Heroes and perhaps even their Heaven's ordained afterlife. There is no way this is going to go over well with that lot.

Honestly, this might in a round-a-bout way accomplish Red Axe's goal in breaking the Terms.

But, I'll admit I'm biased here since I truly want Cat to fail and lose for what she just did and have this whole situation come crashing down. Honestly, what she did really rubs me the wrong way.

ruduen

“‘Graverobbing is not a particular concern of the Seraphim,’ the White Knight replied, sounding almost amused.”

I mean, she's not even stealing it this time. Is there anything more specific available regarding how they treat Necromancy?

erebus42

Hey they were given legal right to do with her remains as they will. I don't know about specific but it seems like while it's not outlawed by the Grand Alliance and is probably employed in certain areas and situations it's probably not looked at particularly fondly overall. They mentioned that being undead is technically illegal under Heresy laws in the Principate. I kind of want them to get a Necromancer or other death related Named who would be able to employ their own undead or be particularly good at dealing with the Dead King's legions and servants.

Ninestrings

So next chapter is a Weekend at Bernie's style comedy of Cordelia and Cat marching the Red Axe's corpse around with a nice scarf on to hide the scar?

Ninestrings

I also am vaguely hoping that her brain gets scrambled to some extent and shenanigans ensue.

Cordelia: You have been charged with Treason, how do you plead?

Red Axe: Cantaloupe

*Cat at the back of the court frantically making “Wrap it up” gesture with her hand.

Salt

The Red Axe could end up getting a few victories for herself with this kind of a second chance to be fair, albeit while still being dead.

... which would make this a Red Dead Redemption for her

[Sugar Roll](#)

I doubt it. She's about to be raised—not resurrected. She will be under Cat's control.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Ah yes, because "this undead abomination is completely under my control" always goes perfectly for villains 😊

[Sugar Roll](#)

Maybe, maybe not. The Dead King still hasn't lost control of his abominations and it's been thousands of years. We might end up waiting for ages for that to happen.

MagnaMalusLupus

Tell that to Good King Edward the Seventh.

[Sugar Roll](#)

How long did he wait?

Ninestrings

I mean the golden rule of necromancy is "Don't raise up what you cannot put down" Red Axe isn't so big a player that this should be an issue.

The undead abomination stuff tends to go haywire for villains when their reach exceeds their grasp.

laguz24

I wonder how the red axe is going to react when they bring her back. Probably something pithy about once not being enough. Also I really want to know what terms they agreed to regarding the ealamal.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm more worried it will be a successful escape attempt.

masterofbones

Proper response: "well if one rape merits one execution in your eyes, trying to cause the entire world to be converted into unwilling slaves to be experimented on by the Dead King deserves *at least* a few more.

[Liliet](#)

One? Honey. Oh honey.

Also, she wasn't TRYING to cause that. It would have been an honest accident!

Myriad

Nah. Any law will equate act with reckless disregard. That is, you are not allowed to hide behind the fact that you didn't specifically intend to harm someone, even if you ended up doing so, to evade punishment if you had to act by refusing to consider or blinding yourself to the obvious consequences of doing so.

So if someone is pulling you up from a cliff to save you from a mortal fall and if someone else rightfully or wrongfully kills that person saving you, causing you to fall to your mortal death or serious injury, the law will allow your representative to pursue wrongful death or damages against the murderer even if that murderer had no specific ill intent to you in particular.

Similarly, here, it really doesn't matter if Red Axe had no specific intent to damage the fight against the Dead King. It was an obvious consequence and that the Red Axe intentionally and willfully disregarded that consequence does not mean she cannot, legally or otherwise, be held responsible for it.

Liliet

And yet, accidental manslaughter out of neglect is still a different charge from murder.

Shveiran

This varies from legal system to legal system, but in general, the distinction matters (and usually doesn't absolve) for crimes consisting of simple acts where the will of the individual can easily be determined. And when the consequences greatly get out of hand IN A WAY THAT COULDN'T BE PREDICTED BY A REASONABLE PERSON.

You call me names, I punch you, you fall and break your neck. Breaking one's neck is not a reasonably expected consequence of being punched, so I am not charged with murder (though I am charged, and not just for the punch).

I decide to burn down a house at night. Someone inside burns alive. The risk is something I couldn't not have taken into account (whether or not I did is irrelevant: I should have) so I'm charged as if I had wanted that result.

Again, this is the general principle: every country has it a bit different.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

I'm just saying that people being idiots doesn't diminish my sympathy for them is all.

Shveiran

Fair.

As we discussed above, them being unwilling to recognize their ignorance before acting greatly diminishes mine. But that's just me.

[Liliet](#)

See, unlike the "just don't fucking skin people, didn't think I needed to spell this one out for you" (as a random example, I've got nothing against Raphaella personally), this doesn't really generalize. People always act in ignorance of SOMETHING. Like... all knowledge to be possibly had in the universe is infinite, people's knowledge is finite no matter how much effort they pour into learning what they need.

And like "in her case, she should have poured more" is a valid judgement and I'm right there with you.

But "if you act before you've learned EVERYTHING you're a rotten radish" is functionally a call to inaction, to everyone, ever.

Knowing when you need to shut up and listen and when you need to act is a delicate balancing act, not an absolute moral rule.

Red Axe failed hard. I'm right here judging her. I'm just also here sympathizing with her because, like, people, y'know?

[Javvies](#)

Sure, our legal systems have a range of charges covering "you killed someone" for various circumstances, and blind accidents or accidents caused by neglect are included.

Red Axe, however, killed Wicked Enchanter and tried to kill Kingfisher Prince knowingly, intentionally, and of her own volition, attacking the Truce and Terms providing the Grand Alliance the coordinated backing and support of almost every Named on Calernia in the war

effort against the Dead King ... which has been grinding on for at least two years in what is effectively a stalemate, though they're selling hopeful victories and progress through their propaganda.

Her killing of Wicked Enchanter would fall under premeditated murder, and conspiracy murder, and probably conspiracy treason, and conspiracy espionage.

Her attempted murder of Kingfisher Prince probably couldn't be proven to be premeditated, but it was definitely an knowing and intentional act. Might have a hard time adding conspiracy charges to the attempt on Kingfisher Prince, though.

At best, Red Axe fully bought the propaganda, and thinks the war is going much better than it actually is and that the Villains aren't actually needed, useful, or contributing to the war effort, far less how vital they've actually been, although, I would expect that somebody probably told her that the actual state of the war wasn't as rosy a picture as the propaganda when she was found and recruited.

At best, she vastly underestimated the value of the Truce and Terms to the Grand Alliance and the war effort.

She still committed murder and attempted murder, not manslaughter or anything caused by neglect.

Even if we ignore the value to the war effort, the Truce and Terms have also put a stop to the depredations of the Villains who have signed on ... and without the Truce and Terms, they can all go right back to whatever they were doing before ... and all the Heroes are going to be way too busy with war to put a stop to any of their malign activities, and the Heroes are also going to be too busy to stop the depredations of any newly spawning Villains.

[Liliet](#)

What are you even arguing about? I never contested that she did murder and attempted murder. I argued she didn't GLEEFULLY CAUSE THE SLAUGHTER OF MILLIONS.

[Javvies](#)

She gleefully attacked the Truce and Terms. The immediate consequence of ending the Truce and Terms is to the war effort. It's effectively providing aid and comfort to the enemy, only worse. However, the Truce and Terms also put a hold on signatory Villains doing Villain things to the Proceran/Levantine/Callowan people. And ensure that there are Named tracking down and bringing onboard

any freshly spawned Named, cutting short their malign activities.

Without the Truce and Terms, the signatory Villains can bail on the war effort and resume their Villainous and malign endeavors against the Proceran/Levantine/etc common folk who are away from the battlefield, and the Heroes will be too busy fighting the Dead King to stop them, or any additional newly spawned Villains.

And, y'know, without the Truce and Terms, Cat, and thus Callow, (and probably the Drow) are likely to bail on the Grand Alliance, what with Cat being a Villain and all.

Plus, Red Axe almost certainly got told more about what's actually going on with the war when Archer's band found her and while traveling with them.

[Liliet](#)

The secondary effect of villains being in the Truce and Terms INSTEAD OF doing something else (and instead of needing to commit heroes to stop all that) is not obvious either.

And you seriously think Archer and Co gave her geopolitics lessons, rather than telling bawdy stories?

[Javvies](#)

...
Villains going back to doing Villain things is somehow not an obvious consequence of ending the Truce and Terms that pointed them at the Dead King instead of doing Villain things?

Also, while Archer and company probably did tell a lot of stories ... I fully expect that they also told Red Axe at least a little about the realities of fighting the Dead King's armies and that every Named was needed because the truth wasn't as good looking as the propaganda said things are.

[Liliet](#)

Archer and Co haven't been on the northern front actually as best I can tell. And they're none of them strategists. Well, Archer can be when she focuses, but I strongly doubt she would, especially when it comes to Not Contradicting Official Propaganda.

And no, it's not obvious. Who's to say it's the Truce and Terms that keep them there in the first place? Maybe they're looking to get something and the T&T is just what they negotiated themselves in the meanwhile (NOT obvious that there's nothing to get there; if nothing else, Cat herself had an ulterior motive to aligning with the Grand Alliance from the start). Maybe they're already threatened/mind-controlled into compliance and have nowhere else to go. Maybe they're not complete idiots and understand that the continent is where they keep their stuff so they shouldn't let DK eat it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They already told us what Cat & Yanno wanted regarding the ealamal: People of their own on-site, including the Rogue Sorcerer and Forsworn Healer.

Jworks

Whenever Cat partakes in genuine evil it always feels like a mistake, hopefully this doesn't come back to bite her.

erebus42

Eh I don't know if I would call this genuine evil though. It certainly will piss off quite a few people if and when it gets out though.

Salt

She just executed a girl for doing exactly what she herself did at the same age, under Terms that she herself admits are ugly and horribly unjust, while betraying the trust of her colleague to a degree where she's too ashamed to even look him in the eye, for the explicit purpose of executing someone twice.

As far Catherine herself is concerned, this is the kind of hypocrisy that would have had a younger Catherine Foundling want to kill her for. It's reminiscent of how Black Spoke at her to force her to watch him hanging Callowan traitors. Except nowadays she's not just executing traitors so much as executing them and raising from their rest so they can suffer execution a second time.

It's a Necessary Evil, sure, and she's not exactly cackling in glee about it, but let's not pretend that this isn't blatantly evil rather just a really mean way of being good.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine killed those two

1) with the implication from the Black Knight that they'd be back on the streets doing the same thing in 5 or so years if she did nothing (probably a blatant lie, he'd have filled in if she didn't, but she didn't know that and had no way to guess);

2) NOT during a war for survival of the whole continent;

3) ...with the personal approval of about the highest authority to be found in the entire country at the time.

This is about as different from the Red Axe's situation as going home from work is different from deserting in wartime. It's not the act itself that's the problem in this case, it's the context and implications, and consequences if it is unpunished.

> betraying the trust of her colleague to a degree where she's too ashamed to even look him in the eye

I mean, Catherine's not all that shameless overall. She's a shameless liar, but she doesn't have all that thick a skin when it comes to actually ugly deceptions. Yeah she feels guilty about this. That doesn't mean it's the worst crime ever committed. This is Catherine, not Indrani.

> for the explicit purpose of executing someone twice

Yep.

Unpleasant? Yes. A horrifying evil? I'm not seeing it. Not any more than a death sentence ever is, period.

> As far Catherine herself is concerned, this is the kind of hypocrisy that would have had a younger Catherine Foundling want to kill her for.

I'm not seeing it.

Younger Catherine Foundling sparked a war so she could get promoted and hopefully do good. Her moral standards if anything rose with time.

> It's reminiscent of how Black Spoke at her to force her to watch him hanging Callowan traitors.

...Which was a pretty necessary and timely lesson about 1) the consequences of her actions for other people, 2) facing and owning them. Not one administered in a particularly gentle way, and it was the method itself that Catherine perceived as a violation – the Speaking – but the making her watch thing? That was entirely fair.

Salt

You seem to be confusing admitting that the morals of her actions are lacking as some sort of disapproval of the practicality of them. They're not the same thing. You can understand and agree that she chose the only road

available to her, and still be aware that the only solution available to you is anything but a moral one.

Honestly, this reasoning you're putting forward seems far too close to the kind that demands a pat on the head for being gritty rather than a realist understanding that it's nothing more praiseworthy than undertaking the burden of committing necessary evils so that others aren't forced to.

Having to choose the lesser evil doesn't somehow whitewash the action into not an evil at all – the fact of the matter is that “Necessary Evils” are called Evils for a very good goddamn reason. They're not Necessary Super-Gritty Goods That You Should Feel Fine With Because Justifications Never Matter

There's a reason she attempted every other possible method before being FORCED to resort to it; it's not as if Catherine is somehow delusional enough to seriously believe that the approval of the Black Knight – who she herself outright calls a monster even as she loves him like a father – somehow makes it any less morally wrong.

The fact that her first murder was under the explicit approval of the authorities means less than nothing when said Authority is the Black Knight. Amadeus is the one who Catherine stabbed and told to reform himself into someone deserving to live in a better world, not some paragon of morality to look up to. She's trying to be better than him, not the same.

Why does this matter? Because acknowledging the fact that what she did is still morally wrong even if it was practically necessary is the exact kind of thing that stops you from sliding down any slippery slopes. It's what proves people like the Mirror Knight wrong, when they claim that her Necessary Evils are some sort of slow corruption into madness. Remembering it is what let's you avoid choosing the wrong road, when in the future you do have a choice and the less morally correct choice is by far the more convenient one rather than a necessary one.

Her Terms, her enforcement of them, and her latest resurrection of the Red Axe was not just, nor fair, nor kind, nor anything resembling good. It was Necessary, and not an inch more. Catherine being strong enough to look the truth of this in the eyes instead of hiding behind “oh but it's not really evil because I was desperate” is what makes her a damn adult.

[TeK](#)

Ok, gotta disagree on something here. You divide necessity and evil, as if there is some objective morality. There isn't. We all uphold our own personal hierarchy of moral values, and it just happened that "killing rapist" never was an outmost value in Cat's worldview. Which is fine, I guess, but really, she didn't do anything noble, she does not martyr her conscience or something like that. She made a choice, because she values one thing above another, that's it. Everything else is empty words.

Because morality is not universal, and we all value different things differently. And yes, sure, we more or less agree that some things are bad, but the badness is relative. I think murder is pretty bad, and life is valuable, but if my life is threatened and there is no other choice, I would rather choose someone else dies. Look at that, I tried as hard as I could to not spell out "morality is relative", but guess what.

Acknowledging that you did a moral wrong even if it was necessary does not stop you from a slippery slope. The opposite, if anything. Once you had found yourself a convenient justification, you can ignore your conscience entirely.

I agree with Black on that one. You should just be honest with yourself about what you do. What you choose. I would rather not have a fastfood burger than get morbidly obese, but by the same token, I would rather eat a burger than starve. It does not mean I consider eating fastfood good or bad, only better or worse.

So if Cat chose between not getting a nice dinner and letting Red Axe go free, I am pretty sure she would let her go. But unfortunately, nice dinner is not on the table, on the table is the fate of millions.

See, I wrote all this, but I had a hard time articulating quite exactly what I disagree with. Necessity in the context you use sounds like nothing but justification. It's an excuse. It's an exception. The moment you use exception at all, the entire system falls, the precedent itself is enough for you to break your own values on a fucking whim. It is better to have a solid established hierarchy of values that you can adhere to every day. That way, you abolish the very concept of exception, and it's no longer about "well it's bad, but one more time". Either it's an acceptable trade, or it's not.

No exceptions.

Salt

I also have to disagree, because it comes perilously close to equating practicality or necessity with morality.

As if ideal is defined by what you have to live with, rather than defined by what you should strive for despite what you have to live with.

Practicality is simply ONE of the many considerations to take into account when determining morality, not the only consideration or even the all-important one. For heck's sakes, it's "the practical guide to evil" not "the practical guide to not-evil because it's not evil when practicality determines ethics".

Here's the thing – the discussion of moral ethics in casual discourse (and generally as shown in the guide verse for the Good-side of the spectrum) are based on three factors. Character, correctness of action in moral law, correctness of action in outcome. Loosely translated into virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and utilitarian ethics, if you want to open up an academic can of worms. Some interesting characters/entities take one of them to an extreme at the expense of others (like the Pilgrim), but generally it's a mix of the three.

This, and the truce and terms in general? Still fully within the bounds of outcome as a basis. It's almost completely outside the bounds of moral law as a basis – whether you include Catherine's own morals or that of greater society – especially considering that she herself finds value in many of the same moral laws that the Red Axe does, if not necessarily in the same order of precedence.

Virtue? It's a bizarre mix of cold blooded ruthlessness and bleeding heart empathy, with varying degrees of mercy, cruelty, fairness, and unfairness given the situation.

So could you consider her and her actions as less Evil than someone who would gleefully partake in this? Sure. Could you say it's not wholly Evil, since morality isn't something so simple as to be fully black and white? Sure.

Can you say this could be anything approaching 'good', 'moral', or not significantly evil, overall? Absolutely not, in my opinion, unless Catherine really is starting to turn her back on all of her old values virtues and

moral laws, in favor of outcomes. Something like that would be THE definition of a slippery slopes

When the ugliest needs of the Queen override the wants of the woman, that's not too far off from walking the thin line that she's always been. When those same ugly needs of the Queen are no longer opposed by the wants of the woman, that's when she really starts to become an Evil that needs to be put down.

This is why Black is such a monster, he has no moral laws to ascribe his actions to. He has little in the way of personal virtues. It's exactly why Cat needs to NOT follow in his footsteps no matter how painful it is, because at the end of the day the Black Knight is every tiny bit the monster that Catherine has been calling him, even if he is a reasonable one.

[Tek](#)

>equating practicality or necessity with morality

Yes, that is, in fact, exactly what I do.

>As if ideal is defined by what you have to live with, rather than defined by what you should strive for despite what you have to live with.

I classify practicality as striving to the best possible outcome in accordance to your ideals. No contradiction to me. It's not a desirable outcome, but you still chose the one you desires the most out of those available. You wouldn't be able to make that choice without some form of ideals.

>For heck's sakes, it's "the practical guide to evil" not "the practical guide to not-evil because it's not evil when practicality determines ethics".

I laughed out loud on that. Good one. Though I imagine it is more of a catchy title, because "Practical guide to what is considered by common morality to be evil, even though all morality is relative" is quite a mouthfull.

I think you misunderstand deontology a little. A person who just wishes to attempt to kill everyone he meets is still deontologically ethical, because the outcome doesn't matter, only actions do.

That being said, I get where you are coming from, and I agree with your point about Black. Still, the moment there is an exception, deontology (and moral

law) is no longer applicable. If the rule is "killing is bad*" with an asterisk the size of War and Peace, it's no longer a moral law, it's a passing fancy.

Black is a monster not because he ascribes to mostly consequentialist ethics (oh god, that is some mighty stretch). Black has virtues, albeit most of them are born out of practicality, and he also has rules, although again, born out of practicality. But the virtues and rules are never created from a thin air, so you either take it from another person, society at large, or create on your own in accordance with your goals. And don't you dare imply that creating virtues and laws for yourself is somehow inherently more evil, because those are fighting words.

The problem with Black is WHAT values he has, not that he has values about outcomes instead of actions. Or to be more precise, what makes Black EVIL is how his highest value is to WIN. His vision will be put into the worlds, whatever it takes. It is, mostly, outcome based, but what matters is WHAT outcome he is aiming for.

I am genuinely suprised how you argue that looking only at the outcome is evil. Or maybe understand something. I need to take some time to process that, I can't coherently represent my position atm.

Salt

Practicality by definition is simply the exercise of considering feasibility *rather than* theory or ideals. Not some flawed reality in attempting to strive toward ideals. I'm wondering if this entire debate doesn't stem from your using a rather strange definition of "practicality" in the first place.

In academia this is why ideal and practicality are treated as two entirely different things, with ideal sometimes taking practicality into account but never ever ever ever being conflated with it as an equivalent.

Morals are far more ideals than practicality. Ethics is the field of study regarding what SHOULD be acceptable or not, rather than what we need to currently accept or not.

Morals are not defined by what is attainable, as far as current knowledge allows us to determine.

They are simply what should be attempted to attain, regardless whether or not it is currently possible.

I'm arguing that virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and utilitarian ethics are all competing theories, but it is generally agreed on that none of them (ignoring the many many sub branches of each) fully encompass the needs of human ethics as a whole. As a result, in real life and apparently in this setting, it's usually a mix of the three that gets used as an actual system of morality – individually or on a larger scale.

Meaning that yes, I do consider that a character who is only justified in a consequentialist sense (and debatably at that) and not at all justified in a deontological or virtue ethic sense – as seen from the viewpoint of most of the characters in the story, if not said specific character himself – is pretty much severely immoral.

I am also not going to try seriously debating radical relativism vs natural law or any other form of objective morality here, especially since it would require about a ten page dissertation of the common arguments for and criticisms against before we can even have a halfway functional discussion on that. Not sure where you're getting that radical relativism is either an inherent truth or academically general consensus, but at any rate we will have to agree to disagree.

[Tek](#)

Yeah, I got off tangent on that one. I am not sure what position exactly I was trying to defend, and I feel like I don't have the necessary education to actually debate it now. I guess I'll go educate myself, as well as brush up on the proper meanings. I retract my disagreement with you until then. All I am currently is confused and slightly embarrassed.

[Liliet](#)

(I have a very specific position on what exactly is the outcome Black is aiming for, how his WIN dereferences at its base (if not necessarily in all situations, because he's still a person and sometimes just wants to have been right all along). If you are interested in talking about that, just give a signal)

Salt

I might, if you don't mind linking to this discord channel you're talking about. WordPress is a terrible platform to have a conversation on, even in text.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not hanging out on the official Guide server right now, but here's my personal handle:
Liliet#1061

[TeK](#)

I feel like we've talked about it. You wrote about it on reddit and invited me to Discord, but I never actually joined. But if you can refresh my memories, I would be grateful.

[Liliet](#)

tl;dr he wants a better future for Praes, specifically for people who live in it

[Liliet](#)

P.S. he has no moral laws to ascribe his actions to. He has little in the way of personal virtues.

Just marking this with a "LOL", contact me on reddit or discord dm's or hell even in this convo for more details.

Salt

Key word is "moral" laws, and "moral" virtues, not laws and virtues at all.

I'm not really sure why it's "LOL" to say that a character who blatantly doesn't care about whether his actions or intentions are morally considered right or wrong, is immoral. Especially when it was outright spelled out in the early books, while he was still being fleshed out.

The Bard's description of the moral difference between him and Catherine was

>"She won't, though," the Bard replied. "That's not her nature. She's the very worst kind of villain, you see – the kind who thinks they're doing the right thing. In that sense, she's even more

dangerous than her teacher. He doesn't labour under that impression."

As in he quite literally thinks he's not doing the "right thing" and just doesn't care. Not sure where the idea that he's in any morally justifiable is coming from, since he's characterized as knowing that he isn't a moral person at all, even by his own standards.

Liliet

> who blatantly doesn't care about whether his actions or intentions are morally considered right or wrong

Who blatantly insists he doesn't care about that, you mean. All while brooding to his best friend that he's made himself a liar, a cheat and a murderer, insisting to his student that he's a morally terrible person she shouldn't emulate, and actually attempting to construct a moral argument for why attacking Proceran infrastructure was totally morally okay in the same sentence as denying he'll do that (that last one was a fucking gem).

Amadeus high key cares.

> the kind who thinks they're doing the right thing. In that sense, she's even more dangerous than her teacher. He doesn't labour under that impression."

> As in he quite literally thinks he's not doing the "right thing" and just doesn't care

Yees, that's definitely why he told Catherine in chapter 1 that Named are defined by "what do you think is right and how far are you willing to go to achieve it".

Amadeus is far more critical and cynical towards his own actions than Catherine, but not because he doesn't care. It's because he does that he defines himself as morally unjustifiable, otherwise he'd just make up whatever ethical system was convenient for his argument at the moment to insist he's perfectly right. If he didn't have standards, he wouldn't have had trouble living up to them.

I'm not saying he's justifiable*, I'm saying he cares.

*not saying he's unjustifiable either. There are a lot of different lines one can draw for what is justifiable or not, and Amadeus uses multiple at once, which is what results in the unpleasant "I believe that what I am doing is horrifying and immoral in every way but I also consider it unjustifiable to stop doing it as long as I live" result.

Salt

If your argument is that Amadeus considers himself morally reprehensible but thinks that his justifications are rational and that he intends to follow them, I don't think I disagree at all.

My point was that Cat's is right about her actions being immoral here, and that Black's approval doesn't matter at all since he's someone who is blatantly immoral.

Practical/necessary and moral aren't the same thing. She can be simultaneously correct that her action was necessary and also correct that it was immoral

[TeK](#)

Unlike Catherine though, Red Axe holds "kill the rapists" as a supreme ethical value. Hence her actions. There is no hypocrisy happening, Catherine never betrayed her ideals.

[Liliet](#)

I threw in Amadeus's approval for one point only – consequences.

There's no divorcing morality from consequences. Is it moral to push a button? That damn well depends on what the button does, doesn't it?

Oh, the Terms and the enforcement of them isn't moral per se. But it's not immoral either. It's – amoral. It's Lawful Neutral. It's just, if not necessarily fair, because justice is always limited by what *can* be done. Catherine is doing justice towards the soldiers fighting in the north and the refugees whose lives depend on how well they fight.

I agree that this is a probably bad idea, and that it does harm and potentially even more harm.

I disagree that this is Evil, or evil, any more than any punitive justice system is ever an evil.

Salt

There is also no divorcing morals from ideals, either. Practicality doesn't somehow retroactively change the ideals to fit the action, especially when the Character's own personal moral ideals and the setting's moral ideals both pretty much say her actions are about the furthest thing from good.

Even Catherine doesn't think she's some sort of neutral "can't be judged either way" character. She outright compared herself to the accomplice of the rapist that she killed in THIS chapter. By her own set of standards she's actively questioning whether she's still the one holding the knife.

I'm always a little flabbergasted at the comments section wanting to believe that Catherine never does the morally wrong thing. Half the story is about doing 'evil' things for totally rational reasons. Protagonist-centered morality is a powerful drug, man.

Morals are never limited by practicality, they're by definition the ideals you strive for. How well you CAN adhere to them is limited by practicality, but this doesn't retroactively change the ideals themselves, nor does it change your failing to adhere to them.

[Liliet](#)

Well, I consider every execution of a deserter Catherine ever authorized to be a failure to live up to her ideals.

...when they are taken to the highest extreme.

See, ideals are like mountains. You can try to climb to the very top, but you probably won't be able to. How high you manage to get is what ends up your result, and while Catherine believes she should be higher, I don't believe she's so low as to be called "what child!her would have wanted to kill".

jworks17

Salt already covered this pretty well, but working towards a greater good can very commonly be evil in instants. When the Grey Pilgrim killed that Proceran town to stop Black he was working towards a greater good, but what he did was doubtlessly evil.

I think cat did what she thought was the correct thing to meet her goals, but executing a heroine for murdering a rapist, then raising her corpse to lose its head again in the hopes of decreasing political pressure in the high council is doubtlessly an evil act.

It is a practical evil, but she rarely deals in genuine evil, she mostly deals in practicality. I find her to be at her best between good and evil, doing what makes the most sense without tipping the scale one way or the other.

[aurikdomi](#)

well people definitely called it. kill her, raise her and try her again.

RoflCat

I guessed for something slightly off, but still two 'deaths'

First death as a Named, removing all her aspects to be turned into artifacts under Grand Alliance to help with the war effort. Nothing as powerful as Severance, but even the ability that makes her immune to magic should be a great help.

Then physical death.

Lord Haart

That would have actually been a great resolution... Even if Red Axe wasn't executed by the Highest Assembly I think the loss of Name aspects would have been fitting given her Name was given specifically to stop the Wicked Enchanter, which she did. She may have even been able to argue that she stabbed Frederick due to an illusion from the Hunted Magician – who could say otherwise? It would be nearly as good as death in the eyes of most Named, too, so wouldn't have threatened the T&T all that much. The main issue is that it's a clear reinterpretation of the T&T which does so undermine or somewhat, which could spell danger.

Frivolous

Let's face it: We shouldn't be surprised. Catherine has a history of creative necromancy. It only began with undead suicide goats.

The latest iteration will be Red Axe the Twice-Executed.

[Jarwain](#)

Didn't it begin with her animating her own body when near death?

[Liliet](#)

Yes. Yes it did.

Catherine, to Red Axe: "yeah dying twice sucks, I know. I really, actually do."

RoflCat

Clearly she should start with "decapitation? been there, done that"

From Book 2.

"You're dead," the Lone Swordsman said. "I cut your head off."

"Eh," I shrugged. "I got over it."

[Liliet](#)

YES

[sivarajan](#)

Necromancer? But I hardly know 'er!

[Adrian_V](#)

I have to get this right way: i just read the quote and i am all like "Oh boy, this can't be good..."

And lol that last bit is right out of praesi culture xD. I can't already see everyone but the praesi clamoring "what the fuck?" while the praesi look at them like uncultured hick for never hearing of undead standing trial lol

Also who was Farrier?

Frivolous

Commander of the Gallowborne. I think Summer incinerated him, poor fellow.

Konstantin von Karstein

John Farrier, the tribune commanding the Gallowborne.

Frivolous

I think the best and most shrewd part of this necromantic and legal plot by Catherine and Cordelia is that it denies the Intercessor the opportunity to more easily make allies out of those heroes and villains who disagree with the Truce and Terms.

I mean, it was smart for Catherine to insist on the terms of Red Axe's T+T trial to be put under seal, but I don't think it will

have much practical effect, because the trial won't be a secret to the Intercessor, and she can travel anywhere and talk to any hero or villain antagonistic to the T+T. She can spill the details to them, which means the seal won't do any good. Not alone, that is.

On the other hand, if the Red Axe is tried in public (and it probably will be public) by the Highest Assembly, the HA can broadcast far and wide that they executed the Red Axe for trying to murder Prince Frederic, but they don't have to broadcast that she was an undead abomination at the time, if they even find out. And I doubt Cat and Cordy will bother to tell them.

Which means that if the Intercessor tries to use the Red Axe's story as a persuasive argument against the T+T, she'll have to fight against the common knowledge that the RA was executed by the HA for attempted regicide, not by Hanno for violating the T+T.

And best of all, Hanno himself agreed that he wouldn't talk about the T+T trial, which means he is honor-bound to not blab about the RA being an undead abomination, which means he can't refute the HA's own story.

Sure, he'll be furious at Cat and Cordy for twisting and trapping him this way, but they won't care.

[Liliet](#)

What I'm worried about is whether it'll undermine Catherine's own efforts to keep the T&T's legitimacy. If the intent is for everyone to think the Red Axe was in fact surrendered to the HA instead of the T&T trial, while the point of not doing so is so everyone would not balk at the idea, Catherine might have just outsmarted herself.

Frivolous

It's only the villains and the heroes who would care that the Red Axe was given over to the Highest Assembly in violation of the Truce and Terms. No one else will, I think.

Catherine can privately explain to the villains, and Hanno and the rest of the heroes will probably figure out eventually, that RA was an undead abomination when the HA tried and executed her.

The villains will congratulate Catherine on her ingenuity. If Cat threatens them enough, they won't talk.

The heroes will be incensed, and they may talk, but Hanno can keep them in line if he wants to. It will help that RA tried to kill Frederic. and anyway, Catherine already has a

reputation as a necromancer and she herself has been an undead abomination, so it won't be news to them that she did it yet again.

The real problem will be Frederic, who is both hero and prince. I have no idea how he will react to this plot twist. He should probably be the angriest of them all. On the other hand, he's had sex with Cat and sex is known to make males lose their perspective.

It will be quite odd for Fred to look at Cat later and see the woman whom he had sex with, who also raised his would-be killer the Red Axe as an undead, but who also saved the Truce and Terms and kept the Principate from imploding.

Will he admire Cat for her ingenuity and political adroitness? Will he loathe her for her twisting and mutilating the rules so that the RA could be tried twice? Will he be gratified that she kept the Highest Assembly from losing faith in his idol Cordelia? Or will all that be ignored because Fred likes Cat personally and because he has been her lover?

All I know is it could be really really awkward for Freddy.

[Liliet](#)

I think Frederic of all people will understand. He's been kind of in the middle for all this – subordinate to Hanno and present for the disastrous meeting of heroes, Cordelia's eyes and ears among Named, her deputy to Catherine, and the person who decided that his personal principles override practical concerns on this one because surely they can figure something out without making him break his own preferences in half.

They did. And he's partially responsible, just for that.

The problem is, which details are going to be kept secret from whom? Catherine appears to want the very existence of the T&T trial kept secret, which is fucking wild. Or does she just want the fact that Hanno's sentence was "death" and the rest was improvisation by her and Cordelia kept secret? With Hanno not allowed to clarify otherwise? Because that's its own brand of nastiness, towards Hanno. Does she want it secret from the Highest Assembly, but will bring in Named on the logic of a need to know basis? Thaaat's not going to hold for long, is it?

Just... what.

[Javvies](#)

I believe that Cat it's interested in keeping the details about why and how Red Axe was working with Bard – specifically/especially working with Bard in order to overthrow the Truce and Terms – a secret.

The sentence cannot be kept secret. For one thing, Hanno already told the Heroes that he was expecting that he would be executing Red Axe.

For another, the villains/non-Heroic Named need to know that Red Axe got executed for violating the Truce and Terms.

I think the theory Cat is running with is that they're going to let people know that they executed Red Axe, but they're going to leave out the details about Red Axe's actions voluntarily being part of Bard's efforts to bring down the Truce and Terms, as opposed to a Bard plot to attack the Arsenal and destroy the weapons the Arsenal is developing to fight the Dead King.

That is ... they're leaving out the details about Bard's plots as being primarily an attack the Truce and Terms, and everything else being just a sideshow to Bard, and letting the official/public interpretation be that Bard was primarily attacking the Arsenal, and any threats to the Truce and Terms were secondary effects.

[Liliet](#)

That's what Catherine said.

When looking at the Red Axe's reaction, she also good as admitted that it was a trick that Red Axe might or might not have seen through, and that there was another purpose to keeping the proceedings secret beyond what she specified it would be for.

Shveiran

Personally, I think that IN ADDITION to what she said she wanted the seal for, she wanted the REASONS the Red Axe was executed to be put under seal.

Not to keep them secret, but **to keep them from being official**. Ora at least, publically official in a way that can be brought up in a political play.

My reasoning is, if the trial is under seal, the Highest Assembly cannot know for sure that the REASON the Red Axe died is not because the Highest Assembly herself judged her guilty. It is a fig leaf, of course, just like I doubt Cat's necromancy will be so good as to fool anyone that the Red Axe is actually still alive (that kind of necromancy was never her forte and the only undead we saw who weren't obviously undead are the

DK's infiltrators).
It's a fig leaf.

But hey, fig leaves can matter.
They allowed us to display statues and paintings of naked people in churches for centuries because the artists could point at them and say "Nuhu, he's not naked, are you mad? There is a leaf. I never drew the naughty bits, that would be vulgar, THIS is art."

It can be a way for Cordelia to prevent a precedent being set, which was what she was actually afraid. It muddles the water.

That can be enough to spare the First Prince a loss if she can milk it properly. And if Cordelia can't, who could?

[Liliet](#)

Hum, makes sense.

That would be nice.

Frivolous

If Cat wants to make Red Axe look like she is alive, she doesn't have to rely on her own necromancy. She can just get Ivah to glamour the Red Axe into looking like she's alive and breathing.

Does that make sense?

Shveiran

She could, admittedly. Yet I still fail to see why she would want that. That secret is coming out, and what Cordelia needs is a way to save face and avoid a precedent. A technicality works better than a lie, cause a lie can be revealed at a later date.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah ... pretending Red Axe is still alive is of dubious value.

She needs to be known to have been executed when it comes to Named.

As for the public ... she violated the Truce and Terms, and tried to kill a Proceran Prince and fellow Hero ... then got tried and executed for her crimes. Unless the Procerans try to drag out their trial overlong, it'll simply be a matter of fudging and/or blurring the dates and timeline of events for public consumption.

Cordelia isn't worried about the public with respect to Red Axe's actions ... she's worried about Proceran nobles. Red Axe being undead for her trial means that they'll see that the Heroes are willing to kill their own to keep them in line – which itself is an important thing – but also that Cordelia has the connections to get Red Axe in front of them for her attempt to kill Frederic even after her execution.

Shveiran

Yeah. It's not the victory she wanted, but it's not a defeat.

edrey

For once i think this all part of the bard plan, at least cat should read her memories about the bard. If the WK found out its going to be a mess

[Liliet](#)

I don't think there's a way WK might nOT find out

hakureireimu

I don't even think that keeping it a secret long term (after the 2nd trial) is the plan, since Cat knows that Villains can't keep secrets.

nick012000

Hopefully the Dead King won't be able to usurp control over the Red Axe's undead form and turn her into a Revenant puppet. The Red Dullahan?

dadycool

Ooh, putting an undead corpse on trial? This might actually be a good precedent to be made, given DK. I can't remember if Praes has ever put a corpse to trial, but it's only a couple steps between this and putting one of Cat's goats on trial, like the Tapiers.

[Javvies](#)

Dread Emperor Revenant? I think it was.

The one who was already Dread Emperor, died, and returned as undead to resume being Dread Emperor.
Also, the reason why undead aren't allowed to become Dread Emperor/Empress anymore.

[Liliet](#)

He spoiled the stew for all others to come)=

(There were more undead Dreads than just him, at the very least IIRC Sanguinia)

[TeK](#)

Yeah, some people just can't become walking undead abominations without screwing up things for the rest of us.

TimeLock

Since this was the third trial, I fully expect this to blow up in their faces.

[benthelynx](#)

It has. They just don't know it yet.

[onedollargum](#)

An ugly affair.

[Liliet](#)

Holy shit lmao.

It does make sense though. The one way to get someone out of the jurisdiction of the Terms after they swore to them... death.

Hanno is not going to love this, but, well. He got all the forewarning there was to be had.

Jack Reader

I think Cat's play here might be to get Cordelia to seal the records of the trial on HER end, and with the records double-sealed, all the information that will be publically available was that Red Axe stood trial and was executed.

Sure, Hanno will learn of it, and Mirror Knight also might through his Principate connections, but as far as the Heroes and Villains and procerans at large are concerned, Cat and Cordy will be able to fudge the sequence of events until it fits the necessary narrative and and call it a day.

Of course, this is basically handing ammunition for Malicia/The Wandering Bard/a progressively more desperate Malicia that cut a deal with the Bard to screw them over at a later date, but borrowed trouble is better thsn present trouble.

[Liliet](#)

Huh, yeah. If they just keep everything secret from anyone and answer all requests from people who weren't present for a part of it with "well she's dead", and all requests from people who WERE part of it with the same, that might actually fly.

Soronel Haetir

Death is usually said to settle accounts owed by the perpetrator. I do see raising the Red Axe as a mistake.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, it settled her accounts under the Terms. As a walking cadaver, she is no longer a Named, so she isn't under the protection of the Terms. So she is just a Proceran citizen accused of attempted regicide.

[sivarajan](#)

Didn't we just see undead Named? The question is whether she's the same person. If she is, she'd still be protected by the Terms, having just served her sentence.

[Liliet](#)

That depends on whether death officially releases you from oaths and negates your citizenship and all other shit.

A ruling can go either way, and Hanno's agreement to surrender her body... well, implies.

Adrian Eric Gorgey

Holy shit Catherine. Trying a dead woman? That's fucking brutal.

masterofbones

Ah, the classic weirdness of the death penalty in a world with resurrection magic. Do executed people get a second chance? Do they get re-executed? Weird questions for a weird situation.

[Liliet](#)

Necromancy, not resurrection. Cat's not undoing the White Knight's sentence. The Highest Assembly can sentence her to a lifetime of servitude to Frederic as an alternative to execution* and Cat will be like "haha, yeah, about that" and put her right back into the grave as the "lifetime" is already over.

*Hypothetically. I am well aware of the 100000 reasons why they would not do that lmao

[Liliet](#)

Okay, um, so.

If this goes public (to Named) the way it happened – the White Knight sentenced and executed Red Axe under the Terms, then surrendered the body as it was no longer under their protection – and *then* as a consequence of said execution and subsequent lack of protection she stood trial necromancy'd before the Highest Assembly – that'll work.

If, however, the public impression ends up being that Hanno and Cat gave Red Axe over to Procer...

Catherine might have just picked out of the two evils, BOTH.

Shveiran

I see where your concerns come from, but I personally doubt the Red Axe will rise as anything but a clearly undead individual. We saw only one instance of undeads that could pass for living, and they had to inhabit the body of living beings to do that anyway. Not to mention, it was the work of a much more experienced necromancer.

The Red Axe will walk to the trial as an undead abomination. And anyone looking at her will be able to tell.

That's my prediction, at least.

[Liliet](#)

Perhaps 😊

[TeK](#)

Yeah, about what I had expected. I argued to do as much. But wouldn't it still lower the Principate's influence or something, since they were second to pass the judgement? I do believe similar argument was made already.

Also, I wan to point out that practicality and principles are not polar opposites. I mean it is obvious deontology vs consequentialism, but I personally believe in neither. We all hold some values and principles as subjectively superior, and then act in accordance with said set of values. It's both, if anything. We all hold principles on a basis of nothing more than sheer faith, and we all act practically in enforcing those, if not always smartly. That Cat holds a supreme principle peace, while Cordelia holds duty is no reason to dismiss those as dissimilar to Hanno's justice. Or Red Axe to be fair.

The fact that she is willing to potentially throw millions under the horse for the sake of principles, does not mean she is more principled than Cat, she just has different out, and,

accordingly, act different. Well, at least I think that is the case.

Salt

I don't disagree so much as finding this as not entirely accurate/complete if we're going into the formal moral debate. The ethics of "Principled" good in this serial is a mix of deontology and virtue ethics, leaning more toward deontology, but two are decidedly not the same thing. Put very simply, virtue ethics defines morality as adherence to virtues and focuses on personal traits – your character. Deontology defines morality as adherence to normative moral laws and focuses on actions – how well you follow those moral laws. Utilitarianism defines morality as almost entirely based on the outcome – claiming that all goodness can be quantified into utility.

Meaning that Catherine is in many ways virtuous, and if you squint a little she could be considered utilitarian. Her standing in terms of "Principled", in the deontological sense, is pretty shaky. She breaks far too many normative moral laws, both her own as well as that of greater society, to actually be considered adhering to principle in an action-focused view.

Which is largely where the disconnect is coming from – because generally deontological principles work better for the individual and utilitarian ones work better for many people. She started out as the Squire not having much issue on the deontological end as she could keep a fair majority of her actions as both high in utility AND deontologically principled as she was only beholden to herself and her few close relationships. The "needs of the queen" end up causing her to have to choose between the two – which ends up being the obviously more fitting option of utilitarianism for the role of a Ruler.

She's upset about becoming less principled and more evil because, in terms of at least the deontological framework and (to a lesser degree) the virtuous framework, she actually IS becoming less principled and less evil. Not less practical, mind you, or less well intentioned, but good intentions and practicality are two pieces of a puzzle that has many many many pieces, if you're only looking at ethics.

Salt

Typo, and more* evil, not less evil

[TeK](#)

Yeah, basically her dilemma is "good actions do not always produce good results" and "bad actions sometimes produce better results", and so now she actually has to pick and

choose, which one she values more, actions, or consequences. She can't combine the two anymore.

Although she actually can. You don't really have to pick one side. You can choose a set of rules as pretty moral, and the set of outcomes as pretty moral, and then rank them in the list of personal importance as she feels it. For example, killing is bad, unless it's a killing of a rapist, unless it endangers lives of millions. See? Pretty simple, ain't it.

I would argue with you whether the term "less principled" is really applicable to the choice here. I mean, I would concede evil, at least from the point of common morality, but I don't think Catherine becomes less principled. I personally think she becomes more principled, because she explores her own moral system in depth on the testfield of actual moral dilemmas. As in, she understands her own principles even more, so she can act even more in accordance to those principles, which in turn, makes her more principled.

I would consider a "less principled" person the one who doesn't know what he wants, and so values one thing above another in one moment, and the same thing beneath the same other thing the next. Who doesn't really know why he makes the choices he makes, and what choices he will make in the future. Who is as much in the dark about what he will do, as an independent observer.

Salt

Mostly agreed, although that use of "principle" is dangerous.

If we are purely considering it principle as in having any principles at all – having some fundamental basis that determines behavior – then in that sense every Named who ever lived is extremely principled, and most of the common folk besides.

In the context of a moral discussion, principle becomes a fundamental basis for *ethical* behavior, at which point Catherine is not ethically principled, favoring practicality instead.

It is not so "killing is bad, unless it's a killing of a rapist, unless it endangers lives of millions.". There is no such thing as "unless", for the ethically principled.

For ethical principle, it's three separate things: "killing is bad". "rapists are bad". "endangering the lives of millions is bad".

Some people decide to attempt follow as many of those rules as possible despite practicality, this makes them principled but not sufficient for necessity's calling. Some people decide to forsake some of those rules in the name of practicality, because "if not us, then who", which makes them in many ways ethically unprincipled, but necessary.

[Tek](#)

Yeah, I guess we are near the area of playing definition game. For me, yes, principle is just a proposition of value that guides behaviour, so most people have it. i'd argue, everyone has it, really. What I consider to be a principled action, is, well, an action according to ones own principles, which necessitates really only one thing: a self-awareness of what your principles entail. As well as an ability to distinguish what your principles are, and what is momentary whim or outside influence. And, obviously, to fight those whims and outsiders off.

I guess I am a tad biased, because I don't see being ethical as following a *specific set of rules commonly accepted in western society*, but rather, following any set of rules at all. The word "unless" can be used in regards to principles if there is a hierarchy of those, or in other words, if some upholding some principles is more valuable than upholding others.

In the end, I mainly argue that principles and practicality are not mutually exclusive, nor could they really be. You don't just decide what action is practical from nothing, you decide it based on the outcomes you consider desirable, and you decide which outcomes are desirable based on the moral values you hold. Following that logic, truly practical action necessitates principles by it's very nature.

Salt

Honestly the only part I have issue with is the very strong assertion of pure relativism

In my views, that's not a big issue. Catherine's own set of "ideal" ethics and common ones found in society are pretty similar, in scope if not in actual order of precedence.

The very fact that she does feel so distraught about often being forced to do things that both she AND society thinks is wrong, pretty much answers the question of whether she can be considered deontologically moral.

If she becomes character whose innate morals were starting to deviate from that of society/her own at the beginning of the series, rather than one who is very upset even as she is forced to violate them, I'd outright say she's already fallen down the slippery slope.

[TeK](#)

Honestly, I am a supporter of a pure relativism, if it's a thing. I think that we have largely similar rules of behaviour because we are largely similar and because we live in largely similar environment, not out of some, I don't even know, mandated by heavens morality?

I agree with the rest, but for different reasons, I feel. For me, she feels distraught not because of the actions she took, but because life handed her a really crappy choice of what she could do. So naturally, she felt crappy, as you would if you had accidentally stepped with a sneaker into what you can only assume was a dog poo, thought it was just a dirt and tried to scrape it with your hands only to get your hands in it, while getting progressively LOST IN THE MIDDLE OF FUCKING SUBURBS, AND YOU ARE LATE TO THE JOB INTERVIEW AND YOUR PHONE LOST ALL CHARGE AND THE SUN IS SLOWLY MELTING YOUR BRAIN AND WHY THE FU~

Sorry, got off tangent again. The point is, she felt crappy because she was handed a crappy choice, that left her no choice that would've fit in what she considers acceptable action.

And well, I am not sure again what I argue for. I'm gonna lie down. Sorry.

Juff

Typo Thread:

realm where simultaneously > realm were simultaneously
deathly downwards > deadly downwards
They make from > They are made from
home," I > home." I
into way to > into ways to
try, even > try – even
such a thing, > such a thing –
in in > is in
Enchanted > Enchanter
what my ally > what might allay
respond, "In > respond, "in
to be parade > to be paraded

issues Mercantis > issues with Mercantis
I glance at > I glanced at
blood end > bloody end
a murder and > a murderer and
“ That I (extra space)
an eulogy > a eulogy
has issued with > has issues with
then decided it > then decide it
an herbal (for UK, it should be “a herbal”, because we pronounce
the ‘h’)

Salt

I don't disagree so much as finding this as not entirely accurate/complete if we're going into the formal moral debate. The ethics of “Principled” good in this serial is a mix of deontology and virtue ethics, leaning more toward deontology, but two are decidedly not the same thing. Put very simply, virtue ethics defines morality as adherence to virtues and focuses on personal traits – your character. Deontology defines morality as adherence to normative moral laws and focuses on actions – how well you follow those moral laws. Utilitarianism defines morality as almost entirely based on the outcome – claiming that all goodness can be quantified into utility.

Meaning that Catherine is in many ways virtuous, and if you squint a little she could be considered utilitarian. Her standing in terms of “Principled”, in the deontological sense, is pretty shaky. She breaks far too many normative moral laws, both her own as well as that of greater society, to actually be considered adhering to principle in an action-focused view.

Which is largely where the disconnect is coming from – because generally deontological principles work better for the individual and utilitarian ones work better for many people. She started out as the Squire not having much issue on the deontological end as she could keep a fair majority of her actions as both high in utility AND deontologically principled as she was only beholden to herself and her few close relationships. The “needs of the queen” end up causing her to have to choose between the two – which ends up being the obviously more fitting option of utilitarianism for the role of a Ruler.

She's upset about becoming less principled and more evil because, in terms of at least the deontological framework and (to a lesser degree) the virtuous framework, she actually IS becoming less principled and less evil. Not less practical, mind you, or less well intentioned, but good intentions and practicality are two pieces of a puzzle that has many many many pieces, if you're only looking at ethics.

Salt

Disregard this, meant it as a reply to another post... I wish I could delete posts when I fuck them up and post them in the wrong place.

[TeK](#)

Or at least edit them when you maek typos.

[vernal.ancient](#)

... I can't tell whether the "maek" was accidental or on purpose, but it illustrates the point beautifully

Aotrs Commander

HA! Once again Necormancy Solves The Problem. I keep telling everyone how useful a tool necromancy is, but no-one (save maybe Cat) ever listens...

[vernal.ancient](#)

It is a pretty useful skill, though it's no Animal Husbandry...

[Sugar Roll](#)

I can see named pushing for an ammendment to the terms after this. Cremation soon after death sounds reasonable to prevent anything similar from happening again in the future.

Frivolous

I don't think I agree. It's too useful to preserving the Truce and Terms for cremation to be allowed, unless Hanno gets really upset and demands that it be forbidden.

I do wonder how many times a body can be raised as a zombie. It's known that magic or an aspect can repair things that should not be repaired, so technically a zombie ripped to pieces can probably be put back again. But can it be reanimated again? I'm not as sure.

I mention this because it might come to pass that a Named might violate the T+T and the laws of more than just one nation. It might therefore become politically expedient to be able to execute someone 3 or more times.

[Liliet](#)

The important legal sticking point here is whether or not death means one's ties with the T&T are cut. Or is it not just death but a death sentence specifically? A death sentence carried out? Being raised as a necromantic construct? Being raised as a necromantic construct after a death sentence is carried out? Being raised as a necromantic

construct after a death sentence is carried out only if the representative for your side agreed to surrender the body?
There are so many fun distinctions possible here!

IncognitoMe

I'll just leave this here:

Interlude: Kaleidoscope

"Spoken like a man I'll have raised from the dead just to execute a second time."

Dread Emperor Malignant III

IDKWhoitis

Something about a necromatic construct in the presence of the Highest Assembly strikes me as a stupid idea. I'm not saying the Dead King is guaranteed to usurp the reins on the Red Axe, but there are many storylines that can exist, and not many that don't result in the Red Axe becoming a problem down the road.

A trial en abstinencia or bringing the corpse as is might have been more clever.

Bakkasama

The real question here though is whether we get a sidestory about the MK escaping from the GP's purview in order to stop the Red Axe from being unjustly executed by Procer, only to find out she is undead and assume that it was murder instead of execution.

[Liliet](#)

I think MK is one person we're done with for the moment in this storyline.

Still waiting for the answer on who's Constance.

Daniel E

Given that Red Axe had an extensive conversation with Wandering Bard, I wonder if this outcome was foreseen. An undead Heroine who hates everything about Truce & Terms might be end up being a lot more trouble than expected.

[Liliet](#)

This seems a bit... too specific?

Daniel E

Possibly, but given that she had an extensive chat with Wandering Bard, I wouldn't discount the possibility of further mayhem by Ms. Axe.

[Liliet](#)

Oh I am high key not discarding that 😊

Daniel E

Gods below I hate the lack of editing here. I meant to say, given that Bard anticipated her own demise, warning Red Axe of her fate doesn't seem far-fetched.

[Liliet](#)

Red Axe knew she would be dying from the very start of the scheme.

It's the "raised as undead to stand trial twice" that's a bit too specific.

Captain Amazing

So the logic here is that she stopped being a hero when she became undead and the custody of the body was legally transferred? I want to see her come into a villain Name and then apply to the Terms again as undead. Her grey moral motivations cast as Evil instead of Good. How do they argue against it? If the Terms for whatever reason stopped applying to her then surely nothing would stop her from joining again once they do. It screws everyone over so hard and I love it.

Shveiran

Considering who the Grand Alliance is fighting, I seriously doubt there isn't a clause that prevents undead from applying.

Shveiran

Or at least require approval.

superkeaton

Necromancy is a most valuable tool. Cut your cake, and eat it too.

Abrakadabra

Okay, I did not expect that!

Skidaddle Skidoodle

Lets see, she gets to somehow resurrect completely and throw a wrench into the proceedings. Bard has something to do with it and spirits her away. Bard is very smug about the whole deal and Cat is frustrated as always. We later learn that it was all a ruse within a ruse and Masego or Roland (or Masego) or Masego put a very faint untraceable tracking spell on the corpse which they use to beat the bard once and for all at the end.

trashdragon

Fuckin' hell, pathetic is right.

Like, there's no audience or jury here that can be swayed by her words. The only purpose the gag serves is to preserve the precious decorum ad the fee-fees of these powerful people who seem to have little to no interest in actually confronting the stark reality of what they believe to be necessary. Which to me makes Cat and Cordelia making mouth noises about feeling bad about it feel hollow, and make the Red Axe's criticism of their little system feel like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If they're going to do awful things for what they're convinced think is the right reasons the least they can do is suck it up and allow their victims a voice, and get in nose deep into what exactly it is they're doing. For all that I don't care for Black or his smug bullshit he was never this much of a moral coward.

Konstantin von Karstein

She said herself she didn't intend to hold to the T&T even 1 second, and knowingly put millions of people in danger. She doesn't get to criticise those who want to stop her.

matesbe

"Confronting the stark reality that" Red Axe is an oathbreaker and murderer who put the lives of half the continent potentially in jeopardy?

No one at the trial doubts that they're doing the right thing. Some may sympathize with the Red Axe; in fact, I imagine many do; but they all feel like executing the Red Axe is the right move to make, morally and practically.

[*benthelynx*](#)

Well this isn't going to end with either the red axe escaping or the dead king interfering in the second trial...

ohJohN

This seems like a weird, overly complicated solution to the problem?

Like, Hanno's only objection to the "try twice, execute once" approach was that it precluded a fair trial:

> "I will not promise a sentence or an executioner before a trial has been held," the White Knight said. "This is not a compromise, it is a perversion of the oaths we all swore. It does not matter what the Red Axe has done: she has rights under the Terms, and among these is a fair trial."

And Cat is able to successfully work around that objection

**during the same conversation*:*

> "Procer could be allowed to dispose of the body as it wishes, at least," I said, and sighed when Hanno began to respond, "In the eventuality that there is a body, yes, not to make assurances either way. But if there is a corpse, White Knight, can it not at least be ceded to the Highest Assembly?"

Why not apply that exact same logic to the original plan? Agree to give her a fair trial under the Terms, and if she happens to be sentenced to execution (as literally all of them expect), agree to assign Freddy as the executioner and set the execution date a month later, giving Procer time to hold its show trial.

Even if Hanno's concerns were explicitly about making **any** decisions before a fair trial could be held (which they weren't, since he agreed about what to do with the corpse, should there be one), they could have made those decisions after the trial. Seriously, if the three of them had met directly after the trial instead of before, none of the arguments he made would still apply – nothing would have been decided before the trial or influenced its outcome, and their obligation to her under the Terms would already be fulfilled. I guess they'd have to formally revise the specifics of the sentence ("tomorrow morning, by me" to "in a month, by Freddy") but that seems less like a miscarriage of justice than acceptable judicial discretion – death is the important part of the sentence, determining when and by whom should allow for practical considerations, to a degree.

It just seems like an easy compromise to make, or at least worth discussing further, and it's weird that none of them bothers – especially since Cat jumps straight to the necromantic solution! Why take that risk before exhausting your other options??

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, Hanno was responding to a request to have the Proceran trial *first*, and now the Proceran trial will be *after* the Terms trial.

Satan

Christophe is gonna be pissed when he finds out the proceedings of the trial are being withheld. Not to mention the whole resurrection business.

Chapter 40: Campaign

"A war is not always won with daring, but it is always lost without."

– Florianne Goethal, Princess of Brus

When the First Prince left the Arsenal, it would be with a talking corpse in a locked box.

The work on my end was done, and it'd been exhausting enough that I slept fitfully for a few hours after returning to my rooms. Archer kept watch, and intercepted messages and reports before they could reach me. I woke up halfway to Afternoon Bell with a stiff leg, the undead Red Axe remaining as a little bundle of senses in the back of my mind I could look into if I so wished. I could snuff her out again with a snap of my fingers if I so wished, a precaution I'd judged necessary given who the heroine had made deals with when she still breathed. Let Procer have its trial, and Cordelia settle her princes. I'd made it clear it was the last favour I'd be doing her for some time, and that now it was her time to deliver.

Among the messages Indrani passed me was one from her, which turned out to be a good start on that. She'd officially ratified a treaty making the ealamal a weapon under the Grand Alliance, if not a weapon *of* the Grand Alliance. Yannu Marave and I were being invited to post up to three hundred soldiers each to stand guard over the weapon, with Procer itself promising to limit its own garrison at five hundred. Twenty slots for 'scholarly observers' were offered for each us, with access to the doomsday weapon, though if Named were to be part of that twenty it would require unanimous approval by a vote of the signatory members of the Grand Alliance.

All this we'd agreed over the Lord of Alava's strong wine, but the added list penned by Cordelia's own hand of all Named she was willing to grant access was an unexpected boon. As I'd expected Hierophant wasn't on it, but both Roland and the Forsworn Healer were. Only a few villains were among them: the Harrowed Witch, the Forgetful Librarian, the Royal Conjuror and the Hunted Magician. Three out of four were Proceran, but honestly of my lot they were the most decent folk that'd be able to get something out of looking at the corpse. The Affable Burglar was the only Named she went out of her way to specify would be allowed under no circumstance, which honestly was fair.

Aurore was delightful, but she had the worst of Vivienne's old habits paired with a moral compass to make a priest weep.

I penned a quick diplomatic thank you note for the First Prince, then a longer message for Lord Yannu mentioning I was still willing to back up his nomination of the Healer if he was willing to do the same with mine of the Rogue Sorcerer. I was willing to get it all going this very evening, if he was. Most of the other messages were minor, the only one of decent importance a formal confirmation that the war council would begin tomorrow through the Mirage. I'd already agreed to that, though, so it wasn't a surprise. What was, however, was the official report I got from the Arsenal research council that a functional, usable Unraveller pattern had finally been made.

Mind you the estimated costs for one were still higher than I'd like – about the same as a good horse – but it'd be worth the coin if they worked as advertised. I'd spend a good horse's worth of gold on an artefact capable of destroying a beorn or even a turtle-ship with a single touch without hesitation, considering how necromantic constructs tended to be the Dead King's means of shattering shield walls. Hells, with a decent supply of those the Lycaonese would be able to hold Twilight's Pass until the Last Dusk – they were a damned stubborn folk, and their fortresses would hard to invest without Keter's monstrous siege engines.

"We've got Unravellers," I told Indrani, grinning. "We still need proper field testing, but they seem to hold up. The Blind Maker had a breakthrough while we were busy politicking – apparently wood soaked in Arcadian water works just as well as that murderously expensive stuff we were bringing in from the Waning Woods."

It was easy to forget that, for all the intrigue permeating it at the moment, the Arsenal remained first and foremost a research facility. That'd not stopped just because nobility had swarmed all over it.

"I want a full quiver," Archer replied without missing a beat.

I snorted.

"Sure, if it comes out of your pay," I said. "Even for your beast of a bow the size of the thing will be a little hard, though."

I passed her the report, which included dimensions, and she looked disgruntled. Yeah, that was more a lance than a javelin. She might be able to throw them – scratch that, she'd definitely be able to throw them – but unless she had a bow made specifically for firing Unravellers she'd not be able to use them as arrows.

"Alexis's silver bow will be able to handle them," she reluctantly admitted. "It's a Gigantes artefact, it can change its shape some."

Huh, good to know. Just for that the Silver Huntress had earned a guaranteed place among the Named that'd be joining the offensive into Hainaut. Assuming said offensive was agreed on by the Grand Alliance, though I expected it would be. That bridge the Dead King was building didn't leave us much of a choice. I had a few questions for Indrani – including whether or not she could spare the Harrowed Witch, now that her old band had been gutted – but we were interrupted by a messenger. The White Knight was requesting, firmly but politely, a moment of my time. I didn't allow myself to sigh until I'd sent back an affirmative that Hanno could call on me.

"Want me to stay?" Indrani offered. "If you want a loomer, I can loom."

"I won't be needing a loomer, no," I amusedly replied.

"I've been practicing this thing with the knives, too" Archer told me, "Where I'm carving away all casual at a piece of wood, but then I change the angle and it makes this *sinister* scraping sound-"

"You're not going to intimidate the White Knight with sinister wood scraping, 'Drani," I told her, lips twitching.

"You can't know until we try," she insisted, then peered at me piercingly. "Good to have that chat alone, then? Shiny Boots is bound to be a little miffed over your latest bout of corpse-snatching."

"He'll have to get over it," I said. "I broke no laws."

"Because that argument always works with heroes," Archer drily said. "I guess you haven't had a polite and oddly preachy argument in too long, something's got to be done to scratch your itch."

"Out with you," I grinned.

"But what about what's *right*, Catherine?" Indrani said in a deep voice, looking at me stoically. "Have you thought about the children, or how this will make angels sad?"

I bit down on my laughter, since otherwise it'd just encourage her.

"Away, witch," I said. "Go chuck terrible sculptures at Masego."

"Heard that might get illegal soon," she replied, cocking an eyebrow at me.

I let out a startled laugh. I'd forgotten my teasing promise to Zeze from when we'd been mopping up the last enemies in the Arsenal, but I shouldn't have expected him to – or to have failed to inform Indrani of it.

"I'll make you royal art thrower," I promised. "Court title with a legal exemption and everything."

"Make sure it sticks under Vivienne too," Indrani requested, "I'm fairly sure the wench likes him better than me."

I managed to keep a serious face at that, which was quite the achievement, and ushered her out before the White Knight could arrive. I was a lot more dishevelled than I would have allowed myself to be in front of Lord Yannu or the First Prince, but unlike them Hanno had seen me on campaign. Staying in a tunic and comfortable boots wouldn't be taken as an insult by him. I poured myself water waiting for him, and before long an attendant was knocking at my door. I dismissed the young woman in question at the door and welcomed him in myself, gesturing for the salon in front of my room. The White Knight was dressed just as fancily as me, his tunic grey to my green, and if anything his boots were more worn than mine.

I found Hanno's face hard to read as he entered and sat, though his continued silence save for simple courtesies did not bode well. He sat and declined the water I offered, expression calm. I lowered myself on the seat on the opposite side of the table, raising an eyebrow to invite him to begin.

"You made the body of a heroine into an undead prop," the White Knight said.

Calm, but it wasn't a friendly kind of calm.

"Legally speaking, Procer did that," I noted. "It employed my services in doing it, true, but I acted on its behalf."

"I expected better of you," he said.

"Oh, fuck off," I flatly replied. "I wouldn't have had to step in if you'd compromised with Hasenbach yourself. The way I asked you to."

"What she asked for-"

"Was hard to swallow," I interrupted, "but she asked it for a reason. Refusing her is fine, Hanno, but if you do then something has to be done to address those reasons. You can't just call it politics and say it's out of your wheelhouse, not when your heroes are half the reason we're in this mess to start with."

"There was no call to compromise, Catherine," the White Knight said. "If the Principate is proving incapable of fulfilling basic treaty obligations it agreed to, it should not be further indulged with concessions. You are acting in a manner that will secure signatures for your Accords but destroy any trust there might be in them."

"I'm acting in a manner that keeps Principate conscripts, food and coin flowing," I said, voice grown cold. "You know, those things we need if we want to have any chance at all of beating Keter. What was done breaks no laws and did not interfere with the sentence you passed under the Terms. You have no grounds on which to complain."

"You could have told me of your intentions," Hanno said. "You chose, instead, to scheme."

His eyes narrowed.

"I am not blind," he said. "You pushed to have the details of the trial placed under seal so that word of the trial in the Highest Assembly will spread among the people of Procer long before the one in the Arsenal does."

"Named will be able to ask about the sentence passed on the Red Axe, as is their right under the Terms," I replied. "They will be told, if they do, that you personally executed her."

It'd come out eventually that Procer had tried a walking corpse, that much was certain – there were too many Named for loose lips not to eventually spill the truth, and the Arsenal itself was not airtight – but by then it wouldn't matter. Hasenbach would have had town criers all over Procer spreading her story first, an apparatus that no Named could hope to match in speed and scope. The people of Procer would treat it as rumours, not the true story, while Named would have the White Knight's own word of having killed the Red Axe to count on. Hanno's own reputation was being used to anchor this, which I suspected was part of the reason he was angry.

"You build your tower on a foundation of lies and confusion," the White Knight said. "It can only crumble."

"If this was about ten people, or even a hundred, you'd be right," I said. "When it comes to a few hundred thousand, though, to *millions*, then all those stories in the back of your head stop mattering. The scope is just too large for a pattern like 'the secret coming out' to make a dent. Even if rumours linger, more rumours can be seeded to dislodge them."

"More lies," Hanno said. "Making a game of treaties can only lessens them, Catherine."

His expression tightened.

"There was a moment, in that room where we had come to speak with the First Prince, where you decided I had become an obstacle," the White Knight said. "Already you had it planned, suggesting that Procer to get custody of the corpse."

"I'm not one of yours, Hanno," I mildly said. "You got in your own way and it needed to be done, so I did it. If you want pretty ends, get them yourself. Below deals in much, but rarely that."

"This has cost you trust, Black Queen," he said. "From heroes, and from me. You made the choice to go behind my back instead of working together."

And that was true, I wouldn't deny it. But this pretence that I was just a scorpion stinging out of habit was infuriating me, because I wouldn't have had to do anything of this if he'd godsdamned handled it himself.

"This has cost you respect, White Knight," I replied, voice gone hard as steel. "Because the longer you speak, the more I can't help but notice that for all your whining you haven't given a single *alternative*."

The conversation ended there, which was for the best.

—

Sometimes I thought about how much gold had been sunk into building the 'Mirage' and winced, but I had to admit that at least it *looked* impressive.

It wasn't that the room itself was large, or all that richly decorated: it was a circle with a radius of maybe a hundred feet, and the place was *aggressively* bare of ornaments. Nothing had been brought into here that might interfere with the enchantments, and even we had been warned to keep our clothing simple. No jewelry, and no weapons were allowed in – and for me in specific, neither my yew staff nor the Mantle of Woe. At the centre stood a great table of stone, carved with small runes that could be touched to silently signal you were requesting the right to speak, and around said table twenty seats of stone had been assembled. Those seats were within boxes of clear glass, which would serve as the medium for the magic, but in truth the entire room was an intricate ritual array hid under the floor tiles.

With all the glass and the strange table, surrounded by smooth walls of polished stone, the Mirage made for an unusual sight. I claimed my seat with a limp, letting a mage attendant close the glass panels behind me, and breathed out in surprise when within moments I began to see around the table people that were thousands of miles away. The illusions were damned convincing,

too: I could see the flush on Rozala Malanza's cheeks, and the details of the folds on Itima Ifriqui's skin. It was a shame that there would be no refreshments offered at this war council, given how long it was likely to last, but Hasenbach had suggested that after an hour we vote on taking a pause so at least I wouldn't stuck in this box forever. It was going to get warm in here, I suspected, considering the openings in the glass were small and meant more to let in air than address heat.

There were too many commanders in the Grand Alliance for them to all fit in one room, much less warrant the expensive arrangements necessary to be connected to the Mirage, so it was only the very highest rung of command that'd been invited to this war council. For the front in Twilight's Pass the Kingfisher Prince had come in person, while an illusion Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei stood in for the Dominion troops in the region. For Cleves, an illusion of my old foe Princess Rozala Malanza of Aquitan had been conjured up while Lord Yannu Marave had claimed his seat in person. For Hainaut, grizzled old Klaus Papenheim has been brought in phantom form while the Kingdom of Callow had its representative in my person. Though not a general, the First Prince naturally had a seat of her own as the highest military authority in Procer.

Going by numbers Callow's presence in the room was almost slightly small, and in truth I'd been offered the right to bring in an Army officer from the Pass to even the numbers a bit, but I'd declined. Dragging Pickler or Kilian into this was unwarranted for essentially the same reason that neither Razin Tanja nor Aquiline Osen were in attendance even though they fielded troops in Hainaut. Hells, it was why General Pallas wasn't here even though her Tyrant's Own numbered more than the troops Lady Itima had brought up north. None of those commanders were of the highest authority in the front. If I told Razin to send out his foot, the boy did it. If the Iron Prince wanted the *kataphraktoi* to screen the flanks of Alamans skirmishers, screen those they did.

While all those people would be told of the decisions made, and participate to the planning of the campaign itself, the hard truth was that none of them were influential enough to warrant a seat here. And not all seats were equal in here, either. I spoke for the entire Army of Callow and was the informal representative for the drow as well, which meant my word weighed heavier than that of any single Levantine or Proceran save perhaps Cordelia herself. Their authority was diluted by their numbers, not strengthened: Itima Ifriqui could not speak for the captains under another of the Blood, and Malanza couldn't speak for the Lycaonese holding the Pass. My army's chain of command was fundamentally unlike theirs, when it came down to it. Theirs forces were a messy patchwork of personal noble troops and free

captains answering this way and that, while mine had been inherited from the relentlessly professional Legions of Terror.

Given the difficulties Cordelia still had in getting her princes in line I might actually have more soldiers under me than she did, regardless of Procer fielding a significantly larger force overall.

There was no small talk, and barely even greetings. Once the spells were stable and the mage-attendants had made sure the links were matched silence was given without even needing to be called for. Everyone knew why they were here, and how serious the matters at hand were. It was the kind of weight that tended to make small talk feel like whistling in a graveyard. Hasenbach did not let the silence linger for long, opening the council with a few brisk courtesies and then getting us started in earnest with the unfortunate realities of our war.

"All of you have, by now, received the information that the Witch of the Woods obtained during her sally beyond enemy lines," the First Prince said. "The Dead King is raising a bridge in northern Hainaut, in the flatlands known as Thibault's Wager. Troops are being massed on the northern shore, and fortifications have been raised to harden the site against assault."

Itima Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood rapped her knuckles against the table before her, requesting the right to speak and having it granted immediately.

"Did we get hard numbers on what is being massed?" the Lady of Vaccei asked.

"The initial report by the Witch estimated around two hundred thousand on the northern shore," the First Prince replied, "but that was more than two months ago. We have not been able to scry the location since."

"I mean no disrespect to the skills of the Lady Witch," Princess Rozala said, "yet it occurs to me that the Hidden Horror might well have allowed her this vision. I won't argue against the necessity of break that bridge, but it seems to me we are being provoked to battle on his time and terms."

She was right about that much, in my opinion. While I honestly doubted Neshamah had given up the game with the bridge on purpose – he wasn't infallible, we took him by surprise sometimes – he was aware that we knew about his bridge and couldn't afford to let it stand. He knew a battle was coming in this 'Thibault's Wager', and he'd be prepared accordingly.

"I've been sending native outriders and Helike cataphracts deep into enemy territory," the Iron Prince told us after being given right to speak, "and the reports from the survivors all speak to

the same truth: the Enemy is withdrawing deeper into Hainaut. We still get regular raids on our lines but the army Old Bones wanted to strike with while the plague ravaged our backs broke into smaller forces. We think at least half of them are headed north."

I touched a rune on the table with my fingers, which drew Hasenbach's attention, and she gave me the right to speak a heartbeat after.

"It's a safe bet he's fortifying the Wager," I said. "The longer we wait to make our offensive, the more heavily dug-in the dead will be. Revenants, constructs, earthworks. He'll make that place into a fortress."

Possibly literally. The flatlands would become even more strategically valuable after the bridge was built, should we fail to stop that, so it would be a sound use of resources to raise a fortress there. The right to speak passed back to Lady Itima.

"A surprise strike through the Twilight Ways is the answer," she said. "A strong force with Bestowed can shatter the works and retreat."

"And the moment the dust settles on that raid, the Dead King will begin raising a new bridge," Frederic pointed out. "It would be worthwhile for him even only for the forced attrition – how many elite troops and heroes will we lose with every attack?"

"The work can't be done in a day," Princess Rozala disagreed. "It will slow him down enough that we'll get breathing room to muster a proper answer."

"Your theory rests on the Hidden Horror's means to build staying the same," Prince Klaus retorted. "They won't. The longer this goes on, the more bodies he can mobilize."

"If we strike at all, it should be to win lasting gains," Lord Yannu said. "There is only so much blood we can afford to spill over that bridge."

"The strategic reality is that a raid is just pissing away lives," I bluntly agreed. "We have to be able to hold the region, or we'll be doing this again and again. Even if we make this Wager impossible to build in, what prevents Keter from starting work on a bridge a hundred miles upriver?"

"We would be committing to a major offensive entirely on the Dead King's terms, Queen Catherine," Princess Rozala replied. "And if a severe enough defeat ensues, it seems likely that the Hainaut defensive lines will be unable to withstand the counterattack."

"If Ol' Bones gets two hundred thousand of his finest on the south bank, we won't be able to withstand a plain attack," the Iron Prince grunted. "Your instincts are good, Malanza, I mean no slight to them. It'll be a nasty piece of war to slog through, for sure. But I don't see that we have a choice. The Black Queen put her arrow in the eye: this is going to keep happening until we secure the shores of Hainaut."

"It would make the principality easier to defend," the Kingfisher Prince noted. "Barring disaster, having a moat between Hainaut and Keter should offset the casualties taken winning it."

"A plan that accounts for victory but not defeat is not a plan, it is a daydream," Lord Yannu said. "If disaster does happen, how does Hainaut hold?"

"I will be bringing reinforcements from Callow," I said. "The Duchy of Daoine has agreed to send six thousand men, under condition that they are used purely for defensive warfare. Lady Dartwick will hold the command."

Duchess Kegan had been willing to shake loose some of her soldiers, if they were used only to man the defensive lines. I didn't even grudge her the limitations, considering those lines were going to have to be manned regardless: skilled as Deoraithe fighters were, on the field I would rather have more legionaries in the ranks. I would have liked some Watch, mind you, but Kegan had been understandably unwilling to let any of them near the greatest necromancer to ever live. I didn't want Neshamah to get his hands on that mass of souls the Watch got its powers from either, so I'd live with the disappointment. Besides, if they stayed in Callow then they were for Malicia to worry about – and given how few troops were left to defend my borders I wanted her to worry as much as possible.

"Six thousand will not hold back the tide, Your Majesty," the Princess of Aequitan said.

"Neither will hiding behind our walls," I flatly replied. "And even if we suffer a defeat, the Ways mean there will always be a path of retreat the enemy can not follow us into. That will mitigate casualties, and the defeated force could then retreat to the defensive lines faster than the dead can march and replenish its ranks with the reinforcements from Daoine."

"Companies of volunteers are also being raised from the refugees in Brabant," the First Prince said. "Though they will not be ready in time to participate in a summer offensive, they can at least serve as a strategic reserve."

"Starvelings in dwarven tinpots," Lady Itima snorted. "How many of those poor souls are you raising?"

"Between ten and fifteen thousand," the fair-haired princess replied.

A pretty number, especially when you added my six thousand Deoraithe to it, but no one here was fooled. How many of those ten to fifteen would truly be fighting fit, instead of sickly elders or children too small for the breastplate? If it was even half I'd count us lucky. Procer was at least a year past scraping the bottom of the barrel when it came to recruitment, these days it was digging into the floor *under* the metaphorical barrel. Still, warm bodies with spears could hold the defenses we'd raised. Not well, but long enough for reinforcements to arrive. And with Named to stiffen the backbone, we should be able to avoid a general rout the moment the volunteers first saw what an offensive by Keter looked like.

"Ten thousand starvelings can hold a wall, Itima, if they have a Callowan backbone spread through their ranks," the Lord of Alava said.

"Might be," the Lady of Vaccei grunted back.

"Though our hand is being forced, there is another reason I'm in favour of an offensive in Hainaut," I said. "The Hierophant is close to a breakthrough on a weapon that would make an attack on the Crown of the Dead feasible – and reclaiming Hainaut would be necessary before such a step."

It was good news I'd given them, and it was treated like it. Only Hasenbach knew of Quartered Season in any depth, though both Malanza and Marave were aware that I'd had Masego working on something since the foundation of the Arsenal. Klaus Papenheim, in particular, had finally traded that grim Lycaonese scowl for a distinctly wolfish smile.

"Within three months we should have the artefact itself," I continued, "and though the time required to make it a fully functional weapon is uncertain, it would be ready for use by next summer."

Meaning if we took back Hainaut this year and dug in over the winter, we could attempt to end the war in a single stroke the following year.

"Might we expect a fuller understanding of this weapon soon, Your Majesty?" Princess Rozala asked.

"Once the initial trial is complete, in three months, a briefing will be arranged," I said. "Before that I will only fully inform the First Prince herself and a designated high officer for Levant."

The Levantines shared a look.

"I will be that officer," Lord Yannu said. "It will be confirmed by the Majilis before the end of the day."

I inclined my head in acknowledgement.

"In light of what I've said, I'd like you all to reconsider how you're looking at the offensive ahead of us," I said. "While it's true that Keter will be expecting us to attack, at this time I don't believe the Dead King will be expecting an all-out and sustained offensive to reclaim all of Hainaut. This could be an opportunity for us to do real damage."

"You're suggesting we destroy the Enemy's forces in Hainaut," Frederic said. "Bold."

"I'm suggesting that if this is to be our last offensive before we move against Keter itself, it's in our interest to destroy as much of the Dead King's armies as possible," I said. "Better to face them on the field than behind the walls of the Crown of the Dead."

That siege would already be hellish enough without Neshamah being allowed to pull back his armies in good order and turning his capital into even more of an impregnable nightmare.

"We don't have the numbers for that kind of campaign in Hainaut," Prince Klaus pragmatically said.

"The Firstborn forces under General Rumena are willing to participate to that offensive," I said. "And I'd like for commanders on the other fronts to consider sending reinforcements."

"The defense of Cleves will be made significantly harder by the absence of the Firstborn," Princess Rozala said.

"Perhaps that will remember Gaspard Langevin the realities of his situation," I said, tone gone sharp. "Sve Noc's patience is not without limits. Besides, it is Twilight's Pass I would expect more soldiers from."

"Holding the grounds we've taken is not leisurely, don't let the stalemate fool you," Lady Itima said. "Your raiders ought to have told you this much."

"You believe the Unravellers will stabilize our front enough we can afford to thin the ranks," the Kingfisher Prince said, eyes narrowing.

There was some undisciplined talk at the talk of the artefacts, since to my surprise the news hadn't made it everywhere. Lady Itima had held no idea, and to my surprise neither had the Iron Prince – he must have been away from reliable scrying relays.

"I wouldn't take my mages from you, but Special Tribune Robber and Sapper-General Pickler would both be of great use on this campaign," I said. "Not to mention a few hundred Lycaonese foot."

Prince Klaus looked a little flattered, I saw from the corner of my eye. Well, he knew what I thought of his people as far as soldiering went. Lycaonese fought fierce and rarely broke, there were few better men to field against the dead. Frederic's horse was famous as well, but they were mostly retinue troops and Hainaut was already well served in cavalry by my reckoning. Between my knights, Lycaonese cavalry and the *kataphraktoi* we had a fine array of heavy horse, while Alamans horsemen made for fine skirmishers and outriders.

"If the Unravellers prove reliable, I would agree to lending troops to the offensive," the Kingfisher Prince said.

Not that he could keep Pickler or Robber from leaving if I recalled them, but it would be undiplomatic to withdraw my soldiers without first consulting the commanding officers of the front.

"You don't need my lot, not when you've got Tartessos screamers," Lady Itima noted. "I'll send Moro and a company of sworn blades, but no more."

"I would be willing to contribute Alavan captains," Lord Yannu said. "Should the campaign be soundly planned."

More heavy foot, these, allegedly the finest in Levant. I nodded in thanks at both Levantines.

"If the Firstborn leave and our Levantine friends split their forces, I do not believe I can spare much men," Princess Rozala said, tone faintly regretful. "And of that little no horse, if the drow no longer screen the coasts."

"Setting aside the details of the offensive," the First Prince said, "I now ask formally: is this is council in favour of a summer offensive in Hainaut?"

The vote was unanimously in favour.

[*ErraticErrata*](#)

First update of the month, so there's an extra chapter in the tab of that name. Titled Charlatan IV, it's the last of the sequence.

Javvies

Yep. Hanno's not happy about what's happened with Red Axe's corpse. We all saw that coming.
And I expect that most of the other Heroes aren't going to be happy about it when they find out either.
Villains might be amused.

On the other hand, Cat's right – Red Axe's actions caused problems, and Hanno wasn't considering the larger picture of problems that Red Axe contributed to and Cordelia needs to deal with.
There weren't any good solutions, far less any that could be considered Good.

Also, this is basically confirmation that Cat and Cordelia were interested in being able to confuse, blur, and spin the details and timing for public consumption, rather than truly keep secret the sentence.

dadycoool

I half expected Cat to threaten him with something like "Would you like me to tell my people that the Heroes are getting upset that dirty work got done?"

caoimhinh

I expected Cat to remind Hanno of what she told him 3 chapters ago when he admitted he had no solution to this issue:
"Then pray, hero. And I'll see what I can get done down in the mud."

I thought she would say something along the lines of "I warned you. Did you expect a clean solution down here in the mud?"

Liliet

I don't think Cat would appreciate if HE reminded her of her snappy one-liner either. Remember how flustered she was when he brought up what she said to the Choir of Endurance? Yeah, what you're proposing is high key not Cat, bless her self-conscious dramatic soul

Shveiran

That is comparing apples and oranges, I feel.

She was embarrassed because that one-liner was spoken from a version of herself she no longer aligned with, not completely.

This time, I'm pretty sure that she stands by what she said; even more now than then, in fact.

[Liliet](#)

It was still a silly dramatic bit of theatre.

Shveiran

I do not disagree, but there is a lot of difference between a snappy one-liner thrown at enemies she no longer wishes to antagonize, and something she still believes but could maybe, possibly have been phrased a bit more placidly.

I'm not totally convinced that even that isn't exaggerating, to be honest: this chapter saw Hanno talk about how she "lost his respect" for solving a problem anyone else refused to address, and I can't imagine Catherine being embarrassed because she sharply reminded him he was washing his hands clean of the matter and leaving it in her lap.

[Liliet](#)

Maybe.

caoimhinh

Nah, that time she was embarrassed because apparently there's a pun somewhere in there. Something to do with bottom-feeders, if I recall correctly. She even states that to Cordelia "I didn't say it because of the pun!".

Cat always stands by what she says, and it is not "high key not Cat" for her to remind people of what she has said before. We have seen Catherine remind Malanza, Tariq, Akua, and Cordelia about their previous conversations and invoke parts of it, particularly the parts when she made offers that were refused, which is pretty much what happened here: Hanno refused to take Cat's offer of compromising in something, so she had to do things on her end without his help.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, i withdraw my previous concerns though. I thought Cat was walking into a villain mistake, but she accounted for it. This story's biggest point of vulnerability was it's discovery. If she is letting it be discovered this easily and accounting for that instead of trying to suppress it, it can't form into the crashing wave and will but dribble at her feet. The hurting of

the relationship with White Knight is unfortunate but survivable.

caoimhinh

Indeed, though it seems to me that Catherine handled her conversation with Hanno quite poorly. She reacted with harshness and coldness to his complaint when she could have calmly explained the necessity of her actions. Not an excuse nor a justification, but a reasoning, and Hanno would have listened and made his peace with it even if he wouldn't agree to such course of action. Heck, she knew this was coming, she should have prepared for that conversation, she had time to think of what to say and how to say it. Hanno did not need to agree with her by the end of that conversation but there was absolutely no need to go about it with such rudeness.

That whole conversation, Catherine was all "shut up, I got it done, suck up your complaints"

This is not the first time they have argued and disagreed over a subject, nor will it be the last; but it was the first time that she spent the whole conversation being rude to him.

hakureireimu

I disagree; Hanno already knows about the necessity of her actions and her reasoning. They are simply have a disagreement over their **values**, and that's not something mere words can gap, similar to their previous disagreements over the pray vs act dichotomy.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno knows the reasoning and they've had this conversation several times already.

What Catherine could have addressed and didn't was Hanno's complaint about the breach of trust on her part – she didn't just do this, she also did it behind his back.

Of course, the breach of trust results from a lack of trust of HER in HIM – she expected that if she gave him the veto right (which she'd effectively be doing by not tricking him), he would be obstructive.

And it's... not unreasonable, given context.

I think Hanno has a lot more to reflect on from this than Catherine does.

'Ladi Williams

Actually, this was a conversation they have had times without number. He was coming with the same complaints without have an alternative to put forward. She was tired of saying same things over and over again.

Shveiran

This.

dadycoool

"Excuse me, Cat. This wool is uncomfortable on my face." Too bad he really didn't have any alternatives to give. Indrani's a treasure.

Ooh, a war council, complete with holograms for those not physically present. It's good to see how they manage all this.

IDKWhoitis

I'm kinda surprised that the Named didn't get an official seat, or at least Hanno also get invited.

[Liliet](#)

Named don't hold battlefield command, they're flatly subordinate to battlefield command they're attached to. Hanno handles his own assignments of who goes where, sure, but so do Razin, Aquiline and others Catherine has brought up as examples of who DIDN'T make it to this council.

Hanno's not a general and he's not pretending to be.

IDKWhoitis

I think even if the Named are theoretically not included in battlefield command, they are important assets that must be accounted for. A front could do more with less troops if Named are a part. Therefore, when looking at how many troops are being strategically redeployed, keeping the Named in mind must be done. In not only quantity and positioning, but also condition and favorable groupings.

At the same time, from a political standpoint, the villains have a non official representative at the table making important decisions. In a different context, this isn't too much of a probelm. But in the context of Hanno being tricked and cut out of decision making process, it sets a Trust trap for the future where the Heroes cooperate less than they do now. The heroes either ignore what strategy is laid out in front of them by the committee (arguably the best case) or actively propagate the perception that Cat is controlling the Grand Alliance (worst case in my eyes, as it breeds hidden poison for future endeavors).

Liliet

Everyone's keeping them in mind already. Information bits are taken care of, the point of the war council is to make sure the politicians are on the same page. Named stay out of mundane logistics by choice – unless it directly concerns their Name, it's not their problem and they're not going to think about it.

Actually, I think you're right, not including Hanno IS an oversight. If he'd been present for these, maybe he'd have a better appreciation for how goddamn important keeping Procer whole behind their backs is.

Javvies

On the one hand, that assumes that they didn't offer to include him, only to have him refuse – probably something along the lines of he's not a general or ruler, and therefore has no place in discussions concerning non-Named policies, politics, and other matters.

Or that he was invited and decided not to show for this meeting because of what Cat and Cordelia have done with Red Axe's corpse.

On the other hand ... this appears to, at least on the surface, be an entirely secular meeting – the principals or designated representatives of the primary battlefield commanders and the member nations of the Grand Alliance.

We should also keep in mind, Hanno was pretty clear in the infamous Hero meeting that Heroes should not have sway or influence over the Grand Alliance members and their policies solely on the basis of being a Hero.

There's doubtless going to be another meeting, likely between Cat and Hanno, it isn't clear who else might be an appropriate attendee, concerning the Named response and reallocations necessary for the threat.

It's also possible that they are dealing with the non-Named stuff first, and Hanno will be brought in to discuss coordination between mundane policies and decisions and Named/Heroes.

Liliet

Hanno being invited and refusing way back when they were first figuring things out is about what I'm thinking for this.

IDKWhoitis

Although if that were the case, I feel like Cat would have mentioned that or it would have been conveyed in some other manner. This meeting is obviously important enough that any absences would be noted immediately by Cat or the other members.

Although thinking of it further, this could be one of those things delegated/shrugged off by Hanno earlier on when Cat was taking all the responsibilities.

I think Cat should push for him to be present at the next of these meetings, for the sake of perspective. And because I think Hanno is going to be sensitive to the appearance that Cat is withholding information.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's what I mean. I figure he established that he wouldn't be present for those two years ago, so there's nothing Cat feels like she could note about this one.

And that's what left him oblivious to the actual urgency of Cordelia's request I think, so yeah, I agree Cat should demand he come.

WuseMajor

I feel like, if Hanno had come back with a counter offer or something, or at least some kind of assurance that Cordy could take back to her people, that might have solved things. The Red Axe and the Bard set up a situation that the treaties really just...didn't take into account. I feel like, if they had all agreed that the treaty wasn't perfect and things needed to bend a bit, things might have resolved better.

But then the Bard's Broken Tower was still going most likely. Hopefully, it's run its course by now and they'll be able to work to regain trust after this, but who knows.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno has a good point in that what Procer was asking for went specifically and exactly against the treaty it signed – it seems Terms directly specify that yes, a hero attacking whoever will definitely and explicitly be ONLY tried under the Terms.

Hanno doesn't have a good point in that the flat answer of "I don't see what we possibly could" when Catherine said they needed to give her something, did not exactly inspire the kind of confidence Catherine would have needed to bring him in on the plan (thus effectively giving him a right of veto, as all

he'd need to do is specify what would be done to the body during the trial).

He really needs to pick what part he's complaining about, the solution or the not being told about the solution. Because both together only serve to weaken each other.

Abrakadabra

By not telling him she also protected him. He can honestly claim He did not know. Which is better than furthering the doubt among heroes that Hanno got corrupted somehow. As for Catherine, they did not expect better from her. The side benefit might be some mild respect from the villains for being clever.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, and Hanno is not seeing it because he still believes he could have his cake and eat it, too.

Ninestrings

This is gonna be a god damned bloodbath.

A quarter million undead at least, being commanded by the wildest and most powerful mage on the planet.

That bridge is gonna burn for a thousand years.

JJR

"And now that we've discussed the plan in great detail we can expect it to go off without a hitch."

-Literally No One

Probably not going to happen because non-named tend not to play to stories like this, but it would be kinda funny if Princess Rozala actually did sent a large group of soldiers to swoop in at the last second but not tell anyone.

Jack Reader

The thing is, Hanno wasn't complaining that what Catherine did was wrong and morally repugnant, though it was. Our boy Hanno is much too canny to try and argue that to the Black Queen, which, if we were to contrast with Taylor Hebert's "Queen of Escalation", could be called the "Queen of Pragmatism". What Hanno was complaining about here was that Cat chose to cut him out of the decision-making process, and went behind his back to get things done instead of even trying to bring him into her plan. And he is correct in that, if he and Cat are to work together in their roles as representatives under the T+T, they

need mutual trust, which Hanno had so far actually given to Cat, before she broke it. In an interesting reversal of roles, Hanno is the one that came in talking about the relationship between Hanno and Catherine, and Cat was the one to turn it into an issue between Above and Below.

Of course, Cat wasn't wrong to go over his head, because if she had brought the plot to him, in the best case scenario he would have had to sign off on it, which would have dirtied his hands and put his position as Representative of Heroes in jeopardy if it ever came out (which obviously would in the worst possible moment); and in the worst case scenario he would have refused to cooperate and actually made things more difficult. Neither of them was wrong, but neither of them can afford to be right either. It just goes to show the ugliness that is politics.

Xinci

Yeah, the mutual trust part being broken is a bad pattern to get in to. We have sadly seen it ruin things at the most tenuous of times, in multiple instances. Hopefully, Cat will work to avert such a thing but Creation does love to retread its tragedies with different actors.

Shveiran

She didn't really go behind his back, though.

They had a talk where they discussed that concessions were needed or Procer risked collapsing. Then Hanno said "I don't think we can do concessions", and Cat said "Then pray, White, and I'll see what can be done here in the mud".

Then they had a talk with Cordelia, and Hanno doesn't give an inch. Then he leaves and the two of them stay.

Was there any doubt she would have done something to address the issue? She straight out told him. Then he refuses the compromise, leaves them, and acts surprised that there was further discussion on the subject?

I'm kind of disappointed in you, Hanno.

How could you expect anything else? In fact, I dare say you didn't expect something else, or in refusing that compromise you'd have likely condemned Procer and everyone else.

It's kind of convenient to indulge in idealism while relying on someone else to fix the practicalities, but heroes will be heroes... at least don't bitch about it afterward, though.

It's kind of embarrassing.

nimelennar

"What Hanno was complaining about here was that Cat chose to cut him out of the decision-making process, and went behind his

back to get things done instead of even trying to bring him into her plan.”

She didn't cut him out of the decision-making process. Hanno did that to himself when he categorically refused to discuss the sentencing of the Red Axe. If you make it clear that you can't even allow yourself to hear what theoretically might need to be done if a “guilty” verdict is returned and the likely sentence imposed, you forfeit any right to complain about what people have to do to mitigate the obvious political damage that would result from that sentence.

Liliet

Honestly, Hanno's wrong in how he mixed complaints here. He complained that what Catherine did was morally repugnant... AND that she didn't bring him in on the plan. Yes, White Knight, she was treating you as an obstacle, are you saying you wouldn't have been?

For all of his love of trials, he doesn't really get how adversarial process works, does he?

You don't get to both insist that you will not discuss the sentence ahead of time AND complain you weren't told the discussion about it that other people held ahead of time AT THE SAME TIME, honey.

Xinci

Hm, I do wonder how true Cats' statement on “the truth comes out trope” would be. Information propagation between small and larger groups doesn't change that much, so how well the true events would come out may depend on where the Heroes/major dispersals are located. That is what gives Cordelia the advantage in putting a proper spin on things here.

I do suppose perception is really the biggest part here rather than the pattern actually not being viable to larger sample sizes.

Cat not finding a method to keep trust with Hanno is rather unfortunate, and hopefully not a recurring pattern. As trust keeps being one of if not the most important underpinning factor for averting disaster as it strikes attempts to create better institutions.

Burlyraven

Okay, we've been teased on Cat's coming Name for a while now, but I seriously do not see how this attack goes well without her coming into it in full. Either she's the Named leader of this host, or she earns her Name as she stumbles out of the remains of the thousands she committed to the attack. Considering too many

story threads are saying that we have a year to wait for the final offensive, this is just feeling like too big of a pivot.

dadycoool

Yeah, if nothing else, the scope of this threat requires something really big, like a Naming.

edrey

Well, Hanno mentality is the problem but that is heroes for you. As side note i was half expecting the spell for that weapon would come from the scorched apostate, that kid was talented.

[TeK](#)

So what do you think DK's plan here? I think either it's a bait for an all-out assault to strike at other fronts, or it is some kind of a ritual that would benefit from having near hundred thousand living bodies being near it.

I mean, no way it is JUST a bridge.

mamm0nn

Cat arrives at the bridge

Cat: Oh no, it's actually an aqueduct. The Dead King is stealing our water!

Meanwhile at the dwarven side of the siege

Dwarven soldier #14325: Darn, me socks are getting wet again. Makin' me grumpy and slightly less inclined to charge.

Dead King: Trading two hundred thousand on the surface for a mild inconvenience to the dwarves is definitely worth it.

Shveiran

Thank you. Truly.

thearpox23

The Dead King's armies are basically Shrodinger's armies at this point. He can simultaneously afford to throw away a hundred thousand troops for a minor advantage, but also get his defensive potential for Keter reduced if the Grand Alliance gets a couple efficient victories.

Frivolous

Not sure I agree. The Dead King knows how to create a permanent gate to a Hell. Diabolist was only the second person known to do it. Neshamah was the first.

If he ever runs out of zombies, he can always open another gate and use the devils that pour forth as troops.

thearpox23

I was addressing the way characters (mainly Cat) think and are strategizing dealing with Neshamah's fighting potential, not his actual strategic options.

[Javvies](#)

Opening a permanent Hellgate, or a Greater Breach, isn't that complicated in terms of skill/knowledge by Praesi High Lord trained mages.

The problem comes in the form of needing a massive amount of power to do it (which also means massive amounts of wasted power radiating out creating massive amounts of magical fallout), and devils summoned via hellgate are more complicated to control.

Also, once you open a Greater Breach/permanent Hellgate ... it's there forever, and you can't decide you want to close it ... which means it's going to be letting out demons for the rest of time (or until some Hero drops an Angel on it – and you).

mamm0nn

Unless of course you conquer the entire Hell and fill it with undead and supposedly people to prevent there being demons and devils on the other side of the Hellgate to come out. (The only living person we saw that told Cat about there being people living in the Serenity turned out to be a Malicia fleshpuppet. Technically we never saw anyone alive native to the Dead King's lands, so we cannot say for sure whether he actually has human farms in his Hell.)

Letouriste

I have this weird conviction DK want to bring back Dread Empress Triumphant from the hell she probably conquered. A metaphysical bridge fueled by the death of tens of Named and hundreds of thousands of soldiers could do the trick

[Liliet](#)

Dead souls don't actually go to Hells, as was firmly established fairly early on. The Triumphant saying is just a saying that survives on tradition + narrow spread of actual

knowledge of how Hells work. There's a reason Masego rolled his eyes every time someone uttered "may she never return" early on too.

thearpox23

The bitch dropped her own tower on two opposing armies and two legions of her own soldiers in a gigantic conflagration. If she had a plan to go to hell post-defeat, she could've pulled it off. And no mage or spiritualist would be able to trace the ritual afterwards because of the above-mentioned conflagration erasing any and all evidence. That Masego rolled his eyes at the idea speaks more to his narrow focus on the specifics of the legend than on the much more important question of 'Could Triumphant have actually gone to a hell?'

For the record, I don't particularly anticipate Triumphant's appearance, and even less that the bridge is in any way related. But I would not discount it entirely.

[Liliet](#)

I am.

She's dead. Heroes killed her. She's worldbuilding.

thearpox23

I enjoy your confidence.

[Liliet](#)

Me too

Frivolous

You know how the city in the old Transformers cartoon movie turned into a giant Transformer?

This could be a bridge that transforms into a colossal Revenant with a footprint capable of squashing an entire town at once.

7imelock

So we have the Red Axe, a heroine (specializing in anti-magic and presumably able to use Light) brought back from the dead against her will, restrained, and with a long-ranged death switch held by none other than the Black Queen herself, is now going to the heartland of Procer to take part in a second execution. This second execution that one could argue to be extremely cruel and unjust, given that Hanno, the Sword of Judgement, was deceived in what nefarious purpose they would use the corpse for when he

passed his sentence and was understandably upset when he found out.

Oh, and the First Prince and the Black Queen have, as step three (or at least four if we include transporting Red Axe and her second sentencing separately) of their plan, distributing misleading and false rumours about her trial.

And now they think this morally unrighteous and unjust plan (that Catherine may or may not have implied to be infallible), with multiple steps, is going to go off without a hitch.

Furthermore, Cat has now lost the trust of Hanno, and probably quite a few other heroes, just in time for the summer offensive against DK. Wonderful.

Eldrene_ay_ellan

I think the plan bears startling resemblance to Malicia's plan to acquire Liesse as a weapon. A situation that seems hopeless, deceiving and going against the most central convictions of an ally, multiple glaringly obvious points of failure and the need for all of it to not only go off without a hitch but remain a secret.

It's a terrible plan, if a problem cannot be solved cleanly trying for the quick easy fix is not inherently better than waiting to see if an opportunity presents itself.

Frivolous

I don't think the Red Axe came back as a Revenant, with intact aspects. I don't believe Catherine knows how to do that.

I'm virtually certain that the Red Axe can't use Light anymore. She's an undead raised with Night. Using Light when you're animated with Night seems very very contradictory.

I don't think the second trial of the Red Axe will be cruel, unless the Highest Assembly uses something nasty to kill her a second time with. I mean, the first execution was pretty humane. A single slice through the neck with a Light-imbued sword had to be very quick and almost painless.

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, Catherine did establish through questioning that the traditional punishment is boiling in oil. On the other hand, I'm extremely not seeing what that's going to do to an animated corpse besides being a pretty bit of ceremony. I recall raised Catherine in Liesse taking an arrow to a hand and barely even noticing, and I'm seeing exactly 0 reason for Catherine to spend effort on giving Red Axe functional pain receptors.

Decius

It just needs to be boiled in oil for longer.
A regular human boiled in oil feels pain until medium rare.
A specialty undead boiled in oil feels pain until extra
crispy.

Shveiran

That's... not how not having pain receptors work? It would
destroy her, not making her feel pain.

AceOfSword

"villains : [...] the Forgetful Librarian"

I have questions.

Earl of Purple

She's the lady Cordelia is using as an archivist in her new spy
headquarters. We know little about her, save she's been Named a
while and was discovered by accident.

Shveiran

Oh, Hanno.

You are usually on my very short list of esteemed heroes, buddy,
but you really took a nosedive here, didn't you?
For all your calm and thoughtfulness, you turned into a full
teenager protester here.

WK: I don't like what you did!

BQ: Do you deny that this problem had to be addressed?

WK: No, but I don't like what you did!

BQ: Did you have a different plan to address it?

WK: No, but I don't like what you did!

BQ: Did you not, in fact, physically leave the room where a
solution could be found without making any suggestion to a
possible solution?

WK: Yes, but I don't like what you did!

BQ: If I had done nothing, would you be any happier with the
consequences?

WK: No, but I don't like what you did!

BQ: In light of all this, do you feel you have a right to be
angry here?

WK: Yes, because I don't like what you did!

BQ: Would you like a lollipop, kid?

And there is nothing wrong with teenager protesters. Heck, I was
one. But they are meant to protest and raise awareness, not lead
the fates of nations. This kind of attitude has no place in the
shoes you are wearing, pal.

Drop one, or the others.

[Liliet](#)

...Kind of, yeah.

I hope Hanno reflects on this and finds some realizations.

Shveiran

I know, right? I don't want to dislike Hanno, Sister damns it. Stop making me dislike Hanno, Hanno!

[Liliet](#)

Eh, everyone can be a buttface sometimes. I still like him.

Shveiran

Oh, me too. I just like him less. Kind of the same with Frederic, really. Which I'm still heart-broken about.

[Liliet](#)

Eh, I love 'em just the way they are. Characters who are in no way idiots are just boring -_-

Juff

Typo Thread:

would hard to invest > would be hard to invade
you," I grinned. > you," I said with a grin.
began to saw > began to see
wouldn't stuck > wouldn't be stuck
illusion Lady > illusion of Lady
brough up > brought up
participate to > participate in
Theirs forces > Their forces
Quartered Season > Quartered Seasons
remember > remind
little no horse > little to no horse

Frivolous

I find it interesting that Hanno kept complaining about Catherine's lies.

I guess that in the 2+ years since he and Catherine first met, absolutely NO ONE bothered to inform him or the other heroes that the Woe's motto is Lies and Violence. Not even Tariq, who had a good look into Catherine with Behold before Sve Noc came along.

It seems a shame that this sad neglect has occurred. So very sad.

I can only guess that until now Catherine has been relatively straightforward with Hanno. Which just means she's not a pathological liar, only a practical one.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine does get by on being straightforward and honest most of the time. Her lies are effective BECAUSE they're few and far between so you're not really on guard – when she does try to lie, it's these really blatant silly things, isn't it? Like "I don't speak Ashkaran" or "this was my plan all along", those charming affectations.

And then there's actually a trick, and you fall for it because 99% of the time doing exactly what Catherine Foundling suggests is in fact the best course of action for you with your interests fully taken into account, no false bottoms.

Hanno should really do a bit of reflection though, on whether he wants his and Catherine's relationship to be an adversarial process or a cooperative one. Because if it's the latter, he shouldn't have refused to discuss the sentence – perhaps not with Cordelia, but with Catherine, absolutely. And if it's the former, she's completely within her rights to look at a solution he'd be obligated to object to, as he looks to his adversarial obligations over the cooperative goal, and say "I'm keeping this secret".

Like, it's an exact match. He cannot complain that Catherine didn't tell him her plans about THE SPECIFIC THING HE REFUSED TO DISCUSS, REPEATEDLY, EVERY TIME SHE BROUGHT IT UP THE MULTIPLE TIMES THAT SHE DID.

Raved Thrad

This brings to mind the scene in Twilight where they're arguing as to who needs to sit the throne and die, after Saint slashed the crown. As Catherine gets set to talk, Archer comes up from behind and puts her hand over her mouth, saying "the last thing you want to do when you're winning is to have Catherine Foundling talk." Or something to that effect. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Heh.

Ragnarok Ascendant

Hanno...okay, yes, I saw this coming, but I never really like heroes in this story in general given how inflexible they end up being. The utter refusal to see a bigger picture and *bend* aggravates me.

[Liliet](#)

omg Aurore
my new favorite Named

Hanno has a point which is that Catherine did not tell him ahead of time. It's a sign of existing lack of trust – she worried that if she told him he wouldn't agree to give over the body, which... well, that sounds like a "him" problem, too.

Catherine's talking like he was objecting to what she did rather than how she handled it, which is fair as he objected to the first part too – but I got the impression his main problem was the second. He'd thought they were closer and had more trust between them than was the truth.

I don't think he's chosen the best way to address that, which is nothing new for Hanno. He's excellent at some things, but he's no politician and no diplomancer. Charisma is decidedly NOT his highest stat.

I hope this doesn't turn into a disaster)=

Tom

> Only a few villains were among them: ... the Hunted Magician.

What could go wrong?

trysalvages

Why has the iron prince been away from scrying? Staking a bid on him being somehow compromised now.

Kyrius

Why should Hanno sacrifice his principles? Cordelia turned down a name that would solve her Prince issue because she didn't believe a Named should Rule Procer. Protecting Procer is her job and yet she has never shown willingness to sacrifice her principles to save the country even during a coup with a war they were losing. Protecting Procer isn't Hanno's job, its Cordelia. She chose the non practical option (she didnt know about Bard and she still wants to use the Angel even today). And yet some in the fanbase are more mad about Hanno not doing it then Cordelia turning down that Named. So its not really about practical vs principles.

trashdragon

To add to your comment; the entire premise of why Hanno should let Cordelia and Cat just do whatever is that it's necessary for the war against the Dead King. Okay, Sure. But why doesn't this argument apply to the nobles of Procer that are getting uppity *solely* because they're butthurt over the war effort

cutting into their coffers even with all life on the continent in the balance. Apparently war necessity doesn't apply to them and Cordelia has to needs to pussyfoot around with political wrangling instead of just bringing them to heel in the name of survival? She just had a team of heroes sent to Mercantis to bully them into keeping their wallets open but we can't do the same to Proceran nobles?

Of course there's a reason for this, it's that Cordelia has a political agenda of keeping her power base and the general power of the Proceran nobility intact and free of heroic meddling. And she's piggybacking this agenda on the back of the war. And Cat is going along with it because it advances *her* long term interests of keeping Procer on board with the Accords. And it's heroes (no matter what wrong they may have done) who get used as sacrificial pawns to protect the ambitions of self-interested politicians.

For anyone who's familiar with Metal Gear, this is *exactly* the kind of shit that drove Big Boss into creating Outer Heaven. And I wouldn't blame Hanno for a second if he did something similar when the smoke clears with the Dead King.

Mirror Night

I find it hilarious so here in the fanbase argue that Hanno should sacrifice his principles when Cordelia turned a Name (Warden of the West) that solve her Prince issues not because it was practical but because her principles said a Named shouldn't rule Procer. So she basically caused Prince Issue by refusing a Name cause her principles are so important. And I should note these things matter more for Names cause going against your core tends to weaken you and make you more likely to fall or lose your name. So Cordelia is not willing to do whatever it takes to save her country and cannot do her job because of that but Hanno should be making a compromise when Cordelia refuses to compromise her core principles? Saint was right kill all the Princes.

As for Cat wow really cannot take criticism. This is a lady who gets mad at Champ for the Captain cloak threatens to kill her despite you know the terms saying everyone gets a free pass for bygones even Rapist. Even after Champ does this Cat still gets mad at her and the Levant Heads for inviting her to a meeting so again not practical that is pure emotion and putting principles or at least sentimentality first. Hakram has to talk her down and again shows the importance of Hakram because he tempers her while Indrani just amplifies Cat's worse impulses. Levant should put Villains on Roles despite it being against their Principles but the HBICs dont have to compromise at all. She then goes on to attack a little girl in Pascale cause she failed to her job to protect Tancred and refuses to apologize for no reason besides Principles that say she shouldn't have to cause she is the Black

Queen. Despite an apology costing her jack, she can do it in private and having Pascale afraid of her has zero practical benefit. So Cat cause of her Principles refuses to make the even smallest concession that costs her nothing at all.

So Hanno and Levant should sacrifice their principles despite Cordelia and Cat refusing to do the same. Cordelia is especially egregious cause its her nation on the line. So Hanno should give his for something that isn't his job and when its Procer welching on the deal. But Cordelia doesnt have to when is her job to protect Procer and she refuses to do so cause her principles. I expect characters to be hypocritical. I just find it so funny that the fanbase gets so blinded by Protag Centered Morality they fall for it as well.

AbraKadabra

Cordelia refused the name because she did not want to be influenced by it. There. Your first point obliterated. 🤪

Lord Haart

That... WAS the point though? The Name would protect Procer in the short-medium term but not the long term; Procer may survive, but will become just a regular story like everywhere else.

I think the point here – and the one Red Axe was making – is that you can't always assume "how to survive" is more important than "why to survive". I tend to agree with OP here – I see exactly why Cat is how she is but she gets in her own way and her alignment with below comes with a price – she isn't tied down by principles, but she's going to have a hell of a time creating a legacy of principles with the Liesse Accords for this very reason.

Even Black has a principle (victory and defeat), Cat is more pure utilitarian but with two major flaws; 1. She is still human and has personal bias, 2. She has urgency/survival bias which stops hey from really questioning the kind of society she will create, or the sort of Named who will follow after her – people who will start civil wars, raid other nations to kill their leaders, and even protect the most foul abuses of power by those under their leadership. All in the name of a greater good

Put like that, it really sounds alot like the criticisms of Above I see on here a lot, no?

(For all the above, I love this story! It's called the Practical Guide to Evil after all, and at this stage I think Neshamah is effectively Cat's sixth guide, after Black, Malicia, Larat, Sve Nov and Kairos. It's actually pretty neat

that each book has had a guiding figure who leads Cat a bit further into doing things "by any means necessary").

trashdragon

Especially since we've already gotten a taster of what a society being built by Catherine looks like. It involves heavy handed military rule with administration completely dominated by the Legion with Catherine placing her closest confidants in the highest positions of power and outright hand-picking monarchs. It means powerful spy networks that suppress any hint of dissent via blackmail, assassination and shows of force. It means the Clergy becoming an arm of the state. It means Callowans being removed from their lands to make way for Goblin settlers.

A lot of this was inherited from Black, sure. But instead of hand the power in Callow back to Callowans like she originally wanted she essentially doubled down on Callow as a military junta backed by Praes. Except now Callow might end up at war with Praes anyway, which was the entire point of Black conquering Callow in the first place.

Is this whole mess justifiable by wartime necessity? Maybe. But the problem with authoritarian war measures is that the power taken is almost never given back. And Catherine herself think's almost entirely in terms of *war measures* and the thought of relinquishing powers rarely even enters her mind. Will the world under her Accords be some medieval fascist dystopia? Maybe, maybe not. But I don't trust Catherine to prevent it from becoming so.

Shveiran

→ Especially since we've already gotten a taster of what a society being built by Catherine looks like.

We didn't.

We saw what she could scramble together with the existing pieces between two country shattering conflicts (the Fae/Diabolist and the Crusade).

Noticing the limits of what she built with little resources, less time and a tight timeline does not really inform us on what she could build without those constraints, especially with a narrative victory in her sails, which in the Guideverse kind of counts for a lot.

AbraKadabra

Bullshit. Callowans removed for goblins to make place, huh? You have a rich imagination because there was none of that ever written.

sengachi

“apparently wood soaked in Arcadian water works just as well as that murderously expensive stuff we were bringing in from the Waning Woods.”

-This is an experimental research mood.

“This has cost you respect, White Knight,” I replied, voice gone hard as steel. “Because the longer you speak, the more I can’t help but notice that for all your whining you haven’t given a single alternative.”

-Well damn if that isn’t the crux of the problem right there. It’s understandable to take a principled stand. I’d even argue that politics and life would be harder if we couldn’t trust people to take principled stands even when it’s a sub-optimal decision. But you can’t criticize someone else for not taking a principled stand without providing an alternative to get what they need.

kinghaart

It really underscores the difference between Above and Below again.

Below will do what it takes to get the outcome every time, precedent be damned. Every decision is made in the context of itself, with as much knowledge and forethought as possible, but ultimately still limited to the context of that question. Lessons from the past are generally ignored; hence why Villains are so often considered insane – they try the same thing and expect different results. Even the Calamities still operated within this general mode, despite being more self-reflective and precedent-aware than nearly any other Villains to date short of (arguably) Irritant and Traitorous. Below rewards ambition and testing limits and boundaries.

Above, by contrast has principals, and these are unerring. There’s a clear hierarchy of them, too, and if a Hero is in a dilemma where one must be sacrificed the answer is always clear, even if it’s just to pray. And Above rewards that sort of blind faith by saving the day with Deus Ex Machina most of the time, or having some other silver lining like with Heroic Sacrifice.

When looked at in these terms, it’s clear that while Cat is a different sort of Villain than others in the story, she’s not actually outside the bounds of Villainy altogether.

Satan

We know too much of the plan. By the power of tropes it must fail or at least be significantly altered by a new development.

[aran](#)

I do sort of suspect that Cat has paid for short-term success with long-term failure here. It's not clear that there *were* good options, but it's also not clear that she acknowledges the latter at all.

Going through with the judgement reinforced the hero/villain truce terms as inviolable (which both Cat and Hanno agree was necessary right now). But it also established, to the heroes, the pretty monstrous cost of such a truce.

Right now, with a world-ending threat to fight, the heroes (or most of them) are willing to pay that price. *Afterward*, when the threat is gone, and Catherine is hoping the heroes will nonetheless go along with her Accords? I'm not sure that she can count on even Hanno's support.

Chapter 41: Coterie

"The only thing more inconvenient than being part of an alliance is not being part of it."

– Prince Luis of Tenerife

The last time I'd seen anything near this scale had been the Doom of Liesse, when every major Callowan and Legion force west of the Hwaerte had engaged the Praesi and wights under the Diabolist. Yet, however apocalyptic that day had been, in the end it'd been only one day. The Grand Alliance's attempt to reclaim Hainaut would be a great deal more sustained than that.

The numbers were staggering, when put to ink and impossible to ignore. The Army of Callow would be fielding, in this campaign, a little under thirty thousand soldiers – the entire Second, Third and Fourth Army. Counting only the forces of Lady Aquiline and Lord Tazin the Dominion would be offering up at least twenty thousand, but if Lord Yannu's promises of Alavan captains came through the numbers should end up closer to twenty-five. General Pallas had seven thousand in fighting fit, though before mustering the full roster of the Tyrant's Own she'd want horses brought in since the kataphraktoi were running low on remounts. General Rumena still had thirty thousand to pledge to the

offensive, the thinned numbers having actually strengthened the southernmost host of the Firstborn in several ways.

The exact numbers of the Proceran forces in Hainaut were harder to determine, on the other hand, since their chain of command was the stuff of nightmares for any Legion-taught officer. As in most things warfare, the Lycaonese were a notch above the Alamans: the armies of Hannover and Neustria were under the combined command of the Iron Prince, they shared supplies and kept track of their casualties. While they relied a little too heavily on the nebulous rank of 'captains' for my tastes – officers that could command anywhere from a hundred to a thousand foot, horse or even a mixed force of both! – but they were typically well organized and well trained. The northern royals fielded, between the two of them, a solid eighteen thousand. Including four thousand of that solid Lycaonese heavy horse we could never have too much of.

The Alamans forces were contrastingly disorganized, which to my admitted surprise hadn't even proved to be entirely their fault. The last Princess of Hainaut – elder sister to the current one – had hired every fantassin company she could get her hands on the moment Keter began to stir, but a lot of those had taken severe losses failing to defend the northern shore. Half the originally contracted companies no longer existed or no longer fielded the amount of men they said they did, and maybe a quarter of the current mercenaries in Volignac service were 'successor-companies'. Those were, essentially, mercenary companies raised from the survivors of broken ones and laying claim to an old contract under a different name as the successor of the disbanded company.

The mercenaries were trouble, and not just because they were fiercely independent. Fantassin captains habitually lied about their numbers so that they might claim more supplies from the Grand Alliance, or bargain for better remuneration, and weren't above lending each other soldiers to fake their way through inspections. We hung the captains we caught at this, but that tended to lead to desertions so we had to be careful. It didn't help that even the principality Alamans troops had their issues. There were the forces of three royals serving in Hainaut: Prince Etienne of Brabant, Prince Ariel of Arans and naturally Princess Beatrice of Hainaut. The Arans soldiery was steady, but also under the prince's personal command and he was often reluctant to take risks. If Hainaut fell his principality was the next on the block, he often reminded us, but for all that the Brabant folk were arguably more trouble.

Not because they were as cautious, on the contrary: Prince Etienne had bankrupted himself arming everyone he could in his principality and sending them north when the situation in Hainaut first went bad, which while a brave and necessary gesture was also the source of the trouble. Maybe a third of the Brabantines

were actual trained soldiers, even their 'officers' were green as grass and though when they had the upper hand they were enthusiastic fighters their morale was otherwise... fragile. I'd not call a coward anyone who took up arms against Keter, but when you put shoemakers in armour and sent them to fight the likes of beorns they had a distinct tendency to rout. The conscripts had to be closely watched, and carefully used.

The forces under Princess Beatrice Volignac were the fewest, since they'd been bled hard failing to defend their homeland, which I found a damned shame as, practically speaking, it was a force entirely made of veterans. They fought hard, mercilessly, and with a burning spite I could only admire. They were also in some ways the least well-equipped, and the heaviest draw on Grand Alliance resources of the forces in the region: the capital of Hainaut had fallen, as had most its largest cities, so there was little coin behind them and only sparse land to feed them. At this point, the House of Volignac had more fortresses under its rule than towns – and its armies weren't even the largest force within those fortresses.

Accounting for the inevitable lies and grandstanding, our estimates had the total Alamans forces in Hainaut at around forty-one thousand. Fantassins companies made up for about fifteen thousand of that, and the Brabant conscripts maybe another ten to twelve thousand, so that meant more than half the number was less than reliable. If we got lucky the armies of Twilight's Pass would be able to send around ten thousand our way, mostly Bremen and Rhenia men with maybe a few from Brus. Which meant that at the end of the day, when all those forces would be brought together, there would be around one hundred and sixty thousand soldiers on the field. And that would be on the Grand Alliance's side alone. We were, typically, outnumbered at least two to one by the dead.

The campaign hadn't even begun and already the numbers involved were giving me a headache, so naturally I'd consulted the finest military mind at my disposal as soon as she was fit to be scried.

"It's logistically impossible for you to feed that many soldiers as a single force," Marshal Juniper of the Red Shields bluntly told me. "You'll have to separate them into several armies or you'll run out of supplies after a month or so."

"Our scouts have confirmed the Dead King left the roads mostly intact," I pointed out. "If we march along Julianne's Highway and spread out to prevent raiding, we could have an active supply line."

Named after an ancient First Princess of Procer, the highway was one of the major roads of northeastern Procer: it began in Salia, headed east through the city of Aisne, up into Brabant through the major trade city of Tourges and ended up north in the city of

Hainaut, capital of the eponymous principality. It was large, made for wagons and very well-maintained. The Dead King had skimmed on the upkeep some, our scouts had said – which made sense since he didn't usually use wagons of his own – but ensured it remained in state to be used by his troops, and therefore ours. It was pretty much impossible to feed this large an army without using carts and wagons to bring in rations so I expected we'd need to do some repairs while we campaigned, but my sapper corps should be capable of handling that much.

"The Hidden Horror will ruin that road the moment it becomes obvious it's the axis of your offensive," Juniper growled. "Think, Catherine. His priority is stalling us while he finishes his bridge, he'll pull out every stone from the defensive line to Hainaut if that's what it takes."

"That's just as much of an issue if we split our force into smaller armies," I pointed out. "They'll have to follow roads as well, if smaller ones. And we might move quicker, with the Twilight Ways, but he's got better awareness out on the field. If one of our forces pulls ahead of the others it'll get surrounded and annihilated."

Or worse, slaughtered and raised anew. Sure, we could open gates into the Twilight Ways – but we could only open so many, and only make them so large. An army trying to retreat from an active battle would lose most its numbers to the retreat, assuming it could even pull one of those in good order. My legionaries and the Lycaonese probably could, but the Levantines and the Alamans? They were brave and hardy fighters, I meant not disrespect there, but they weren't *disciplined*.

"You're looking at it from the wrong way," Juniper said. "Going up the Highway you'll get stuck in one of the natural bottlenecks. The dead could mass in Lauzon's Hollow-"

It was the name of a natural 'pass' leading the highway into the hilly and rocky highlands of Hainaut, which while not exactly narrow was steep-sloped and easily defendable. Last year during our offensive we'd taken the dead by surprise there, smashing the force defending it with a deep raid of kataphraktoi backed by Named and then held it open long enough for our army proper to arrive. That trick, though, would not work twice.

"- or the overpass fortresses at Cigelin," she finished.

Fortresses was something of an oversell there. *Les Soeurs de Cigelin*, or the 'Cigelin Sisters', were a pair of large towers overlooking a dip in the hills the highway passed through. They'd been built atop very abrupt slopes at the point where the dip was deepest, one on each side, but the real danger was the chain-gate they commanded. A massive chain allowed a portcullis of enchanted steel to be raised or lowered across the road, and while it was

hardly an unbreakable obstacle given enough mages or sappers it would be a costly strongpoint to force. Last time we'd used the Ways to go past it and then struck the garrisons holding the towers from the back, after drawing them out, but it'd slowed us down by at least a sennight. There wouldn't have been *nearly* as many nasty surprises waiting for us near the capital if not for that delay.

We'd torn down the fortresses and the chain-gate as we retreated, of course, but I knew better than to expect not to see them standing again this summer.

"We need those places under our control, Juniper," I pointed out. "By the time we get to the capital it'll be filled to the brim with corpses led by Revenants, which means a siege unless we want to throw away several dozen thousand soldiers storming the walls."

And we couldn't have a siege without supply lines to feed our soldiers, that much went without saying. Julianne's Highway was our best bet at such a thing.

"You are throwing away your only strategic advantage, superior mobility, to turn your army into a lumbering battering ram you want to smash through every gate until you reach Hainaut itself," the orc growled. "Losing scrying is making you too cautious, Warlord. If you split your army in three along three lines, the first taking the blue road towards Luciennerie in the west—"

I kept an eye on her profile in the mirror but the other was on the map spread out in front of me, displaying northern Procer. Luciennerie was a minor fortress by size, but it was the key to western Hainaut and more: holding it would give us control of the blue road when it went further west into Cleves, and so allow us to anchor our flank to our allies there.

"—the second marching up Julianne's Highway in the centre and the third going east by the old mining roads, aimed at Malmedit—"

Malmedit was a city, at least in principle, though even before the war against Keter it'd been turning into an empty husk. The city had grown out of multiple mining towns fusing into a single larger one, and lived off the ore trade, so when the ore had run out the people left for greener pastures. The Dead King had dug tunnels from further north that connected to the old mine shafts and he used the city itself as a staging area, since the lands beyond Malmedit itself weren't really fit to march an army across. If we took the city, though, we could collapse the mine shafts and shut the door on Keter's fingers.

"—then all three losses would be severe enough he'll have to commit to battle," I finished with a frown. "But he won't shy from that, Juniper. He has the bodies to spare, and he knows that

if he defeats even one of those armies he can turn this entire campaign into a rout by collapsing that flank."

If either the eastern or western army was beaten back, the central one would have to withdraw or see its supply lines cut by raiders. If it was the central army that was beaten back it'd be even worse, as both other armies would have to retreat for the same reason.

"So he'll commit forces against all three offensives," Juniper said. "He'll be going after that victory hard, because if he wins it and finishes the bridge he has a decent change of overrunning as far as southern Brabant before a defence can even be mounted. And when his armies are committed, his reserves emptied, then the fourth army – the one you kept back, kept quiet – take the Twilight Ways and hits the capital directly. While it's been stripped of defences."

My eyes narrowed as I stared hard at the map. It was a bold plan, it was true, but then that tended to be Juniper's preference. And the basics of it held up to scrutiny, I thought. Once the dead committed to the battles, once they sent their soldiers out, it would not be possible for them to be recalled in time. They'd have to race across broken terrain, often without roads, while we cut through with the Twilight Ways. The army that assaulted the capital would be taking a risk, but if it paid off... We could keep a strong garrison in Hainaut then send forces to hit the enemy in the back as they tried to hold off the army going up Julianne's Highway, taking the dead in a pincer. Victories there, which should ensue swiftly, would open the road to the capital and allow for supply lines to be established.

Hells, with the dead out west and east stuck defending fixed positions we might even not suffer too badly from raids on it.

"It could work," I admitted. "And the smaller armies would lessen the burden on our logistics a great deal. Mind you, that's also thrice as much supply line to defend."

"I'd wager they won't even raid, at the start," Juniper grunted. "Keter will want you in deep before striking, it won't want to risk spooking you. After that, well, that's what you've got all that Alamans horse for. It sures as Hells isn't to win battles."

I snorted. The Hellhound's enduring dislike of Proceran light horse continued to amuse. Especially since she'd several times suggested Callow acquire its own in the past, should we ever get the means. Juniper appreciated the value of light cavalry on the field, which was hardly surprising given her taste for winning by manoeuvre. It was just that she believed, and I tended to agree with her, that Alamans light horse was useless against most kinds of undead. Unlike Proceran peasants the skeletons wouldn't break and flee when charged at, and the riders just weren't armoured

heavily enough to withstand staying in melee long. As skirmisher, outriders and patrols they were still leagues better than anything else we had but given how many of them we had I'd have eagerly traded a few thousand for their equivalent in northern horse.

"It needs refinement," I said. "And I'll need to take it to the other commanders. But it sounds like the bare bones of a plan."

We didn't leave it at that, of course: I still had at least two hours before crippling headaches indisposed the finest general of my generation, and I intended to use every moment of them.

—

It was another five days until the delegation from Mercantis arrived at the Arsenal.

I was not part of those who received the six merchants lords led by an ambassador. Given the amount of gold the crown of Callow still kept in the city – from the coin the dwarves had paid me for my... mediation down in the Everdark – I'd been expected to, and my absence did not go unremarked. I left them to the First Prince, knowing that as long as I kept handing her such pretty hooks there were few fish she would not be able to catch. My hours were spent arranging the upcoming campaign, consulting both Vivienne and Juniper when I could and then taking those increasingly refined plans to the regular war council. Prince Klaus had his own notion of how the campaign ought to be conducted, but they were not incompatible so steady progress was being made.

After two days of being ignored, the diplomatic party from Mercantis realized that I had not the slightest intention of reaching out to them. They tried to arrange something through Cordelia, who to my great amusement 'declined to interfere in Callowan affairs', so when faced with that failure they finally took direct steps. It wouldn't be that easy, though. When the merchants sought an audience with me I passed them off to my designated heiress Lady Vivienne Dartwick instead as a calculated insult. They'd walked out of the room as soon as it was halfway polite to do so, Vivs told me afterwards. Good. I wanted them angry: anger would dull their edge, and dullards was what I wanted to deal with. The letter I received from Cordelia that evening was short and unsigned, but undoubtedly hers.

They want you at the table, the First Prince said. *They want something from you. Anger them further.*

It was heartening to see that these days Hasenbach knew me well enough not to even doubt my ability to infuriate other people. I was no noble, and I was hardly a deft hand at the games of those born to that station, but when it came to giving slights it must

be said that I was rather well learned. I sent a messenger to arrange a meeting with the head of their delegation, Ambassador Livia – making sure her name was misspelled, a detail as petty as it was personally satisfying – but sent Lady Henrietta Morley as the Callowan representative. Vivienne's secretary was known as a lady as a courtesy title, as while she was the heiress to Harrow she had no lands of her own, and she held no formal position in my court. I was later told that sheer disbelief that she'd be snubbed this way had Ambassador Livia stick around for nearly half an hour before she left in a fury. I received a formal letter of complaint about my rudeness from the Mercantians, and without missing a beat responded by handing it over to Archer so that she could do a theatrical reading of it in the meal hall.

Indrani got a few Alamans priests to sing as a background chorus while she declaimed it in the style of epic poetry, which I thought was a nice touch. It was the little pleasures that made life worth living.

I knew Hasenbach had read them perfectly when they *still* tried to get me in a room after that. Mercantis officially requested an audience with the high officers of the Grand Alliance, to speak of the large loans it had extended over the war effort, but to my amusement this time I didn't even have to do a thing. Lord Yannu flatly refused to have the matter considered a Grand Alliance one, since neither Levant nor Callow had taken loans. So what was it that Mercantis wanted from me sorely enough they'd suffer repeated insults and still try to have talks? The merchants lords of the City of Bought and Sold were a proud lot, and not afraid to make their displeasure known when provoked. Whatever it was they wanted, they must want it *very badly*.

The following day I threw in another slight for good measure, requesting that they be contained to lesser parts of the Arsenal while war councils were held through the Mirage, and it must have done the trick because that afternoon I got another letter from Hasenbach. *They want Cardinal*, it said. *Owned or buried*. It took me, I had to admit, almost entirely by surprise. But it shouldn't have, looking back. A neutral city at the crossroads of Calernia, whose neutrality would be backed by several realms and a treaty binding Named? It was a natural rival for Mercantis, who would still benefit from the ease of transport over lake and rivers but lose out in most other regards. Cardinal would be, to the Consortium, the death knell of their influence.

It would do worse than destroy them, in their eyes: it'd make them just another of the Free Cities, another squabbling city-state the great powers would run roughshod over with little consequence.

"Owned or buried," Vivienne repeated.

I'd shown her the letter before consigning it to flame.

"Buried begs no explanation," I grunted. "So long as the Red Flower Vales remain a fortified border instead of a city, Mercantis is still presumably the main trading partner for Callow."

Trade with Procer had, even back in the days of the Fairfaxes, never been widespread. It'd been mostly restrained to luxuries, and even that much had died after the Conquest when Praes shut down the borders. Mercantis' days of influence over my home were soon to disappear anyway, though. Even if Cardinal never saw the light of day, I intended on seeing peace between Callow and Praes: my homeland's grain would start heading east instead of downriver, and the need for a middleman starkly decline.

"Owned is trickier to ascertain," Vivienne frowned. "The land for Cardinal will have to be ceded by Callow and Procer, so they can't possibly think to buy it. At a guess, they want control of the trade in the city."

I slowly nodded. It made sense. The concessions needed for the Consortium to have such a stranglehold would probably involve privileges granted by laws and treaties, which they could not help to secure without Callow's assent. They had leverage on Procer given how it was in debt to them – though thanks to Cordelia's caginess they likely didn't realize quite how *badly* indebted the Principate was – but they had little they could realistically strongarm me with. The Callowan gold in the vaults had been placed there by the Kingdom Under, so they couldn't do a thing there without angering the dwarves. That left pretty much only threats to sabotage the finances of the war effort as a whole. After all, while the defensive fleet of Mercantis meant it would be hard to attack militarily the city had so few mercenaries left to call on at the moment that the thought of it attacking Callow with any degree of success was laughable.

"So we know what they want," I grunted. "And why, at least in part. Now we move on to the trickier parts."

We had their aim and their angle of attack. In a sword fight that would be enough for any halfway decent blade to settle the match, but diplomacy was not so clear-cut. Hasenbach would have sweet-talked them into a degree of trust towards her, by now, since she was good at being mannerly and they believed they had a knife at her throat. The nature of this game was that the First Prince just wanted to settle this to everyone's satisfaction – but mostly Mercantis' – while the Black Queen was just being the worst sort of ruffian. Catherine Foundling, right? What a wench. Have another cup of wine, ambassador, and tell me more about what you want so that I might help you get it. No, on the silk glove side I considered us to be well handled. It was the steel I'd have to bring to bear, and that was more delicate than you might expect.

Too much steel and you had a fight on your hands, too little and they shrugged you off. There was an art to it.

"It can't be anything physical or provable," I mused. "Else we'll have a legitimate diplomatic incident on our hands."

My being a prick to their diplomats wasn't that, even if they liked to pretend otherwise. I was in no way obligated to grant them an audience if I didn't feel like it, though after my slights if the shoe was ever put on the other foot they'd be perfectly within their rights to humiliate me just as publicly.

Assaulting the diplomats, though, would be something altogether graver. It'd soil my reputation, Callow's and push them closer to Malicia.

"Don't forget the Tower will likely have a man or woman in the diplomatic party," Vivienne pointed out.

I didn't bother to say that we couldn't prove that, since even if I had doubts that Malicia had outright subverted one of the merchant lords into her service I had no doubts whatsoever that she'd bribed at least one to spy on her behalf. There was a reason they'd been brought in through a fake location and kept blindfolded through the translations. So the enemies to beat here were fear and greed, I thought. Fear of being left behind by the world that would rise from the fall of Keter, greed for gold and influence and power over others. I didn't have the know-how to craft an acceptable settlement deal with Mercantis, but that wasn't to be my role here anyway: the First Prince would see to that end of it. My part was forcing the merchant lords to back down from their ambitions, so that Hasenbach could slide in and offer them that alternative.

"So it will," I murmured back, then shook my head. "I need to talk to Masego."

Vivienne cast me a wary look.

"Why?"

"Because he knows the wards of this place inside out," I said.

Including those protecting the diplomatic quarters where our friends would be sleeping.

"Make it known to the First Prince I'll need a few days," I told Vivienne.

I did not insult her intelligence by specifying this should be done secretly. It was important that she and I not be seen to be collaborating, as part of our strategy rested on the appearance of us being at odds. If I was out of control, Cordelia could not be asked to prevail upon me with sweet reason. Why, I was trouble

for her as well! I'd wager some of them would suspect something was going on, but the cordial working relationship between Hasenbach and myself wasn't exactly public knowledge. And it couldn't be denied that my stint as the Queen of Winter had left me with a... reputation. I was not above using that, if it came down to it.

"I'll handle it," Vivienne said, then cocked her head to the side.

She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"What for?" she asked. "The days, I mean."

I hummed, considering.

"Best you don't know," I finally decided.

"That reprehensible?" she asked, brow rising.

"It's better for the both of us if you keep your hands clean," I patiently said. "You know that."

She breathed out, as if gathering patience of her own.

"I know you're trying to smooth the path of succession," Vivienne said, "but this is getting out of hand, Cat. I don't need to be protected."

"A lot of your appeal as a queen will be that you're made of paler cloth than me," I bluntly replied. "It would be counterproductive for you to start tainting your reputation."

"I ran with you for years as the Thief," she said. "That ship has sailed."

"You also fought in a rebellion against Praes," I pointed out. "Look, Vivienne, I didn't pick your name out of a hat. I can trust you to take care of our home, and I respect your ideals. But we have to be practical about how this gets done or there's going to be trouble. I'm a warlord with no real claim to the throne, and you're deriving your legitimacy from the howling void that is mine. If this is going to hold without a civil war, you need to be popular enough no one wants to fight you. That means sometimes you'll have to be distanced from necessary evils so your reputation stays clean."

"There's no one else here, Cat," Vivienne calmly said. "For whose watching gaze are we doing this distancing?"

My irritation mounted.

"If you're not going to be involved, there's no reason for you to know," I said.

"To give advice," Vivienne said. "To provide a second pair of eyes. To make suggestions. Unless you no longer consider me fit to serve these purposes."

"I didn't say that," I sharply replied.

"I know," she said. "But you've been using this as a reason to take a step back from me, Catherine. For some time now."

That sounded like an accusation, even if she'd tried to make it otherwise. It was also infuriatingly vague.

"What are you saying, exactly?" I asked, frowning.

"That it would be natural if it stung," Vivienne delicately said, "that even after all you have done, since the truth about Diabolist has been known, there are some among our countrymen who would rather see me reign than-"

My fingers clenched.

"Enough," I cut in. "*Enough*. We are not talking about this."

She looked at me, and it burned that Vivienne looked not angry but instead tired and a little sad.

"We will have to, sooner or later," she replied.

"I have actual real problems to deal with, Vivienne," I told her through gritted teeth as I rose to my feet. "Instead of... whatever this is. Handle what I asked you to."

I didn't wait for an answer. I left the room limping, headed for Masego and the answers he'd have for me.

It felt like fleeing.

laguz24

Mercantis, the city that bought and sold it's way into irrelevance. Also, alienating your friends cat that is not a good idea.

Ninestrings

I've figured out Cat's new Name.

The Troll Queen.

naturalnuke

The bards most insulting play; trying to settle Cat with the Name of Fool.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah. Most of Callow isn't happy about Akua still being up and around. That's ... probably going to cause other problems down the road. Actual problems, rather than just grumbling and Cat not wanting to talk about it.

It makes sense that Mercantis would be worried about Cardinal. On the other hand ... Cardinal is going to be landlocked, while Mercantis isn't. Cardinal is definitely going to be a major center of power, but it is not exactly in the best location for a major continental trading center. Although, with the Accords, Mercantis might not be as necessary for being an intermediary between Praes and the nominally Good-aligned nations.

dadycool

That is a good point, with Mercantis being an easy water route, but Cardinal is going to be the main trade, etc, route across the mountain range, isn't it?

[Javvies](#)

Yes and no.

As I intend it, Cardinal is going to be in the Red Flower Vales, more or less.

That is, the traditional, and formerly only, point to reliably cross the mountains between Procer and Callow.

There is now also the Stairway, that the Alliance burned through the mountains for the northern invasion of Callow.

The Stairway is likely to be better for transportation, considering it was made to provide passage for an army, and presumably doesn't have sudden elevation changes.

The Vales are mostly naturally formed and are a well known choke point, plus have been fortified to prevent easy travel, plus had half a mountain dropped on one of the passages.

At any rate, Cardinal is likely to be a regional land trading center, between nearby principalities of Procer and Callow, and probably a center for magical reagents and components for magical workings, because of the school. And information, that's going to be a commodity in Cardinal as well.

But Mercantis is basically a Calernian equivalent of late medieval to Renaissance Venice, I think. At least in terms of waterborne trading potential.

agumentic

The Stairway is too up north, far away from any rich places. And it's simply not wide enough to sustain major trade through it. The Proceran attack was never intended to be constantly supplied, they had to reach a big city on what they had or starve. So I expect the Stairway to end up largely irrelevant in the aftermath.

Mercantis would still have advantage over Cardinal in the matters of normal trade, but that normal trade is only a part of its influence, maybe not even a majority. Cardinal is going to have more legitimacy because it will be backed by all major crowns of Calernia, which means it will be seen as better place for all diplomatic matters, and its financial institutions such as banks will be more trusted as well. Involvement of other power on the high level and constant movement of people in and out of positions will mean more opportunities for intrigue. It will have all the mage academies, which means that's not only rare reagents but all strange artefacts Mercantis now sells in its private auctions seen in Archer's Extra Chapter are going to end up. Last but not the least, there will be a lot of Named there, which means it's going to attract influence and narrative significance just because of that. So, Mercantis is not wrong to be worried.

caoimhinh

There's also the matter of Cardinal is supposed to be the equivalent of the U.N, so it's gonna have A LOT of relevance and influence as the neutral ground where representatives of all nations on Calernia can gather, which was to a certain degree a position that Mercantis had, as it has been shown in previous chapters that they served as intermediaries for trade between the Free Cities, and also between Praes and Procer.

Jago

The Starway is a military road burned by brute force on the flanks of an impassable mountain very rapidly with a limited energy source in a short span of time. Almost certainly it has sudden elevation changes, as it was made the point where the width of the mountain chain was the smallest. Probably it is something like this: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Boldo_Pass.

That is a military road built by the Austro-Hungarian army in a hundredth day in 1918.

hakureireimu

I think the Cardinal will be in the Twilight Way, as the Arsenal proved that you can have permanent settlement in a fae realm long term.

Konstantin von Karstein

I doubt it, logistically it would be too complicated. And one of Cardinal's goal is too prevent war between Procer and Callow. With a neutral and very important city protected by all GA members between the 2 countries, the only way to invade is through the Stairway, which is at most 20 meter width.

[Javvies](#)

On what basis do you derive that width for the Stairway?

As far as I remember, nothing specific was said about its width other than it was big enough to efficiently move an army through.

And presumably it's a relatively smooth, fairly level (or at lowest only gradually sloping), more or less straight shot though the mountains.

Besides ... even if you're right and it's only 20m wide, that's still wide enough to allow for a multiple lane route in both directions of travel.

Konstantin von Karstein

From the second chapter of the 4th book: « It was difficult to put a finger on the exact size of the passage from this perspective, but I'd gauge as broad enough for two large carriages to pass simultaneously without getting too close.»

It could be use for commerce, but if remember correctly northern Callow is much poorer and with less things to trade, so Cardinal will still be a greater trade hub, even without counting all the raw materials the mage schools will need.

And I was giving the width to demonstrate that it would be in Callow's interest to put Cardinal in the Red Flowers Vale, so the only way possible for an invasion of Callow by Procer is the Stairway, a ridiculously defensible position.

[Javvies](#)

Oh, good catch. Still, I'd assume that it's basically a high quality roadway by virtue of being burned out of the solid rock. And then any improvements necessary for an army to use it, first by the Crusaders, and then Juniper probably had Pickler and the sappers review it for any needed improvements when the Army of Callow moved into Procer.

Yeah, the Stairway is going to be ludicrously easy to fortify, and ridiculously hard to force if defended.

On the other hand, the Vales are also easily defended and difficult to force.

That said, Cardinal is going in the Vales for multiple reasons, not just putting a neutral party as a buffer in between Procer and Callow. Though that is a rather nifty side benefit.

[Liliet](#)

I think Arsenal is going to end up part of Cardinal, but there will be a Creational part, too.

Abrakadabra

Or alternatively, the Arsenal will have several entrances, in the vicinity of each capital. If it is possible?

[Liliet](#)

It might, but it's likely to be administratively subordinate to/part of Cardinal.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

We know for sure that it will be on a mix of formerly Callowan land and formerly Proceran land, ceded to it by both nations.

Darkening

Sure, it's landlocked, but the more gates they get up for the twilight ways, the more irrelevant ships get as a trade method. When people can outrun ships with carts and without any risk of storms sinking their cargo I imagine that will shift trade lanes dramatically. Wonder if the twilight ways have oceans or if you can just walk to ashur?

[Javvies](#)

The Twilight Ways are limited ... most merchants aren't going to be mages, after all. And Permanent gates are massively limited in who can make them and how many can be made.

Xinci

Actually, they may have had a good point, all you need to activate a gate is an offering of blood. Given the ways seem quite amendable to travelers and nomads they might actually be a great avenue for regular trade.

Madover

In my head the reason as to why Mercantis is afraid of Cardinal is not the loss of trade per say but power.

Cardinal offers something that the merchant lords don't like and that is a reliable option for trade between nations that is neutral on the good/evil and thus can negotiate with both and they have the hypocritical benefit of not dirtying their hand by negotiating directly with a hated nation.

That would destroy Merchantis capacity to unilaterally dictate and enforce terms of trade with all nations as now there is an alternative aka competition something they never really had, most of the raw resources come from the big kingdoms like procer and callow, so with Cardenal they can reliably trade ignoring the city estare which only source of income and influence at a international level is trade, so with competition the merchant lord cannot just look down rulers as their displeasure would not mean a economic crisis or collapse of the hated party.

Liliet

So there'll be a limited amount of Permanent Gates, sure. Put one in each major trade center – which are big cities where a lot of things are going to be happening and there's a great many reasons to put a gate – and that's all you really need for Twilight to be a trade route medium.

Anyone who has blood can open them.

iLissuin

It doesn't matter that Cardinal is landlocked if it controls the Twilight Ways after the war. It would become a trading center without peer. It could move goods from any two places in Calernia faster than Mercantis could ever dream to do so.

Miles

I hate to say it but Cat is taking on even more nonpractical villain flags in this chapter. Maybe that's the name influence but either way it's something she needs to get a handle on if she wants to live. Sarah O'Connor

Liliet

I don't think it's Name influence, just the same psychological fraying that had her leave the frontlines.

TheCelestialEquation

But it will be a center of magical learning, so normal trade route tendencies will probably go out the window!

Javvies

That only goes so far. And only for certain categories of goods.

Cardinal will likely be a de facto center for magical and/or alchemical components; and information. It'll import things like luxury goods and paper/parchment.

But I don't think it'll really be a physical center of many trading routes.

I don't think Cardinal is going to be very useful for Praesi looking to import grain from Procer, for example. Maybe a deal gets worked out there, but the actual route the grain travels will probably not go through Cardinal, and will probably be more or less what it was before the Crusade got in the way of commerce, which would be by water.

Deals might get worked out in or through Cardinal, but I suspect that most of the physical trade routes, especially for large mass or bulky items won't go through Cardinal, unless they're starting from and/or going to places in the surrounding regions (that is, nearby in Callow or one of the close Proceran Principalities).

dadycool

Juniper's plan is getting way too much screentime. It's one thing to give vague details so they know what the other is talking about, but she's a known liability and sort-of leak. Her plan is definitely either what one of their enemies wants them to do, or it's not going to survive five minutes.

Cat can be quite the bitch. Way to good-cop-bad-cop with Cordelia. Maybe Mercantis will finally feel the pressure of real competition soon.

Interesting conversation between Cat and Vivienne. I wonder if Viv understands that the throne was an unexpected side-effect of Cat's plan to improve Callow lawfully. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think Cat ever really wanted to be queen, just a position where she could make the lives of the common Callowan better. Disposing of the crown would probably be a relief when all is said and done.

Liliet

Juniper is not a leak. The Grey Pilgrim had cleared out what the Empress had put into her head, that's the entire reason for the headaches now.

Catherine + Cordelia cooperation is A+.

Just because the crown was an unexpected side effect and Catherine doesn't actually want it long-term, doesn't mean it wouldn't be nice if people APPRECIATED her in this role. It is, in fact, perfectly natural for it to sting, and Vivienne has hit the nail on the head sounds like.

It's not an "actual cross purposes" thing, it's an injured pride thing, and you cannot really reason with it.

It's really fucking sad that the way Catherine is handling it is isolating herself =x

Darkening

She may not want it, but Vivienne is likely right that it hurts that people don't want *her* even after all shes done and sacrificed for them.

agumentic

I don't think that the reverse of the Unspoken Plan Guarantee would apply here. This is more of a description of a plan in a heist movie – we need to know what the plan is so we can understand what the hell is going on and what is the objective in the first place. So while things won't happen precisely as planned and there's a room left for wild improvisation in the climax, the general skeleton of a plan and its objective will remain as described. In a way, the story and the reality here are the same – plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.

Liliet

This, yeah.

Note how after the basic outline of multiple armies and the routes they will take it goes back to "and then we discussed details". The screentime was given to the basic info without which we the readers would be utterly lost as to who what where at all as things happen.

dadycool

OK, yeah. Usually, the plan is a voiceover detailing what we're currently seeing the thieves doing, complete with the mastermind turning to the next person and the POV doing the same, but that's hard to do in text form. I also see what you

and Liliet are talking about. The skeleton was sketched out, then the screen faded to black with a "now let's get serious."

tigerquoll

Typo thread

"The only thing more inconvenient than being part of an alliance is not being part of it."

– Not being part of one?

They were brave and hardy fighters, I meant not disrespect there, but they weren't disciplined.

I meant no disrespect there/ I meant not to disrespect them there (probably the former).

tigerquoll

It was important that she and I not be seen to be collaborating, as part of our strategy rested on the appearance of us being at odds.

As part of our strategy.

Juff

but they were typically > they were typically

As skirmisher > As skirmishers

perfectly > perfectly

mustwant > must have wanted

ascertain," Vivienne > ascertain." Vivienne

[Liliet](#)

I think it's meant as "not being part of it", as in "an alliance exists but you're not in it".

Abakadabra

Exactly. It is fine to not be in an alliance, until the other players have no alliance either. But if an alliance exist, not being part of it can be bad.

In todays terms, it is fine to not be part of trade agreements with other countries, until there are no trade agreements at all. For example if I was Russia, it is desirable to be for me to be part of the EU. But if it is not possible to be part of it, Than it is better for me to destroy the EU, than being excluded from it. If it is also not possible, than I will make my own union with whoever I can lure in. (That strategy led to the conflict between EU and Russia which culminated in the ukanian crysis btw.)

[Liliet](#)

thanks for the insightful explanation of that one -_-

Abrakadabra

You are welcome, wether You want it or not. 😊

[Liliet](#)

To clarify: I'm Ukrainian. I come to this website specifically to NOT discuss the war directly to the south of me.

Also, there's like half a dozen other reasons for it, all of which suck and aren't relevant here.

Abrakadabra

Sorry.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think there was also the fear that a pro-EU Ukraine would endanger the Russian fleet's base in Crimea.

[Liliet](#)

This is definitely a great place for this discussion! 😊
😊 😊

Agent J

Coward.

Xinci

Ah, I was surprised Cat may have felt stung by them not wanting her as Queen once her methods came to light but with more thought it makes sense. She gets attached quite easily and has shown a pattern of distancing herself when she knows things cant work out. In a narrative sense, it is necessary to distance herself from Callow and views that shape her as the "Black Queen", but it cuts her away from her roots. Everything she has done has been to safeguard Callow and improve its chances, and given her focus on results/practical methodology, supporting her results supports her views. It's a painful thing to leave all you knew and fought for, even if it's necessary.

This is even more important for someone who is narratively aware like Catherine, feeling your own people against you must sting for someone like her. Still, if she is to have a greater Name and a greater Role she needs to be more than that, and as such, she needs to be cut away from some of her former ties to get a Role that is more purely viewed by everyone.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

Catherine's sensitive to rejection and this is a pretty big one, considering it's all been for her homeland. She's basically martyring herself here, in the reputation + belonging way, and the emotional reaction to it not being pretty makes sense.

I hope she sorts out her attitude towards Vivienne, though.

[Liliet](#)

Oh Cat)=

Ouch.

[Burlyraven](#)

If Cat were a Hero, this would be a story in which she realizes she needs the power of friendship in order to win, and gets the band back together. Considering she's nominally a Villain, it's far more likely that the cracks that are showing now are only going to become fissures and canyons. Her story is showing too many signs of her taking the path towards being one of the dark and lonely Old Powers in whatever new world comes for me to think otherwise.

At the very least, there may be some very lonely times ahead, and soon.

thearpox23

Hey, maybe Akua actually does something redeemable by helping Cat through this, even at the cost to herself. It'd usually be Hakram helping Cat, and with Hanno's friendship semi-ruined, she really is the only one with the understanding and the ability to get through to her without being shut down.

dadycoool

Referring to her as an Old Power made me think of her as a Lovecraftian Old God. Depending on what kind of Name she develops, she might be anything from a crippled hermit (Old Toph stomped into my mindscape) to an Evil Galadriel in the new world that she will likely create and immediately get shunned from. If nothing else, she can party it up underground with the only people shorter than her.

[Burlyraven](#)

I was thinking more along the Old Toph lines, honestly. I just get the feeling that all paths from here (good, bad, and ugly) lead that way.

[Liliet](#)

I think the pacing is wrong for this to be cracks that will stick. Lots of minor conflicts have been accumulating in a way that feels like it's leading towards some resolution. And Guide's rhythm so far leads me to believe Catherine will find a new fairly positive equilibrium by the end of the book.

Tom

I agree. I mean, it's "A Practical Guide to Evil," not "A Sad Old Tale of Sad Villains Being Sad."

thearpox23

Historically, powerful trade centers had always had their magnates feel significantly less patriotic about their city than the regular folk. After a certain amount of wealth it becomes possible to settle anywhere, and so the bond to one's place of origin grows thinner. And whether or not Mercantis as a city gets any rights or benefits over the Cardinal, there is nothing stopping these Merchant Lords from being the first investors and businessmen in the newly found city.

Let their personal greed overpower their patriotism. Or at least that is how I expect the resolution to go.

caoimhinh

So... why don't they use the Twilight Ways for the supply lines?

Seems weird that half the issue with the strategy was that they needed the supply lines defended. I initially thought they couldn't gate that far due to some interference or due to the lack of scrying in the region, yet they can gate the fourth GA army to strike the capital from the back. Surely the supplies can arrive though a gate after the armies have settled in their respective positions?

The issue Cat spotted was that they couldn't *gate out in a retreat* since making the gates to enter so many people requires time and effort, but gating out requires no such thing, and they can also open smaller temporal gates for smaller groups of people, which the returning caravan now depleted of goods would be.

Then what's the issue? Using the Twilight Ways would provide safety for the caravan of supplies to each of the 3 or 4 locations of the armies, and not need to take as many guards as it would take if they use ordinary roads. Although they obviously

need to still have patrols around that area to scout for remnants of the undead armies, there's no need to risk their supplies walking those roads when they can just gate to the armies' camps.

SpeckofStardust

The three armies are moving front lines intended to be fighting the undead at every point, opening and closing gates constantly for the front to act as a supply line is likely going to go poorly as a full supply line in neither small or easy to use. they'd be able to do it if they weren't planning on being on the offensive for this entire campaign.. And even then the supplies don't all magically come from a single location that everything can start from.

[Liliet](#)

This.

[Liliet](#)

Only permanent gates can be used by non-Named non-mages, and they don't have the mages (let alone Named) to spare for supply lines.

Daniel E

I like the bit of info we got about the aftermath of Juniper's compulsion, though I'd expected we would have seen more about the Legions in Exile by now.

LizAris

Aw poor Cat...

On the other hand, no one pisses off diplomats quite like our Black Queen. Letting Archer do a reading from the ambassadors, from the city that enslaved her, is absolute genius. Drani definitely enjoyed that.

I don't think I'll ever get enough of Cat and Cordy working together. I bet Cordelia first put on the crown she never thought she'd have such a useful, and usefully rude, ally.

[Liliet](#)

00ooooh I missed the personal touch for Archer part. Fucking beautiful, wreck them Drani!

[308924810a](#)

So the discussion of two thirds of the Brabantine Proceran troops being green as grass makes me think that EE needs to remember that he's just also said these guys have been at war for two

years.

Either this is a now-unjustified reputation based on early showings, or the author is forgetting the time skip.

Mercantis should be easy to attack through the Twilight Ways, and unlike Keter they don't have enough forward-deployed forces capable of pressuring defences to be able to divert armies from a deep strike on their city.

Finally, my understanding of the logistics situation is that it was physically impossible to field a force of more than two hundred fifty thousand in antiquity (and then only when you had a waterborne supply route), and that's more or less the size estimate for the force that Persia invaded Greece with. And that Napoleon was able to figure out that by splitting his army of hundreds of thousands into parallel columns of no more than fifty thousand each he could speed up the pace of requisition of food from villages along the path of March, reducing the time spent on that and the strain on his supply chain in order to speed up the march. Unfortunately this trick is much less effective if all of the villages along the path of advance are dead.

However the Twilight Ways completely change the logistics equation, my understanding of them is that for anyone who can open a gate all of the trade and agriculture hubs on the continent are maybe a week's travel away, so it actually makes more sense for an army to march united and fight divided than it does to march divided and fight united. By which I mean that they all stay together while on the move so it's easier to get supplies to everyone through Twilight, then they either take the time to crush fortresses along their path, or they split off enough of a force to siege them and keep on going with the main body of their force if they're so concerned about giving the enemy more time to prepare for their arrival.

Once every target fortress is circumvalated with inward and outward facing palisades and is beyond easy reinforcement the amazing marching speed advantage of Twilight allows them to either crack the places one by one, or else reinforce the siege forces when they realize the dead are marching to relieve a particular siege.

Twilight means that normal difficulties with reuniting divided forces, with denying battle to an enemy you see coming and want to retreat from well before he gets in range, with supplying truly massive forces in the field, and with fortresses in your rear providing basing for attacks on your supply train, do not apply.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

With regards to the green troops I don't know if it's that inconsistent. They're specifically noted to be conscripts which means that even with training they might not have the build or

the mindset to be soldiers in better times. Not everyone is cut out for that. Combine that with the fact that their morale is known to be inconsistent and it's entirely possible that they've been mostly deployed defensively or as Garrison's, in such a way that they haven't accumulated much experience against anything but Neshemah's dregs.

mavant

Can you say more about the impossibility of fielding a single force above some size bound? I don't quite follow that part. It seems like the bound would be mostly on flow rate of goods through the supply train, right? Is the implication that by splitting an army you can use more separate routes to supply it and thus have more supplies per unit time? If so, then does the 250k number imply something about an assumption of the throughput for a standard ancient road?

mamm0nn

Reading these plans made me actually realise something incredibly troublesome: we've seen but the reliable basis of the Dead King's might. The Dead King can also summon and control demons and devils, as should be obvious by power, age and him being the first to create a permanent Breach. He's currently going full undead theme, but he could potentially summon a host of devils against that fourth army if they try to corner him this way.

More troublesome, right now he's going slow and steady. If he summons demons, they can corrupt his undead with no problem to morale and likely strengthening them instead, though they do become more unwieldy to handle. Possibly requires him to make one-way feedback undead to not get corrupted through the connection himself, too.

But right now, we're looking at the Dead king leisurely and safely going about this. If he were to be truly cornered he could demon things up and Calernia is dealing with twisted undead running rampant instead. Probably doesn't do that right now, as it would corrupt and wreck the regions he takes and has a risk of backlash when those more difficult to control forces may turn around. But when there's true risk and resistance...

[Liliet](#)

Well, that's what all these heroes are for! One in particular managed to all but solo 8 demons with only one getting away recently! Where was he anyway-

-oh. Oh yeah.

mamm0nn

True, but as we've seen in Book 2 the demon is indeed very powerful but their regional effects being allowed to fester amongst a group of people is a league above that. Named cannot just negate massive numbers, and demons given a few days can make an entire army. Why the corruption demon didn't also have an entire army of corrupted squirrels and deer at the time, I don't know, but when it appeared a thousand Silver Spears didn't even have the time to run away fast enough before they were corrupted pretty much entirely.

[Liliet](#)

Maybe it does require a sentient base to work with, and horses count because they're specifically mounts for people?

Consider: corrupted bugs 😊

[Javvies](#)

Could be a minimum threshold requirement for one or more factors – ie, size/mass, intelligence or other mental qualities, or maybe you need a soul, or any number of other possible factors. Either to be affected in the first place or, perhaps more likely, in order to survive the process.

Or the horses got Corrupted because they were in physical contact with their human riders as the humans got Corrupted.

The horses might not normally have “survived”, if they weren't being used as mounts when they got exposed to Corruption.

Or maybe the horses didn't actually survive to merge with their riders, maybe the horses died and their corpses got absorbed and merged with their riders. This could be an explanation if a soul is required as a buffer or sacrifice for a subject to be transformed by or survive exposure to the Corruption infection.

At any rate, the Dead King really doesn't want a Corruption demon anywhere near his undead. Remember, all his undead are magically linked to him, which means that Corruption could potentially transfer through that link from the exposed undead to him, if he can't permanently sever the link quickly enough. And I rather suspect that's far too great a potential risk for him to even consider running. I expect that he'd instantly sever links with, if not have self destruct, all of his undead in the area if he learned they were anywhere near a Corruption demon.

[Liliet](#)

i thought about the 'merged with their riders' option but there was a separate horse the demn was in

and yeppppppppp re: DK also running risks with demons

Javvies

That was the Demon itself, not just the aura effect.

I suspect the Demon itself has fewer limits and more flexible options than its passive aura, especially if it's actively choosing to do something.

The difference between sunlight and sunlight focused through a magnifying glass. Normal sunlight is like the passive aura, the Demon choosing to do something like focusing that sunlight through a magnifying glass. The latter can be used to start a fire ... the former is just unfocused power.

Liliet

Mm, yeah, that's also a very plausible explanation.

Either way, we DO have precedent for horses being the only non-sapient being Corruption worked on. Note how Marchford's still inhabited: with people hidden away, it seems the streets etc didn't retain any.

Liliet

*sapient, not sentient. Goshdarned terminology.

Javvies

Eh ... I feel like the Dead King popping devils and demons would just end badly for everybody. Including him.

I mean, that's the kind of thing that could actually convince or drive people to summon Angels in order to counter (or at least seriously consider the option), despite the risk of Bard interfering ... and he knows that Bard can interfere with Angelic manifestations, and likely has no interest in risking Bard interfering with an Angelic manifestation.

Oh, sure, if he limits himself to summoning devils, nobody will risk Angel's. So devil spamming is probably still on the table, but devils are relatively manageable.

Also, I'm pretty sure he knows that Cat has Akua on a leash.

For some reason, I think any sort of plan relying on devils or even demons against the side with the person who was(is?) Named Diabolist isn't going to go very well.

Plus, between Akua and Masego, they'll know basically everything about devil's and demons that the Empire every

discovered ... which probably includes stealing the information that the rest of Calernia discovered as well.

Besides, they're seriously off brand for him.

mamm0nn

Don't underestimate devils. Masego or Akua on terrain of their choosing with a few days of prep, sure they can do a lot of damage. But that's wards and thresholds that devils and demons are weak against. When it comes to more direct damage, magical or otherwise, and more impromptu protections, then devils will take a lot more energy per devil to get rid off. An army of devils defensively summoned in Keter, Masego can do little against to turn the tides.

Akua's power of devils back when she had it, was that she ruled them by summoning them. That's as far as we know impossible for her to do to devils already in Creation without a lot of time and effort, as opposed to summoning the ledgers of devil names her city held which bind those devils to unbreakable pacts. Someone else's devils she would be a nice addition against, but not a tide turner. Pilgrim and other heavy hitters will do more in that fight.

Demons, that one as I said before is more if the Dead King is ever really cornered or threatened even mildly. He won't risk the demons when there's no real need for them because of what the demons are, the angelic retribution probably isn't that great a factor when he does fall back to them.

laguz24

What can't he stand to lose? Nessie is a long term planner and player, he doesn't summon devils and demons because he did not create them also there is the story groove of evil diabolists failing and demon summoning is a one way ticket to failure or him becoming unstoppable which means a story based defeat. No he wants to keep himself beatable so the heroes don't get providence shoving them all the way to the happy ending.

mavant

In B4 Cordelia invents the concept of soft dollar fees to appease mercantis

~~in B4 Cordelia retires to start the first hedge fund~~

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Chapter 42: Castigation

"Do not look down on fear, my friend: it is the rare case of a voice in your head actually helpful to your survival."

– Dread Empress Prudence, the 'Frequently Vanquished'

I'd seen some profoundly beautiful things over the years. I sometimes liked to remind myself of that when the bad days came. I'd seen the first breaths of Liesse reborn under twilight, the peace born of a good man's sacrifice. I'd walked the ancient cities of the Everdark, where flowers lit up the dark and poetry paved the streets as a riot of colours claimed the rooftops. I'd been hosted in the finest palaces of Salia, felt a storm sweep over me from the heights of the Tower and strolled through the mad bazaar at the heart of Skade. I'd even glimpsed the last glory days of Sephirah, before death came for it. I'd seen wonders enough to fill two lifetimes, and perhaps before I died I might see yet a few more. It felt good to remember that, to believe that.

But I'd known terrors the likes of which few could fathom, too, and it was those I would be calling on for this kind of work.

There was no lack of them to draw from. Black had preferred. I recalled, to use fear as a watchman's cudgel: sparingly, measuredly, and always bluntly. He'd seen it as a tool, and not a particularly good one. But while my father had been my first teacher, he'd not been the only one. I'd learned from the Empress and the Diabolist, exemplars of the most horrifying Wasteland virtues, and then from even harsher creatures. The King of Winter and his patient, farsighted cruelties. Shrouded Sve Noc, a godhead born of fear and blood and kept hallowed through the same. Even the Dead King had, in his own way, been a teacher: you could not fight such a monster as long as I had without learning some of its ways. And so, honouring those many tutelages, I set to crafting horror.

I began with the smell.

Death had a particular reek to it. It came to the aftermath of battles along with the rest of the carrion, that stench of blood and shit and steel – with the rotting of flesh never far behind, even as the crows gobbled up the dead and flies burrowed into the flesh. I drew from the Doom, from the Battle of the Camps, but it wouldn't be enough. Death come to a city wasn't quite the same, even before stone and flesh began to burn green. A hint of the

Hierarch's madness spread through the streets of Rochelant, red hate bleeding out of every pore, and more from the burning blaze of green that'd begun at my very feet and devoured a fourth of Summerholm. All this I wove together and made my own, then slipped into the sleeping mind of Ambassador Livia Murena.

Her sleeping self sunk into the dark and gave me my opening: a glimpse of the winding streets and beautiful avenues of Mercantis. Night coursing through my veins like a river, eyes closed as I cut myself off from my senses and skimmed around the edge of the wards protecting the ambassador just the way Hierophant had taught me, I smiled and sunk my teeth into the older woman.

I began with murder. Livia Murena felt warm blood splash her face as a drow in the colours of the Losara opened the throat of a man with an obsidian blade. The ambassador screamed and stumbled away, wiping away with her hands and finding them soiled red. There was no relief to be found away from the drow. She turned the corner into an avenue only to find it burning green, legionaries dragging people out of houses and butchering them in the streets, eyes cold and hands steady. Livia Murena ran, finding a large plaza with a sprawling marble fountain, but painted Levantines of the Brigand's Blood were there. Some amused themselves by drowning people, holding their heads under the water until the panicked scrabbling against the stone died, while others were pulling down a great statue with hammers and rope. Livia Murena let out a strangled sob, and as she did a painted warrior threw a barbed javelin at her that tore through the flesh of her shoulder.

Bleeding, in pain, she ran again.

She found only horror. Orcs tearing at the corpses of merchant lords with hungry fangs, armoured ogres smashing through villa gates to rip apart those huddling behind them, Taghreb and Soninke making bonfires of paintings and tapestries to roast the loot they'd ripped out of pantries over the corpses of their owners. Goblins made servants race only to shoot them in the back with crossbows, the drow blinded the young and let them bleed out screaming, jeering Callowans dragged entire families to the gallows to hang. Livia Murena wept but kept running until she found a tall house. Hers, I intuited, but it was not the house she sought. A wife, and though the face did not come to my mind's eye long blonde tresses and fair skin did. It was enough.

Green flames and heavy smoked filled the halls of Livia Murena's home as she raced through them and up, up the stairs and at the end of a too-long hallways where finally her great bedroom could be found. Relief as she found her wife standing there, besides the great canopy bed. *Cassia*, she exclaimed. With a crisp, resonating twang a coin went spinning. Livia Murena's eyes went

to it, spellbound, watched it rise and fall and land onto the open palm of the Black Queen, who had been sitting in the dark. The coin, shining gold, had landed on the side showing crossed swords.

"Do you believe in fate, Ambassador Livia?" I asked.

And before she could answer, her wife burned green. I drew on the screams from Three Hills, for that. I remembered those well. Cassia screamed and screamed and *screamed*, until mercifully she died. I met Livia Murena's eyes and smiled, thin and sharp like a blade slid between the ribs.

"Not the right answer," I told her. "Let us go again."

And we did.

Mercantis was put to the sword and the coin showed swords and Cassia burned.

"Not the right answer," I told the weeping ambassador. "Let us go again."

And we did.

And we did.

And we did.

Nott until dawn did I let her learn the lesson this had been meant to convey. Cassia burned, the screaming having grown more vivid as the sleeping ambassador filled the gaps, and Livia wept exhaustedly as she fell on her knees. Like an old friend I leaned forward, offering a girlishly mischievous smile.

"Fate's a trick, Livia," I told her, and showed her the coin.

It had the crossed swords on both sides.

"The only way not to fall for it," I said, gently smiling, "is not to flip the coin at all."

I left her dreams alone, after that, but she slept not a wink anyway.

—

I was in Hakram's infirmary room more often than my own quarters, or the offices made available to me — I'd pretty much handed those over to Vivienne — so it was there that messengers came to find me. It was the same with Archer, when she returned from the little errand I'd sent her on. I dipped my bread in the warm potage that was to be my morning meal, cocking an eyebrow at my friend.

"So?"

"Didn't drive her mad," Indrani replied, settling into the seat by my side, "but I'd bet it was a close thing."

I popped the bread into my mouth and chewed on my mouthful thoughtfully. I'd walked the line just fine, then. If I kept doing this for too long I'd probably break the ambassador, which wasn't the objective here, but I wanted at least one more night of this. Once could be dismissed as a fluke, but twice? Twice was a warning.

"What'd she look like?" I asked when I'd swallowed.

"Exhausted and twitchy," Indrani said. "You really didn't pull your punches there."

"She needs to be more scared of me than she is of Malicia," I replied, "and if we're to get through this without Mercantis trying to blackmail the Grand Alliance, then I need that fear deep enough in the bone that they know *exactly* what the consequences of that would be."

"Hey," Archer shrugged, "you know me – I could care less if you want to turn the lot of them into gibbering wrecks. I'm just surprised it's the two of us alone having this conversation, I guess."

I threw her an unimpressed look. That had been less than subtle.

"If you have something to say, say it," I told her.

She sighed, passing a hand through her long dark hair. Unbound, today, and a little messy. It suited her.

"You been fighting with Vivienne?" she asked.

My fingers clenched. She noticed it, unpleasantly perceptive as she was.

"So that's a yes," Archer mused. "I'd ask you if you want to talk about it, but I don't think you've ever actually answered that question with a yes in your life."

"That's pretty rich, coming from you," I flatly said.

Our last tense heart to heart had required half a fistfight to get started. She looked more amused than offended, waving the reply away.

"Sort that shit out, Cat," Indrani said. "I won't try to use sweet reason with you, because Gods know the odds on that are steep-"

"Hey," I reproached.

"- but her sister cold-hearted logic will do," Indrani blithely continued. "It's too late for you to dismiss Vivienne from her place as your heiress: she's got support, and when it comes to us she knows where a lot of bodies are buried. So if you won't talk to her because she's your friend and you're being pissy for things not really her fault, then at least do it because otherwise you're being a pretty terrible queen."

I grimaced. Archer didn't really care about Callow except maybe in the sense that a lot of her stuff was there and it'd affect some people she cared about if it got destroyed, but that didn't mean she was unaware it was good angle to take with me. She wasn't wrong, at least, that I couldn't just let this go forever.

"I don't like that I have to do things, now," I admitted.

Indrani's brow rose. I snorted.

"I mean that, when we disagree, I have to compromise with her now," I explained. "Not always, and not on everything, but it still irks that I have to do it at all. I gave her the title in the first place, and 'Drani it's not that I think she'd done badly with it, on the contrary-"

"But she's got power of her own now," Archer finished. "And she doesn't always agree with you."

"I can't just tell her to fuck off either, when we disagree," I tiredly said. "If I do that in public she'll lose a lot of support in the Army of Callow, and if she loses the Army there's a lot less dissuading nobles from taking a swing at the crown down the line."

It wouldn't be a sure thing, and I was doing my best to polish her military record so that she'd have some reputation with the soldiers, but at the end of the day Vivienne just didn't get on with them the way that I did. On occasion I'd taken some petty satisfaction in that, given how the nobility made no qualms of its preference for her and more people back home that I was comfortable with shared that opinion, but it was a hollow thing to embrace. After putting her in that position in the first place, how much of a prick would I have to be to relish her difficulties? It wasn't a minor matter, either. There weren't Dartwick household troops for Vivienne to call on, she had no personal holdings and most noble forces had either been abolished with their titles or curtailed under Imperial law. Within Callow, after the war it would be the army Juniper and I had built that'd stand as the largest amount of people with swords.

My banner had the sword weighing more than the crown on the balance for a reason.

"I bet it's like a burr in your boot that some of the folk back home like her better now," Indrani knowingly said.

I breathed out, keeping my face calm.

"I'm starting to get tired of hearing that," I evenly said.

She squinted at me.

"Yeah, that's about the face you would have made," Archer said. "And Viv's never been great at handling your moods, so now you two fine ladies are in snit. Lovely."

"It'll pass," I grunted.

"It'll pass when you have a drink with her and you spell it out," Indrani said. "But you already know that, Cat, you just don't want to do it. I'm guessing you'll get to it once you're done tripping over the pride you keep claiming you don't have."

I flipped her off, but without much heat, and she took it in stride.

"Go find out what the Mercantis delegation will do to proper up their defences after tonight," I said, having tired of this conversation the moment it began. "I want to know as soon as possible so I'll know how to get around it."

Another night of this, maybe two, and then I'd be ready for the talks. Even as she left, I began to consider the shape of the nightmare that would plague Livia Murena tonight.

It was not going to be any more pleasant than the last.

—

I'd let Hasenbach pick the room where, at long last, the diplomats would get their meeting.

I went to visit it beforehand though, to have a look at what I'd be working with. It was yet another hall from the seemingly endless supply of them the Arsenal had to offer, though this one was clearly not meant for meals. Multiple tables facing each other in half-circles, enough room between for servants to pass and no less than six ways in – as much for refreshments as the fetching of documents, I figured. Well lit, but with chandeliers and mage lights. I could work my way around both of those, I knew the tricks. It would do. I'd need to strike the right tone from the start, though. Come in alone and with not a thing in hand, when they'd be laden with attendants and papers.

I trailed a hand atop the smooth surface of the table, enjoying the grain of the wood, and frowned in thought. Ambassador Livia had only gone through another night of my tender attentions before

I – Archer – had judged her to be on the ragged edge. Not a faint-hearted sort, that one, but I suspected a great deal more used to doling out cruelty than suffering it. Part of me wanted to throw in another night just to be sure, but there would be risks to that: the protective amulets the ambassador had worn after the first time might not have been a match for Night paired with the Hierophant's eyes, but if the Mercantians asked for heroic protection this would get trickier. No, best to end it here.

Today, this very evening.

I napped through most of the afternoon, as using Night had been less than restful, and woke less than half a bell before we were due to hold the meeting. The clothes I was to wear were only of middling import, a simple grey tunic and matching trousers, but I made sure to wrap around myself the patchwork banners of the Mantle of Woe and set a jagged iron crown on my brow. With the last errand I'd asked of Indrani tucked away into my pocket and my dead staff of yew in my hand I limped to our appointed time, though with careful timing so that I would be the last to arrive. Not so late that it would be remarked upon, but just enough to be mildly insulting. The doors were opened for me by attendants, and even as my name and titles were announced I flicked an assessing glance at the people within.

That Cordelia Hasenbach had brought a number of scholars and secretaries was nothing unusual, but that she'd brought a full fifteen people with her was. She must have pieced together that she'd be handling the actual negotiations here mostly on her own. My gaze did not linger on them, instead moving to the delegation from Mercantis. Ambassador Livia Murena was easy to pick out from the rest: she sat at the centre, and her ostentatious gold and ivory chain of office was hard to miss. On the ivory medallion at the end of it thirty silver coins had been carved, the ancient crest of the merchant lords of the Consortium. Seven golden braids hung from her left shoulder, over a robe of deep blue silk that made it plain the ambassador was overweight.

Most of the diplomats were as well, for fat was considered a sign of wealth and power among the merchant lords of Mercantis. All wore blue silk and the seven braids denoting that they were here on the behalf of both Merchant Prince Fabianus and the Consortium itself – the prince's business could carry three braids of gold, and the Consortium's seven in silver, but only both in agreement could command the seven golden stripes – but for all the riot of bracelets and rings dripping from their arms and ears laden with and precious stones, no one save Ambassador wore anything around the neck. Each diplomat had an attendant standing behind them, all of them young and beautiful and utterly still. Mercantis did not practice slavery, it was said. Of the Free Cities, only Stygia still kept to that horror.

Yet Indrani had been raised a slave there, and called such, though no doubt if pressed her owner would have had papers proving it was mere bonded service. All very legal, nothing at all like slavery. That was the trick, you see: the 'servants' began with the debt of the sum it had cost to acquire them, and though they were paid for their work the roof and food they were provided cost them money. The debt increased, and the service continued until death – and then was passed onto children, for debts always carried in Mercantis. I kept that knowledge in mind, looking at the dark rings around Ambassador Livia's pale brown eyes that cosmetics did not quite manage to hide, and found that guilt never came for the torturous horror I'd put this woman through.

I'd done worse to people a great deal less deserving.

"Queen Catherine," the First Prince greeted me amiably. "I am glad of your presence."

"Your Majesty," Ambassador Livia said, tone even, "we are—"

"Let's wrap this up quickly, Your Highness," I interrupted, looking at Cordelia. "There's a war on, in case you forgot."

The ambassador was well-trained, so she did not betray her offence at the casually offered insult. It wouldn't be the first I'd thrown her way since this started.

"I assure you, Your Majesty, that I have not," the First Prince replied, eyebrows rising the faintest bit.

A warning to tone this down? No, I decided after a moment. She would have had other ways to reach me if restraint were called for. I slid into the seat at the edge of the part of the half-circle kept empty for myself and my delegation, seeing from the corner of my eye the dismay that flickered across some Mercantian faces when they realized I had come alone. That was not the mark of someone taking all this seriously. I drew lightly on the Night, softly, and wove a thread that slipped into the shadows beneath the table and to the side. It remained hidden, waiting. I leaned back into my seat, looking impatient, and waited for someone to speak.

"I must protest the insults you keep offering us, Queen Catherine," Ambassador Livia said. "Has the Consortium not been a generous and understanding ally? What have we done to earn such treatment?"

This was the part, I thought, where I was supposed to demur and weave and bob and all those little diplomatic dances. So we could keep talking in precise truths and pretty lies, keep this all civilized as we tried to a war of words just as dangerous as one of steel. I did not bother.

"Either you genuinely don't know the answer to that question," I said, "and speaking with you is a waste of time. Or you *do* know the answer to that question, and you are *still* wasting my time. Which is it, Ambassador Livia?"

Her face tightened for the barest fraction of a moment before going almost unnaturally slack. That one had stung, huh. I glanced at the First Prince, whose face was the very definition of polite serenity.

"Is this serious?" I asked.

"It is, Queen Catherine," Cordelia amiably replied, then half-glanced at the diplomats. "Though perhaps we should see to the purpose of this meeting, given the demands made by circumstance on all our hours."

Under the table, she traced with a finger a Y against the Night. Yes, it meant. I was not to keep pushing them, she wanted this to advance.

"That would suit as well," the man to the ambassador's side smoothly said. "If there are no further objections?"

An expectant gaze went to me. Ambassador Livia had regained her calm on more than a surface level, so it was her I replied to.

"By all means," I drily said. "The suspense has me all atwitter."

"Given information recently acquired by the Consortium, it has become necessary to revisit the matter of the loans extended to the Grand Alliance," the ambassador said.

N, Hasenbach's fingers traced against the table. I pushed back my chair and rose to my feet.

"There are no such loans," I flatly said. "As Lord Yannu Marave made exceedingly clear, I believe. This meeting is at an end."

She looked, to my faint amusement, genuinely surprised. For career diplomats, they really weren't catching on to this game quick. It wasn't that they were fools, I thought, but simply that they weren't used to so bluntly being *dismissed*. Mercantis might not be a power in the leagues of Praes or Procer, but it'd always been influential – and when crossed, it was not above spending coin to make its displeasure known.

"Perhaps the honourable ambassador refers to the loans extended to the Principate and its constituent principalities," the First Prince mildly said. "I am sure the unfortunate wording will be rectified, Queen Catherine, if you give the ambassador opportunity to do so."

I cocked a brow at the ambassador.

"We did not mean to imply that the Kingdom of Callow is indebted to the Consortium, Your Majesty," Livia Murena lied. "My apologies for the misunderstanding."

Barely refraining from rolling my eyes, I settled back into the seat.

"As was mentioned by our esteemed ambassador," the man at Livia's side said, pouty red lips offering up a smile, "the Consortium has learned of the particulars of Proceran debt. Given the almost... reckless borrowing practices that were used, doubts have been raised as to the capacity of the Principate of Procer to repay these debts."

"Gods Below and Everburning," I said, tone openly contemptuous. "You really are going to insist on being the Tower's borrowed knife, aren't you? No matter how many people warned me, I'd genuinely not believed that the Consortium would make that glaring a blunder."

"A hollow accusation," Ambassador Livia replied. "And one thrown very carelessly, I might add. There are limits to our tolerance, Queen Catherine."

Y, Cordelia wrote. I changed course, snorting in feigned amusement.

"You know what?" I mused, "Maybe you're right. I just *assumed* that you lot are going to try something as hilariously ill-advised as attempting to coerce an alliance that commands more soldiers on a single front than there are people in all of Mercantis. That was premature of me. Go on, then. Speak."

I thinly smiled.

"Prove me wrong," I said.

There was a beat of silence.

"We recognize the heroic contributions made by the Grand Alliance, and Procer in particular, to the safety of all Calernia," Ambassador Livia said. "It is why we have been so willing to extend loans, and at rates with little precedent. The Consortium will continue to support the war effort however it can, rest assured that this is not in doubt."

"That is most pleasing to hear," Cordelia mildly said. "His Grace Fabianus has reconsidered my request to expel the Praesi embassy, then?"

I smothered a grin. She had them there, considering Malicia was the Dead King's open – if rather lethargic – ally.

"The high court of the Consortium is debating such a measure, Your Highness," Ambassador Livia smiled.

"Indeed," Cordelia Hasenbach smiled back, just as pleasantly, "yet I recall hearing the debate was to be set aside indefinitely. Has this measure been revoked?"

"That is quite possible," the ambassador evaded. "Given the length of our journey here, our news are grown quite out of date."

"You were leading up to a 'but', Ambassador," I said. "Do get on with it, instead of insulting the intelligence of everyone in this room."

"While the Consortium remains firmly behind the war effort," Ambassador Livia said, tone aggressively calm, "given the financial troubles of the Principate and its extensive amount of loans it has been suggested that assurances must be sought. Else a collapse of Proceran commerce could feasibly, in the coming years, bankrupt Mercantis itself."

"A reasonable worry," the fair-haired princess replied. "I have pondered this issue myself, as it happens. The Highest Assembly is willing to sign a treaty guaranteeing a set portion of the taxes collected by the office of First Prince until the debts are settled. Would such an assurance be acceptable to you?"

Promising coin that had yet to be collected, huh. I supposed that was one way to make up for lack of revenue. Mind you, if Cordelia's eventually successor refused to pay up there honestly wasn't that much that the Consortium would be able to do about it. *Unless the treaty is guaranteed by the Grand Alliance itself*, I thought, and glanced at Hasenbach. Even the most firebrand of First Princes would hesitate at antagonizing its two most powerful allies in such a way. *Canny woman*, I thought, not without fondness. It wasn't like myself or the Dominion would refuse to be guarantors of this: it'd give us some leverage over Procer after the war, which given how short-lived Proceran gratitude tended to be would prove most welcome.

Somehow I doubted it was a coincidence that this arrangement would end up soothing some of the lingering fears about Procer belonging to the two nations Hasenbach wanted to keep as close allies. Circles within circles within circles, with this one.

"It would go some way in abating worries, Your Most Serene Highness," Ambassador Livia replied, "yet to invest more coin into the war, the Consortium seeks more practical dividends."

Ah, and there we were. Her eyes went to me but did not linger. She never looked at me for long, I was beginning to notice. Even

when she was talking to me. The nightmares had left a mark, as they were meant to.

"It has come to the attention of Mercantis that plans are being drawn for a city to be raised at the heart of the Red Flower Vales," the diplomat with the pale brown eyes said. "Cardinal, is it not?"

I drummed my fingers against the tabletop in open impatience.

"We recognize such a city for the opportunity it is," Ambassador Livia said. "And so in place of further loans, the Consortium seeks instead to purchase monopolies on the trading of certain goods in Cardinal."

I cocked my head to the side. Huh. That was cleverer than what I'd been expecting, actually. They had to know that purchasing land ceded by Callow and Procer was not a suggestion that'd go over well, but monopolies over trade that did not yet exist was another story. By putting up gold now they could get a stranglehold on certain kinds of trade down the line, effectively pushing out any competition by being the sole providers for long enough that people would grow used to relying on them. It was their old role as middleman made anew, I thought with a touch of admiration. The merchant lords were a greedy but they were not without wits. This was actually halfway reasonable, as far as demands went, which had me rather wary.

"And how long would these monopolies be expected to last?" the First Prince asked.

"Permanently," Ambassador Livia said. "This would reflected in the price offered for them, naturally."

I did not need Cordelia's finger to trace the *N* to know this was not to be tolerated. So this was to be the pivot of this little adventure. Now they would push, or be pushed.

"Mercantis," I said, enunciating the word slowly. "The City of Bought and Sold. The most impartial place there is to be had on Calernia, for coin is queen and it claims no party."

"A lovely compliment, Your Majesty," Ambassador Livia replied, smiling like a shark.

"Spell it out," I said, leaning forward. "What happens, when I laugh at this and tell you to crawl back to your island."

I drew on Night. Slowly, quietly. The shadows of the room began to lengthen, in the spaces between the glow of the mage lights and the chandeliers.

"There is no need for such hostility," the diplomat said. "We will not withdraw our support for the war effort, as I have said. Yet it would be difficult for the Consortium to consider extending further loans when it would be courting its own bankruptcy."

Which sounded all nice and reasonable, until you knew what we knew. Hasenbach had told me that Malicia was almost certainly aware that Procer needed the flow of gold from Mercantis to keep its head above the water. Malicia had in turn told at least *some* of these fine fellows the piece of information. This had the Empress's touch all over it, the more I saw the more it was obvious. As usual, Malicia had played to all the angles. Merchants not in the know would not consider ending loans to be enemy action, and if the Grand Alliance reacted harshly they might turn to the Tower for protection against our perceived tyranny. Merchants that were in the know, and there were bound to be a few, would consider us to be deep enough in the hole that they could extract concessions from us if they didn't push it too far. No doubt the Empress had made promises of protection to encourage that perception, and leaked information about where our armies were.

Very far from Mercantis, the bottom line was.

"I'm curious," I said. "You must believe – I can't understand this, otherwise – that you have the upper hand here. And I have to ask, Gods, I really have to ask-"

The Night deepened, the light dimmed.

"*Why?*" I coldly asked. "Why is that you think that, exactly? Explain it to me."

"No threat has been made, Queen Catherine," the ambassador said. "Your behaviour is-"

"Let me tell you what happens," I softly interrupted, "if you choose to become my enemy."

I met Livia Murena's eyes. Darkness deepened around us, and came a faint sound like the dying whisper of a scream.

"I will not be civilized," I gently told her. "I will not keep to laws and treaties, to decency or the milk of human kindness. If you become the tool of a woman who has allied herself with the King of Death, if you *willingly* make that choice, then I will visit a ruin on you that will still haunt the sleep of men in a hundred years."

She looked away, towards the First Prince.

"Your Highness-"

"Don't look at her," I said. "It won't help. She can't stop me, and she doesn't particularly want to."

The ambassador's pudgy fingers tightened around her chain of office and she turned back to me, gathering her courage, but my hands had slipped in the pocket where I had stowed away my last surprise.

"Do you believe in fate, Ambassador Livia?" I asked.

She did not answer, eyes fixed on the golden coin in my hand. There were crossed swords on the side that could be seen. The other woman's breathing went uneven, her hands trembled, and still I waited. Sweat drenched the back of her neck, smudged the cosmetics on her face, and in her eyes I saw reaped the terror that I had sown.

"Yes," Livia Murena hoarsely answered. "Yes, I do."

"Then let us keep to laws and treaties," I said, my smile never reaching my eyes. "To decency and the milk of human kindness."

Or else, I did not say. She heard it anyway.

I did not speak another word for the rest of the meeting, or need to.

Sir Nil

Good reminder that Cat is scary when she wants to be.

LizAris

I can just about SEE Amadeus, a whole continent away, blinking back tears of pride.

Salt

His flair for unnecessarily dramatic gestures really rubbed off on her. I mean, lengthening shadows to scare people? Flipping a coin and asking cryptic questions about Fate? A+

Amadeus is the dude that first made her a Squire by dramatically stabbing her for absolutely no reason, instead of just poking her forehead. He'd be absolutely beaming if he found out about it.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah, we're all going to continue pretending that stabbing had no effect other than being silly and did not set up anything for the future. Haha.

Anyway YEP.

Miles

She did stab him back several books later, FWIW.

Her family owes him 2 more stabby stab stabs..

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, and I bet he was pretty surprised the return stabbing was nonfatal.



Letouriste

That's...

I never thought about that

[Liliet](#)

You're so welcome!

[Liliet](#)

So, this is funny.

shikkarasu

He'd probably lecture her on the dangers of monologuing and posturing. I imagine it's one of the reasons he uses fear sparingly; intimidating displays can pin you down into a trope. Cat is willing to risk it due to her skill with Stories. She knows better than Amadeus exactly where the deep end is, so she can afford to swim closer to it. She has -and I say this without hint of irony, nor shame of pun- truly stepped out of his shadow.

[Liliet](#)

I think he'd compliment her on playing well. She stepped out of his shadow narrative game-wise back at First Llesse and he knows it. He's never been less than completely proud of her and he never underestimated her.

He'd mention the danger, just as a point of prudence, but he wouldn't *lecture* her when it clearly worked as intended.

And he would definitely clap.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

At least in that part she is a classic, and classy, villain.

[Javvies](#)

Heh.

Being known as a Villain, especially one who has made examples of their enemies has its uses.

The nightmare sendings definitely helped. But the fact that Cat crucified hundreds of Diabolist's captured supporters after Akua's Folly makes the threatened ruthlessness more believable. The fact that Cat has a reputation for torching cities to get at her enemies wouldn't hurt either.

Of course ... Cat absolutely would have done it – never make a threat you aren't willing to carry through on.

Fear is a tricky method to use for more delicate ends. Cat seems to have threaded the needle here.

Cat and Viv are both prideful and touchy about it, even when they try not to be. And Archer is being the voice of reason here? That's ... yeah. Hakram, wake up and get better. Cat needs your relationship wrangling skills.

Miles

Done what? What threats?

Just more nightmares. Cat has something to protect now, and that makes the costs of lashing out matter.

Insanenoodlyguy

If mercantis is in Praes' pocket, what she does IS protection. No. She'd rather not do it, but she'd do it if pressed.

WuseMajor

"Threats are useless unless you have previously committed the level of violence you are threatening to use. Make examples of the enemies you cannot control so those that you can will be cowed. This is the foundation of ruling."

—Dread Emperor Terribilis II

...It's something of a pity that Cat has done what was necessary to live up to this advice.

Salt

Yeah, right on the money.

Lots of people here complain about her conscience still acting up when she's forced to do stuff like this, but that's actually one of the best/most complex things about her character.

Cat isn't someone who's blind enough to confuse Good with striking at Evil. She has to, lest her Good become the act of striking. She knows and fully admits that her actions are Evil, even if her intentions are not. The ambassador somewhat deserving it is a just silver lining that soothes her conscience a bit, not a justification.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure Indrani is cannier regarding close interpersonal relationships than Hakram is. He's good at wrangling casual acquaintances and people he meets once and never again. Indrani understands how close bonds tick.

Raved Thrad

She just prefers to hide her sensitive nature under a guise of brutishness. 😊

[Liliet](#)

More like she's always running fast enough feelings can't catch her ♥

Salt

For real, Indrani with the brutal callout on Catherine's little tantrum. Hakram may have phrased it in a way that's easier to swallow, but I'm more with Indrani's style of straightforward bluntness on this one.

Vivienne isn't somehow wrong for not doing everything Catherine wants or for disagreeing with her. She hasn't done anything wrong for not being associated with the burden of the necessary evils that Catherine herself chose to take on, nor is she wrong to want to share those burdens as a friend. The sting of Callowans thinking that the Black Queen is a little too Black nowadays, has nothing to do with Vivienne either.

Catherine needs to just swallow her pride and just have an adult conversation with Vivienne, and Archer was being a damn good friend for going through the trouble of making sure Cat couldn't run away from this.

[*Liliet*](#)

Mhm!

Darkening

I dunno, hakram hand-led Thief's insecurities pretty handily.

[*Liliet*](#)

He couldn't have come up with a handier method before things got out of hand though

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Gotta hand it to him, that prince among men has a steady hand. Why, just look at the role he played in keeping Christophe and co from catching Cat and 'Drani red-handed a while back, or the hand he's always had in administrative matters. Hands down the most reliable of the Woe overall, I feel, even as the others may be better-suited to various roles.

[*Liliet*](#)

He's Catherine's right hand for a reason.

shikkarasu

Don't forget that the official announcement of Vivian as Heir Designate was written in his hand. He handles so much, it's no surprise that he beats Zeze at shatranj so handedly.

Frivolous

I didn't know Night could be used to invade dreams, but I should have guessed. Catherine effectively tortured Livia. Very crafty, very cruel.

Also, burning paintings and tapestries is just bad form. They should be kept as souvenirs or sold instead.

JJR

AKA

Pillage, then burn.

Miles

Oh yeah? Then why do they call it burn and pillage? Check mate.

Alshain

Maxim 1!

thearpox23

Night can be used for almost anything. It is a medium that can be shaped, much like light or arcana, not a spell or swiss knife

Frivolous

Eh, you probably can't use Light to give someone else a nightmare. With Night, on the other hand, it probably comes (un)naturally.

I do wonder what the range on that power is. Could Cat use it to invade the dreams of someone unwarded and far, far away? After all, Sve Noc is Night, and Sve Noc are goddesses. I have some doubts that distance on the same plane can hamper them too much.

Maybe if even one drow is in the vicinity, they can extend through that drow.

.

Salt

You could probably use light to give someone a dream of being a beloved Heroic do-gooder. Visions of traipsing around in shining armor, praising the will of Above and saving small children would have Villains like Kairos vomiting in revulsion or screaming in terror. Possibly both.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hey, remember when Tariq used Light to create a magical plague? Good times.

You might still be right about the nightmare thing, but I'm skeptical.

[Javvies](#)

I'd say that most Light-wielders wouldn't be able to use Light to send someone a nightmare. On the other hand, I'd also say that most Light-wielders can't use Light to create plagues. To be fair, before we saw Tariq do it, I'd probably have said Light couldn't be used that way at all.

So while it's probably technically possible, it's going to be a very rare skill. And possibly require a Name with a relevant skillset, if not a direct Choir link.

Although ... nightmares could be one way of describing what Contrition did to William. And what he said it would have done to "convince", aka mind control/brainwash, people. So ... yeah, definitely possible to do something similar with Light, though I'd call it near certain that doing so is going to be an exceptionally rare skillset amongst Light-wielders.

thearpox23

Each medium (i.e.: Light) obviously follow their own rules and limitations that make them better suited to certain tasks. If I had to give a limitation, I'd have used the Night's seemingly innate weakness against demons, not dream manipulation.

Because when it comes to such things as sending nightmares and magical plagues it seems much more a question of intent than ability. There aren't a lot of heroic narratives where the hero indiscriminately wipes out a multitude of civilians in cold blood after all. As for nightmares... What the hell do you guys think prophetic dreams are?!

SpacyRicochet

I got the "Gandalf jazz man" video in my head with this remark! 😄

Miles

The stuff Pilgrim has done with light gives tons of people all kinds of nightmares.

[onedollargum](#)

NiGHTS into Dreams ;D

[Liliet](#)

I'd THOUGHT Catherine would be able to invade dreams as a High Priestess of Night, but this is the first time she's actually done it. I thought it could work as a long-distance communication method, but I guess apparently not.

We know Night can be used to invade dreams in principle because that's what Sve Noc did to Cat one time in Everdark, the fake Name Dream.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sve Noc have also been using dreams to simply communicate with Cat, keeping her up to date on developments and stuff they've learned (like MK's dalliance).

[Liliet](#)

Oooh, yeah, good point. Still, Sve lived in Cat's head moment to moment for a while, it's not necessarily quite the same as a hostile invasion towards an unwilling recipient.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

One of the first things we saw Night used for was the transfer of information directly between minds, both in real time and after the fact, so dreamwalking is honestly not that much of a reach.

As for burning paintings to cook 'loot' that came from a pantry, that's Cat's basic anti-aristocratic tendencies leaking through. She only barely tolerates a very rustic sort of luxury.

[Liliet](#)

Hahahah, yep ♥

Anomamdris

Now that is diplomacy...

Also, I am also very curious at the whole "Financing" cities in fantasy fictions such as these. What prevents a nation from establishing its own currency and inflating the value of that to fund it's war purchase? Why are Mercantis coins or letters of credit needed? How would these LCs be any better than a Proceran LC (I presume actual coin is not being transferred). If it's a case of a third party guarantee, said guarantee needs to be backed (i.e. the person who would be selling Procer goods feels it won't survive, but Mercantis will, and therefore would be willing to accept it's LCs – which seems strange to me.)

I get financial backing from Cities/Countries that has its own standing armies or an extremely rare resource (which can be put to practical use), but never been able to understand how a bank can dictate terms without these. Money is only worth what people say it's worth.

Also, what stops the alliance from simply 'conscripting' Mercantis and it's resources?

Miles

Because money is a medium through which value is exchanged. Coins and bills are not actually money, they are tokens which represent money to enable deferred exchanges. Printing more bills and minting more coins doesn't actually increase the amount of money, it onlyincreasesthe number of tokens that

represent the same amount of money. In other words it just reduces the amount of money each individual or coin represents.

When a state creates more tokens, they are in effect taking money from everyone who has the existing tokens. It's expected in small amounts, since bills and coins wear out with use, but if the state goes crazy with printing more then it becomes more practical to just not accept that currency any more.

If that was too complicated you can think of it this way: The State is like a wealthy merchant whom everyone trusts to be the final arbiter of their bookkeeping. If this wealthy merchant starts lying and adding extra zeroes to his own books, then using the made up money when trading with others, that trust will evaporate and he will be no more wealthy than any peasant out on the streets.

James Nylan

I think you just argued for abolishing the fed. Careful with that 😊

Cicero

No, he just pointed out the limitations of power that the Fed is subject too, and why the Federal Reserve cannot just "create" enough money to do something like just abolish rent or any of the other proposals to "solve" the coronavirus problem by creating money.

There are a couple complications in money supply that justify the Federal Reserve (assuming it acts in a restrained and rational manner).

First, economies create new wealth, thus increasing the money supply to enable new transactions around this new wealth is perfectly fine, and does not damage the value of the money held by other people. A central bank to make sure that the increase in money supply is limited to this new increase in wealth is reasonable – if it can be established with sufficient credibility that it will not increase the money supply otherwise. This is covered by the Federal Reserves' mandate to prevent significant inflation.

That credibility is the purpose that Mercantis and other such "financial cities" serve. They have credibility that Procer itself does not. People will look at Procer and say "they are fighting to survive, so they are lying about the wealth that they can produce in order to get wealth from us to fund their defense – don't lend them anything." While if Mercantis is loaning them money, people will say "Mercantis always collects their due, it must be safe if we loan our wealth to Procer through Mercantis."

Second, there is the claim that the effective money supply can fluctuate due to mistaken assessments of wealth and corrections to this mistaken assumption (ie, booms and busts). Generally assumed to occur through changes in the velocity of money. This is used to justify monetary policy (the kind that is generally reported as adjusting interest rates), in which the Federal Reserve adjusts the money supply to counter act this maladjustment of the velocity of money. Supposedly smoothing out the boom and bust cycle. This is covered by the Fed's mandate to maintain full employment.

The second claim is disputed by the Real Business Cycle theorists, who claim that it is not mistaken assessments of wealth, but actual real changes in wealth that drive the business cycle.

The justifications of the second claim are also disputed by classical economists who insist that the Federal Reserve is not capable of consistently accurately determining the maladjustment and so are more likely to harm than help by attempting to correct for it.

Miles

No. Economists already know all of this. It's one of the few economic theories that's been proven with empirical evidence (sort-of. Prenazi Germany).

Alan

I've zero knowledge on this, but from reading Discworld "Making Money" I understand that the nation backing the currency needs to be trusted. Procer as a whole should be more powerful and trusted than a single merchant city-state so that's why the OP is asking why there isn't a Procer currency.

Cicero

Powerful does not equal trustworthy.

In fact, since Mercantis' power is entirely tied to it's credibility as a banker, Mercantis is more likely to be trustworthy than Procer.

It's the same reason that France was trusted less when it came to bonds/coinage than merchant princes from Italian city states.

It's also one of the reasons that the US and Great Britain are financial powerhouses.

Great Britain repaid it's bonds from WWII despite near ruinous debt ratios. (Of course, the US did help a lot with that, but still, compared to most other participants in WWII, Britain displayed unusual financial probity).

And the US repaid it's bonds in full after the Revolutionary War instead of defaulting or partially defaulting (like most revolutionary states do). It's why Hamilton was so important as the first Sec. of the Treasury. It was mainly due to him that the US repaid it's war bonds and so established a credibility of repayment that currently allows us to borrow at such high levels.

Miles

There's also the fact that these nations are on the gold standard or silver standard, not fiat. To make more coins they have to mine more gold or silver, respectively. Exchange rates in these standards are based on weight and purity. There aren't many tricks they can pull to make their coins more valuable than other coins that won't quickly become obvious.

Abrakadabra

Exactly. Which is a strong argument for the gold standard opposed to what we have today, which is a black box no one person can truly understand and can be disrupted or even destroyed with one mass hysteria...

Though Cordelia now has similar problems, because the very notion that the grand alliance might lose, can freeze up further loans, making it a self fulfilling prophecy.

Abrakadabra

Which is exactly why the Black Queen threatened military action. If we lose to the dead King, we will Drag you along, If it is the Last thing we do.

Abrakadabra

Which is exactly the reason Bk threatened military action. 'If we die to the dead King, we will Drag you along If it is the Last thing we do.'

Miles

You can put yourself on the gold standard if you really feel that way. Just buy gold the moment you're given a different currency and spend gold when you need to buy something.

And if that seems horribly inconvenient well that's why we use fiat.

Abrakadabra

Yeah, bs.

Miles

The entire push to go back to the stone ages of currency standards was a transparent attempt to sell gold that only ever gets brought up when there's an opportunity or need for that sector to bring in some extra profits. Try questioning your fake news for once.

Tricks314

While you are correct that fiat money (paper currency) is worth only the value that people say it's worth, most medieval fantasies operate on commodity money (or actual gold and silver coinage) that do have intrinsic value due to the raw materials they are made out of. In this example, Poncer cannot simply mint additional money because chances are they simply don't have the raw gold and silver needed. While they can reduce the amount of gold/silver in their coins doing so will result in rapid and widespread inflation as the coin changers can tell the silver/gold ratio by the weight of the coin (The anime Spice and Wolf has a really good episode about this subject).

The act of buying on credit is not the same as a fiat currency as credit is a promise of later repayment of debt. It's rather difficult for a country that no longer exists to repay their debts, making Poncer's credit much less attractive to merchants as they are actively fighting a war on their own land and running out of money feeding their armies and defending against the dead king. Mercantis, on the other hand, is farther away from the conflict and not actively involved in it, not to mention they have a steady reserve of currency making their credit a lot more attractive. Basically, credit is more attractive the higher the chances of repayment.

Historically, large financial institutions like Banks and Churches can dictate terms due to the large amount of cash reserves they have and by lending to the Kings and Lords at the time. Wars tend to be expensive (soldiers have to be armed and eat) and kings usually have to seek financing as taxes typically can't support a prolonged war. Therefore they usually go to the banks who lend them the money in return for favorable concessions like property or taxation rights.

Finally, while the Alliance can "conscript" Mercantis, it's too much effort to do so. As Cat mentioned they are spread thin against the Dead King as is, and Mercantis is an island which will send an invasion force that can be used to hold the dead at bay.

[Liliet](#)

Making it a much more attractive option to ""conscript"" Mercantis by smiling nicely and saying: you give us money, we fight, everyone wins and nobody raises the question of if you *have to* or are doing it out of the goodness of your hearts, okay?

It's horribly inconvenient to the Grand Alliance to actually make moves to coerce Mercantis, but if they wanted to, they could. Everyone knowing that is what allows the equilibrium of Mercantis being definitely independent and definitely doing what they say based on their own considerations.

The GA will even give them offers, concessions and guarantees in return for the valuable service of not making them come over there.

[boballab](#)

"What prevents a nation from establishing its own currency and inflating the value of that to fund it's war purchase? "

First in these settings the "currency" is actual coin and the only three ways to inflate it's value and they are:

1. Make the coins more pure. Higher the the gold or silver content of the coin the more value it will have however if you make the coins more pure you better up your gold or silver mining or you run into the second method of inflation on top of it.
2. Have fewer coins in circulation. Less coins in circulation the more value each individual ends up being.

Both of those methods actually up the value of the coin but they will also make it harder to trade and people that need to change their coin because they need to buy alot of things in a short period of time such as war supplies can't afford to do that. Which brings us to the third method and is a complete ripoff and has very major downsides the longer it goes.

3. Debase your existing coins. This is what Monarchs in the real world did when they went to war, they put more lead or other less precious metals into their coins so they could make more coins to buy more stuff with. This is all based on doing it, getting what you need and wining before everyone knows you did it, because until they know they think the coins are the same as your old ones because they went by weight, coin weights the same and your coin is "known as good" they treat it that way. So you basically trick people into believing the coins which are less valuable are still as valuable as the old ones, but once the merchants and other countries find out they adjust exchange rates and prices and you are back to where you were.

Second in most feudal settings each country already does have their own coin that they mint because no one really wanted some

other country to control the amount of coin and thus their economy.

Playing with the coins is a good way to end up screwing yourself in the end because the market will react to anything the ruler does to bring about an equilibrium.

Mingablo

I highly recommend watching this YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIQY44LCIjc> – The History of Global Banking: A Broken System? by Economics Explained) because our history was most certainly the inspiration – and if you can identify the source then you can see where EE may or may not have diverged. This system seems far simpler than the earth equivalent, Calernia is still in the mercantilism phase, but has developed a system of international exchange. The loans they are taking out appear to be from private banks in a currency that is backed by a mercantis central bank. The value of currency at this time appears to be based on the gold content of the coins, not sure if they've moved to fiat currencies yet – which is basically understood worldwide. As for “conscripting” mercantis and its resources, they could, but that would completely tank their reputation and they have no time or resources to do it right now. It's glossed over for a reason, this stuff is hella complicated.

[Liliet](#)

If you squint, what Cat is pulling here is kind of low key exactly that.

There's just a lot of polite fiction on all sides, backed by the fact Mercantis is far away territorially.

erebus42

“AMBASSADOR LIVIA! Do not take me for some conjurer of cheap tricks!”

dadycool

“I'm trying to rob you blind.”

erebus42

“Or at the very least extort you for the greater good!”

[doominator10](#)

I need the sauce for this chain.

erebus42

The initial post was a riff on a quote by Gandalf the Grey from Lord of the Rings. The rest were just fun little amendments

[sivarajan](#)

The next line in the original was also "I'm not trying to rob you."

Miles

"Then let us keep to laws and treaties," I said, my smile never reaching my eyes. "To decency and the milk of human kindness."

Fill in the changes in your mind, if you wish, or do not. But pgte is in 3rd place and that is just uncalled for.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Liliet](#)

This is one of the better ones

Miles

Best part, I realized later, is what line comes after the section I quoted. Entirely an accident.

[i]Vote,[i] I did not say. We all heard it anyway.

dadycoool

Holy fuck! Badass Cat is a BAMF. Yes, she's a monster doing monstrous things and threatening to do more of them, but damn!

[Liliet](#)

Cat specifically considers the monstrousness of her actions in the chapter. Keeping in mind the Indrani backstory chapter, I wholeheartedly second the resounding "nah" she arrives at.

dadycoool

Yeah. She may have had a lot of teachers, but she's a product of Black's Callow to the core, supplemented very mostly by his personal teachings and opinions.

[Liliet](#)

Not sure how this relates to my point, would appreciate clarification and discussion :3

dadycoool

I think, in response to the Indrani backstory part, I was specifically thinking of how well Cat's always gotten along with greenskins due to her Tavern Wench past where the Orcs were basically her heroes, which is only true because of Black's War Doctrines and him ruling the place. Also, due to Black's teachings, she knows exactly what she's doing, what the consequences would likely be if she pushed too far, and that those consequences would outweigh the benefits, but only to a point, because slavery and Indrani. So, maybe because of all her teachers she knows how well it gives her what she wants and because her core is Black she knows (previous sentence).

[*Liliet*](#)

Huh, nice.

LizAris

YESS and the Catdelia partnership continues. For all of her words and diplomacy Hasenbach sometimes just needs a really scary hammer of Night.

All I could imagine after "and she doesn't particularly want to" is Cordelia sitting in her corner like

"Thank god this one is on my side. Knelt in front of her for a reason. Ya'll dumbass Merchants wanna listen to me now??"

Unrelated note—the proportion of queer Calernians makes me very happy 😊

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, it's nice to have your existence acknowledged. That proportion is a bit higher than in reality, no?

[*Liliet*](#)

We notice every single one, we don't notice those who don't violate the norm.

Okay, so maybe in PGTE specifically the queer couples/preferences get more mentions, but that does nothing but balance out the overwhelming hetero mentions of the rest of media in our world.

It's not like the narrative asides need to be statistically representative for some reason.

Konstantin von Karstein

Indeed:)

Miles

Doubt it. Lots of people hide and be invisible. Doesn't seem as necessary in Calernia.

Salt

I'll be honest, I found it a little hard to take Cat's whole "bad cop" act too seriously here.

I mean she did a good job, it's just overshadowed by the absolute hilarity of Cordelia playing a precisely-tuned political game with national representatives by... secretly finger-painting instructions under the table to the foremost Villain of her generation.

I can just imagine her thought process, planning for this. "Should I convey my intent with discreetly hidden glances? Or perhaps innocuous gestures accented with almost undetectably subtle changes in tone?"

"... you know what, fuck it, it's Catherine. I'll just draw Y/N under the table for her and call it a day"

Liliet

I don't know what option is better: for them to have agreed upon it beforehand or for Cordelia to have improvised this in response to Cat's improvisation. Both are fantastic.

A+ best colleagueship would see 1000 seasons of a tv series about.

LizAris

What always strikes me is the proportion of people in power who are openly queer. Malicia, Cat, Warlock, Livia, etc. Very neat.

dadycool

I've always noticed that it's the "Evil", or at best neutral, characters that are LGBT. I've always figured it was because they don't have the "HERESY, VULGARITY, AND PERVERSION" stigma that classical "Good" would have, given the Judaeo-Christian elements of the morality system.

Konstantin von Karstein

The head of the Holy Society (now Great Inquisitor or something like that) is a trans man, and no one bats an eye. The Ashuran ambassador was openly gay, and there are miracles that make possible for lesbian women to have kids. Light is given by Above, so it's a confirmation they don't have a problem with same-sex couples. Above and the Good

countries have no stigma against queer people, even if the rest of their morality seems indeed based on the judeo-Christian one.

Frivolous

Hey. I hadn't noticed the now-Inquisitor was trans. Could you kindly link me to where that is confirmed or implied?

Konstantin von Karstein

From Interlude: Candle in book 5:

«They had not changed at all since he'd first gazed on them when they were both fifteen and Simon still believed his rightful name to be Simone.»

And there is another reference, when Cordelia said to himself that the « accident of birth » (or something like that) of Simon was corrected.

Frivolous

Thank you. Really appreciate it.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia is bi.

We just get more Evil/Neutral POV than Good, it's an accidental statistical bias.

Ninestrings

"Don't look at her," I said. "It won't help. She can't stop me, and she doesn't particularly want to."

First Prince: *Whistles innocently*

[Liliet](#)

Ambassador Livia, in her head: What do you mean she doesn't want to?!

Ambassador Livia in her head, two seconds later having remembered what her own position is: Oh. Right.

[Burlyraven](#)

Heh, the half-hero Archer comes along to smack some sense into Cat before she goes full tragic fall of the villain. And more Cat as the dark trickster is always welcome.

[Liliet](#)

HELL YEAH

[boballab](#)

It would good to see Cat indulge in her inner Pyromanic even if it was only in someone else's nightmare. Besides now if Merchantis ever catches fire and burns down, even by accident, the Ambassador will make sure Cat gets blamed.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Ma'mm, the Deducing Diviner themself has aided us in this, and swears on their name they have seen the events. The fires, though tragic in scope, started humbly when a goat in a stable kicked over an ill-placed lantern. That's the whole of it."

"SHE USED THE GOAT TO DO IT, I JUST KNOW IT!"

[vernal.ancient](#)

I mean, they didn't say the goat was ALIVE at the time, so...

Konstantin von Karstein

If the story of the undead goats spread, she would be totally right to accuse Cat 😊

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, considering the way Cat described the fire, I'd say she's sharing her PTSD more than indulging her pyromania.

Much as one is funnier than the other, I've always found the memes based solidly in accurate characterization to be higher quality in the end :3

[doominator10](#)

Hold on, there might be extenuating circumstances. If the fire's not goblin fire, heck if it's not just regular fire that looks green if you squint at it real hard, then Cat may be able to get away with some plausible deniability with that.

[boballab](#)

Remember Cat got blamed for the fire in that city when someone else set it on fire and she used that trick to get through it and that was just plain old normal colored fire.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Nope, goblinfire is one of the Legions' points of terror – and now one of Cat's.

Juff

Typo Thread:

preferred. I recalled, > preferred, I recalled,
heavy smoked > heavy smoke
Nott until > Not until
not to flip > to not flip
then. If I kept (extra space)
back home that > back home than
would the army > would be the army
in snit > in a snit
facing each other > faced each other
save Ambassador > save the Ambassador
tried to a war (missing word)
suit as well > suit us as well
Highness," Ambassador > Highness." Ambassador
"Indeed," Cordelia > "Indeed." Cordelia
pleasantly, "yet > pleasantly. "Yet
eventually successor > eventual successor
a greedy > greedy
would reflected > would be reflected
and came a > and there came a

spencer

This is the most Evil we've seen Cat in a long time. It's easy to root for her laissez-faire humanistic form of villainy, but chapters like this are reminders of the problems of humanism as a basis for morality.

[Liliet](#)

-looks at the part of the chapter where Cat ponders whether she feels guilty about scaring Livia-

Yeah, nah.

Also, I'd be curious to hear what exactly you mean by humanistic/humanism in this concept? I'm not sure clear on the terminology, this seems like an interesting take.

dadycool

Probably the "Humans applying their own morality to other species" version, specifically about the pleasure the Orcs and Drow seem to be deriving from their actions. Of course, using that description/explanation, you could replace "Humans" with "Americans" and "Species" with "Countries" and have the same effect. Probably wouldn't apply to the eating of human flesh or gouging out kids' eyes, but we probably/definitely have other habits that are about as horrific to other cultures.

[Liliet](#)

...that does NOT sound right

dadycoool

As in "That's messed up" or "That's completely off the mark"?

[Liliet](#)

the latter

[sivarajan](#)

In the context I have usually heard it, humanism refers to any moral framework not based on religion.

[Liliet](#)

...then I'm really confused about the original point.

Salt

Well, at the least Cat definitely is a humanist as a character, in terms of modern humanism which is very closely tied together with secularism and materialist philosophies.

It was pretty blatantly spelled out when she had her argument with Hanno about the stalwart apostle (the scorched apostate's heroic mirror), considering her reasoning was about as humanistic as it gets. Hanno (correctly) pointed out that it was a humanist complaint rather than a the practical complaint she was claiming it to be, since in the guide verse world, both faith and the higher power the faith is offered to are proven to be both tangible and practical as a solution.

Although, not sure exactly which correlation spencer was going for here. I suppose the most obvious one would be that a system of morality based on purely human/mortal views is innately flawed due to the innate imperfection in human views – as we all have our biases and blinders. Normally modern humanism responds to this by simply disbelieving in higher powers, but in this setting it gets messier since higher powers undeniably exist.

[Liliet](#)

Higher powers also undeniably leave it to humans to figure out their own shit. See also: Hanno's musings on slavery and evolution of morality.

Guide is a setting where Gods exist, but it's also a humanist setting completely, in this sense. That's what makes it so interesting to me.

Salt

Half correct – it's a humanist setting for the Villainous half, and a nearly complete rejection of humanism for the Heroic half.

It's only Below that specifically wants you to grasp certainty for yourself – rewarding you for it accordingly. In the eyes of below, it's only the sum of human actions that matter, and the victory you grasp with your actions will *retroactively* make you worthy of victory in their eyes.

AKA there are no principles. There is no natural law of morality. Do what you want, and your victories or defeats will prove that you are right or wrong. Quite literally "one grace, victory/one sin, defeat"

Above is the opposite, they reject extremist humanism. They reward a giving up of agency – like Hanno or the Stalwart Apostle. They say there are a predefined set of virtues/principles that should be aimed at, and how willing you are to give up your own desires and your own control for the sake of those principles, is what makes you deserve to win. The Choirs/Above rewards heroes accordingly, for following this philosophy.

AKA There ARE principles. Those principles are paramount, above your own wants or desires. Natural law of morality is spelled out for you by the Choirs. Follow those laws, and in doing so you make yourself worthy of victory before the battle is ever fought.

This is why Catherine is a 100% Villain that is paradoxically also Heroic in intent. She follows only her own idea of morality and her own desires like a proper Villain should. She's a Hero at heart because the morals she wants to follow and the desires she wants to achieve are... coincidentally Heroic. Bringing peace, saving the poor and innocent, all that good jazz.

Hanno's thoughts on Heroic morality? Just further proves that the Above half of Creation doesn't support Humanism at all. He noted that Heroes are often mistaken about what Above actually wants, not that they're rejecting what they think Above wants for the sake of their own agency.

[Liliet](#)

You are incorrect?

Hanno's point was that insisting someone "wasn't following the will of Heavens" was ubiquitous, often on both sides, and could not be used to practically figure out what the will of Heavens actually was. He's also commented on priests for "speaking for the silent Heavens".

It's also completely incorrect to say that either he or Stalwart Apostle "gave up their agency" at any point. Yes, I know that's what Amadeus said. I'll even be willing to believe he wasn't just talking shit and genuinely believed it. Doesn't make him the author's intended mouthpiece, if only just because Erratic is a better writer than that.

Stalwart Apostle was not in a seconds-matter urgent situation. She took the time to pray before she could / would have to look for other solutions. It worked. Pascal's wager, you lose nothing and might gain something by believing; there's a reason Pascale is her name. Catherine's lashing out at her was bullshit born out of an entirely different reason, one that had nothing to do with her agency and what she did with it.

Hanno did not receive any input from his Choir other than the coin's answers. Cooperate with the Delosi bureaucracy, ignore it or throw the coin for them? His decision. Bring Kairos's tower down with his party inside it? His decision. All attempts at training to take down the Black Knight, successful and not? His decisions. Helping put together the Crusade? His decision. Calling Black out for a duel? His plan. Going North afterwards? Him. Giving heroes lectures on collateral damage and how to avoid it? His coin didn't print that speech out, it's not a printer, it's a coin. He has (jokingly?) *threatened* heroes with throwing the coin for them when they were in a dispute. The decision to go south, the decision to throw the coin for each individual he met in the burning Salia – that was alllll him. Talking to Catheirne was him, telling her that she was dangerous because she swept people up in her enthusiasm easily was him. The coin had 0 role in any of that, nor the Choir of Judgement in any other way.

Saying he "gave up his agency to the coin" is like saying a person who looks something up on wikipedia "gives up their agency to wikipedia". They offload some of the work, and there are tradeoffs involved perhaps in reliability and how well it matches what they want (I think perfectly in the Choirs' case by their very

nature, but that's not the point), but their AGENCY? The decision what to look up is still theirs in the first place, and just because they precommitted to using the result of their looking up whatever it is, doesn't mean that doesn't count as their decision either.

The segment I am talking about in the previous post is this:

> The interesting thing about morality, Hanno had found, was that it evolved across the years. Living through shards of a hundred heroes and heroines' lives had made it impossible to deny as much, though he disliked the thought that concepts like Good and Evil could be mutable. The Book of All Things, after all, did not change – neither should ethics. Yet, a few thousand years ago, most of Calernia had once practiced slavery. The ancestors of nations that now found the very notion repugnant had then been unable to function without it. Procerans, in days before there was a Procer, had raided each other for plunder and workers. The Titanomachy had built its wonders as much by the legendary craftsmanship of the Gigantes as on the backs of a hundred thousand Arlesite slaves. Even Ashur, his homeland, had once kept a citizenship tier beneath them all where forced labourers and servants were inducted into. But over the years, that ugly reality had been... outgrown. Recognized as unworthy of all those who would call themselves the children of the Heavens.

> And so slavery went from commodity to sin, and Creation was made a little brighter.

The entire world of Guide functionally runs on humanism. Even Choirs are culture-relative: EE has confirmed Yan-Tei doesn't have them. Gods Above have set guidelines for following guidelines, not even guidelines for setting guidelines, see Golden Bloom elves for an extreme "wut" example. That sure ain't what Gods Above "told" the rest of Calernian Good to be like, eh?

Salt

Nope. The point you're mistaken on this one is about what the IRL ideology of humanism means in the first place, not the characterization of the doods in the story.

Humanism, at the very core of it, is one that considers humans **solely** responsible for ultimate progress, determination of morality, and goodness.

This is why modern humanism is so heavily tied with secularism, because the belief that a “higher” entity – one above humans – even exists at all is contrary to humanist belief. Not all religions have such beliefs, but the vast majority do.

The fact that the Heroic characters in the story still made the *choice* to follow Above doesn't mean that they're humanists in any way shape or form. That has nothing to do with “humanism”. The important bit is that they chose to believe that the judgement or metaphysical status of Above (no matter how vague their guidelines) as greater than that of mortal human beings in the first place.

Hanno believing that humans are not qualified to Judge, and only that the “higher” spiritual entity that is the Seraphim being capable of perfect Justice, is by definition the exact opposite of a humanist belief. It doesn't matter that he made the choice to flip the coin, the fact that he's choosing to rely on flipping the coin rather than choosing to believe himself capable of Justice, makes him the antithesis of humanism as an ideology.

Humanist Apostle wouldn't have prayed to a higher power to save her, because to be considered a “humanist”, she can't really believe that said power is higher and worth praying to in the first place.

Hence why Agency comes up, which also doesn't mean what you appear to think it means. It's a fairly complex IRL sociological/philosophical term that EE made a valiant effort to explain through story dialogue, but he may have been overambitious on that one, considering the mass confusion I've been seeing in the comments section.

Agency in terms of decision-making capability can mean either the physical/involuntary capability, or a voluntary and intentional action where there is outside influence or guidance (goal directed action)

It's a rather controversial topic on sociology/philosophy as well in terms of underlying beliefs due to personal experience and societal beliefs affecting the ability to truly make independent decisions, so I can't actually blame EE that much for most of the readers only latching onto the (much simpler) involuntary capability part of it instead. He did pretty well explaining it through context, it's just a very VERY complex concept/topic in the first place.

As a tl;dr instead of copy pasting an intro to sociology lecture here though, ingrained beliefs causing you to choose to allow an outside actor to interfere in your personal decisionmaking is 100% considered a giving up of/a loss of agency, obviously to varying degrees depending on situation. Giving up agency doesn't (necessarily) mean you're not the one making the choice or that you're physically compelled, and I imagine involuntary agency is not what the "Black Knight" was talking about in his conversation with the "White Knight", since otherwise his monologue makes no sense whatsoever.

Liliet

I do know what agency is, and I see where we talked past one another a bit.

I'm saying that the *world* of Guide runs on humanism. And sure, some characters don't think so, but they're observably, provably wrong. Above basically runs a mirror maze that reflects their own values at them in a way that makes them ooh and aah and go "yeah Above is sooooo right!!!!" because values it professes directly towards them never conflict with their own... WHAT A COINCIDENCE, HUH. Religion is religion, but people who observe the world make functionally humanist observations even if they don't profess the philosophy per se.

So humanism-guided actions are based on objective reality, and actions based on objective reality well enough end up looking like they might have been guided by humanism, because it's the underlying mechanic whether you know it or not.

As for agency, Stalwart Apostle received exactly the effect she asked for – trading her Gift for the ability to wield Light. If asking other people things and predicating your next actions on their reaction is giving up agency, boy do I have bad news for you about whether agency exists at all.

And sure, Hanno gives up a millimeter of agency when he flips the coin...

...which is an individual choice he makes separately every single time. When he's not willing to subordinate his actions to the coin he doesn't flip it, and this happens most of the time.

As a matter of fact, Hanno has used the coin 3 ways:

1) a powerup mid-fight. He didn't really doubt what the verdict for Kairos or Amadeus would be, and in fact had been fighting (and trying to kill) Amadeus for a while before flipping. No agency loss involved, or at least no expected agency loss, as "the coin shows laurels" would be very much a freak and absurd outlier indicating something somewhere had gone very wrong (and if anything be helpful as an indicator of whatever that is, allowing Hanno to exercise his agency with that additional information);

2) Information gathering method. Hanno didn't *know* those people in Salia, he could not have any meaningful agency regarding them. Sure, there was a tradeoff in how little information he got from the coin leading to how narrowly he could use it, but the alternative was not him exercising personal agency instead, it was no information at all – so either doing nothing or random actions. Not more agency-full;

3) "I literally don't give a shit and would like you to fuck off", aka some Proceran nobles at Vales asking for Hanno's arbitration. In that situation Hanno's personal decision making was that he doesn't want and doesn't consider himself qualified to do the thing. He used the coin for that, and it didn't give him input on whether he should arbitrate disputes between nobles in the future. For all that he personally cared about the outcome of that flip he might as well have been flipping an actual coin.

When there is actual personal decision making to do, *Hanno doesn't flip*. He didn't flip on Cordelia, he didn't flip on Catherine, he didn't flip when heroes were squabbling. Whenever there's any actual agency-differentiated decision to make, he does not ask angels what it should be. He acts on his own, and if he flips, it's because he expects / knows that the coin's answer would line up with his.

Often he doesn't flip when he expects/knows what the answer would be and doesn't want to do that. So, when he doesn't want to do what the angels want, he doesn't do it. His agency is perfectly preserved.

Salt

We'll have to disagree, because I think you're using a very VERY large stretch to try justifying "humanism". One that wouldn't fly in an IRL setting where we don't have physical proof of things like

gods, let alone a fiction setting where such exists.

Humanism is not a narrow, positive, philosophy. It's broad enough to be more of a denial of metaphysical spiritualism or the supernatural more than anything.

The fact that you believe that humanism is correct isn't a proof for humanism being correct, it's just proof that you're a humanist. Personally I just cannot understand how someone can believe that a fiction world that runs on quite literal invisible supernatural story tropes that railroad entire nations like Praes into particular stories, one which is verifiably created by what many view as higher powers, one in which higher powers frequently intervene, and one in which a good half the population has a rather fervent belief in the metaphysical superiority of higher powers, is somehow a purely humanistic one.

Also no, I really don't think you understand agency, if you still think the fact that being able to make the conscious decision means you haven't given up agency.

Giving up of agency, I will try to make it even simpler, includes willingly choosing to give it up because of your beliefs. It is not about the number of actions that you defer, so much as how willing you are in deferring how far you're willing to take it.

It is about the degree of willingness, not about the numerical proportion of how often intervention/guidance is relevant.

Hanno would off himself on his own sword if the Seraphim told him it was necessary for Justice. He routinely walks around aimlessly, letting the invisible force of Providence take him where it believes he is needed. He actively avoids even forming his own judgements, rather than letting his judgements be superseded, because he simply does not believe that a flawed mortals like him should ever judge at all.

He's someone who is willing to let any decision of ANY importance be superseded by another agent, if they wished to intervene. That's the *definition* of voluntary loss of agency.

The Tyrant's view of Hanno – “all desires his own faded while that horrid thing intertwined with the Seraphim – I wish to be just – tainted everything” is about as close to a blunt author acknowledgment of it as you'll ever possibly get.

[Liliet](#)

When you google something, do you surround your agency in looking for things to Google, or do you use google to facilitate your agency?

When you check your email, do you surrender your agency to whoever wrote you emails that day?

Hanno wishes to be just, not to be obedient. Those are different things. And he decided he wanted to be just on his own, not on someone else's advice – he went to the Face of the Just in that temple, he chose to push on even after a warning from the old man. “I wish to be just” is as clearly his agency as it gets, even if it's born out of trauma. A hypothetical of “he would off himself if an angel told him so” is a hypothetical that remains unproven and needs a lot of clarification of circumstances.

(There are a lot of circumstances under which Catherine would off herself, too, and some of them would involve other people saying so, though admittedly few. Under analogous circumstances Hanno would, too, sure. If the Seraphim just told him to out of the blue? I'd think he'd question if that's actually Seraphim and if they're okay and if he should still listen to them, first)

Kairos's opinions on various motivations are... special.

And avoiding forming your own judgements on things you're underinformed about is nothing but prudent thinking.

I'll leave humanism alone, a terminology debate is not what I'm super interested in, here.

[Liliet](#)

Note:

> The Ophanim were at his side, helping his tired old bones stand straight, and though in their whispers there was sorrow there was also something other.

Trust. They trusted him, the murmurs said, to make the choice. They had seen as he saw, tread in his wake for the seemingly endless days and night he had been the Peregrine. They'd been at his shoulder for his every mistake, his every bitter triumph, and still they trusted. Sometimes that was the only reason he woke with dawn, the knowledge that hand in hand they could still do more. Sometimes that was the weight that pressed down on his chest and choked his lungs, the strain of that unearthly trust. Tariq had tread with angels in his wake for so long he'd forgot how it had felt before.

> "Should you not have answers?" he asked, voice choked. "Are you not the Watchers Kindly, the burning wisdom of many eyes?"

> Old friends, he thought, help me. Help me see, for once more I am lost. But they had no answers for him, would not take the burden from his shoulders. But they stood at his side, holding up his tired from, for in the end they were the Choir of Mercy and though they could not save him they would at least share in his suffering.

One time, Peregrine DID try to do what Good is memetically famous for doing and defer his agency to the literal angels over his shoulder.

And the answer was "lolno".

Mirror maze. No answers except those you yourself bring.

Avren

This chapter was a cut or two below this web novels average quality. I dont want to say it but this one was a bit cheesy and cliché.

[Liliet](#)

Beauty's in the eye of the beholder.

Nothing's too cheesy for PGTE to incorporate it, that's one of the things I love best about it.

Avren

Sure but when i think of PGTE kind of cheese i think of something like Cat coming back to the infirmary at the end of the chapter to find Hakram's throat slit and a coin with

swords next to him. We have different taste in cheese
~_(\ツ)_/~

[Liliet](#)

What the fuck.

Yeah, we have VERY different taste in cheese!!!!!!

Salt

100%. The whole thing started out rather cheesy to start, with Black's naming sense for his personal guard being one of the most egregious puns we've seen to date. We started with the first chapter of the first book containing an absolutely awful dad joke

(He called them "blackguards", aka both the ye olde English word for "male scoundrels" and also Black's guards in a literal sense)

[Liliet](#)

Oh yes, that IS one of my favorite PGTE puns ♥

AbraKadabra

Eh... No.

Nicholas Guyett

I think you might be forgetting to account for the fact that this was primarily a performance that was leveraging the combination of exaggerated and earned reputation to force Mercantis to think more pragmatically about how important it is that the Grand Alliance win this war.

Particularly within this setting, it necessitates a certain amount of narrative cheese to do it right.

Avren

My main gripe with this chapter is that stories about overpowered demigods vs normal people is not fun. Those kinds of stories are only fun if there is an actual challenge involved.

Honestly the challenge could also have been the moral dilemma of Cat torturing a defenceless woman but we already know that she has done worse and isn't even squeamish about it.

The casual callousness of what she is doing could also have been a good point but the story doesn't really focus on that and just moves on.

The challenge could have been the confrontation with the Mercantis group but even there Cat is always in complete

control of the situation from start to finish. I was half expecting the Ambassador to piss herself at the end there. So we end up with a chapter where Cat is just playing with ants. Sure the story moves on but the chapter is lacking imo. Not that big of a deal, i dont have to like all chapters.

Liliet

> stories about overpowered demigods vs normal people is not fun

Stories where power levels escalate endlessly aren't fun. "So Last Season" isn't fun. Cat's at the top of the power totem pole, the story has been about that since Book 4. It is precisely a story about an overpowered demigod surrounded by normal people and trying to take care of them, and how the overpoweredness does and does not help.

It is important and valuable to periodically show the overpoweredness in question, to avoid making it an informed attribute and keep the readers' understanding of Catherine's level of ability fresh.

Also, there was very blatant subtext here about how Catherine's ability to weave a nightmare was 10% functional power for that in Night and knowing Hierophant (an institutional power, that one!), 90% the horrors she'd seen and willingness to dredge them up. Did you know she remembered the screams of people burning alive in goblinfire at Three Hills? I didn't! I might have been able to guess, but *knowing* is a different thing. Did you know she remembered Summerholm (First or Second?) as "a blaze starting at her feet and devouring a quarter of the city"?

This chapter was about a lot more than just "oh look Cat is >9000". It was about the attitude and skill and resolve she'd learned and earned the hard way. It was about her deciding that she didn't feel guilty about doing things to Livia because of the beautiful and young "attendants" standing behind her and other ambassadors and her knowledge from Indrani of what those are. It was about her casual coordination with Cordelia. It was about her skill in showmanship.

It was about how, for possibly the first time in the story, Catherine made a threat for the purpose of avoiding following up on it, and the interlocutor listened.

Avren

This is devolving into meaningless arguing. Yes i do know that Cat wove what she saw into the nightmare, yes i also read her justification about why she doesnt feel too bad

about torturing a woman or how she coordinated well with Hasenbach . I've read the chapter as well. For the last time, i dont have to like each and every chapter. I feel this was a particularly weak one, it happens.

[Liliet](#)

And that is completely fair. I just challenged what sounded like an "objective"/"universal" assertion in your logic. Didn't presume you meant it as such, just engaged with the written text on its own terms.

Cause I really like writing and theory of what writers do wrong and right and this particular issue is a THING for my at least enjoyment >x>

[Liliet](#)

So, a bunch of cool shit:

- Cat's nightmare creativity. She more or less explicitly spells out that she's drawing on her own trauma for this – take the mention of her remembering the Three Hills screams clearly in light of how many years it's been since – which is an excellent take;

- more low key queer characters. A+ could always use more;

- Indrani's backstory being DELICATELY brought up. I'm with Cat on not feeling guilty about this shit. You represent the system, you get treated in accordance with what it deserves;

- Indrani calling Cat out on her absolute failure wrt Vivienne. I'M SO HAPPY WE HAVE HER;

- Catherine/Cordelia cooperation. From Catherine's estimation of signals at the start, it really does sound like they improvised the Night-based signaling on the fly through sheer mutual understanding, which is THE BEST MOST EXCELLENT A+ I LOVE THIS;

- there's an interesting interplay between projecting power by bringing lots of people and projecting power by bringing no-one. There's a particular... threshold one needs to clear before this becomes an option, and Catherine Queen Of Nightmares just successfully did. Love her and love this story.

mamm0nn

Ah, I knew that something like this was coming. For all that Cat has been forced in the "For the Greater Good" corner where doing anything but would be chaotic stupid villainy, we shouldn't forget that she's not actually a Hero or bound to a redemption story or some form of kindness. And Mercantis right now isn't even just being troublesome but still contributing enough to not

be just struck down, they're the people that believe Cat to be bound by the Greater Good only to misinterpret themselves to be part of said GG.

I was really hoping for something along the lines of:

"I think there's some kind of misunderstanding, Livia. All of this political nonsense I have to go through, all of these people I need to work with and whose opinions I have to respect, you're not one of them. And the Cardinal, it's not actually part of the war against the Dead King, it's my pet project. My way of carving myself into the annals of history, my lofty ideal to grasp as a Villain."

"There's no Greater Good or concessions for the war there. It's just you, trying to worm yourself into a Villain's ideal. Do you know what happens when someone tries something like that? Their city burns. Forget all of this clutter that has nothing to do with You and I and My City. If you oppose me and my ideals, I'll just burn Mercantis to the ground for your insolence, whether now or after the war. I honestly don't care, I can do either."

[Liliet](#)

Eh, too crude. She DOES need Mercantis to keep Procer afloat still.

A very tempting idea though!

mamm0nn

Crude, indeed. I tried to keep my comment short where EE can spend a whole chapter to refine her words and actions into a subtle and refined statement.

Considering the massive debts though, burning down Mercantis to take the gold and make the debts go away is a viable, if not indeed troublesome Story for a Villain, way to resolve it for now. And considering that gold is a hard value in this story it seems rather than something that becomes relative at best at a government league, it's not as if the current situation will remain viable for long either.

[Liliet](#)

Um, people live there. We're talking about Cat, not an abstract villain. She has lines in the sand she would like people to be aware she doesn't cross and she cares about more things than villains "normally" do, which has also been significant in her diplomatic relationships.

Also, gold still stands for 'ability to buy things'. I'm not sure burning down Mercantis and taking all of it will help much, as it might just destroy the exact resource they wanted in the first place. (Mercantis gold to buy services Mercantis provides)

mamm0nn

Burning down a city in medieval times is not the same as calling a bombardment or nuclear strike on it nowadays, and the Legions of Terror have the discipline to not go raiding and pillaging and raping if Cat told them not to. She can go to Mercantis and make it burn, without setting the lower residential districts on fire. She has been willing to do similar things before, such as the siege of Marchford had the Silver Spears had successfully retreated there, or marching to Liesse to kick Akua's teeth in before she'd got her evil scheme up and running. Not to mention, she never discarded that 'People need to know you're willing to do what you threaten them with.' as a lesson as Black taught her. I wouldn't say that her marching on Mercantis for this is crossing a line she would never cross. The contents of the dreams she sent Livia, yes, but not the act of military intervention on the city itself.

With the gold I meant the rather complicated and perhaps even abstract detail that to (real world) governments and banks a currency isn't at all as absolute and relevant as one may think it is, even when we're talking a gold standard. To them a debt isn't a number or something that can be cashed in by the debtor, rather than a much more complex matter. But if you're wondering why almost all countries just rake up their debts ever further as we speak, it's simply because those debts don't actually work as a raw number the way one may think they do.

Considering the Alliance doesn't have any trade partners for an income of vital goods outside the Alliance, and all countries that could enforce repaying the debts are already their enemies or insignificant in size to back those demands, Procer can quite literally ignore the debts and if need be even the need for gold at all. Who's going to enforce the debts, and how?

If the people accept it, who's going to stop them from switching to silver or coupons instead? As long as they produce the food and other necessities themselves, which the Alliance does while Mercantis doesn't control even a vital part of that trade, the city of Bought and Sold has no actual leverage to force Procer's hand.

The only real leverage Mercantis has, other than Story enforcing the gold standard which I doubt it does for non-Named, is that it can stop the stream of gold. It can choose to stop granting loans, but just like real life governments lending from banks the country can then just ignore the debts or take the currency by force if there's no equal or greater policing force to enforce the bank's

rights. As much as we may believe otherwise, at the end of the day that's how it works if the country chooses it works that way, even in the real world.

[*Liliet*](#)

Ah, that, yeah, I agree re: burning just the upper districts. It's still going to be a very nasty business though, for servants and children and the aforementioned slaves if nothing else, and Cat Would Rather Not. Sure she would if she were pressed, but that's exactly the angle she's taking here. "Don't MAKE me".

mamm0nn

Oh yes, absolutely. I just think that the bar for her doing that is a little lower than most people and Mercantis themselves may think.

[*Liliet*](#)

I'm not sure Mercantis has realized that's an option. Or, had realized, up to this point. Existential threats tend to fall outside of people's imagination.

Sunday

After a solid week of nonstop reading, I've finally caught up. One of the best pieces of media I've ever read!

[*Liliet*](#)

Welcome to the heaven of strict on-schedule updates and hell of there being a whole three days in between them!

Miles

How *do* ital[i]cs[/i] work here?

Miles

Oh I see. It's .

Satan

Cordelia and Catherine, playing hand and brain chess.

Chapter 43: Conclusions

"I have been assured that my enemies lie behind every shadow, which is why they will henceforth be illegal."

– Dread Empress Sinistra III

During one of the first conversations I'd ever had with Black, he'd told me that he did not believe rule through fear alone could be sustainable. I found it one of those lovely little ironies of life that my first teacher had arrived by cold pragmatism to share that belief with Cordelia Hasenbach, who'd gotten there largely on account of being a halfway decent person. Whatever the reason, in practice it'd ended up meaning that while we could have bullied Mercantis into withdrawing with nothing to show for its efforts they'd instead been thrown red meat. Not in the quantity or quality they'd wanted, but enough that they'd have something to chew on besides their pride.

In the event of a lapsed debt by princes, Hasenbach committed the office of First Prince to taking up the debt in their name and repaying it from diverted taxes at a fixed rate. She also guaranteed payment in goods if coin was not forthcoming, for up to a third of the worth of debts and offered that both commitments she'd just made would be guaranteed by a treaty under the aegis Grand Alliance. To sate the hungriest of the merchant lords, she even sold a handful of monopolies as well: only for a duration of ten years, however, and they would solely be enforced in Proceran lands.

Mostly it was monopolies on goods in which Mercantis already dominated trade – perfume, cloth, dyes and enchanted luxuries – that were sold, which would essentially serve as a ten-year stay on competition in those goods whether or not the monopoly was enforced in Callow. My kingdom had neither the skilled artisans to begin trading in such goods nor the gold to sink into building the workshops necessary for their creation. In time we might, but the merchant lords would have quite the head start by then and no competition from the greatest realm on the surface of Calernia while they took it. My people lost nothing with this and might yet gain, though. The audience ended coolly but not with hostility, and the matter was considered settled.

For now.

The following days went by quickly, the last stretches of haggling over how the Hainaut campaign was to be raised and waged – Malanza was still trying to trade back some of the drow sigils for Arlesite foot and horse, the Iron Prince wanted fewer prongs on the attack than Juniper's suggested three – occupying my hours along with regular meetings with the White Knight to discuss which Named should be assigned to the campaign. So far it was skewing a little heavily favour of heroes for my tastes, but we

were starting to figure out what a functional roster would look like. A haze of anticipation hung in the air of the Arsenal, as all awaited the arrival of the envoys from the Titanomachy.

They were the last loose end left to tie up, and when they were tied we'd return to the business of war.

—

When the Gigantes did arrive, they startled me with their swiftness.

We had less than a day to prepare between the first warning that the three giants had reached Iserre and their unexpected arrival in the Arsenal. The fortress in Iserre where they'd appeared was used to cross into the Twilight Ways but wasn't actually one of the translation points, just a shortcut to head towards one in southeastern Salia. Which made it all the more of a surprise when the three giants emerged in the translation room of the outer gatehouse to the Arsenal most of a day later. Neither the swiftness of the march nor the direct crossing into the first level of Arsenal defences were something any of our people would have been able to replicate, Hierophant privately admitted to me.

I got the message the Gigantes were sending, as I expected the Procerans and Levantines did as well: there were mysteries at their disposal we could only dream of, and we should not get too cocksure even after all we'd managed to build.

The hastily arranged welcoming party for the envoys ended up being a headache to wrangle. The Titanomachy still did not have any formal diplomatic relations with the Principate, and while it was dubious they'd attack the First Prince if she stood before them that did not mean they would be willing to speak with her. Which meant Hasenbach couldn't come, and if Procer couldn't have someone in attendance then to save face it would be best if the Grand Alliance simply 'elected to send a single representative'. I voted for Lord Yannu Marave to handle it, given the Dominion's cordial if distant relations with the Titanomachy, but he voted for me and the First Prince abstained.

A round of bickering later, I ended up sent out when the whole matter was settled by our being notified that Hanno intended on going to greet the Gigantes himself. If the heroic representative went so must the one for villains, while Lord Yannu and I could not *both* go – it'd make Hasenbach's absence all the more glaring. Masego tried to be there as well, rather transparently so he could have a look at the Gigantes from close with his magical eyes, but I turned him away. He could try his hand at that later, when the diplomatic claptrap was over with. And so I found myself standing once more atop the stairs leading down to the stone floor where the translation ritual would take place.

At least I wouldn't have to go down the damned stairs again, so there was that.

I wore formal clothing in black and silver, a crown set on my brow and the Mantle of Woe on my back as a pointed reminder of the two offices I was standing for here. The White Knight was in plate with a sword at his hip, though he'd chosen not to wear a helmet. We'd exchanged a few courtesies after I arrived, a dozen attendants from the Arsenal staff standing behind us, but while there'd been no brusqueness from either part we'd quickly lapsed into silence anyway. Neither of us were in much of a talking mood. There was a little more to it than that, of course. Since our conversation over the fate of the Red Axe, we had not once shared words save in our official capacities.

There was a price to everything, I'd learned that lesson early – and never forgotten it since, as fate went out of its way to refresh my memory every few years. My thoughts did not get to linger on the subject, as a shiver of power in the room warned that the Gigantes were soon to be among us. Leaning against my staff, I had a look over the edge from the high vantage point.

Immediately it became clear that this was not the usual ritual. The gates in and out of the half-realm that served as the funnel into the Arsenal had a particular look to them, like a cut into the fabric of Creation that rippled outwards, but the large gate beginning to open was nothing alike. A broad and tall rectangle bordered in shining glyphs came into being at once, with a muted blast of air, and along the inner side of the border there was a small tremor. The filling of the rectangle wavered, and I realized it had been almost like a cut as the layer between the Arsenal and the travellers crumpled and shrivelled into nothing. Slower than our own method, I noted, but it looked more stable and their gate was perfectly aligned with the ground on both layers of reality.

I wasn't sure that was actually *possible* under the laws of Trismegistan sorcery.

The Gigantes came in without fanfare, or for that matter human mages guiding their translation. I'd not been sure what to expect, as I'd never seen any member of their race before and illustrations in books tended to vary wildly. Their height was impossible to miss, of course. The tallest must have been thirty feet tall, and the others but a few feet shorter, which had them standing taller than the ledge I've been using to overlook the platform. Though there was some variation between them, their skin was a deep brown and looked rather coarse. Though shaped not unlike humans in much greater proportions, there were easy differences to pick out: they had long, powerful legs and their necks were noticeable shorter.

Their clothing was light, eerily beautiful white cloth which had no stitches but instead complicated folds that revealed a triangle of brown flesh beneath the neck and went down in a tunic that covered down to the lower legs. It was belted with flashing bronze, fashioned as a hundred little cards of the metal interlinked, and the short-sleeved cloth revealed arms covered by winding, curling patterns of flowing gold. It was the same with the parts of their legs bared, and their sandals were polished stone bound by sinuous copper strings. Two had beards, of the same dark brown as their skin, which were without a moustache and went down to their chest in luxuriant curls – to the side they went up to where ears would have been on a human, though on the giants there was only smooth skin and a small cartilage-like ridge.

All of them had shaved their heads in part, though the one without a beard instead had a long stripe of hair beginning near his – – her? Hard to tell, I saw no difference in body shape – brow and going all the way down to the back. Their eyes were startlingly human-like, though, I found. Perhaps a little pale for our kind, but otherwise much the same as ours and similarly topped by eyebrows.

The gate collapsed into the ground behind the giants without a sound, and there was not a trace of it in the heartbeat that followed. They took slow steps forward, careful of the arched ceiling above, and the tallest of the three – he had a beard, and unsettlingly luminous blue eyes – subtly moved his head and arms while his body otherwise remained eerily rigid. Hanno moved, at my side, the way his own head moved to the side displaying what I believed to be friendliness and deference. The Gigantes shot me a cursory look, which I returned with a face like a blank mask.

“I am Ykines Silver-on-Clouds,” the giant said, his Lower Miezan only slightly accented. “Amphore for the Hushed Absence, envoy of the Titanomachy. I greet you, Queen of Callow.”

I’d not expected him to recognize me, to be honest. It unsettled me some, even though I could reason it away at the cloak and crown being rather distinctive. *Amphore* wasn’t the title Hanno had called this one by, I thought with a frown, when we’d last spoken of the Gigantes. It’d been *skope*, I was certain. From context I’d gathered that *amphore* was a higher title, though I was uncertain as to what it entailed. Before I could answer the greeting, the envoy turned towards the White Knight. They moved their bodies in ways that were too quick and slight for me to really catch any of the nuances.

“I greet you, Guest of the Nine Peaks,” Ykines said.

“I welcome you in peace,” Hanno replied.

"Indeed," I said, forcing myself not to cock my head to the side. "You are all welcomed to the Arsenal, as guests of the Grand Alliance."

"We receive your hospitality," Ykines Silver-on-Clouds said. "Slumber will be required for some hours. After, the Titanomachy can be heard and hear in turn."

Blunt, though I didn't particularly mind. I didn't hound the envoys with small talk, instead passing them to the awaiting attendants. Most of the hallways of the Arsenal were too low even if the giants bent their bodies, so it would be a specific itinerary they had to follow. Their rooms would be fitted for them, at least, though they'd be lodged in the Repository instead of the Alcazar. Their 'quarters' were a repurposed warehouse, though it'd been decorated richly enough I wouldn't have believed it if told. Following through exactly on their word, the Gigantes disappeared into their quarters and did not stir in the following hours. Knocks on the doors were not answered.

It'd been early morning, and it was only mid afternoon that they emerged. Lord Yannu's presence was requested, as was the White Knight's, and for a few more hours the doors closed. They broke only for a communal meal – Gigantes apparently did not eat much meat, to my surprise – and then cloistered themselves away for one last hour. The two humans left after that, and I was not entirely surprised to receive a messenger from Hanno soon afterwards. I agreed to meet without delay and limped my way to one of the Alcazar halls not too far away.

He'd changed out of his armour, I noticed, and settled into his usual grey tunic. A few papers and scrolls took up part of the table where he'd sat, as well as a quill and inkwell, but it looked a light workload. The White Knight duly rose to his feet when I entered, which I dismissed with a grunt as I took a seat on the other side of the table. Hanno had asked for the meeting, so as I sipped at the glass of water he'd poured for me I waited for him to speak.

"The Myrmidon has volunteered to participate to the Hainaut campaign," he told me. "Since the Grey Pilgrim will be participating as well and the Mirror Knight will be with him, the Anchorite must stay in Cleves. The principality grows too lightly defended otherwise."

My brow rose. Not the conversation I'd expected, though it wasn't unimportant either. Cleves was admittedly getting low on Named, since both the Exalted Poet and the Maddened Keeper had come from that front and they wouldn't exactly be coming back.

"I can leave the Red Knight there, if you're worried," I said. "Though not the Headhunter, that tracking trick is much too useful."

The Red Knight was one of the finest killing Named on my side, but she was also deeply unpleasant in a lot of ways. There were only so many times you could be told that the weak should die and the strong take what they wanted before it became more than slightly grating. No, given the difficulties inherent in juggling a coalition of Named it might be wiser to leave her regardless – I could even cite Named running thin in Cleves as the reason why when she inevitably complained about being left out of the offensive.

“That would be appreciated,” he nodded. “I also intend to reassign the Stained Sister from Twilight’s Pass to the Cleves theatre, unless you have a major objection.”

My brow rose.

“She’s been doing well there, last I heard,” I said.

Hard old girl, the Stained Sister, and her affinity with Light made her very useful against the massive necromantic constructs that the Dead King used as siege engines up north.

“I need someone to take up leadership in Cleves,” the White Knight admitted. “With the Mirror Knight gone, the eldest hero in the region is the Anchorite and they are... not a good fit.”

Yeah, spending forty years in exile in the mountains did not tend to do wonders for one’s social skills. The Myrmidon was probably second in the heroic pecking order there, right now, but while an impressive fighter all her languages except some obscure Penthesian dialect were a little shaky. She also despised the Red Knight, a feeling violently returned, which made her even worse a fit. The Knight wasn’t exactly a leader of villains – I’d assigned mostly Named with an independent streak in Cleves partly as a way to prevent her from gathering a power base – but she was the strongest of my lot in the region, which carried some weight.

“You need someone good with Light assigned to the Pass,” I said. “We’re already pulling out the Forsworn Healer, they’re starting to look a little bare up there.”

Of the three villains in Lycaonese lands – the Bitter Blacksmith, the Affable Burglar and the Skinchanger – only the last was truly fighting fit in my opinion. From Above’s lot the Daring Pyromancer had proved worth twenty times his weight in gold since he’d come from the Free Cities and the Bloody Sword’s appearance as the first Lycaonese hero of the war had been a massive morale boost for his countrymen, but for all their skill neither of them could smash a *beorn* the way a Light-wielder could.

“The Stalwart Apostle will be heading there, the Astrologer has agreed to take charge of her,” he countered.

Ugh, that Ashuran lunatic. I didn't care how often she'd predicted storms, what she did was just specialized scrying and not some sort of unearthly discipline. Still, she was older and not prone to getting herself killed. There were worse mentors to have. Like the Skinchanger, who the Lycaonese would probably have gone wild over as their first Named in at least half a century if she'd not also been a shapeshifting cannibal. That, uh, tended to put a damper on things.

"The Unravellers are proving effective, so I'll make my peace with it," I sighed. "You hear back from the Swaggering Duellist?"

"He still considers his honour sworn to the protection of the First Prince until next winter solstice," Hanno replied, "even if she personally orders him north. We'll be without him."

Shame, the man might be next to useless in an actual battle but he'd be a right headache thrown at Revenants.

"The roster's taking shape," I mused. "Archer is leaning towards releasing what's left of her old band, right now. If she does, I take it you want the Paladin for up north?"

"His presence would neatly fill the niches left empty by the departure of the Stained Sister and the Forsworn Healer, when combined with the Stalwart Healer's assignment," he agreed.

Replacing strong hands with weaker ones, but then if we wanted our finest fighters in Hainaut we couldn't then complain they weren't elsewhere. I sipped at my water, and a moment of silence I offered as an opportunity to speak up ensued. We were done with Named, then. Good.

"How'd the talks with the Titanomachy go?" I bluntly asked.

"Fruitfully," he replied. "A formal proposition will be made to the Grand Alliance this evening."

My brow rose.

"Good news," I said. "What are they offering?"

He met my eyes calmly and did not reply. I knew instinctively, from the start, that this wasn't the silence of someone choosing his words. I still waited.

"So it's going to be like that," I eventually said, voice gone quiet.

"You cannot have it both ways, Catherine," Hanno simply replied. "Lord Marave will soon attempt to arrange a formal meeting of the Grand Alliance, during which he and I will present the offer made by the envoys of the Titanomachy. That is all I have to say on this matter."

It was on the tip of my tongue to correct him, to say that he should be calling me *Queen Catherine* then, but I mastered my temper. I would not further salt these fields out of petty spite. I breathed out, studying him. I felt, I'd admit it, a tinge of sadness over this. We'd been friends, in our own way. It had been a friendship with many boundaries, but a friendship nonetheless. Perhaps we might be that again, someday, but even if we were it wouldn't be the same. I looked for an echo of the same thing in him but found only a tranquillity that now seemed... cool. Distant.

Perhaps it always had been, I thought, and I'd just been too busy staring at my reflection in the pond to notice.

"Then we're done talking," I said. "I will see you when the proposal is made, White Knight."

For a moment I thought he might speak, but instead he nodded.

I had neither the words nor the right to change his mind, and so I simply left.

—

The message came within moment of my having returned to my quarters, and I wasted no time agreeing to the time suggested — a little after supper, this very night. A note from Vivienne was awaiting me also, as it happened. Her people in the Arsenal staff had seen Lord Yannu and the First Prince having a private meeting that began not long after my own with Hanno. The Levantine lord made no such effort with me, I could not help but note, and somehow I doubted it was because he'd expected the White Knight would fill me in. Hanno had, after all, taken pains to make it understood that he would not meddle in the political affairs of the Grand Alliance.

Was Marave showing goodwill to the First Prince, to make up for the times we'd made common front to leverage her? Callow had common interests with the Dominion, it was true, but my kingdom was far and Procer was close. *Careful Yannu* might simply be living up to his name once more, hedging the Dominion's bets when it came to its alliances. It was unpleasant to be the one left out of the loop this time, but I would take it as a helpful reminder that my influence within the Grand Alliance was not something everyone enjoyed. I'd concentrated a lot of power in my hands by virtue of being both Queen of Callow and representative for villains, and while no one was trying to replace me that didn't mean no measures would ever be taken to check me.

The council came quickly, and after an afternoon's worth of anticipation I found the proceedings rather anticlimactic. The White Knight standing as witness, Lord Yannu brought out written transcriptions of the proposal made by Ykines Silver-on-Clouds on behalf of the Titanomachy. The goods offered were well worth a

second look, I silently admitted to myself. Two hundred wardstones, around a hundred artefacts suited for fighting and the temporary services of ten artisans from the Reticent Fidelity – a Chorus whose preoccupation was such artefacts, and whose members were some of the most frequent traders of their kind with Levant – to adjust them before they were used, as well as lend their expertise on the fronts so long as it did not involve combat.

In 'exchange', the Gigantes required two of their spellsingers – whose identity had yet to be determined – to have full access to the Arsenal, its resources and all its public projects. They also wanted formal recognition by the Grand Alliance of their people's right to use the Twilight Ways.

Tempting as the artefacts were, I was honestly inclined to hold out for better terms given what was being asked of us. The Arsenal had cost a fortune to make and carried the research of some of the finest minds on Calernia: we ought to ask for more than trinkets if we were to share it with the Titanomachy. Then Lord Yannu put the final part of the offer on the table, and I was glad to have held my tongue.

"The Titanomachy acknowledges the threat of the Dead King's rising," Lord Marave said, "and though they will not make war at the side of Procer, they offer instead a gift: a great warding, raised along the shores of the Tomb, that will turn away the dead."

I saw the hunger in Hasenbach's eyes at the words and knew the giants had us. I set aside the strategic implications of such a gift, instead wondering that the Gigantes knew to make it at all. It was not yet common knowledge that we were to have an offensive in Hainaut. I eyed the White Knight and the Lord of Alava, wondering how much they'd told the giants, before admitting to myself it didn't matter. The Gigantes might have made the offer meaning to begin the work in Cleves, were the shores were somewhat secure, and going east along the water with our armies in support. Besides, even if it turned out these two had been overly chatty the results they brought more than justified it.

It was tempting. Gods, but it was damned tempting. If we took back Hainaut all the way to the shore and behind that wave the Gigantes came in to raise wards rivalling the quality of those beneath the Red Snake Wall, the nature of this war would change. The heavily fortified Lycaonese lands would become the main path of invasion for Keter, and the lakeside fronts would stabilize almost overnight. Enough that it might be possible for us to take a stab at the Crown of the Dead itself, should Masego come through with Quartered Seasons.

"Gigantes do not bargain," the White Knight told us. "This is the only offer there will be, and I ask you consider it seriously."

Hasenbach thanked him, and it was agreed that we would reconvene tomorrow after having 'considered' matters, but everyone in the room knew how this was going to end. It was just a matter of how long we'd delay before accepting so we wouldn't be looking too desperate.

—

There were still a few days left to my stay in the Arsenal, but it was swiftly coming to an end.

As soon as the treaty with the Gigantes was wrapped up and my own few affairs settled, I'd be returning to Hainaut to begin arranging the campaign from there. Indrani would be coming with me, and perhaps eventually Masego as well – it depended on how the Quartered Seasons project was looking – but there were others I would be leaving behind. I was looking at one that'd sting the most, once more settled in the same old infirmary seat that'd become as a second bed for me. The only sign that Hakram was healing was that the healing mages had removed the breathing spell, trusting his lungs to carry him without the help now. Otherwise, his sleeping form had not changed.

"I'm going to have leave you behind," I quietly said. "'Drani's right. I could stretch out my stay by doing some planning from here, but it'd just be delaying the inevitable."

It still sickened me to think that I'd be abandoning him to this little bed in this little room, when the only reason he was wounded at all was that he'd fought for me. A knock on the door jolted me out of my thoughts, though it also irked me more than a little. I'd instructed my people not to disturb me.

"Come in," I said, tone forcefully even.

I'd give whoever had the come the benefit of the doubt, if they were willing to interrupt against my clear instructions. It was not some nervous messenger who came in, though, but Vivienne Dartwick. I immediately bit down on the sharp words already on the tip of my tongue. Vivienne did not look nervous, not exactly. It'd take more than our current disagreements to make a woman who'd faced down a Princess of Summer feel nervous. But she did look... cautious. Hesitant. And she'd noticeably dressed down.

In Salia she'd gotten into the habit of wearing nice dresses. Nothing extravagant – she was Callowan, and we were at war – but there'd been a distinct noble tinge to it. It made sense. Her father had been a noble, if one stripped of his lands after the Conquest, and she must have worn clothes not unlike those when she'd been younger. I'd never occurred to me how different it made her look until just now, when I saw her for the first time in ages in something closer to the leathers she'd worn as the

Thief. There were still skirts and leggings beneath the long shirt, but this was a notable departure from usual.

"Cat," she greeted me. "Do you have a moment?"

She had a bottle in hand, I noted. The glass was of poor quality, so it was probably Callowan. Vale summer wine? She'd come prepared. Or trying to bribe me, like I was a drunk that could be bought with a favourite poison.

"I asked for-" I began, and saw something in her face close.

I bit down on the sentence. The hesitance, the dressing down, the wine. Gods but she was trying, wasn't she? When it wasn't even her fault. And there was something about the change clothes that left me a sour taste in the mouth. It felt a little like abasement, and I did not like what it said about either of us that she'd thought it might work. Poor timing was no reason to bite her head off.

"Never mind," I said. "Come in, close the door behind you."

She nodded, but the wariness did not leave. She looked a little at a loss as to what she should say, even as she sat down at my side in the same chair Indrani usually did.

"I was saying my goodbyes," I told her. "Or maybe warning him they were coming, I suppose."

I wasn't going to leave tomorrow, after all, even if the date was not far in the future either.

"I still can't believe he was wounded this badly," she admitted. "He was never our finest fighter, but he always seemed so... solid."

I grunted in agreement.

"Nobody's solid against demons," I said. "At least the Mirror Knight cut him before the taint could spread."

Otherwise... I thought of Nephele's pleading eyes, and my staff coming down. I closed my eyes for a moment and breathed steadily, in and out, until the cold fear that'd seized me ebbed low. Gods. Even just the *thought* of having to do the same to Hakram...

"It's been a long few years, hasn't it?" Vivienne said, tone almost thoughtful.

She was looking at me with an expression that was hard to read. My jaw clenched in embarrassment.

"For everyone," I said.

"For you more than me," she said. "We're both tired, Cat, but it's a different kind of tired."

"A hollow excuse," I said.

The heights where I now stood had been reached through a pile of corpses. I would not spit on those deaths by moaning about the *burdens of authority*. Vivienne said nothing for some time. It did not mind, though the silence was not exactly comfortable.

"I have been putting together a census of Callow," she suddenly said.

My brow rose in surprise. I'd not actually heard about that.

"The Fairfaxes only held them infrequently and by unreliable methods, but under the Carrion Lord the Empire gathered a great deal of trustworthy information," Vivienne continued.

Black had probably been most interested in population numbers and what the local trades were, I thought, since that information would allow him to follow the flow of coin. Lack of gold where there should be plenty would have told him which nobles were trying to raise troops to rebel.

"What do you intend to do with it?" I asked.

"I want to fund workshops and guilds to foster certain trades," she said. "We have the materials to make dyes and the manners of cloths that have enriched Mercantis. Royal coin could help our people enter the trade. And we could organize much, through guilds: the lumber from Holden and what was once Liesse would be worth a fortune out east, where they so sorely lack it. Trading cattle with the Clans upriver for amber and fur would not only enrich us, it would give the orcs a reason never to resume raiding."

"You need peace for that," I gently reminded her.

For there to be any trade with the east, to have the coin to make any of this at all.

"I know," she assured me. "I really do. I understand that the war with the Dead King is what matters right now."

She met my eyes, the blue-grey of them grown pale under the glow of the magelights.

"But I need you to know that I won't be a... parasite," she said. "I won't just coast to the throne on your reputation and then do *nothing* with this. You put trust in me, Cat. And I know some of it is because I learned to see what you see – how much more we could be, if we stop seeing greenskins as the enemy – but I want to believe you saw in me the makings of a good queen."

Her voice had grown raw. I held my breath, somehow afraid it would be enough to interrupt.

"I want to live up to it," Vivienne said, eyes gone hard as stone. "I *will* live up to it."

Slowly, I breathed out. She did not speak a word more, only searching my face with something like desperation.

"I know," I quietly said. "I never saw you as a..."

I did not stay *parasite*, though the word echoed in the silence anyway. I passed a hand through my hair, mulling over my words. However inarticulate my first words had been, I saw on Vivienne's face they had at least taken the edge off of the apprehension. With clumsy hands I ended up reaching for my pipe, that old gift from Masego that had become so dear to me, and filled it. Moments later, a touch of Night was enough for me to breathe out a long stream of wakeleaf. Vivienne had been patient, and so I talked.

"I believe you'll be a good queen," I said. "I genuinely do. And while I have been an able warlord, I don't think the talents that helped me there would suit peace times."

I'd grown too used to having my orders obeyed without questioning. I'd grown too used to resorting to violence to get my way, to schemes and assassinations and all the bastard ways to see your will done. Those methods had their place for any queen, but they'd come to be just a little too close to my hand. Too easily grasped. I liked to think I had done the best I could for my people, but I would not deny I had done it as a tyrant. Vivienne was not weak, but even as a heroine she'd disliked killing. It would not be her first resort. And the plans she was already making only reinforced my belief I'd made the right choice of successor.

"That's part of what makes me angry, I think," I admitted. "I know my name will make it onto the pages of history books, Vivienne. But back home, I can't help but suspect I'll be remembered as the dark days before you took up the crown."

I smiled, a tad bitterly.

"Necessary days, most will agree," I murmured. "They were savage times and so Callow required a savage queen. But we were well rid of them and her, afterwards, so that a more enlightened era might take their place."

That enlightened era, I thought, was sitting next to me with something like grief on her face.

"It won't be like that," Vivienne fiercely said. "You know I wouldn't let them..."

I took her hand for a moment, clenched it in a gesture too hard to be gratitude but too grateful to be anger.

"I can already see the current," I gently told her. "And its inevitable end."

It wasn't without reason it was happening. This had not sprouted from thin air as if by divine intervention. Deciding to keep Akua in my service had cost me much esteem among even my most loyal, and back home sending Callowans to die on foreign fields against the Dead King had become increasingly unpopular as the soldiers stayed abroad and the taxes stayed high. I wouldn't face revolt over this, I suspected at least in part because anyone who might feasibly lead one was either dead or part of my armies. But I'd turned Callow into a cradle of armies, and only that. My only legacy among my people would be the victories and defeat I had led my soldiers through.

It was not an enjoyable thought.

"Archer chewed me out," I admitted, "in that way she does when she pretends it's not what she's doing."

"Because Indrani is much too tough and aloof to care about it when her friends quarrel, naturally," Vivienne amusedly said. "It would be beneath her to ever meddle in such things."

I grinned, though it faded after a moment.

"She was right, though," I said, "when she castigated me for clutching to my pride when I like to claim I have none. I've said for years I was ready to abdicate, Vivienne, and I thought I meant it. But then I had to deal with genuinely sharing power – not just delegating it – and it got stuck in my throat. It matters more to me than I like to admit, the authority."

"It's all right, you know," she said. "To be hurt that after all you've sacrificed, the gratitude passed so quickly."

I breathed in sharply. That was perhaps, I thought, the closest anyone had come to actually reading me right when it came to this.

"Maybe it is," I said. "But all these years, I've always told myself I was taking that next step because it needed to be done. That I'd surrender it all the moment I was no longer necessary. And maybe that's half a lie, always was."

The words came out in a stumble, perhaps more honest than I would have liked.

"But I'd like to live up to it, Vivienne," I softly said. "I'd like to be the kind of woman who genuinely believes that."

I gathered myself, after a moment.

"I'm sorry I took it out on you," I said. "It's not your fault, and it was ill-done of me."

"I'm sorry too," Vivienne replied. "For what this will do to you, before it's all over."

A knot I'd not known was in my shoulders loosened. I smiled, and she smiled back. Sometimes, I thought, the things that mattered could still be fixed. Sometimes you got to them in time. A hoarse breath sounded, which I realized a heartbeat later that was neither mine nor Vivienne's. I hurriedly rose to my feet, wincing in pain at my bad knee, and arrived just in time to see Hakram's eyes flutter open.

"Cat?" he groaned.

"I'm here," I told him.

It'd been a hard few years, there was no denying that.

But sometimes, just sometimes, we got lucky.

Javvies

Reconciliation between Cat and Viv is good.
Viv has plans for the post-war future, also good.

Hakram is awake! Even better.

That's a pretty good offer from the Gigantes. Honestly, the ward on the lake shore against the dead would probably be worth what they're asking for anyways.

Distance between Hanno and Cat ... could cause problems down the road, especially if it worsens.
Although, honestly, Hanno, not giving Cat a heads up on what the Gigantes offered? That's just petty.

Insanenoodlyguy

On the plus side, now they can sleep together without it being a risk! Here's hoping they get trapped in a cave in awaiting rescue jussssstttt long enough to be bored and naked.

Miles

Hhhhhhiiii Jaaaack /(slash)

““I want to live up to it,” Vivienne said, eyes gone hard as stone. “I will live up to it.”

Slowly, I breathed out. She did not speak a word more, only searching my face with something like desperation.

“I know,” I quietly said. “I never saw you as a...”

I did not say <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> though the word echoed in the silence anyway. I passed a hand through my hair, mulling over my words. However inarticulate my first words had been, I saw on Vivienne’s face they had at least taken the edge off of the apprehension.

caoimhinh

I wonder (and actually hope) if the Gigantes could do something about Hakram. They have ways to magic that other races’ sorcery are incapable of achieving.

shikkarasu

They make artefacts, he needs prosthetics....

AbraKadabra

Which probably can be the same thing.

Xinci

Yeah, they could probably weave him prosthetics from “living” concepts of Creation to get around the soul issue. Honestly, the Gigantes would know best how to meld a concept to him and his soul as they have the depth of connection to the world that other sorceries don’t have without the safeguards that Light has.

Salt

It would be much better than using standard trismegistan sorcery imo, as they’re going into a fight with the Dead King who invented trismegistan sorcery and was confirmed by EE to be quite literally the most skilled sorcerer on the continent.

Wouldn’t even put it past him for one of the twists to be the Dead King putting an intentional flaw in the foundations of the “Trismegistan sorcery” that he spread to the rest of the world, so that every single person who used it would be at an utterly crippling disadvantage when fighting him in the future. A Jade Empire style backdoor

Light-based prosthetics clash with him being a Villain, Jaquinite sorcery is too closely tied to Above-miracles, Trismegistan could be risky when fighting the dead king, and Cat doesn't do devilish pacts. Spell singers that use a completely alien and hyper-advanced form of sorcery would probably be a narratively and practically better option if the giants were willing.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

Now. She only needs to convince them. That hakram is worth years of their lives.

Jude Taggart

Cat and Viv are friends again, The gigantes have made a great offer, and Hakram is awake. Happy times before the dark?

Thanatoss

Yes, too happy chapter, we are going for a hell now guys. Assassinations, betrayal, army destruction. New Plague? What with Amadeus and Ranger? Maybe there will things go downhill?

Salt

Rather worried about Black to be honest. We know the Bard was the one who pushed him into becoming a Claimant for Dread Emperor. I'm rather worried that he'll end up in trouble or at odds with Cat, simply because we know that him attempting to Climb the tower is something that is at least partially the result of Intercession.

Actually if you look at it, the Bard was the one who pushed the first domino in every event that caused him to go down the road.

The Bard stopped the Elves from killing Akua to prevent second Liesse. This resulted in causing a rift between him and Malicia.

The Bard intervened to help the White Knight's band survive/ maim the Calamities in the free cities – setting up the story that killed Captain. She told him immediately afterwards to go murder his little friend in the tower and rule until someone does the same to him. This was the loss where he realized that no pattern of three started, and that the "Black Knight" was dying

After the role fully died, and he was captured by the Pilgrim, he figured he was at the end of his story and

accepted death. The Bard once again intervened, this time directly talking him into becoming a claimant.

Not a fuckin clue what her game is with this one, but anything that has her fingers in it is guaranteed to be trouble.

Ninestrings

Anyone want to bet Hakram was feigning sleep for the last twenty minutes just so he didn't have to deal with all the relationship drama again?

LizAris

Viv: "Cat, do you have a moment?"

Hakram, cracking an eye open: If she doesn't agree, I'm going to listen to the whole gooey goodbye before waking up

Letouriste

No bet

Eleron M Pfoutz

That's a sucker's bet. 5 GP.

Benjamin Smith

Providence throwing Catherine a bone, just once.

Ninestrings

No that was the Kingfisher Prince.

nimelennar

How do we know that isn't his Choir?

Darkening

Providence isn't a Choir, it's the luck every hero has guiding them.

[Liliet](#)

Choir of Bone? 😊

dadycool

The Angels with 69 wings?

shikkarasu

Read this while listening to Phantom of the Opera. Made coffee come out my nose.

Darkening

Well, that's a suitably dramatic time to wake up. Nice to see the story throwing cat a bone lol.

[onedollargum](#)

Reconciliation is a time of healing. I wouldn't be surprised if Hakram caught just enough story spillover to wake up.

It might also be that by damaging ties with Hanno, Cat's starting to put the woe back together- Her name is returning, Archer's old band is breaking up, Masegeo's research is near a breakpoint and Vivi's reconciling. Hakram waking up at this point is almost inevitable =D

dadycoool

Now that sounds interesting. Now that Vivienne's in the Arsenal, an excuse can be made for her staying with the group and ruling from afar. Especially considering this is the first time in a long time that all five of them have been in the same region and also conscious.

Konstantin von Karstein

Vivienne is to take command of the Deoraithe troops at the front. Also, she's not Named anymore.

dadycoool

That would actually be a good place for her, including cementing in their minds that "This is the future queen." Also, she might not be named, but she's still part of the Woe. Cat didn't have a Name for years. She still doesn't, in fact.

Konstantin von Karstein

Sure Cat doesn't have a Name, but she's the high priestess of Night and has the corresponding firepower. Vivienne does not have any supernatural capability, you can't compare the 2.

dadycoool

I want to give some rebuttal about how not having a Name doesn't mean Stories, Tropes, and Types don't apply, but the only two people who that would work for are Cordelia and Abigail, and even then Cordelia isn't affected nearly as much as Cat Jr. So, it's more that

Cat has the narrative weight from another source (Night), in a way that Vivienne doesn't. I guess in summary, "Yeah, I agree."

Konstantin von Karstein

I am not speaking of narrative weight, you're right on that front. I just say that Vivienne can only be useful in a commanding or administrative position, while the others (especially Archer) are much more personally powerful and can have a big impact on the frontline.

naturalnuke

Whooooo!

Insanenoodlyguy

"It's all right, you know," she said. "To be hurt that after all you've voted the validity passed so quickly."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Liliet](#)

This isn't one of the better ones, though there have been worse.

Again, what I dislike is taking a genuinely powerful emotional moment and... changing associations. In a manner that is funny and snappy and ends up sticking better than the original because it's funny, see? And then you cannot read the original without thinking of the change and PLEASE STOP DOING THIS. COME ON. PLEASE. IT SUCKS.

galanailo

That's like complaining about fanfiction as though it were stealing from the original work. It's not quite the same, even if there is a point there, and if the existence of fan works ruins the original show for you then that's your problem, not theirs. And you whining about it in ALL CAPS isn't going to change that.

I mean, Jesus, if these really bother you that much then I feel like you need to think about if something else is involved and if it's healthy to think this way, or maybe at least reconsider your relationship with this comment section. You've as much right to fruitlessly complain and moan about it as they do to post it, but if your comment was serious (maybe I'm misreading sarcasm or playfulness?), then I'd be concerned.

[Liliet](#)

If there's a porn fanwork scene posted right as text in the comment section under the chapter, yes I will complain about that too.

My comment IS serious. I only give so much space in my head to fictional characters and stories about them, but to the degree that I do? That happens, and I do not like it.

KageLupus

Normally I don't find these as annoying when they twist an emotional moment, but I also agree this one was a little weak and there were some other lines that would have worked as well without that emotional baggage.

"We thanked him, and it was agreed that we would reconvene tomorrow after having 'considered' matters, but everyone in the chat knew how this was going to end. It was just a matter of how long we'd delay before voting so we wouldn't be looking too desperate."

[Liliet](#)

Okay this one is genuinely funny and good.

Taking a line that was *neutral* in the original and adding drama to it regarding voting is MUCH BETTER.

And funnier.

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, lots of very good things happening here, but also lots of cause for concern. Cat's a Villain, and when sympathetic Villains get closure and have heartwarming moments before major battles, bad things tend to happen to them. The fact that the other leaders and dignitaries are cutting her out of meetings and discussions is more alarming because of that fact. I'm not getting outright betrayal vibes, but I do have concerns.

[TeK](#)

She does not yet have a defined Name though. But reconciliation coming in time and a loved one waking from the coma in exchange for humility and protagonist striving to be better are decidedly not Villainous tropes.

caoimhinh

Catherine has never been one for Villainous tropes. It's one of her greatest advantages that she has Heroic tropes on her

side despite being a Villain, because she is an Anti-villain who genuinely wants to do good.

Pilgrim was even certain that “Dramatic Return in the time of need of her friends” was something inevitable for Cat, which prompted the Saint of Swords to grunt and observe that *that* was not a Villain’s story, yet she knew Pilgrim was right, and she didn’t like it.

AbraKadabra

Yeah. I bet she will be the Villanious Hero. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia was cut out of Cat’s meetings with Yannu previously.

It’s just the normal tumble of politics.

flashburn283

Geeze, way to milk an injury Hakram, and all so that Cat would learn a lesson about honesty.

Minions, why do we put up with them?

erebus42

Because then we’d have to actually do all that boring gruntwork ourselves.

[onedollargum](#)

YEAH!

LizAris

FINALLY!!! Ah but I have missed the feel good chapters. Thank you EE for a little brightness before Cat goes back to slaying zombies.

I won’t call it a reconciliation because I think that’s a little too strong—Cat and Viv weren’t really even fighting, it was more misplaced anger— but I really loved the dialogue here. Not only that Viv will take up the crown and make it her own, but a herald of the end of Cat’s story. And a recognition that she is a warlord who has had a very...interesting relationship with justifications, and she’s willing to look that right in the eye even if it hurts.

It seems like a small thing but I am SO glad Cat was there when Hakram woke up. That just speaks volumes about their relationship. And of course the first thing out of his mouth is her name. The loyalty between the two of them is phenomenal.

And shit, now I have to wait three days for more of my favorite orc.

dadycoool

“Clearing the air” is what came to my mind when reading your comment on Cat and Vivienne.

And yeah, narratively there’s only one time when he can wake up, and that’s when Cat is there to greet him. Maybe it was her and Vivienne, the girl-turned-woman that he was advising in Cat’s absence for a long time, “clearing the air” that did it.

LizAris

Yeah that’s a good way to phrase it—what can I say, after a new guide chapter my brain abandons any attempts at eloquence xD

But you make a great point about the weight Viv brings, esp considering her relationship with Hakram, and how incredibly far THAT’s come. She’s the heir who he’s both terrorized and guided in her path to backing the warlord he loves, and I like to think the fact that Viv is doing a little of his work here for him jolted him awake.

dadycoool

Lots of wow this chapter, but special mention to Cat and Vivienne’s making up, complete with Hakram waking up.

I like how Cat made an effort to keep her face blank, exactly the same as someone purposefully keeping their mouth shut when a language you don’t know is being spoken.

[Liliet](#)

Ooooh yep good catch.

Xinci

I do doubt it helped much given how minute expressions of body language are for the Gigantes method of communication she was probably a bit of an open book.

Salt

Which begs the question – if the Gigantes communicate through body language and minute facial expressions, does that mean that, to a Giant, the other races walk around constantly shouting rubbish in Giantese?

nick012000

I wonder... Vivienne, the Shining Princess? It's starting to sound like she's getting some of her old resolve back.

caoimhinh

The Good Queen.

[*Liliet*](#)

>Vivienne comes into the name of Good Queen at coronation
>Catherine standing in the back groans and buries her face in her palms. "I don't know what I expected"

Tohron

The Name that would really annoy Cat would be the Vivacious Queen. Having the Name of her successor be a pun on her successor's actual name is something she might not be able to handle.

erebus42

Well wasn't that sweet and heartwarming. One friendship potentially irreparably sundered, another mended anew. That being said, I really hope the Skinchanger gets some page-time now, she sounds cool. I mean a shapeshifter alone is pretty cool, but a shapeshifting CANNIBAL?! Come on!

LarsBlitzer

I know! The evocative Names, the powers that come along with them, and the personalities that shape them are part of why I love EE's creativity. I'd like to see the Red Knight and the Swaggering Duelist in action, and I suspect we will before the book's through.

On another note, I think it's perfect timing for Hakram to wake up. With Masego champing at the bit to get a glimpse of Gigantes magic, part of the terms including magical artifacts, and some leeway on what those artifacts would be I'd wager my lucky D20 Cat would lobby heavily on getting her Adjutant on his feet ASAP. They can rebuild him; they have the technology.

[*Liliet*](#)

I don't think it's irreparably sundered. If anything, the fact it was brought up with Cat's reluctance to make things worse even as her spite wanted her to, right before she mended things with Vivienne, looked like a good sign to me.

Must have been an enlightening conversation for Vivienne. "I promise I'm good enough for this – oh. Oh your problem is that you knew that. Oh okay"

Salt

This was the foundling edition of "its not you, it's me"

[Liliet](#)

THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT IT WAS

jworks17

I don't know why but this chapter really cemented in my mind the difference between the old story- the beginnings of cat, the formation of the Woe, and Cat's legion's campaign in Callow- and the new story revolving around Procer and the dead king. I feel like it's been so long since we've seen the Woe in this light, and It's something I missed without realizing it. Old world blues.

Anka

I'm... extremely disappointed in the White Knight. He didn't even make an effort to understand why what Cat did was necessary, and is now being extremely petty about things. I know that's entirely in his character, but it really makes him out to be just like every other "Good" Named out there – only willing to accept blame when it's good for their side and not the "bad guys".

Cat had a reason to not tell him about it before she resurrected the corpse to re-stand trial, because it might have caused a problem, and it was for the sake of continuing the alliance. The same can't be said in not telling Cat what happened in the meeting with the giants – yes, she didn't need to know and he didn't need to discuss it with her, but there was no reason not to. He stonewalled her and cut off their friendship simply because she had to do what she needed to.

I know that narratively inside and outside the universe it makes sense, but it still hurts to see.

Raved Thrad

Dammit, the suspense is killing me. With Catherine pinning all these hopes on Vivienne, I can't help but think this might be a death-flag on her. Doomed shipping aside, I have to admit that she's one of my favorite characters, and it would really hurt if she were to die. Especially if it were to happen off-screen, the way it's happened to so many others we'd come to love.

[Liliet](#)

No, Vivienne's not going to die. Like, where would the story even go from there? It'd be snipping a heavily built up plot thread, not enhancing it.

Nell Rampello

It's all a matter of what the future is for Cat. Is she going to abdicate like she plans? Because that will only happen once they get peace, and if peace never happens, she never abdicates. Or maybe she will abdicate and find a whole new adventure. Go with Archer to a new continent for adventure. Or maybe the Tower assassinates Vivienne, and Cat has no choice but to climb the Tower herself, like the song she hears keeps indicating.

Vivienne taking over just seems like too happy a path for this story. Cat tries hard not to be a villain but always ends up a bigger one by necessity.

Liliet

Guide's one of the lightest and most optimistic stories I've read in a while, and not because I avoid the genre. It's got superhero comics levels of concentration of heroes lowercase, and it has an international alliance consisting wholly of non-corrupt officers who genuinely care. A politician caring only about their own country and not everyone else as well is villain level. Continent sweeping political changes are being made by people in charge who genuinely care and look to the future.

The main character has won over ancient goddesses of blood and death through Power of Friendship, that's the level we're talking about here.

I think Vivi will be fine.

Solesealedsoul

He protec
He attac
But most importantly
He is back

Shveiran

Godsdamn it Hanno, are you for real?

"Oh hey, Catherine, let me ask you for a meeting after a secluded talk with the Gigantes. Oh, but let me begin by addressing a Named issue that is not urgent but that I want to address now anyway for some reason.
Then let me -pause- without saying I'm done.

Oh?

Oh, you thought I had something to add? Possibly concerning said secluded meeting, which you'd hear all about anyway?

But I don't. Of course I don't. I don't know why you'd think otherwise.

I'm not being petty, of course, I just wanted you to know that the next time you fix all of our messes for me, I'm going to be an hindrance ratehr than just an ungrateful prick."

Godsdamn it Hanno. Screw you and your nonexistent horse. I'm trying to give you the benefit of the doubt, so please pull your head out your ass and stop proving me wrong!

dadycoool

Now that you spell it out, wow. What an asshole. He spent all that time proving to us that he's "Not like those /other/ Heroes that are pretentious pricks! I'm practical, like you! I know how to make the hard decisions and not hate myself too much!" and then he goes and does this. Le sigh. Heroes will be Heroes, I guess.

[Liliet](#)

Wow, this whole "heroes will be heroes" thing is getting annoying.

Can we not pretend that every single thing any hero has ever done wrong is an inevitable characteristic of all of them that proves they're all bad? This is reaching chinese robber fallacy levels at this point.

I don't think Hanno meant it this way when he invited Catherine. He's not the greatest at diplomacy, and it's entirely possible he did invite her right after the meeting on purpose to communicate something, but I don't think the idea was to hurt her. Just... to clear the air.

Sure, it ended up coming out in an asshole way, but... I think that's Hanno just not being all that good at people.

Also it's not characteristic of all heroes either way bla bla bla see above.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Yeah, social skills wise, Hanno is at kind of a weird point; he's got enough empathy and intelligence to figure out other's motivations and feelings, but he seems somewhat unaware of how he presents himself (on a moment to moment basis, I mean. I think in general he's aware that he ranges from calm but compassionate to aloof and indifferent most of the time, he's just never quite sure where on that spectrum he's falling right now)

[Liliet](#)

Hanno isn't aware of how he comes off in general either, considering his confusion two years ago about why the heroes even treat him as a leader.

He does his best, the poor thing, but I think living with Gigantes instead of humans for a decade kind of warped his perception there.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Maybe. I feel like that's less about him not knowing how he comes off and more him not getting why his calmness and insight would be valued over a more 'typical' hero's passion and energy, but it's been a while since I read the chapters where he wondered about it, so I definitely could be wrong.

Definitely on the Gigantes, though; just spending a decade with another human culture would provide a major perspective shift, even more so being around a bunch of hyper-powerful giants (who I think are also immortal? Don't know if I'm remembering that right) whose ways of communicating are basically opposite how humans normally do things.

dadycool

Now that you mention it, having just come from a meeting with the Gigantes, he was probably speaking or listening in their language and probably 'heard' something she didn't mean or she didn't 'hear' something he was trying to communicate.

With the "Heroes will be Heroes" thing being annoying, we've just come from five whole books where every Hero has been what the Mirror Knight was during the whole Arsenal arc. We liked GP, WK, and Frederic because they were a breath of fresh air. Hanno's perceived asshole-ness felt like him being unable to escape the nature of Heroism, in the context of this Villain Protagonist story. In the back of our minds, I think most of us realize that the worst Hero is still better than the best Villain, but when the best Villain is Cat and the Heroes don't tend to even try and see her as a human being, for five books mind you, any pedestal we might've had for them has been repurposed as Cat's Lesser Lesser Lesser Footrest. (Can't have it above the best goblin ever.)

Salt

Thing is Hanno DOES see her as a human being though.

He refused to “Judge” her for being a Villain, even though she was reputed to be the worst thing since unsliced bread. He intentionally kept an open mind, resulting in the sword of judgment being willing to try not just cooperating, but being -actual friends with the high priestess of *murder*.

Him being distant with Cat here isn’t some self righteous proclamation about the evils of having a black cloak. He treated her as a trusted friend and got bit for it when she went behind his back, so he takes a step back and treats her with cool professionalism instead of as a close confidant.

There’s... absolutely nothing at all assholeish or holier-than-thou about that. That’s literally how normal friendships work between peers. You lose trust when you betray trust.

Cat knows this too, she’s neither a teenager nor blind to social relationships. Which is why she’s just sad that it had to come to this rather than indignantly angry – she knows full well that it’s a reasonable response, if not a forgiving one.

[Liliet](#)

...I don’t really think Hanno forgetting what languages Catherine speaks and doesn’t is particularly likely. On a subconscious level though, it could be influencing him.

And it’s inaccurate to say that over five books every hero has been like MK. Sure, William has been actually worse, and those three tragic dumbasses from prologue 4 are pretty Christophe-like, but you do have to not have been paying attention to say “all heroes were like that”.

Unless, again, by “like that” you mean “opposing the protagonist”, which, just... 😏

Tariq and Laurence specifically discussed seeing her as a person and kind of feeling like shit about it at the start of Book 4.

Just, I don’t like Protagonist Centered Morality?

Shveiran

You can like what you will.

What *I* have a visceral dislike for is characters that murder and endanger hundreds, thousands, sometimes millions of life for a point of principle without ever considering if maybe murder is wrong, or the possible consequences, or doing their fucking research before they draw their fucking blades and march across the continent to kill people they know nothing about.

And it is **AMAZING** how many of the Heroes fall in this category.

William may have been the worst offender or at least close, but let's not pretend he was an isolated incident.

Thief, Hunter and Conjuror were along for the torture and the deployment of goblinfire in the middle of a fucking city. At night.

Five bands (which, let's be generous, means at least 15 heroes because they wouldn't number less than 3, even if not 25) tried to destabilize a country on the verge of collapse without a thought of the consequences for the people starving or dying of cold.

A shitton of them said "sure, a Crusade? Let's go murder people, I'm sure those Callowans and Praesi citizens defending their homes which we are invading are all wicked warlocks, right? And surely, this couldn't bring to an escalation or wanton loss of life in any way should we, by any chance, not achieve total and immediate victory. Sounds fun."

That's about 2 dozens of them!

Maybe Tariq had some larger design, but the rest, including Hanno, pretty much jumped on board because Crusade. I guess HE at least refrained from murdering random soldiers defending their borders, but we KNOW that wasn't true for the rest of his support team and those using the Stairway.

The Saint tried to roll the dice on a Principality and the armies of the Grand Alliance without any idea of the odds.

The Maddened Keeper released eight DEMONS in the fucking Arsenal during a war with Keter.

That's DOUBLE the demons THE DIABOLIST used in her whole career even including her allies. God.

The Exalted Poet and the Red Axe were complicit in an invasion of the Arsenal which- again, but it bears

remembering- is the place where the weapons to repel the DK are being developed! God! Again!

I'll just mention fucking Cristophe or I'll be here all day.

The Blacksmith being betrayed by a godsdamn hero was not enough to persuade her that maybe not all Heroes are good and not all villains are bad, which admittedly is a minor, minor offense compared to the rest but still made me want to punch her so hard.

Now Frederic would rather keep his hands clear rather than avoid the risk of the Alliance collapsing, while fully aware of the risks, so even if I'd still marry him I also have to hate him a bit now.

And now Hanno joined the band, because he saw a powderkeg about to blow, and said "I'm not going to help keeping it from exploding". Which while a bad mark in my book, given his extensive record would not be enough to earn my dislike if it wasn't for the fact that he now keeps going "I wanted that problem fixed, I didn't want to fix it myself, I refused to give any constructive input regarding a fix, but I'm still going to bitch about how you fixed it".

See how many there are? That's about fifty Heroes! Fifty! As a conservative estimate!

"Protagonist centered morality" my ass, there are a just a FEW atrocities here that have nothing to do with opposing Catherine Fucking Foundling.

Liliet

The Maddened Keeper was a villain/neutral, Cat specifically mentioned her as the only one in the group Christophe arrived with who wasn't a hero.

And sure, a lot of heroes have done a wrong thing in their life. I'm very much not disputing that. I don't think "ugh, heroes" is a reasonable response to that, though.

masterofbones

He's hiding pointless pettiness behind a thin veneer of justice, and acting smug about it. That's exactly what pisses people off about heroes in this story. This isn't him not trusting Cat, this is him continuing the dumbassery that got her to go behind his back in the first place.

"No, I won't tell you things that you will find out later anyway, because that would make your life easier and I'm a prick". He has no reason to withhold this information, he's just doing it to be a dick.

Salt

Yes, because it definitely makes zero difference to know the opposing party's bargaining chips before going into what is a glorified international-level haggling session.

I mean it's not as if the dude doesn't have VERY real flaws, but when the White Knight gets accused of being... smug(???), you know there are some rather heavy biases there

The guy so aggressively avoids gloating or being smug that it's almost unrealistic for a person to be like that all the time. Dude talks up his accomplishments with all the swagger of a limp rag, and actively walks around denying accusations of having virtue, rather than just being an agent of it.

Liliet

I'm not seeing any smug? 0.0

He's drawing a boundary, for his own sake because he realized he trusted her more than he should have, and it's interfering with his duties.

I'm pretty sure Cat's "did he ever like me or was it all just me projecting" is insecurity multiplied by Hanno's Gigantes-nursed facial control.

He IS doing it to send a message of "I'm not sharing anymore", but being a dick is not a purpose. Just... an unfortunate side effect that I think he isn't quite noticing.

(I wonder if he also now has his own doubts of "did she ever care about me or does she view all people as tools or obstacles and affection is in the eye of the beholder")

Fable

Have you considered that Cat has proven that he effectively has no levers on their relationship, while Cat does?

She speaks for a nation and all the villains.
He acts as the first among peers for all heroes.
She is willing and able to act dishonestly for her principles.
Hanno's principles require complete transparency.

Cat is growing in power from her coming Name.
Hanno is fixed in the experiences he has.

And yet this needs to be an equal partnership in order for it to actually work. Hanno is a new hand at this, and he needs to demonstrate that he has some leverage to bring to the table, even if he has no idea how to politic—that is not his Role.

I'd say to throw the dude a bone, but the man has no personal ambitions. There's precious little to concede to him that he doesn't already have a right to. The one thing that he asked from Cat in the aftermath was transparency. A compromise with **his** principles. Which she refused to give or make assurances for, or even show remorse over.

I just hope Cat finally looks at this from Hanno's side before all is done and find something to mend the relationship.

Shveiran

She said we need to fix it or this all burns. He said "I'm not compromising".
She said "I'll fix it myself 'down here in the mud' "

Then she said let's have a talk with cordelia and find a solution.
Hanno makes zero concessions.
Pot is still boiling.
Hanno leaves.

Cat fixes the mess.

This is going behind his back? Come on. COME. ON.
They aren't children playing tag, millions of lives are a stake!
He didn't see this coming? IT'S NOT DOING IT BEHIND YOUR BACK IF YOU TURN YOUR BACK TO THE PROBLEM, HANNO! That's just the solution being taken where the problem still is, aka, where you are refusing to look at.

Breach of trust my ass.

Salt

You're confusing Cat looking at it with the perspective of a guideverse Villain with some objective reality. Except the entire point is that Heroes and Villains don't play by the same rules to begin with.

Of course she says we have to stack the odds, she's a Villain who has lived her entire career by the rules of a Villain. Villains never make the one in a million long shot. Villains don't take a stand against overwhelming odds. They

play dirty until the shot is no longer one in a million, and the odds are no longer overwhelming. Because otherwise the only ending they get is their heads on pikes.

Heroes aren't villains. There are thousands of years of history irrefutably proving that Calernian Heroes can reliably make the one in a million long shot, as long as they're being a good enough do-gooder. The odds being overwhelming means the odds are about as good as they'll get, if they're taking a hard enough stand for some principle. Above quite literally rewards them proportionally for holding to principle, the same way Below repays villains for working to prove that people can get by on their own.

Catherine thinks rolling the dice is braindead stupid because for a Villain, that's just asking to roll a pair of snake eyes. It IS stupid for a Villain

Hanno thinks it's fine because when Heroes roll the dice, Above rolls for them, and their dice are always loaded. They're just playing to Heroic advantages

You either put full faith in the Heroic route to roll those loaded dice – which Catherine is rather incapable of due to her personal worldviews – or you take the Villainous route and cheat by your own methods, maybe even bastardize a Heroic story or two if it helps you rig the jury. Either way can actually work just fine in the guideverse, but only one option is specifically open to Catherine.

The only thing you're proving here is that you've gotten very into the guideverse Villainous way of looking at the story

Shveiran

I've gotten into the REALISTIC way of looking at things, thank you very much.

If practicalities weren't a thing, the Fortunate Fool would have strolled into Keter and killed the Dead King, instead of, you know, dying.

[Javvies](#)

And Amadeus's Conquest and Occupation of Callow would have failed early. It definitely wouldn't have lasted anywhere near as long as it actually did or been as successful as it was.

Sure, the Story matters. On the other hand, it quite clearly isn't everything.

Remember, framing events into the right Story gave Cat a

chance to defeat the Duke of Howling Winds. It was by no means certain that she would, and she had to actually carry through and put serious effort into exploiting the opportunity the Story permitted her to have.

Aotrs Commander

Yeah, Hanno COMPLETELY lost the smidgen of respect for me when he flatly refused to look at the problem, flatly refused to engage to even try to present an alternative, placed his personal feelings and beliefs above the importance of other people's lives and then got pissy when his allies had to work around his deliberate obstreporusness. He managed to convince with that action that my initial impression of him *was* correct, that for all the affability he sometimes projects, he's a fanatic and just one more symptom of the underlying problem.

So, we are down two exactly TWO heroes (Roland and Frederick) who ACTUALLY live up to the name; unlike the rest who just wear white hats and who are better than the villains only in the sense that the latter has produced confirmed rapists among the number.

Mirror Night

You realize Frederic could have helped mitigate this mess by actually charging Red Axe and agreeing to execute her himself? So you cannot say that he doesn't put Principles in front of what is Practical.

Still Named don't compromise Core Principles. Cordelia didn't want to get a Name which solve her Prince Issue cause she felt a Name should not rule Procer. Let us not act like Hanno is the only one who ever puts Principle first.

Cat is being petty to Viv for no reason and I see less complaining about that which doesn't have anything to do with Principles or Practicality.

Shveiran

For Cat and Vivs, yeah, but that doesn't endanger the world, does it? That's why I'm not bitching about it, personally. Also, got fixed before it was too late. Which isn't true for Hanno, since if it was up to him the pot would have boiled over.

True on Frederic, though. Roland is the only one with a clean record, by now. He doesn't always come through, but he has yet to willingly put people at risk.

Salt

Nah, this is one of the rare cases where the YA protagonist is being more mature about it than the readers are

I mean seriously, you're criticizing him for siding with... the Gigantes? The same Gigantes that he was taught by and lived with, the same way Catherine did with the fifteenth back in the day? Hello?

Catherine is just a coworker of his. The Gigantes are Hanno's teachers and old companions. They're the ones who fished his dying ass out of the water and taught him the skills he needs to be the White Knight. Of-fucking-course he sides with them over a casual coworker, especially when he's acting as a diplomatic intermediary to their ambassador. To bring her into that fold would be to extend a measure of trust that she is in no way shape or form entitled to.

Hanno wasn't wrong to react this way, nor is he an asshole. He's the literal sword of judgement who spent the last few years extending trust and friendship to the also quite literal high priestess of murder and cannibalism in the dark. She betrayed that trust, specifically in a way that touched one of the VERY few bottom lines that the guy has at all, and subsequently lost some trust for it.

We know it wasn't for no reason, but it doesn't change the fact that she did, and Catherine herself, for one, is actually mature enough to recognize it and know that it's fair, even if it is unpleasant.

Catherine isn't some perfect untouchable paragon of goodness and wonderful computer-like rationality that all side characters are obligated to approve of. Her actions are often imperfect, and people are allowed to react negatively to them once in a blue moon.

masterofbones

This isn't about keeping secrets or choosing sides though. Cat was going to find out the details very soon. He was literally just doing it to be a dick.

Salt

You don't typically leak the bargaining chips of diplomatic negotiations before going into the negotiations, especially to the exact same person who just proved herself capable of pulling one over on him if he isn't on guard this way.

You don't get to kick a man in the nads and call him a dick for wearing a cup the next time you interact. That's just a sensible precaution when you don't know if a kick to the nads is on its way.

Hence "you cannot have it both ways Catherine"

Javvies

What negotiations? There weren't going to be negotiations and Hanno knew it.

Unless you're going to say Hanno lied when he told them, in the meeting, that it was the one offer the Gigantes were making and there wouldn't be a second one or negotiations over the first ... it was a take it or leave it offer. And whatever anyone thinks about Hanno ... I don't think there's anybody that could honestly argue that he would be lying when he said that.

There's no upside to not telling someone in advance about a one time take or or leave it offer. And there's no downside to telling them in advance. At least, that's the case unless the offer is secretly an attempt to screw them over with the fine print or with the long term ramifications of some of the clauses that might not be readily realized or thought through initially.

Also, it seems that Yannu told Viv and presumably also Cordelia something ahead of time, or at least it appears to be the case.

Honestly, Hanno was just being petty in not telling Cat anything about the offer. At best.

Salt

Cat resorts to doing shady things to get her way all the time. We just saw her mentally break down the representative from Mercantis to get her way with them. Are you seriously saying it's unwarranted to wonder if she might try something similar with the Gigantes, if she doesn't like their offer? Cat also showed not even a week ago that she was willing to bend the rules and make a total mockery out of even a legal trial in the process, and be dishonest about keeping him in the loop

He's not a white-cloak version of Malicia either, he physically does not have the ability to see through every possible plot of Catherine's even if he's suspicious, considering nowadays she trades blows with the Bard as far as plotting goes

So if you're the white knight, not the white schemer, the only thing you can reasonably do when you no longer fully trust the black queen is to take these kinds of precautions, in case she is trying to pull another fast one

Javvies

There is no reason to think he has a clue that Cat sent the Mercantis representative threatening nightmares to warn against doing something stupid and being Malicia's proxy.

Plus, it's a damned good offer from the Gigantes. And he knows, and could easily have told her, that the Gigantes don't do negotiations like humans do, they don't haggle, they just make a single offer, which had already been conveyed to Yannu and him. Hell, the only reason to try to negotiate for more would be partly (a) to see how much more they're really willing to give, because everything you can get out of them is needed, but also (b) the negotiating principle of never taking the first offer.

Also, and this is an important difference – Mercantis was trying to (a) control and/or kill Cat's pet project of Cardinal, and (b) was going to fuck Procer and the Grand Alliance over for Malicia and the Dead King. The Gigantes are offering some rather significant assistance that if successfully implemented would be a critical gamechanger for the war, and asking for what is, admittedly, a significant level of access to the Arsenal in exchange for that assistance. And, honestly, the lake ward against the dead by itself would probably be worth giving the Gigantes everything they asked for.

Plus ... Cat is neither dumb enough nor suicidal enough to try to strongarm or pressure the Gigantes. And Hanno should be well aware of that.

As for Cat having not told him everything that she and Cordelia planned to do to address the domestic political pressures Cordelia was facing ... he very explicitly took himself out of having any knowledge or involvement.

They didn't make a mockery out of the trial. She was tried and executed. Just now her corpse is going to go to a second trial and get executed.

Hanno doesn't get to say "I have no involvement in dealing with internal political matters nor do I have any interest in helping you solve them" then get upset when he doesn't get involved or informed, or have input into the process of coming up with solutions, or get upset that the necessities of coming up with a solution without his assistance results in working around him or methods that he doesn't approve of.

As I said, this is basically Hanno being petty because he's upset over not being told about something he said he didn't want to know about.

Salt

No, Catherine very explicitly took him out of the plans that she and Cordelia were about to make. She rather explicitly lied to him when excluding him from the initial conversation with Cordelia, and when he gave her another chance to talk about it right after the execution she didn't bite. In a twist of irony, the way she was silent on the subject when talking to him after the execution is an almost exact mirror of the way he was silent on the subject when talking to her before the negotiations.

As far as trying and executing someone who was already tried and executed, for no reason other than political convenience? That is the definition of making a mockery out of the trials. This is even if you completely ignore the fact that she outright rigged another trial two days prior.

The hilarity of it is that most people were on the other side of the argument when the Pilgrim was fighting against Catherine, because he thought it was "necessary". The dude got absolutely crucified when he betrayed Catherine's trust by breaking an oath, and all he could offer for an explanation was "I believed it was necessary".

"I believe it's necessary" wasn't a good enough excuse when Tariq betrayed Catherine's trust. It wasn't reason to stop working with him, but no one argued that Catherine was somehow being a petty dick when she didn't extend him friendship or trust afterwards.

"I believe it was necessary" still isn't a good enough excuse, when Catherine betrayed Hanno's trust the exact same way. Hanno is still working with Catherine, but it's silly to blame him for not extending trust or friendship afterwards.

And the thing is, Catherine isn't even saying that. She's commendably honest enough to understand that this knife cuts both ways, hence why her reaction was "I had neither the words nor the right to change his mind".

Aotrs Commander

He a hero. He doesn't get to hide behind "but he's acting like a normal person," he's a capital-H Hero, that means he has to be BETTER.

If he can't be Superman, or Captain America or Optimus Prime or Ace frackin' Rimmer, then at the least he needs to be Jack O'Neill and losing in a contest to see who is worse between himself and Arnold smeggin' Rimmer.

Aotrs Commander

Frag-damn WordPress and it's not-editable comments, ye gods I've had so much trouble on various places trying to say stuff this last couple of days. (It's not like talking at people on the internet is literally the only interaction I get outside of family these days or anything...)

Yes, the end of the last sentence was hyperbole, but only just in Hanno's specific case, unlike some other "heroes" I could mention. Jumped-up farty little smeghead though Rimmer is, I'd trust him to fix a defective drive plate more than Mirror Knight (even assumng MK had the requisite skills) *even knowing Rimmer would screw it up and kill everyone.*.

Salt

That seems rather hypocritical to me. Being Captain America comes with BOTH the privileges and the burdens of being Captain America. Not just the burdens.

You can definitely criticize "Captain America" harshly for every single instance that he falls short of the standard of Captain America. That is entirely fair and correct.

But if that is true, Villains also have ZERO right to complain about being vanquished by captain America. The Red Skulls of the world don't get to mock Captain America for his "principles", or act as if the Captain Americas of the world are no better than the Red Skulls of the world, or whine that Creation is wrong for always letting Captain America beating Red Skull.

But if you are of the position that Heroes are not innately any better than Villains, like Cat or Black does? That they do not deserve to always win, that they are no better than any of the rest of us, that they don't hold any moral high ground and their vaunted "heavenly" principles aren't worth any more than the so-called "base" values of men and women?

Then how can you justify judging them like they are above you in reality, while simultaneously treating them like they are below you, or at best at eye level?

To her credit, Catherine neither believes that Heroes are innately better than a Villain is, nor does she judge them more harshly than she judges Villains – she is *consistent*, unlike many other Villains, and in my opinion it is most other Villains who are hypocrites in this. Not Catherine.

ninegardens

The fact is Cat keeps *expecting* him to say more. He doesn't. The weird silences and such are as much to do with her expectations as they are to do with his actions.

And she has those expectations, because up until a few days ago they were co-workers AND friends. Now they are just Co-workers. Hanno is treating her professionally, but not with Warmth. If she wasn't EXPECTING warmth/confidence/trust many of these weird silences might not even be noticeable.

Shveiran

The point is the lack of collaboration, not WARMTH.

Juff

Typo Thread:

aegis Grand > aegis of the Grand
heavily favour > heavily in favour
after all we'd managed (extra space)
I've been > I'd been
participate to > participate in
appreciated," he nodded > appreciated," he said, nodding
within moment > within moments
were the shores > where the shores
treaty was the > treaty with the
the come the > come the
wearer > wearing
I'd never occurred > It'd never occurred
change clothes > change of clothes
It did not mind > I did not mind

Earl of Purple

Hakram lives! And my eyes got moist.

Hooray!

Frivolous

I'm not sure why Catherine is very unhappy about the opinions of Callowans.

My reasoning: Even without the preserving effects of her imminent villainy, Cat is going to live a long long time due to her closeness to Sve Noc. She has to start thinking as an immortal does. And one thing an immortal can do is change history. By which I mean she can change the way history is written and interpreted, by getting close to the ones who write history books, by changing the opinions of present-day people, etc.

So what if the Callowans currently despise her? She has a lot of years to change their minds. And if she can't do it in the present generation, she might succeed in 3 or 4.

Plus she'll be living in Cardinal, educating untold numbers of heroes and villains, of mages and priests, of lords and princes. A really influential educator has nearly unlimited power to change the minds of the masses. Even if she can't change their minds directly, she can change the minds of their rulers, divines, scholars, etc.

Also, I'm super happy that Hakram woke up. I think it's almost too sweet that the first thing he said was Cat's name.

Matthew Wells

She's unhappy because she's ruling a bunch of ingrates who need to be convinced stopping a Lich King is the right thing to do. Just because they can be convinced later doesn't make it any less stupid for Mercantis or her political opponents or whoever to be worrying about political power during an existential total war with a god.

Frivolous

Hmm. I'm not sure I agree. Cat's disappointment and angst over Callowan opinion don't strike me as being strategic or political in origin. Her reaction seems personal to me.

But like I said, she needs to get over thinking in the short term. Immortals can't afford to angst over mortal opinions, especially when those opinions can be reshaped to something more pleasing.

Salt

It's because she's as human and flawed as anyone else, not an infallible perfect protagonist like the image that sometimes gets pushed around here. It's actually something in line with the direction that the characterization has been going for a while now, with the Everdark arc ending with "mortal till the end" rather than "let's become more of an immortal inhuman god-thing".

The rational mind in her knows that Callow isn't unreasonable to see her this way – she went into this with eyes open from the start, not in denial. She knew that she wouldn't have the best reputation when she started with “justifications only matter to the just”, and when that no longer fit her she still made the conscious choice to do the dirty work that she thought was necessary before abdicating.

But she's a human being, meaning that despite knowing how irrational it is, she can still be upset at sacrificing so much and only getting the recognition of being some dark product of dark times that came before more celebrated rebuilding – even if she knows that's what she realistically. Because it's not about logic, it's about petty pride and emotion, slowly built up over time.

This was just her finally admitting it out loud, in confidence to Vivienne, because while she can't immediately fix that flaw of hers, she can at the very least own it instead of pretending otherwise and causing more damage to her own relationships

[vernal.ancient](#)

Well for one thing, learning to think that way (or any way you're not used to) takes practice. You don't just wake up one morning, say “you know what? I don't care what anyone thinks” and then actually feel that way (trust me, I've tried). You have to practice the mindset.

That said, I'm not so sure about the idea that moral opinions don't matter to immortals. For one, the Dead King generally doesn't mind that most mortals in Calernia see him as the local Satan figure, and he's currently embroiled in a war with every major power except the card-carrying villains, with a story that's most likely building up to his death. And even he goes to the effort of ensuring that his own living subjects approve of his rule. Heck, while most of Cat's job as Priestess of the Night is teaching Sve Noc about stories, that includes caring about moral opinions so you don't fall too far into the “evil gods” side of the spectrum and end up getting slain by a band of angsty teenagers with crazy hair (and probably too many belts and zippers, if we're taking the FF analogy all the way)

Frivolous

Did I say that mortal opinions don't matter to immortals? If so, my mistake; I meant to say that to immortals, mortal opinions are flexible when the right pressure is applied.

The Dead King doesn't really try to make most people outside the Serenity not fear or hate him. I think he could if he wanted to, but he just doesn't care.

It would help a lot if Cat had any friends among bards who weren't the Wandering type. She'd learn how flexible people could be with the right methods.

I am also biased because of course I'm a real person. I've seen what the Internet and especially Twitter and Facebook can do to what people think. Human beings can reverse their opinion completely many times over the span of a lifetime. Cat would benefit from RL social media experts and spin doctors.

[vernal.ancient](#)

At the start of the chapter, Cat doesn't mind the merchants having monopolies on dyes and such in Procer because Callow can't afford to make those things anyway, so she just focuses on her army. Viv, on the other hand, sees how much money those things make and thinks "so where can we get the gold to make it ourselves?"

Just wanted to appreciate that little contrast

[vernal.ancient](#)

Looking back, your original comment doesn't actually say she couldn't care; one part of your response to Matthew Wells above could be construed that way, if one ignored the context of the original comment, and I guess I was tired enough when I posted my response to both forget the original point and conflate it with my misunderstanding of your response; that's my bad. Your actual point is a good one

Frivolous

That's very polite and gracious and considerate of you to post. Thank you.

mavant

Vivienne's plan seems dangerous. Ere the end of it, I foresee Callowans dyeing by their own hand.

mamm0nn

"I'd grown too used to having my orders obeyed without questioning. I'd grown too used to resorting to violence to get my way, to schemes and assassinations and all the bastard ways to see your will done."

Uhm, Cat? Have you heard of the things you did in the last four books? Pretty much none of this applies, rather the opposite has always been the case for you moreso than others. And I don't think you've ever really tried your hand at assassinations on-screen other than telling Robber to go nuts that one time.

Darkening

I mean, they did bait a bunch of Callowan Noble types into blundering in such a way that she could hang them for treason because they were being inconvenient politically. Sure, they had to actually perform the illegal action, but she deliberately led them to it. It was mostly Thief we saw in the interlude, but as far as I know that whole thing was at Cat's behest. And I suppose the time she tried to murder Malicia repeatedly in Keter is basically assassination.

mamm0nn

True. Though a Named trying to kill a Named in another Named's kingdom in a rather direct confrontation when they both know the other knows is hardly an assassination. More like... a Story-influenced series of fights with a half-hearted theme of secrecy and surprise slapped onto it.

Salt

I mean, for having her orders not questioned, she's had entire armies tripping over each other to volunteer to die for her. She has an entire race that sees her as the divine manifestation of the gospel of their murder-god

For violence and scheming, she quite literally started the story by manufacturing a Callowan rebellion so that she could rise through the ranks during wartime. That's the entire reason she felt so guilty about letting the Lone Swordsman go, since she knew full well that it would kickstart a rebellion she could put down to gain power, even if thousands of Callowans died in the process. Black also explicitly admitted to not putting down the rebellion himself (even though he easily had the capability to), because it was convenient for letting Catherine develop her power base.

She also wasn't above making a deal with the Dead King – Malicia just beat her to the punch. Followed shortly by a war of enslavement over the entire drow race, and then after returning to the surface she ran circles around everyone with her schemes during the Prince's graveyard.

So... yeah she probably has heard of the things she's done over the last several books. Getting her way through violence and schemes is pretty much on point considering her history.

Of course, she was also on the defensive against Malicia, Akua, and the Crusade, meaning she's not exactly alone in guilt for this, but the bar for "I'm not as bad as Malicia, Akua, or the tenth crusade" is set so low that it's underground. Probably a good thing, all in all, that she's judging herself by higher standards than that.

mamm0nn

Oh oh. The Gigantes granting a magic McGuffin means of thwarting the Dead King and the big issue of his undead army BEFORE things look dire and they can really use such a Giant Deus Ex Machina? That sounds like it can only be betrayal or bound to blow up in their faces. And honestly, if the Gigantes can make these wards (for their own island), then why wouldn't they let the Dead King roam a bit more through the lands of their most hated human kingdom before really helping?

Matthew Wells

This is the last second save. We just skipped 99% of the fight between books while the Giants let the undead run around their most hated enemies.

Anonymous

"You cannot have it both ways, Catherine,"

Silly Knight, once again you forgot the alternative! [/wolf-salt]

("You can't have the advantages of both the good way that you should have taken AND the bad way that you actually took. You only get to keep my approval if you take the good way." "So what's this 'good way'?" "Heck if I know.")

Darkening

Let Procer fall apart and lose the war over a point of principle, presumably. But that's okay, surely the gods and angels will see your purity and save the world for you if you're just Good enough~

Salt

> surely the gods and angels will see your purity and save the world for you if you're just Good enough~

I know this is facetious but that's... actually how it does work in the guideverse. Below pays you back for the debt of championing their principles, while Above empowers you more the better you adhere to their principles. That's the problem with Above/Below in the first place.

Above will try to let you win if you're principled enough, even if you are the dumbest motherfucker to ever walk the earth. (See: Mirror Knight, Valiant Champion)

Below will try to let you win if you're clever enough, even if you are the biggest asshole on the planet (see: Triumphant, Tyrant)

Salt

Edit: I guess it would make more sense to say below pays you back for championing their cause more than their principles, considering that they don't have principles so much as "your victory retroactively proves that you were correct and deserving"

beleester

"But we lose the war if this happens!" cuts both ways – why is it okay to tell Hanno "Shut up about your principles and go along with the show trial, or we lose the war and we all die", but it's not okay to tell the Proceran nobles "Shut up about your show trial and let the Heroes have their principles, or we lose the war and we all die"?

And of course, neither Procer falling apart nor the Truce falling apart are certainties, simply probable risks – people can reasonably disagree about uncertain long-term predictions without being evil or stupid. Cat has even pointed out that allowing Procer to demand **more** concessions because they're **less** committed to upholding their obligations to the alliance is a perverse incentive. It's not as clear-cut as "Either we have the Cadaver Synod or Procer dies."

Anonymous

Saving the world: No matter how badly anyone's fumbled their Roles before, somehow the world is still here. Anthropically, an observer can only observe a world which hasn't already ended. In practice, the world actually finally ending might be met with a measure of disbelief/incredulity. Entire countries being ground into paste, now, to the misery of all their survivors... that's happened before.

Then again, when it's just replaceable people or countries which are on the block (rather than the entire war as a whole), the side of Good becoming even more the underdog, then being willing to sacrifice even the people you most care about for the sake of Good can be lauded as Goodness...

Considering the choirs, it would be amusing in a morbid way if Good straightforwardly won because it wasn't hypocritical enough – if it actually kept fighting fair when the other side wasn't, to the point of its own destruction. Not much chance of that, though, from what we've seen so far.

Hmm.

Cat's talks with Cordelia come to mind, Cordelia unable to compromise without dying socially (and losing the crown). Betray the interests of the Alliance/Procer and Cordelia loses the

Alliance/Procer, becoming no help to it or Cat. Be tainted with an unsavory reputation by Cat—even with unsavory dealings later dramatically revealed at a pivot—and the White Knight loses the Heroes under him, becoming no help to them or Cat. The consequences of the Pilgrim's tainted reputation from being saved by Cat also come to mind.

This still doesn't forgive the White Knight's attitude. That he blames her for what he himself can do nothing about, even if he feels distancing himself from her is compelled by political necessities.

I find myself somewhat frustrated by that I cannot put together a functional mental model of the White Knight's thought process—if there is an internally-consistent perspective, a White-Knight-point-of-view thing to read would be welcome, given that everything we see from Cat's perspective are through the lens of her own interpretations.

When in such a situation, I begin fearing that a character is an unintentional strawman: a character serving as a stand-in for a person who didn't make sense to the author, whom another character gets frustrated at how they don't make sense. The concern being whether the real person made choices which made sense to themselves, whereas the character made slightly different choices which make sense to no one. Whatever the case, it is more productive (and fun!) to gaze instead at the inconsistencies of my own mental model and try to think of ways to put it together that I haven't thought of yet, which could explain matters. ...But it is a red flag when a character says something which seems to have a good point and another character says nothing at all instead of something insightful(/which gives insight into their own thought processes), or when a character thinks something which seems to have a good point and yet keeps it to themselves without saying it out loud and having a chance to hear another character's point of view.

Anonymous

Wait, not 'straightforwardly won'. Why did I write that!?
'straightforwardly lost'!

(Answer: 'Because of how easy it is to flip a bit and how hard to notice at the time'...)

Xinci

You could read the Winter Interludes perhaps, it contains his pov. Good's virtues make a lot of sense under a generational model. A Good society, like all cooperative strategies, works only if a majority of its actors are cooperative. A dissident actor, like a Villain, can quite easily ruin the development of such a society as they will outcompete it or just survive in it far more easily than those who cooperate. If attempts

are made to try to punish the dissenting actors, then you may get mutual destruction so other means of pressure may be used to have them act as cooperators. Cat proved herself a bad, and so is being cut off from other forms of interaction so she may only act(at least obviously) in a cooperative fashion due to the restrictions of her position in the grand alliance. I still think Hanno probably wouldn't have stopped her even if she told him what she planned to do.

Xinci

To clarify the generational comment somewhat, Good can afford to lose individual societies so long as it has properly consolidated capital to form new ones over each individual Good societies lifetime along with having other "related"(due to at least partially following its dogma, which aids their survival and mitigates corruption) societies to pitch in to address threats that other Good societies aren't adapted for. So by making sure the dogmatic qualities that keep those living in those Good societies Good's rules, they can retain their function and keep out those who would twist them for another purpose(bad actors/Villains).

Morgenstern

Hm. Strange. The Interlude is in the chapter overview, but the actual *chapter* 43 before that isn't. *rubs chin thoughtfully

Morgenstern

Ah. The link for Chapter 43 is not entirely missing in the menu (anymore?), it would seem, but got shunted between Chapter 40 and 41, somehow.

Interlude: Ebb

"The highest form of victory is not mere triumph over another, but to use such a triumph as the foundation of your own. This way superiority is demonstrated not only over one defeated but also one victorious, proving your own cunning to be beyond both."

– Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

There were some who called Mauricius indolent but he preferred think of himself as patient.

The expensive chilled wine – genuine Baalite red, not the imitation the Ashuran brewed on this side of the sea – before him slowly warmed, the coating of frost on the goblet slowly dripping down onto the table. He had yet to touch it. His eyes remained on the lights of the city instead, on the warm glow that set jewels to the dark and the heartbreakingly beautiful mosaics of the Irenian Plaza displayed below the hidden balcony. It was a common tale in Mercantis that Aeolian himself, the famous Tormented Painter, had died moments after putting the last touches of colour on the work. Mauricius knew the truth behind the unspoken boast, for he'd cared to learn it.

Aeolian had been eighty-three and dying when he'd begun the work, debt-ridden to the extent that he'd been willing to spend even his last days on the mosaics if it meant his children would not inherit the crushing burden of his lifetime of indulgences. Yet the City of Bought and Sold preferred the shorter tale, the one that claimed to own a work so beautiful it had taken the life of a Named to make it. It made the mosaics no fairer to behold, Mauricius thought. They were, regardless, a wonder of this world: moving with hour and sun, a living story of interwoven sorcery and skill. But buying the life of a Named spoke of power, and for the merchant lords of this city there was nothing more intoxicating than that.

Mauricius ought to know, as the eldest of the living merchant lords.

Behind him, past the sculpted marble arch bearing a discreet muting enchantment, the shadowy silhouette of a waiting attendant stood still. The service in Sub Rosa was second to none, even in this island where every delight could be bought, though the truth was that Mauricius had taken a balcony tonight largely for the view. Few people even knew that this place existed, hidden behind wards and secrecy as it was, and most believed the Irenian Plaza to be entirely surrounded by the three edifices that were the heart of the Consortium's power in this material world.

The Forty-Stole Court, the Guild Exchange and the Princely Palace.

Power, wealth and influence – all nestled closely together like chicks gathering for warmth. Knowing what was to happen tonight, Mauricius had thought it fitting that he should be close to the beating heart of Mercantis. Two men were to die tonight, after all. The merchant lord slid a finger along the rim of his goblet, watching as beads of condensation slid down the sinuous length of silver. Even now, in manses across the city, his fellows would be scheming behind closed doors. Dear Livia's return from this *Arsenal* bearing the answer of the Grand Alliance had thrown the Consortium into disorder.

Several of the most influential among them had voiced a belief it was treason for Ambassador Livia Murena to have agreed to such unfavourable terms when half the City knew that the Principate was so deeply in their debt it couldn't even see daylight. It was said that there'd been foul play. Given that Livia had not let her wife out of her sight since returning to the city, Mauricius believed there might be a thread of truth there. Not that the opposition cared. The Consortium buried bleeding hearts long before they might rise to a position where their words might matter, but there were some who objected to fleecing the Grand Alliance on more practical grounds.

If the Dead King won, they first said, we would rue our schemes. That found little purchase, for this was not the first crusade to struggle against the undead. Always these ended in bloody sacrifice and the resumption of the ancient stalemate, as the aftermath decided which among the living nations had been the winners and the losers of this particular iteration. Yet when it had been argued that in the aftermath of the Grand Alliance's victory a burning gaze might be turned to Mercantis, more had bought into the argument. Cordelia Hasenbach was a civilized woman, and her anger could have been appeased should it prove lasting, but it was not so with her allies.

The Dominion was a pack of savages that killed each other on a whim, and Callow was a cauldron of long hatreds. There was a reason that the Consortium had never tried to seize Callowan lands, though it had often had the strength to do so and feasibly keep them. The scheme of taking Dormer and adding it to the holdings of the City had long been discussed, but never once undertaken. The lesson had been learned well from the Brief War, when Atalante had tried to annex part of the Callowan south after buying passage for its war fleet from the Consortium. Jehan the Wise had butchered the invaders, which had not been unexpected, but he'd then began to raise ships for a retaliatory attack on Mercantis itself. Which had been.

Embassies of the Merchant Princess Clarissa had made it known that the City was not involved in the invasion beyond having sold passage through its waters, but the Callowans hadn't *cared*. When Daoine ships bearing soldiers of the Watch began docking in Dormer, Clarissa had realized that the Callowans would go through with an invasion even if they were likely to lose, even if the mere undertaking of it would bankrupt them for a generation. She'd emptied the coffers of Mercantis appeasing the king of Callow, and no merchant lord had ever seriously talked of taking Callowan land again. Jehan the Wise had been a Named of heroic bent, the practical sorts were now eager to remind the City.

The Black Queen was a monster that gave even the Wasteland pause, and the Consortium wanted to *extort* her?

Mauricius had been privately amused by that rejoinder, for the Black Queen did not truly give the Wasteland pause in the slightest. Some days he wondered if anything ever did. Poor Fabianus had been stuck in the middle of it and lost what few feathers he'd still had. Their Merchant Prince was first tricked into keeping the First Prince's secrets, and then was pushed so strongly to reveal them that he'd preferred to recuse himself of such matters entirely than continue to be involved. Given that Fabianus' office held little direct power but a great deal of influence, that decision had practically ended his reign in every real sense.

Mauricius smiled and looked at the shadowed mosaics down below. A decade ago, most of the city had thought him the strongest contender for that very same office. He was among the wealthiest few – trading arms in the Free Cities was ever a tidy profit – of the Consortium, he'd served in the Forty-Stole Court for over a decade and save for that little offence when he'd had his first wife's lover and the man's entire family sold into slavery, there were no black marks on his record.

He'd made sure they all ended up in Stygia, so that they were actually slaves even in the legal sense. He was not a forgiving man, and preferred his revenges to be of the thorough kind.

Though Mauricius was reputed to be somewhat indolent, back then that'd been in his favour. No one in the Consortium wanted too motivated or skillful a prince lest the days of the Caepio, who had ruled as kings in all but name, return. He'd campaigned for the office, of course. Sunk a fortune into buying the love of the streets, the votes of the Lesser Courts. But he'd not fought for the support of other merchant lords. *Indolent*, his supporters had mourned in the years that followed. After Fabianus was elected to the office. None of them ever learned that he'd never sought the title at all: while most saw the elections as a gaping pit for coin, he'd been after a profit. Mauricius had required twice as much as he'd invested in the election as a bribe, to let Fabianus win.

He'd kept a single gold coin from that bribe, as a sentimental token, and as the lights of Mercantis shone in the distance the merchant lord took it out of his robes and idly toyed with it. The luster of it brought out a hunger he knew would never be entirely sated, but Mauricius was a patient man. He'd learned as a boy that the patient always got their day, if they picked the right opportunities. And what was this era of chaos, if not a great banquet of opportunities? The Consortium was fighting itself, the recklessly hungry and the cravenly cautious at odds in the markets and the courts. Praesi gold set tongues wagging, or silenced them, while the long shadow of the Grand Alliance blotted out old certainties.

Mauricius had taken the Dread Empress' bribes, of course. And he'd listened to the honeyed words of her envoys, to the schemes she wove even here in the City. He was not in the habit of refusing coin, though her plots he'd been lukewarm to. At least until it had all unfolded exactly as she had predicted: dear Livia scared into a barely acceptable settlement, a band of Named coming to keep the City under the boot and the armies of the Grand Alliance charging into Hainaut. Far away, and soon to be bloodied. All the while Consortium had turned on itself in bitter infighting, needing the guidance that its Merchant Prince had surrendered the right to provide. And so Mauricius had agreed to the plot, seeing the need for it.

In the distance, what he had been waiting for all night finally appeared: a red light blinked into existence atop a tall tower, for three heartbeats before disappearing.

Merchant Prince Fabianus was dead.

Indolent, patient, Mauricius waited. It was the better part of an hour before a messenger for the Forty-Stole Court found him. Fabianus was dead, he was told, and elections would need to be had. An emergency session of the Forty-Stole Court was to be held soon. And still Mauricius waited. It was almost another hour before he was presented with a second cup of chilled wine, and only then did the merchant lord smile.

"Thank you," he told the shadowy servant.

Prosperus Soranus was dead. That was what the cup had told him. And with him gone, Dread Empress Malicia had lost her puppet candidate to the office of Merchant Prince. All that gold she'd sunk into preparing his election would be gone unless she found another flagbearer for her interests. And even if she tried, that candidate might just lose to Mauricius should he try his hand at being elected. The Empress would suspect his hand at work, but she was a practical woman in her own way.

More gold was coming his way, and soon.

Merchant Prince Mauricius would walk the line, prevent debts being called in early but refuse to extend 'dangerous' loans. Negotiations would be opened again, seeking better terms. Malicia would get what she wanted, a Mercantis unwilling to meekly serve as the coin purse of the Grand Alliance, and the Grand Alliance would be pleased by the rise of a Merchant Prince willing to actively steer policy to their advantage if certain terms were met. There was wealth to be made, standing between the Tower and the West, and even more between the West and annihilation. Mauricius slowly rose to his feet, finally ready to attend the emergency session of the Forty-Stole Court. He was eighty-three, today, and so when he looked down at the mosaics of the Irenian Plaza it was with something like understanding.

"You'd understand, wouldn't you?" Mauricius mused. "You died clutching your brush, after all."

—

Leo had been raised to revile the name of Hypathia Trakas.

His mother had hated it before him and her father before that, a chain going back all the way to the first Trakas to have inherited a mutilated throne after Basilea Hypathia lost the ancient rights of their line. *There was a time*, Mother had taught him as a child, *where we shared power over Nicae with none*. In those days the Trakas had ruled as kings, titling themselves Basileus not out of humility but as a means to claim descent from the legendary emperor Aenos Basileon – and so primacy over all other crowns come from the collapse of his ancient empire. But Hypathia Trakas had been arrogant, and unwise. She had made such disaster of the Second Samite war that a swaggering thug of an admiral had been able to carve her throne in two: thereafter, there would be a Strategos as well as a Basileus.

Yet the truth was that, for all the bile that Mother had passed onto him, neither of them had truly expected that they would be able to right this ancient wrong in their lifetimes. They had been taught the dominance of their enemies when Leo's own father went to sea and never returned, taken by 'Stygian pirates' on one of the safest stretches of water of the Gulf. Father had been of a military line, an old one and more importantly one foe to Strategos Nereida Silantis. The warning was heard clearly, and the alliances carefully sealed by Mother withered on the vine. The Trakas had tradition on their side, hallowed blood and the sacred duties only an anointed Basileus could undertake. They even had deep influence in matters of stewardship.

Yet the Strategoi had swords, and without those what was the rest worth?

Leo Trakas had been fresh to the throne when the war with Stygia and Helike erupted, though of course it was not so simple as that. In private the war had been a cause for despair, for when steel was out the Strategoi had excuses to meddle in every matter be they high or low. Leo's palace would be filled with spies, appointments stripped away and granted instead to supporters of Strategos Nereida and the treasury of the office of Basileus plundered at will for *war funds*. Silanis had even developed ties to the First Prince of Procer, who now showered her with silver and soldiers even as the latest Theodosian madman set the Free Cities aflame. The years ahead looked grim.

And then the armies of Helike and Stygia encamped beyond the walls of Nicae, and Leo realized he'd underestimated the threat of the enemy being fought. Penthes had collapsed into civil war, Atalante outright capitulated and Delos so badly mauled it was

good as out of the war. Bellerophon was busy somehow failing to invade the territories of a city at war with itself, as was the wont of the People, but that was hardly a relief. Nicae stood alone, and in the streets the people were *afraid*. Even the arrival of a band of heroes – and Leo would not soon forget they had gone to Nereida, not him, even though the Trakas stood closest to the Heavens by Nicean law – had done little to improve the mood.

This was no danger to Leo Trakas, for his strengths were not the kind that could be unmade by the displeasure of the people. His blood was in his veins, his authorities writ into immutable law. It was not so with Strategos Nereida Silanis, whose authority came from the sword but also from the love of the people. Strategoi hated by the commons had a tendency to take sick and die, so that the old families might elect a more suitable replacement in their stead. And so Leo Trakas sent what few servants were still solely his to whisper in the right ears, to wonder if once-bold Nereida had not gone craven in her old age. The whispers took, for Nicae's strength had stayed behind its walls during the war, and when the enemies assaulted the wall the Strategos fought in the ranks.

It amused Leo Trakas a great deal, in private, that though he had paid a man to kill her during the battle the assassin died to a stray arrow and the Strategos was still killed by a Helikean blade.

Leo surrendered to the Tyrant of Helike himself, the red-eyed monster humming and grinning like a lunatic all the while before offering terms that were highly generous: the only concession required of Nicae would be its vote in the election of some nobody Bellerophon diplomat to the office of Hierarch of the Free Cities. Unearned as the acclaim was, the city thrummed with praised for his 'having tricked' the Tyrant into gaining nothing of worth from Nicae for his victory. And so when the opportunity had come, when the old families had come to him and asked for him to officiate over the ceremonial council that would elect the next Strategos, he'd done what every Trakas since Hypathia's own daughter had craved like a drowning soul craves air.

"No," Leo Trakas had smiled, savouring the word like fine wine.

They cajoled and whispered sweet promises, at first. And when that failed, oh but how they raged and threatened. Yet it was all but air, for Leo was beloved of the streets – fickle as they were – and they were not. To Nicae, it was a Strategos that had made a disaster of this war. They were not clamouring for another, not yet. And Leo Trakas intended on having seized power properly, by the time it occurred to them that they might want to. At first he courted the First Prince's support, for Cordelia Hasenbach had wasted no time in initiating correspondence, but when he saw the

wind turn against Procer in the councils of Kairos Theododian's puppet Hierarch he leaned into it.

There was nothing the people of Nicae loved more than a good settling of scores with the Thalassocracy, and such a war would put him at odds with Procer regardless. That lion was getting old anyway, he'd heard: there were rumours of the Dead King raiding to the north, even as Praesi and Callowans smashed Proceran armies left and right. The League of Free Cities was riding high, in contrast, and Theodosian was a madman but he was a *successful* one. He was also not as wary of his 'allies' as he should perhaps be, for when Leo began reaching out to the other cities for alliances he found more takers than he had expected. Basileus Leo Trakas had already restored the old powers of his blood, but still he hungered for more.

Was his line not descended from Aenos Basileon himself, who had ruled over the great cities that did not yet call themselves free? There were none more fitting than Leo to rise to prominence in the League, to replace Helike and its twitching goblin of a king as the power behind their simpleton Hierarch. Gods, but in those heady days he'd come so *very close* to getting all he wanted. How had it all gone so wrong?

"The rioters have seized the amphitheatre, my lord Basileus," Captain Attika told him.

Leo looked down at the kneeling captain of his guard, letting the calm on her face settle his own unease. The game was not yet over, he told himself.

"Better that than the treasury," the Basileus finally said. "Have the Valeides and the Petros answered my messengers?"

"They have not, my lord," Captain Attika admitted.

It was a grim tiding, when even his closest allies within the old families were not willing to consider lending soldiers to keep order in the streets – or at least prevent looting of the granaries and the island-gardens. Most of Leo's soldiers were bound to guard the palace and the treasury, which limited his ability to enforce peace in the streets.

"Two days," Leo said. "In two days we will receive the Stygian grain and the dole will appease the people. We only need to hold for that long, Attika."

His captain grimaced.

"I fear that the riots might be as much from the northern news as the rationing, my lord," she admitted. "And Stygian grain cannot mend such accusations."

"Hasenbach," the Basileus hissed. "Her work, this. None of the others have the subtlety for it."

When the threat had first come through the Grand Alliance – that band of robbers – that Leo might be named a *friend of the Dead King* if he did not surrender and come to terms with 'Strategos' Zenobia, he'd laughed at the letter. Procer was too busy warring against the dead to meddle in the south, and the Black Queen had proved a rather distant patron to General Basilia. As for the Dominion it was a pack of squabbling tribes that the only civilized lot among them, the Isbili of Levante, had little control over. They couldn't agree on the colour of tablecloths without honour duel, much less genuine diplomatic policy.

There was a lot less to laugh about now that word of the condemnation had been smuggled into the city and riots shook the streets. Zenobia Vasilakis might be a mere country landowner, well beneath any of the old families that tended to claim the office of Strategos, but she had partisans anyway. Though with no real ties to the ruling naval elite of Nicae, the Vasilakis family did have a record of meritorious service in the army – which had often been neglected in favour of the fleet, over the years. Army folk kept tight loyalties, which was half the reason Leo's own mother had taken a husband from one such family.

The Vasilakis reputation had won Zenobia sympathies, even before the Grand Alliance's official recognition of her as the legitimate ruler of Nicae cemented her status. Leo's attempts to present her to the old families as a country agitator out to replace the influential lines from the city had been largely successful, but after such honours from great crowns it wouldn't matter. Grand Alliance backing made them as powerful as any of them, in practice, and ties to General Basilia's Helike only added bite to her candidature. Zenobia had not been elected under the proper ceremony, which would have required Leo to officiate, but fewer people cared every week.

"I cannot speak to that, my lord," Captain Attika said, "but I will say that should we lose the grain to rioters, it will deal your reign a great blow. I wager they will call it Zenobia's dole instead, and the streets will sing her name."

"The docks are also guarded by our... friends," the Basileus said. "They would not hesitate to disperse riots."

The thrice-cursed Dread Empress of Praes had massacred and stolen his fleet in the same stroke, but there was nothing Leo could do about that. What he *could* do was trade the Praesi access to the port for repairs of the ships in exchange for them funding Stygian grain shipments and providing the coin that let him keep paying his army even after the collapse of trade in the Samite Gulf. If Ashur weren't fighting a very polite civil war with itself Leo might have been afraid of reprisals for the sacks of

Smyrna and Arwad he'd ordered, but until the Thalassocracy dealt with its succession crisis Nicae would remain safe.

"I fear that would only incite further unrest, my lord," Captain Attika said. "Would the sight of the dead slaying the living not seem to put truth to the accusations of the Grand Alliance?"

Leo's fingers clenched. He'd not considered that. Any thinking man would grasp that the Dead King fielded no armies this far south, but angry mobs were not renowned for their wisdom. No doubt his enemies would seize on the opportunity presented regardless of the truth, too.

"Then we must secure the docks with our own men," Leo reluctantly said. "All is lost, without the grain."

He peered at his kneeling captain.

"Where would you suggest the men be taken from?" he said.

She hesitated for a moment.

"The palace," Captain Attika finally said. "It is much easier to defend, and less likely to be attacked. Greed will lead rioters to try their hand at the treasury sooner or later, my lord."

"Agreed," the Basileus said.

Or rivals from old families under the guise of rioters, even. None of that lot was above plundering the coffers of the state to fill their own.

"See to it, Captain Attika," he ordered.

"My lord," she replied, saluting.

After the door closed behind her, Leo Trakas sat alone on the throne he'd been the first of his line to ever fully reclaim. And still the thought niggled away at him – would the Trakas of days yet to come name him as another Hypathia, another fool who'd wasted the gifts of fate? The long tapestries and slender columns around him gave no answer to his musings. No, Leo told himself. The game was not yet over, and this could yet be salvaged. Once the grain ships had come many of the rioters would disperse and he could finally suppress the riots. After he regained control of the city, he could come to terms with 'Strategos' Zenobia.

To his knowledge she was still unmarried, if a decade older than him, and perhaps the surrender being forced on him could be turned into a marriage alliance instead. He doubted Zenobia was any more eager to be under the Grand Alliance's thumb than he was to be under Malicia's. A united Nicae would be able to force Helike to end its incessant war-making, especially if it clasped hands with Stygia, and Leo could count his debts to the Tower

settled if he made that savage Basilia cease attacking the reign of Malicia's Penthesian puppet Exarch. Perhaps sending for a painting of Zenobia was in order, he thought, so that he might have a notion of what he'd be in for.

With Captain Attika gone he'd expected servants to begin attending him again, but the hall was instead eerily silent. Leo frowned. Was something wrong, or did someone simply need to be switched? The Basileus became uncomfortably aware that his regal clothes came without a weapon, or more protection than a few layers of cloth could afford him. There were armoured statues here in the hall, though, bearing the gilded armour of his forbears and matching ceremonial blades. Yet if he were to leave here having strapped on such a sword and there'd been no trouble, if servants saw him... Laughter was the death of fear, and much of his reign now depended on fear.

Silence lingered throughout his thoughts, and that as much as anything else made the decision for him.

The blade of Basilea Sousanna Trakas came clear of the scabbard with a hiss. It fit his hand well, as Sousanna had been tall for a woman. As he recalled she was best known for her victories against encroaching Stygia and having extracted tribute from the hill tribes later to become Helike, so at least half of the old use might see the light of day again. Sure-footed even if it had been years since he'd last held a blade, Leo pushed open the great gates of the throne hall and slipped into the corridor beyond. Still not a soul in sight, he saw with dismay. That was not natural.

Had his own servants begun to flee the palace, abandoning his cause?

More worryingly, there was no trace of his personal guard. There should have been four in the corridor, awaiting his orders, but instead only further silence awaited. Leo decided to head for his quarters in the deeper palace, where more guards should be awaiting him. Tense moments walking through deserted hallways came at an end when he found the butchered corpse of one of his soldiers on the floor. Stabbed in the back, he found, and the body was still warm. It was a coup, must be, and by heading to his quarters he'd be putting himself into the hands of his enemies.

He must turn back now, find the barracks and convince soldiers to escort him to the manse of an allied family. The Valeides might have denied him more men, but they could not refuse him shelter without dishonouring themselves: his father had been brother to their patriarch's wife. Discarding the last pretence of being in control, Leo ran for it.

He heard it as a whistle first. At the tune of a half-familiar song, though he could not remember the name of it. The Basileus abandoned the corridor it came from, banking left to shake whoever was whistling. Except the same slow, mournful whistle awaited him there. Dead end after dead end, until he began to hear the words.

*Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?*

His blood ran cold. And as the snare tightened around him, Leo Trakas ran until there was nowhere left to run. Cornered in his own palace, surrounded by tapestries speaking to old glories as slowly the sound of hooves on stone came closer. The scent of blood was in the air. Back to a splash of blood-red silk, a golden sword in hand, the Basileus of Nicae stood his ground as rider came into the flickering torchlight. Her voice was clear, strong.

"For we did lose,
A hundred times," General Basilia sang, a sharp smile on her face.

Her sword was already in her hand, dripping red on the stone. Behind her, a pack of riders followed her into the corridor – red-handed savages, defiling a palace older than their entire misbegotten city.

"And we will win,
A hundred times," General Basilia sang, the smile fading from her lips and sinking into her eyes.

She leaned forward on her saddle.

"You warned of me consequences once, Leo Trakas. Shall we now finish our talk?"

The Basileus of Nicae spat to the side, defiant.

"Once a hound, always a hound," Leo said. "You will fail your new masters, just as you failed your last."

"Where was that spirit," General Basilia laughed, "a year ago?"

Her blade rose, and so did his. She spurred her mount and he ran forward, ran and yelled until the horse was past him and he felt a flash of heat across his chest and face. Blood, he found as he stumbled onto the tapestries.

"'till falls the age,
And end the times," the general softly said.

Darkness came. And just before it, dread. Gods, if they'd taken the city – the undead the Tower had left, would they not burn the city as they fled? Malicia would not suffer the port to stand, if she could not use it.

Leo Trakas' last word was a rasping gurgle as he tried too late to speak a warning.

Big Brother

As Malicia's pawns fall, the era of her influence begins to wane. And so the rat becomes cornered, 'ware its poisoned bite.

Anomandris

True, she is definitely not going quietly into the gentle night...

In terms of the Story, I have a feeling that she is gonna be higher on the totem pole of the big bad than DK, with only the Bard above her.

thearpox23

I am puzzled as to how you arrived at that. Imagine if in the Lord of The Rings the heroes decided to forego fighting Saruman in favour of defeating Sauron first, and the guy was still sending raids and causing trouble till after the ring was tossed. That's the situation with Malicia now. Her whole plan of hoping the Grand Alliance is too exhausted to fight her after the war with DK is not what I would call "higher on the totem pole than DK".

Miles

She's higher on the pole because she'll be alive when he is dead.

Konstantin von Karstein

I doubt he will die. He will probably be trapped in the Serenity, or impeded one way or another by the Autumn Crown.

nimelennar

Easy, that: he's been dead for far longer than she's been alive.

Miles

That's the joke .gif

hakureireimu

That's a big assumption, considering that Amadeus and Ranger are gunning for her.

Anomandris

I need a Black interlude...

Or Ranger (That would be funnnnnnn)

[boballab](#)

The Empress is only alive at the moment for 2 reasons.
1) When the last we saw Ranger, when she joined up with Black, she still was recovering from her fight with the Summer Queen. 2) Not even the Dead King was able to keep Ranger from reaching him no matter what was done so he actually quit trying and there was the draw with the Summer Queen. Both are technically in the lower tier of "godhood" something Malicia is not. If a fully healed Ranger wants Malicia dead, she will be dead because she won't be able to stop her and remember Ranger never liked Malicia she only help her because of Black.

A.B.

Also while she may not be higher to the world by the time the dead king is handled everyone else will be tired and broke. It won't be grand alliance vs D.Empress but just Cat. So for the stories POV she will be the big baddest even if not for the world.

[Liliet](#)

Actually that's what happened to Saruman, too, cleaning him up was the last arc of the books.

Malicia's going to be the Scouring of the Shire.

Shveiran

...Anyone that liked the scouring of the shire, raise you hand. I'll wait.

In all seriousness, that is usually considered one of the few mistakes of granpa Tolkien. It generally reads as anticlimatic as the conclusion of the series, and here we wouldn't even have the "hero coming home" feel to carry us.

I sure hope EE doesn't go that route. If Malicia will be last, she'll likely need to be relevant. Not a Shire Saruman.

shikkarasu

I'm hoping that Amadeus will take the Tower. We know he's a claimant for it. If not, then I imagine Cat will, having abdicated the Crown. Either way, if it happens post DK it will likely be the "establishing the new Status Quo" final story beat, rather than a story arc of its own.

caoimhinh

Yeah, I think it would be much better if Amadeus beats Malicia without the Grand Alliance's armies and without Catherine.

And I hope we get to actually see it, not a "After the last battle against the Dead King, Catherine received a message: Dread Empress Malicia was dead." sort of thing.

nimelennar

Raises hand

Come on, the Scouring is pretty much directly out of Tolkien's life experience of coming home after WWI and finding that the idyllic place he'd been longing to return to had not, in fact, been left untouched by the war raging across the rest of the continent.

I can understand not liking it; it is yet another conflict (if an easily resolved one) taking place after the climax of the book. It certainly wasn't a "mistake," though.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

It isn't vengeance, it is the only justice those who would not be capable of passing into the "West" would be able to get.

The Nuremberg Trials are Real Life. The Scouring of The Shore was Tolkein's take on the idea.

Even the "Book of Revelations" contains parts of how the "bad guys" get justice.

Just because the imminent threat is gone doesn't mean wrongs won't be righted.

Branwen

Bah I loved the scouring of the shire! It's a much needed reminder that war is inherently destructive and even if heroism is called for it comes at great cost. And the scene with Meriadoc blowing his horn of Rohan and rallying the hobbits kicks enormous ass and is lowkey one of my favorites in the whole series XD

iLissuin

I shall raise my hand proudly.

The Scouring of the Shire was essential to the greater themes of the story: the Shire is what they fought so hard to protect and thus needed narrative closure (it should have been in the extendeds). It is the cost of the journey, the true conflict for Frodo and Sam.

In many ways I see this as a parallel to Cat's relationship with Callow. She's currently fighting "Mordor," but what will await her at home? What of Callow and Cardinal? I highly doubt that Malicia will just let what Cat has built stand, and she is closer to home than Cat will be for a long time. Besides, this conflict of what the end of the war shall bring has been heavily foreshadowed.

What I am very curious about is how Black and Vivi will factor into the equation. What will they bring to Cat's "Shire"?

lordcirth

I liked the scouring of the shire! It gave a chance for Merry and Pippin to come home in style. Not just coming home as strangers, but as heroes. And to show how they had changed and grown, without being overshadowed.

[Liliet](#)

Raises hand.

Clint

Not to pile on, but I thought omitting the Scouring of the Shire from the extended cut of the movies was one of Peter Jackson's two big errors in an otherwise phenomenal set of movies.

(The other was reducing Gimli and the dwarves into nothing but a bad joke.)

Anomandris

That's kinda why I said in terms of the story. Yes DK is Sauron-esque in his power right now, but my feeling is that Malicia is gonna end up causing a lot more problem to Calernia in general and Cat in particular than DK. It's not a plot thing, its where I might see the story going.

Maybe I could have used better wording – Antagonist totem pole?

Mental Mouse

Saruman didn't cause problems on the scale of Sauron – he took a final chance to piss on the Shire, and then he got squashed like a bug. Once the DK is defeated, Malicia will be in much the same situation – if Black and Ranger don't get her first, she'll be facing Cat's full attentions, with Cat riding a newborn Name, wielding the Bard's powers, and riding every story in the books.

Malicia is Doomed with a capital D.

Miles

DK is the smaller threat here. He's always been happy to go back to his hole after causing just enough trouble to avoid ending his story. He wants to be the villain who gets knocked down, not the one who gets killed, and is happy in his immortal retirement.

Malicia is trying to actually take over.

Liliet

It's been pretty explicitly spelled out that THIS TIME the Dead King is playing for keeps. Because he thinks he can, because he thinks he cannot afford not to. Precedent isn't much help here – the last time he made a *decisive* move, it was the end of Sephirah.

caoimhinh

She already has. In fact, most of the conflicts of this novel can be attributed and linked to her in some way. Her actions caused the Tenth Crusade by sponsoring the Doom of Liesse, and she is the one who unleashed the Dead King on Calernia again by inviting him.

Malicia doesn't believe herself capable of facing the other nations, so her style is not a direct confrontation. Instead, she causes a lot of fires around so that the other powers on Calernia have to be too busy putting them out that they can't come against her... which works on the short term, but not on the long run, because eventually

they are gonna look at her and decide she needs to be put down so that the fires end.

So yeah, she *is* the final antagonist of the series because she is, in fact, the first and I don't personally think she needs to cause one last disaster in her final confrontation (though she is probably desperate enough to do that) because she is already the one that caused the whole mess in the first place.

It's as if Saruman had been an evil sorcerer that when Gandalf and co. went after him, summoned Sauron on Middle Earth to get the heroes off him. Then after ending Sauron's forces, the heroes need to kill Saruman because that was his fault.

That's the kind of situation Calernia has with Malicia.

Jago

Raises hand

As nimelennar said, it is the moment when you return home from the war and discover that both you and your home have changed. Frodo is the veteran that suffers from PTD, even if the term hadn't yet been coined when Tolkien returned from the war.

The Lord of the Ring has a bittersweet ending, but that doesn't make it less, it makes it honest.

On a separate note, you must remember that Sauron was Morgoth lieutenant, so already a "lesser" evil.

Moodprint

When people refer to the Dead King as DK, I keep reading Donkey Kong in my head, and I cant help but chuckle a little

[anonymous4968](#)

Bayou Bogie fits my mental image of the Deadlands. uwu

grzecho2222

Still possible that Dead King will summon Triumphant to shed "Big Bad" position to her

[Liliet](#)

She's dead.

[crowlute](#)

Sigh. I'm tired of this "place on the totem pole" meme. Positions on totem poles have nothing to do with one's

importance, and it's a disrespectful statement to actual indigenous people

Mirror Night

I mean I think its gone fairly well for Malicia. Not her first candidate in Mercantis sure but its her Second Option. Nicae is done for the foreseeable future as goblinfire burns down the city and the ports. Ashur is bogged down in a Civil War with two of their major cities sacked. Did it go 100% perfectly not really but I doubt Malicia thought Nicae could hold back Helike forever anyway.

Odd

Malicia's pawns think it's going poorly for her because the goals she told those pawns she wanted are not being fully achieved. If those goals are false, where does that leave the situation for her?

Liliet

Still bad, between Amadeus and Catherine.

There's only so many times you can move the goalposts on what your victory conditions are before you follow in Traitorous's steps.

Miles

Cat is getting blamed for the sacking. It's the fulfillment of a threat she made in a dream.

Also there are lots of fires and zombies

Big Brother

The sacking is being done by Basilia in a completely separate city/country from the one whose envoy Cat threatened.

Anomandris

"Standing between the Tower and the West; and between the West and annihilation"....not a great place to stand, mate..

Also, was that Assassin in Mercantis?? (Please let them not be working with Malicia)

Big I

Sounds like they're behind the unrest in Ashur, since they're going through a succession crisis and Assassin was supposed to kill their leader.

caoimhinh

Yes, Assassin killed Magon, the head of Ashur.
But that 2 years ago, no? I doubt he is still there. Though it is telling that his son and successor (who is on the side of Malicia) was not able to seize power completely.

Shveiran

I think he died at Thalassina, actually? I believe he was in charge of the fleet during Warlock's dramatic exit

Konstantin von Karstein

I think Malicia even complained about it.

[Liliet](#)

No, Augur told Cordelia about Hadast being about to be Assassinated during the peace conference.

Shveiran

You are thinking about the father, but I was talking about the son.

[Liliet](#)

Oh.

Konstantin von Karstein

He's delusional if he thinks he can stay there for long. The GA will have no patience for that.

[Liliet](#)

Actually, I can see the GA seizing the opportunity to have someone stand there. It's not great for his life expectancy and he knows it, judging by the age comment at the end, but he can do a lot from that position.

Shveiran

Not really? I mean, that's what he thinks, that's clear. I'm just saying...He plans to toe the line between the two super-powers, but that is impossible as the two superpowers want irreconcilable things.

If he extorts a few concessions from the GA that are not outrageous enough, they might tolerate it, but that means Mercantis doesn't collapse their economic situation, and that Malicia won't tolerate: the money bag doesn't collapse without Mercantis, and the money bag is how she can sabotage

the war effort.

She won't sit pretty and hope the DK delivers, that's not her style.

If he pushes enough for Malicia to be satisfied, though, the GA will stop playing nice and remind them that coin and influence are not worth shit if the opponent has enough swords and no qualm over using them.

I guess it is possible for Malicia to find another scheme, but Mercantis does seem the weakest link... and therefore the best target.

Even if she starts attacking elsewhere she has no reason not to keep attacking there as well.

talenel

The problem is that Cat can't really afford to sack Mercantis. If she does that, then the money bag still disappears. So Malicia's best plan is to bleed the Grand Alliance enough that they are hapless once they have defeated DK for good. And a Merchant Prince who is clever enough to walk the line where he will bleed every coin and favor he can is honestly almost more of a positive for her then having a puppet Merchant Prince.

[Javvies](#)

Yes and no.

Mercantis still has no idea exactly where "reluctantly tolerated, if barely" ends and "bad things happen to Mercantis" starts as far as pushing their demands goes. There's clearly a point where Mercantis gets trashed immediately ... but before that there's a point where Mercantis gets tolerated for the duration of the war and then demolished instead of fulfilling the terms. Remember, if Mercantis gets sacked by Procer/the Grand Alliance, even if they don't launch a punitive expedition until after the war, the debts and concessions owed to Mercantis can easily be written off. It's easier to pretend to accept and put up with things you don't like if you know it's temporary and are planning on getting rid of them.

talenel

Yes they can write off all their past debts and loans is they wipe out Mercantis. But then where are they getting any money from? No one will be lending them money after they destroyed their last major borrower. And the GA for all it has a powerful army still is woefully lacking in funds. They need Mercantis, its

trade, its business, and most importantly its money. And, after the war, they'll still need those things to function and begin the process of rebuilding.

Now if Mercantis is being sufficiently unhelpful that it doesn't matter, then they will be spitefully wiped out by Cat as Calernia burns around them. However, if they provide just enough recalcitrant help that the GA can still function, then Cat, being her practical self, can't afford to nuke them. Especially since it will just make recovery for the rest of the world much more difficult.

It's the one downside to being practical. Cat would never copy Jehan the Wise and bankrupt her people just for spite. She's too reasonable for that.

Shveiran

But she wouldn't be bankrupting anyone. She'd take a stroll through the Twilight Ways and portal a few glaciers down on the city. Mercantis has no mage or Named worth a damn, I doubt she'd need an army to do it... and if she did, she has one that still has to go south.

Culling them after the war causes no problem to the GA. Sure, they might need funds to rebuild, but they need that less than they need crossing off gargantuan war debts.

And from a practical standpoint... if she is stepping down anyway, she is removing a tick from the continent who would do little for anyone save profiteering from the war-torn kingdoms' impoverished state.

Not crossing off Mercantis after the war is not a practical measure, but a moral one. Because, you know, it's still a lot of death even if they are ruled by dicks.

[Liliet](#)

Well, there IS a band of GA Named in the city now... :3

Big I

So I'm guessing we've just seen the Naming of the next Merchant Prince and Tyrant.

On an unrelated note, I hope we get to see the fall of Stygia and Mercantis in this story to the Legions or the Army of Callow.

"There can be no peace between orc and lash." And how cool was that story about Jehan the Wise? Long prices indeed.

Raved Thrad

I laughed out loud at the part where the Mercantian was recounting how Callow had been faced with penury for a generation and they didn't care. Savages indeed.

"You're going to pauperize yourselves if you attack us!"

"Then let's make it good, yeah?"

"Ok, ok, we'll pay you to go away."

"Score!"

caoimhinh

I don't know about them getting a Name.

Basilias, I could see, since even Catherine sees Kairos in her when she grins.

But the merchant prince position is not a Name, and this guy most definitely didn't do anything worthy of getting a Name.

Anomandris

I think the Interlude and the last chapter seem out of order in the Chapters list below (or so it seems on the mobile) – might want to fix that?

Raved Thrad

An interesting turn of events, the Basileus falling to a Basilias...

[Burlyraven](#)

Ah, what delightful insight into the lesser villains of the story. These events were either entirely according to Malicias plan, or she's been slipping lately, if two of her supposed most important assets can be removed from the board so easily.

KingJulius

I think this is a sign of her power waning. Both halves of this interlude seem to be tools of her dying before they can accomplish her schemes.

talenel

We are seeing these things from an outsider/tool's perspectives. They aren't party to Malicia's plans. And honestly these things seem to have gone pretty well. Nicae is pretty much destroyed as an entity and I don't think she could have ever really trusted Trakas as an ally. And Mercantis has a very powerful and effective MP who will do a

good job of bleeding the GA without giving the appearance of being a figurehead and thus a straight-up enemy.

Ninestrings

Mercantis: I see you loading up ships there to attack us

Jehan: Yep

Mercantis: hahaha that makes no sense though you'll lose a lot of money on that

Jehan: Yep *Continues loading*

Mercantis: Hey man why not stop doing that

Jehan: Nope.

Mercantis: I... I'll pay you not to?

Jehan:...how much?

Raved Thrad

The day Mercantis learned just how long a Callowan's long price is.

WuseMajor

Unfortunately, they seem to have forgotten. Might be time to remind them again.

Frivolous

It kind of makes you think that Callowans have bigger dicks than anyone else. Yes, including Callowan women.

After all, there's only one letter of difference between long price and long prick.

When they decide to fuck you up, you'll know it.

Sun Dog

Angry horse people. Track you down and punch you in the mouth because your grandpa shortchanged their grandpa.

Raved Thrad

The other Callowan motto: "Vengeance is its own imperative."

[Adrian V](#)

I am not sure who will end up more fucked, i think Mauricious didn't think on how whatever happens in the free cities would affect him, and i am not sure what will happen to Nicae.

Also credit where is due Leo's last thoughts were at least about his city and people's safety, pity it came too late but is aparently more than what that guy in Penthes (and his brother) are/were capable off,

Back to that merchant i think he doesn't realize he is on the end of an era, he is sticking to old ways and that could sink Mercantis.

Liliet

I get the impression Mauricius is fully aware he's signing up for a WILD RIDE and going for it on purpose. Eighty-three, YOLO, etc. It's not like he has a "stable" option in this climate.

And yeah I noticed that too about Leo. For all that he was kind of a shit throughout his internal monologue, at the end his thought was about the city in his charge.

Shveiran

Leo Trakas: fucks over his city and everyone else looking out only for his own legacy throughout his life.

Also Leo Trakas: has a last-moment ehipany while dying that maybe if everyone died it would be bad, which affects nothing.

Sure, let's give him a point for that. So long as we count the 10000 that were scored against him as well.

Adrian_V

Well, Cat aside near everyone get points in the asshole scale, and even her too (lets not forget she basically went and tried to enslave a whole race, luckily she got better)

Shveiran

Sure.

I'm just saying that HOW MANY points they get in each category kind of matters.

Liliet

I'm not really counting points, but sure.

Miles

Did we not vote,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?

For we did vote,
A hundred times.
And we will win, a hundred times.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

caoimhinh

'till falls the tale,
And ends the books.

Raved Thrad

Most of a random Jora comment in Guild Wars: "Hail to the future! It is an axe age, a sword age, an age when shields are cleft asunder! It is a wind age, a wolf age, before the world plunges headlong into battle!"

Abrakadabra

Wow, that is terrible. Sounds like a bad copy of that song by Brothers of metal: prophecy of ragnarok.

Raved Thrad

It is derived from poetic (skaldic?) descriptions of Ragnarök. The Norn (of which Jora is one) are giants (relatively speaking) who live in the snowy North. Their culture revolves around hunting, brawling (among themselves), drinking, and killing things. Oh, and dying heroically, but *really* heroic Norn usually manage to put that off for a while.

<https://wiki.guildwars.com/wiki/Norn>

Abrakadabra

I see. Thanks.

[Liliet](#)

Okay, this one IS funny.

edrey

Well, i am sure the augur would save nicae, with atalante priests maybe? Stigia is the problem. For mercantis, on the other hand? There are the dwarfs, the herald sound noble enough to help, they are in the war too, after all, scare them a little shouldnt be a problem

Ryan

"Prosperus Soranus was dead. That was what the cup had told him. And with him gone, Dread Empress Malicia had lost her puppet candidate to the office of Merchant Prince."

This guy seriously thinks he outplayed malicia? I think he is in for a rude awakening.

"There were none more fitting than Leo to rise to prominence in the League, to replace Helike and its twitching goblin of a king as the power behind their simpleton Hierarch. Gods, but in those heady days he'd come so very close to getting all he wanted. How had it all gone so wrong?"

Poor Leo to paraphrase Azula of the fire nation, You were never even a player.

Anomandris

Plus he thinks he can outplay not just Malicia, but Cat and Cordy.

Thats like the answer to the question "Name three Calernian women you do not want to play politics with"

[Liliet](#)

I disagree re: Mauricius. Malicia IS short on options, and he's not claiming to have outplayed her, it's not like this results in her LOSS. She just wins slightly less, and that's just how the game goes.

I get the impression he's fully aware he cannot outplay either of the three women involved. However, he can make himself a person valuable to all three of them as a workable compromise – he's not completely Malicia's puppet but he's as good as she's going to get without sacking the city entirely, and well, the Grand Alliance did just send a band of Named there. Malicia is going to have to settle, and he's the ideal candidate for everyone involved. Sane enough to deal with the Grand Alliance without dismissing them, mercantile enough to give Malicia periodic bites.

Nobody's going to like it, but as long as they don't dislike it *at him*, he's fine.

letouriste

it's not about outplaying her, she probably guessed it could go this way and didn't care. The guy is still willing to do what she want

Forum Explorer

No, I think Black outplayed Malicia and knew that this guy would be Malicia's contingency. But since he's just trying to ride the wave between maximizing profits and being destroyed, he won't actually be that useful of a pawn. Sure, Malicia can bribe him, but there is a much sharper limit on what he's

willing to do. Plus his YOLO attitude means threats won't matter nearly as much to him.

Javvies

Heh.

Things aren't going the way Malicia wants them to go ... but she's the type that has contingencies to trash as much as possible that she can't get to go her way.

Very much approve of the bit about Jehan the Wise and Callowan willingness to get revenge.

But Mauricius is definitely underestimating Cat's willingness to do terrible things to get enemies or those who help them. I rather suspect that Mercantis is going to have more trouble with renegotiating the terms than he thinks they will. And I suspect that if/when he finds out about the nightmare messages Cat sent Livia, he'll reconsider – because he damned well ought to know that having made the threat, and how explicit it was, Cat basically has to follow through or she'll never be able to make another threat believable. Plus, he was just thinking about what Jehan the Wise did, and that he was a hardcore Callowan Hero, while Cat is equally Callowan but also a Villain, and thus presumably has less restraints on what she'll do to people.

Liliet

I get the impression he's not going to be renegotiating Livia's deal directly. He's going to conduct further, additional negotiations for more loans, while accepting the deal Cat nightmared Livia into.

He's not underestimating anything. He's going to play by the rules. He just expects that by the rules, he'll still profit.

Javvies

Even if you're right, that he's not going to try to renegotiate what Livia agreed to ... and I got the impression that he was planning to renegotiate, or at least try to. The point is, the basic point of the message Cat sent was that Mercantis cannot afford to try to push Procer, and thus the Grand Alliance, too far, because crossing the line into unacceptable conditions means Mercantis gets razed. And there's no real way to tell exactly where "reluctantly tolerated, if barely" ends and "bad things happen to Mercantis" starts.

And I got the impression that he thinks he'll have more leeway to push Procer (and thus the Grand Alliance) than Livia does. Remember the past where he thinks about the Grand

Alliance's armies marching into Hainaut, "soon to be bloodied"? I get the impression that he thinks that the forces of the Grand Alliance aren't going to be available to pressure Mercantis soon.

Also, I suspect that he's seriously underestimating Cat.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Cat, without Named (but maybe a few Firstborn), would wreck Merchantis.

Cat & the Woe?

Jago

The main problem is that he thinks it is "a Crusade as usual", with the crusaders being bloodied and all ending to a standstill and al going on as usual. But the war is an invasion of Procer by the DK. If the Crusade fails at least half of Procer fall under the DK and Marcanis larger client disappears. The DK doesn't seem to care for trade outside his territory, so what is the utility of being the trading gate of the continent when the interior doesn't trade at all?

Procer fall, Callow is conquered by Praes and they trade food directly, half of the Free cities are wrecked for generations, the Titanomachy seem mostly an autarchy, so little trade from there, too. It ends like Venice in the XVIII century, when trade was across the Atlantic to the Americas or along the Cape of Good Hope to Asia. A sill famous has been, but not the economic power it was.

And if Procer fall they can say goodbye to the money they loaned.

[Liliet](#)

> And there's no real way to tell exactly where "reluctantly tolerated, if barely" ends and "bad things happen to Mercantis" starts.

There is though. Sure it's a zone of risk, but the GA does need Mercantis and it needs it for specific things. If the 10 things it absolutely needs are fulfilled but the 2 additional things it would also like aren't, the game continues to be played – and the difference between 'absolutely needs' and 'would also like' is calculable with sufficient intelligence.

Juff

Typo Thread:

preferred think > preferred to think
Ashuran brewed > Ashurans brewed
through kind > thorough kind
while Consortium > while the Consortium
soldiers we bound > soldiers were bound
without honour duel > without an honour duel
them as powerful as any of them > her as powerful as any of them
A the tune > The tune
as rider came > as a rider came
fading form > fading from

WuseMajor

So, today's was called Ebb.

I'll place a bet on the next one being Flow. As in the Ebb and Flow that Procerians keep talking about.

I suspect we'll see how these two situations play out for the people who think they're winning right now. If not, then perhaps a few more such situations, ending with how Malicia feels about things.

Or...hmmm...Perhaps Amadeus will comment on something?

[Liliet](#)

OH YES PLEASE LET THE NEXT ONE BE AMADEUS'S

Shveiran

I know right? We still have next to no clue what he has been up to for two years.

We had some rumors about Sepulcral and a dragon being involved, but nothing certain or even detailed.

I need some Not!BlackKnight goodness.

Raved Thrad

It's a miracle, really, when you consider that he's been running around with Hye for two years and neither is half the world on fire, nor has Ranger boinked him to death. After all he *is* just another squishy human now...

[Liliet](#)

Oh goddammit, way to make me like a character right as he's dying)= Leo was a twat, but he could use those extra seconds for a warning... he would have used them well. He wasn't a good guy and he was kind of an idiot, but in the end, he did care.

Mauricius, now, is interesting. I'm expecting he'll be another big player now, having expertly placed himself in exactly the

place he's qualified to make big waves from. I kind of like him, I won't lie, though it's in a "wow what a terrible person" way.

Mental Mouse

Leo hadn't earned the chance to give a "final warning".

Liliet

I really really really cannot understand this logic.

Being able to do a little bit of good is not something you need ot deserve first, even if you're following the 'deserve' framework isn't it HOW you deserve other things?

Mental Mouse

It would have been a moment of redemption, and he hadn't set up anything to warrant that.

Liliet

I... what?

This is not even circular logic, this is like... I don't even know.

Either his last moments being spent on telling Basilia to beware IS sufficient for redemption. In which case it's sufficient and he has "set up" by being the kind of person to react like that.

Or it's not enough, in which case it's not redemption and there's no problem.

There's nothing else there. It's not about him, he's not doing it for himself, he's doing it for the city. How it reflects on him is the opposite of the point. It's just a reflection, and whatever you think the reflection is, it's not relevant to the act itself?

Mental Mouse

The "reflection" would affect how he's remembered afterward, the stories that follow him. This falls under "call no man happy until he's dead" – he hadn't earned a break on his posthumous reputation.

Liliet

Basilia's the only person there. If she doesn't tell anyone, no-one will know.

Also, an entire city full of people NOT being razed by undead KIND OF MATTERS MORE than Leo Tracas's posthumous reputation?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, and Below won that round.

[Liliet](#)

I am really confused as to your point right now.

Sparsebeard

I can't see things going well for Malicia in the free cities. Nicea falling to alliance aligned forces means that her allies in the region are dwindling.

If anything, undead are bound to rally surviving Niceans to fully join to Grand Alliance... which could shift the balance and have Malicia's other allies in the region reconsider.

Unless Leo was foolish enough to let Malicia bring a Dead Waters level WMD in the city, I can't see the fall of Nicea not being a huge setback for her (and even then, she loses one of her few allies).

caoimhinh

Yeah, and oh boy, they are sooo gonna say this is 100% proof of Leo being a friend of the Dead King. The last of the Trakas is gonna be the most vilified one.

I wonder if the new Strategos will become Basileus.

And this situation kind of has to be a wake-up call for the rest of the Free Cities.

AbraKadabra

Yeah. I am still disappointed that Bellerophon Just left. After all who is bigger tirant Than the dead King, who will use and opress you even beyond thí point of death? The People might reconsider things if they see undead killing and torching in the south.

Gabe

I need books to read for the last leg of the summer. Since I figure that anyone reading the Guide has somewhat decent a taste, forgive me for talking about something other than the chapter here and ask if folks here have any recommendations on which books I should seek out?

I'm decently well read, so maybe skip recommending your Tolkiens, Pratchetts and Sandersons.

Anyway, I appreciate any suggestions and wish you the best.

[vernal.ancient](#)

If you want something a bit like Cat's military adventures in earlier books, you could try Codex Alera by Jim Butcher. The battle scenes are fun, the strategies are both impressively audacious and reasonably believable (at least to me, though my knowledge of tactics and strategy comes exclusively from Wikipedia, YouTube, and the occasional history book), and the characters are fun and snarky.

The Kingkiller Chronicles by Patrick Rothfuss is a pretty good read, if you don't mind that the last book of the trilogy has been indefinitely delayed. It's been a while since I read it, and I can't really put my finger on any one thing that I enjoyed, but I found it enjoyable from start to finish. Apparently, the prose is of very high quality if you're knowledgeable about that sort of thing (I'm not, so I can't really tell the difference between it and 'acceptable but basic' prose)

kini

If you want more "soldier's eye view of fantasy ", check out the Tales of the Black Company or Malazan Book of the Fallen

[filtern](#)

The Gods are Bastards is a good fantasy web serial. Great characterization, a similarly sprawling cast, and intrigue

[Javvies](#)

Mark Alan Edelheit. The Chronicles of an Imperial Legionary Officer series is the main series, and is set a thousand years after Rome lost a legion. Turns out they got transferred to a new world and founded the Malzeelan Empire. But the story of Rome has mostly turned into their creation myth. At any rate, the Imperial Legionary Officer in question is one Captain Bennulius Stiger, and he's about to get unpleasantly surprised by his new assignment.

The Karus Saga series is the story of how that Roman Legion got lost in the first place, and if it continues will probably get to where they found what will become the Malzeelan Empire in a later book.

[Javvies](#)

Dammit. Just noticed the error.

It's Marc Alan Edelheit.

Marc with a "c" not Mark with a "k". Fucking autocorrect.

Other authors you may or may not like:

Terry Mancour's Spellmonger series is also entertaining. Not sure when the next book is expected, but with ten books already out (I think of a projected thirty) there should be enough material to keep you reading for a while.

Glynn Stewart – I thought the ONSET series ended a bit abruptly, but IIRC, he cut it shorter than intended because it wasn't popular enough to keep going or something along those lines. ONSET is urban fantasy, as is the Changeling series. Starship's Mage is based on a premise that I haven't seen often – humanity went to the stars, but only because of magic – specially trained Jump Mages are able to teleport starships up to a lightyear at a time. The Martian Protectorate is ruled by the Mage-King of Mars (the first Mage-King used magic to fully terraform the planet) There are eight or nine mainline books, but there's also a side series of currently three books covers some of the events that get foreshadowed in early books and contribute to stuff in later books, but the mainline series main character isn't involved with. Book one is technically a compilation of five shorter stories that were originally released as more of a serial. The Duchy of Terra series – you know how usually in sci fi stories when Earth gets conquered by aliens, we plucky humans figure out a way to throw them off the planet? Yeah, that isn't this story, but on the upside, we got annexed by the terrifying tentacled overlords who are trying to uplift and integrate us as valued and productive members of the Imperium, instead of their religious-imperative slaver neighbors, who are our other neighbors and would happily conquer and enslave us if they had the opportunity. At this point there is a complete sequel trilogy and a subsequent sequel trilogy has been started.

He's also recently started a new series, I think it's called Teer and Kard, book one is Wardtown ... I'm not entirely sure what genre to call it ... there's magic, but also sixshooters, repeating rifles, and a major Wild West vibe (at least in the starting region), but it very definitely used to be a fantasy world, only in this one the probable elf-equivalents invented gunpowder, the steam engine (probably), and landed on the continent where events are set in iron ships.

Jonathan Moeller ... his stuff tends to be a faster read for me, but since he writes insanely fast, you usually aren't waiting too long for the next book, but the next book he puts out is usually in a different series, as he usually has three or four active series going simultaneously. Frostborn/Sevenfold Sword/Dragontiarna are high fantasy, and could be considered arcs of a single series.

Ghost/Ghost Exile/Ghost Night are a different high fantasy setting and are also basically arcs of a single series. Demonsouled is also high fantasy and has a completed sequel trilogy and a started subsequent sequel series. The Silent Order series, starting with Iron Hand, are science fiction.

The Cloak Games/Cloak Mage series are mostly urban fantasy, but there are some classic high fantasy elements ... but it's three hundred years after the Conquest of Earth (and humanity) by the Elven High Queen, the Elven homeworld has spent as long in the hands of elves who successfully rebelled against the High Queen and continually attack Earth.

Evan Currie ... I enjoy his works ... but sometimes the waiting for the next one in a given series takes a while.

The On Silver Wings series has eight books, it's sci fi.

Odyssey One is sci fi and has seven or eight? Books, I think, plus two parallel spinoff series.

The Superhuman series is a near future Earth ... and genetically engineered superpowers (plus increased aggression) are the weapon of choice by an alien AI probe to exterminate all life on planet Earth.

hue hue

Okay, I am a simple man who easy to impress, thus this is not a serious read list but ALL those make my monkey brain happy:

– The experimental logs of the crazy lich. A comedy web novel with some things taken from D&D and chinese novels. It's pretty fun to read, has memorable cast, but each arc has at least one scene where the silly aspect goes to zero and made my eye water a bit (again, I am a simple man easily impressed)

-The girl who bore the flame ring & The girl who ate a death god. Both novels are from a series about girls in different parts of the continent greatly changing the politics. Simple read like If the first book of the Guide was a one shot

-The lazy king. A demon of Sloth gets powerful as fuck, but he is also lazy as fuck. We mostly see his surroundings and how others demons react to him and the holy war incoming

-No game no Life. My guilty pleasure this one. What the first anime episode, If you liked I recommend checking the novel

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

From my "read &/or reading" list.

PGtE. You are Here.

Somebody mentioned "the Gods are Bastards." Good fantasy with a modern feel.

The Legend of Randidly Ghosthound. Chapter 1278 is the most recent release on this webnovel.

Jim Butchers' Dresden Files. Modern fantasy. Cannot recommend highly enough. Dead Beat features "Sue", the Chicago T-Rex. Asimov, Herbert, (Heinlein), Greg Bear, Niven, Robert Asprin, & Hambone1330

The last has a monthly HFY webserial in as hard Sci-fi as HFY gets @

<https://deathworlders.com>

I could recommend more, but that's a few hundred hours. Get some sun.

Really. Go outside. Vitamin D is a thing. Make some. I'm near Seattle. Supplements suck.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Also <https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/26294/he-who-fights-with-monsters>

But really. Get Sunlight while you can.

Miles

Worm by John C McCrae (parahumans.net)

Also check the recommendations threads on /r/rational if you're into the practical aspects of this story

Topwebfiction.com if you're into the superpower fantasy aspect

[Mental Mouse](#)

If you haven't read All Night Laundry, you can do that now. It's a web serial which recently wrapped up its main story (2400+ daily installments with graphics and text!) and is now waiting on the epilogues. We've been waiting a while, but trying not to noodge the author, because he Iron-Manned ANL for most of 7 years, and he deserves a break.

It is not at all like Guide – it started out as interactive, but the author eventually had to tone that down (and eventually cut it off) so he could actually finish the damn thing. Follows our protagonist from "dammit, I'm out of laundry and have a double shift tomorrow", through "I hate time travel!" to "we are going to kill a god", and on to... well, I don't want to spoil the ending, but it's glorious.

Frivolous

I wonder how much money Malicia still has. Praes is supposed to be rich, but all these bribes must be costing the Dread Empire something.

Sepulchral certainly isn't paying taxes or tribute to Malicia. Plus Praes isn't getting taxes from the cities destroyed by the

Ashuran navy and Masego, that time he swallowed the souls of an entire city.

Javvies

And Foramen is under goblin control.

It's a good question.

I suspect that she's probably running a deficit, but I also suspect that the Praesi treasury has numerous well filled vaults that Malicia can draw on.

Although, it probably actually depends on who controls which mines. Remember, Praes has gold and various gemstones as exploitable natural resources. That's something that is definitely useful, at least for a while.

Morgenstern

... aaaand there's a "Next" link on chapter 42 leading to chapter 43 – but in this Interlude, the "Previous" link leads back to 42 instead of 43. Really strange.

Morgenstern

Hm.. where did my last comment go? Before this one, there should be a "Chapter 43 does not show up in the chapter overview" comment. 😊

Morgenstern

Funnily enough, now the "Previous" link DOES actually lead to back to chapter 43 (instead of chapter 42, which it lead back to when I started posting this). How the hell did that get fixed in the seconds I've been typing this? =P

Chapter 44: Cliff

*"I am only seen when blind
And dawn always kills me
My omens can be divined
But my gifts are all empty."
– Taghreb riddle*

Neustal had been little more than a tower by the road, once upon a time.

It had since become the end of the grounds held by the living in the war for Hainaut, that little crumbling watchtower raised into a stout keep by the sappers of the Army of Callow. From it the fortifications of the Grand Alliance spread out like spiderweb, filled with steel and people and wood. Hainaut was too large for a wall to be raised across its entire lowlands, at least by human hands, but we'd done the next best thing: a series of trenches to defend in depth, as deep as we could dig them. The defensive line was not straight, no single stroke of the quill on a map, but instead just as chaotic as a coastline. The trenches bent and twisted to reach fortifications already standing or avoid swamps, or hard stone or hills.

Even if we'd raised a wall across all this land, we wouldn't have been able to defend it. It'd simply too long to be manned with the numbers we'd need to turn back a proper attack by the dead, our forces spread thin where Keter would concentrate as will. Instead we had the trenches and the knots, the strongholds along the line where troops were massed and kept vigilant. Patrolling along the desolate length of the trenches companies went with carts carrying along an ingenious Lycaonese invention, what they called the *holzburgen*: the parts of a small wooden fortress made easy to assemble with nothing more than nails and sweat, cleverly using the carts themselves as walls.

When too badly outnumbered by raiding undead the patrols would fort up and send up signals should scrying be scrambled, bringing in the second line of defence. Further south, along scrying relays, we had established large mobile reserves that could be mobilized without prior warning. Each counted a vanguard of horsemen and kept several mages capable of opening a gate into the Twilight Ways, which meant most of the time our people arrived in time to relieve the patrolmen. We rotated which soldiers were assigned to the reserve as well as the location of said reserves, lest the Dead King be able to map out our ability to respond to his attacks.

The reserves had been half-emptied when I'd had to hastily assemble an army to deal with the undead plague that'd emerged behind us, but they had since been filled anew. Not for long, though. We would be moving into the lands held by the dead, soon, and to get the knockout blow we wanted we would need as many soldiers as we could field. Already many were here, and the stronghold splayed out below felt like a living, breathing creature: a great beast of old with a thousand hands and feet, twisting and turning and bleeding out fires from its skin.

As the wind passed through my hair, I let the thoughts pass through me. Neustal's roof was lead, and sharply angled so that rain would slide off, but there was just enough room for someone to stand at the edge of the ledge. It'd rained the night before,

and the tiles were still slippery, but my footing was sure. It was not my first time standing here.

The moon was nearly full and glaring down at us all through the cover of dark clouds, and there was a cloying humidity to the air that told me more rain was coming. It was enough to frizzle my hair as it was blown forward in strands – the wind was at my back – and have sweat bead the back of my neck. The sensation was not unpleasant, feeling the wind flow around the Mantle of Woe as I closed my eyes and slowly breathed in and out. Try as I might, I could not reach it again: that elusive moment in the Arsenal when my Name had stirred awake, when I'd felt my hold friend bare his fangs again. I suddenly opened my eye. My ears did not tell me she was here, though they did not need to: we were bound by something altogether more intimate.

I said nothing, only taking in the sight of the dark plain and the shifting moonlight that stretched out beyond the bustling walls of the stronghold. Eerie as they were, the lowlands of Hainaut were beautiful to behold.

"It is a strange habit you've picked up of late, dear heart," Akua Sahelian said.

"Is it?" I softly laughed. "I've had stranger, I assure you."

The shade stood at my side, undaunted by the heights. They weren't something that could kill either of us, although... I put my weight in my good foot the slightest bet, felt the tile begin to slip, and my stomach tightened. And in that moment before the drop, in that instinctive fear that was ingrained in our hindbrain, I felt like I could almost touch my Name. *Almost*.

"You told me you feared heights, once," Akua said.

"I did," I acknowledged.

"Yet you confronted that fear," she said. "Mastered it."

"Mastery is a bold claim," I smiled into the dark.

I'd stood on the edge of the orphanage's roof, night after night, until I could stand through the trembling. Until I no longer felt like throwing up. And I'd beaten back the fear, eventually. And yet even after all these years, in that blind moment before the drop, still my stomach clenched. No, mastery was much too bold a claim.

"A strange habit, and a strange mood to match it," Akua softly said. "I do wonder, Catherine, what fear it is that brings you to the ledge this time?"

I did love it, against my better judgement, that sometimes she just *got it* without needing to be told a single thing. I hated it as well, of course. It was like being naked, and while I was not shy about my skin my thoughts were a different matter. I'd been warned not to let Akua in, of course. Not to let her slither into my inner circle, else I find I had made a nest of my bones for this most beautiful of snakes. It was too late for that now, though. I'd already made my choice as to how this would end, and there would be no turning back. Too many prices had already been paid.

"I've been having this dream," I idly said, closing my eyes.

I extended my arms to the sides, like a Levantine ropewalker preparing to cross above the pit, and without a sound found that the shade had moved out of the way.

"I always stand on the edge," I said. "But it's rarely the same. Sometimes it's that roof from when I was a girl, but more often something else."

My arms had opened my cloak and so the wind traced slow fingers against the hem, setting it aflutter.

"It's been that glacier at the heart of the Fields of Wend, with the dark waters below," I said. "It's been that drop into the tunnel to Liesse, during the Doom. The walls of Keter. The end of the Laure docks, on a moonless night. There's always a drop, and darkness below."

I was awake. My eyes were closed, but I was awake.

"Then how do you know you're not asleep, right now?" she murmured into my ear.

The hair on the back of my neck raised. I smiled, slowly breathed out and opened my eyes. I leaned forward, arms still extended, and risked the edge of the ledge. My stomach clenched with that familiar streak of ice, but still there I stood.

"In the dream," I confessed, "I always fall."

My feet grew numb as lead, and down into the dark I went. And never did a scream leave my throat as I tumbled into the quiet stillness, the cool peace of utter night.

"Not tonight, then," Akua murmured.

Damn her, I fondly thought, for understanding every part of it. She was standing at my side, now that I'd brought back my arms to my chest, pretending she had never gone behind me and spoken into my ear just the way she used to when she was still but a spirit

bound to the Mantle. We both knew otherwise, but we left that truth untouched.

"Not tonight," I agreed.

Tonight my feet did not slip. My leg throbbed with pain but still I looked up at the half-veiled moon, breathing out. In and out, calm. My Name did not stir, though it felt frustratingly close.

"There is a place outside the walls of Wolof," Akua eventually said, "where old stone were raised in a circle for some long-forgotten ritual. Water flows beneath the earth, so great clusters of Wasaliti lilies – purple and pale – grow there among the grass."

She looked out into the night, faintly smiling.

"When the moon is at its highest," she said, "you can lie among the lilies and grass like a bed, and the shadows they cast look like the great ribs of a giant."

I studied her for a long moment.

"It's not a place of power," I said.

"No," she quietly said. "I found it, as a child, and shared it with no one. I have not been there in many years."

A secret for a secret, I grasped. Had she known I'd spoken to no one else of the dreams, or simply suspected? No matter. A secret for a secret, I thought once more. It sounded like the way a Praesi would think of... well, that word was best left out of this. Too dangerous for all sorts of reasons, the least of which the stories it brought with it. The silence we kept clung heavy to the air, carrying with it an offer. She had made it to me before, though rarely in too explicit a manner, but it'd been a while since I'd been genuinely tempted. Killian had taught me to value trust over the press of flesh, bittersweet as the lesson had been to learn. If I turned my head to meet Akua's eyes, it would be accepting the offer. Falling off the ledge, just a little bit.

I leaned forward. The fear came, and I did not fall.

"We are who we are," I said without turning.

I was many things but a Callowan most of all, and she was the Doom of Liesse. Forgiveness was not the stuff my bones were made of, and a hundred thousand souls were still waiting for their long price.

"So we are," Akua Sahelian agreed.

Her tone I could not read. Disappointment? Frustration? Even long gone from the Wasteland, she was still a daughter from that circle of Creation's finest liars.

"Why did you come?" I asked.

Safer grounds. Like a slap on a butterfly, my words tore through the last remnants of what had been hanging in the air.

"One of the patrols came back mauled," she said.

I cocked a brow. Hardly unusual. Keter had gotten bolder in prodding out defences over the last month – the Iron Prince believed we were being tested to see if we were building up to an offensive, and I tended to agree – so it was not the first time blood ended up on the ground. We'd already begun to raise the numbers on the patrols, it was a good way to blood our conscripts before the looming battles.

"Razin Tanja was on one of them," Akua said.

Not wounded, I decided, or she would have told me immediately.

"Hard losses?" I asked.

"Near half," she said. "The dead got to them before they put together their wooden fortress."

"It shook him," I said.

"So Adjutant's watchful eyes reported," Akua agreed. "I believed it might be of interest to you."

"You were right," I said, taking a last look down.

Not tonight, I thought. There would be a night, sooner or later. Everyone got one. But it would not be tonight.

We'd see about tomorrow.

—

The Lord of Malaga was in his quarters, they told me.

We'd held Neustal long enough that what had once been a sea of tents with palisades had become closer to a fortress-camp, barracks being raised in stone and timber while smaller houses were raised in a sort of separate officer's district. In those muddy 'streets' nobles and career soldiers from places spanning half of Calernia were made to rub elbows, which had been fascinating to watch when it didn't end up involving loud arguments. It would have been an exaggeration to say that the timber house where Razin Tanja lived was part of a 'Levantine

quarter' within the district, I reflected, but not a claim entirely without foundation.

For practical reasons – being able to find officers easily, ease of supply and security – we'd gone along with the natural tendency of people to stick to their own, so it was no surprise that warriors in the colours of the Binder and Slayer's Bloods were all over the street when I limped my way to Lord Razin's abode. A Binder asked me to present my wrist before I was allowed in, so that she might ascertain I truly was who I appeared to be. The Levantine mages might be rubbish at illusions, but Binders dealt with blood from the moment they began in their trade: what flowed through my veins was proof enough of my identity, as far as they were concerned.

I was not announced in, though neither did I catch the young lord by surprise. I'd half-wondered if he would be drunk by the time I arrived, but he didn't look it – morose, sure, but then I'd be the same if I'd had to watch half my patrol get butchered by undead. He was seated and did not rise when I entered, though he offered a nod.

"Black Queen," Razin of the Binder's Blood greeted me.

"Lord Razin," I replied, brow pulling into a frown.

He was bruised on the cheek, a purple shiner crusting around the edges. It made him look younger, and more beaten down than one of the five most powerful nobles in Levant should ever feel.

"Did your watchers not mention I am unharmed?" he drily asked.

"Not wounded is what I got," I admitted without batting an eye. "Though that hit on your face will het nasty if you don't attend to it."

"It has been cleaned," he dismissed.

"You have healers," I pointed out.

And even if somehow none of the Dominions could be stirred to heal one of the head of the greatest lineages of the Blood, he could have borrowed some from another army. The aristocrat smiled bleakly at me, and I was once more reminded of how few battles he'd seen before our first meeting in Iserre. There'd been an arrogance in him then that'd been cut down to size since, I thought, though the remnants of it lingered. Funny things, people. So fragile in so many ways, and yet even the starkest of lessons found it difficult to change what lay at the heart of us. Like hardy weeds in a garden, the worst of us was often the most deeply entrenched.

"I am aware, Your Majesty," he said. "This is a choice. The bruise will fade, but the ache will be... a useful reminder."

I wanted to chide him for that indulgence, but how could I when my leg still ached from standing atop the keep? Hypocrisy and I were not unacquainted, but I tried not to seek her company. I claimed a seat at his table, since it was clear he was not going to invite me, and it was telling that a tired grunt was the most objection he was able to muster.

"What happened?" I asked.

"That poor orc you strapped to a wheelchair will have the report by now," he acidly replied.

He probably would. Hakram was doing his best to replace his missing limbs with those of a hundred busy attendants, and Hakram's best tended to see things through.

"And I'll read it," I said. "But that's not what I'm asking. What happened, Tanja?"

The young lord looked aside. Not to a window, for we had not made those – too dangerous, given the risks of infiltration – but to a tapestry-covered wall. It was a while before he answered me, voice exhausted and raw.

"We didn't see them until it was too late," the Lord of Malaga said. "The skeletons were far and slow, so we took our time. Even considered duels."

My brow rose. He knew I disapproved of those.

"My cousin Alis was with us, fresh from home," Razin said. "We were close, as children."

His fingers tightened, almost imperceptibly.

"She is also without the Talent."

A sting that'd followed him all his life, I knew, as the descendant of the most famous mage lineage in Levant. Blood were raised to try to emulate their ancestors in all things, so that they too might prove worthy of the same Bestowal. It would have been hard on a youth, understanding that even if he did everything right an accident of birth meant he'd never be fully able to live up to his legacy. Someone sharing that hardship would have been a dear friend.

"One of our riders saw our line's colours on the armour of one of the skeletons," he said. "Enamelled scale. The pattern was an old one but undeniably Tanja, One of our own, snatched up during some crusade and now fielded as a footsoldier!"

His smile spread, and grew bleaker.

"Alis has – had – no deeds to her name, Black Queen," Razin Tanja told me. "Levant is united against Keter, our people no longer fight honour wars. She lost her finest warring years in obscurity. And so I thought I could do this for her, give her..."

"A duel that'd make her reputation," I quietly finished.

To Blood, honour and reputation often mattered more than gold. A grand gift for an old friend.

"The skeletons were barely more numerous than us," Razin said, "and they would not have engaged wooden walls. I delayed to bait them, sent out our horse to take the flanks at a distance to prevent them from retreating when they got close."

"It was a trap," I said.

"Ghouls had burrowed beneath the earth," the Lord of Malaga said. "So when the skeletons were close and we began to make the walls, they rose in ambush."

I let out a long breath. Shit. Yeah, that was classic Keteran tactics. The ghouls would have done some damage, surprising the Levantines like that, but there couldn't have been too many of them or the digging would have been easy to notice. No, they'd been a unit sacrificed to prevent the *holzberg* from being raised before the skeletons closed the distance. With numbers like that, the dead had never been going to win the skirmish. The Dead King had just traded corpses for corpses, knowing he could afford to bury us one patrol at a time. Rough night, going through that. Especially if it got your favourite cousin killed, which by the look on his face I was guessing it had.

"Alis?" I asked.

"She died after having slain three ghouls single-handedly," Razin said. "Her deed was deemed worthy of being added to the Rolls."

I remained silent. I'd not known her, so even commiserating with his loss seemed like a lie.

"Go on," Razin bitterly said. "Have you not warned us again and again that there is no honour to be found in this war, Catherine Foundling? That our ways are that of fools, when kept to in the shadow of the Crown of the Dead, and that we must discard them or suffer loss."

His teeth gritted.

"As I have," he said. "As I might again."

I could have excused him, I thought, spoken of good intentions and everyone making mistakes. But I was not his mother, or his friend, and what he had done should not be excused. So instead I leaned back into my chair and sighed.

"I was sixteen," I quietly said, "the first time I made a decision that got people killed."

His stiffened, dark eyes narrowing in on me.

"I'd killed before," I noted. "But this was different. I didn't swing a blade at them, it was just... consequences."

"What happened?" Razin Tanja rasped out.

"I spared a man," I said. "Not out of mercy, but because I needed him to escape and cause great troubles. It's not only your people who make their reputations by putting down lions on the loose, Razin. I spared him when I could have taken his life, and because of that people died."

I half-smiled.

"It could be said they hanged because they chose to scheme rebellion," I said. "Or that they hanged because the Carrion Lord ordered they would. The choice I made wasn't the only one that led us there."

I traced the wooden surface with my fingers.

"But when I was made to look at those corpses hanging from the gallows," I said, "I knew it was on me. That the decision I'd made had its hooks in all the others, that maybe I wasn't guilty but that I was at least *responsible*."

God, there'd been a barmaid who'd flirted with me. The look in her eyes, before the drop... For the life of me I could not remember her name, and it made me feel oddly ashamed.

"So what did you do, after?" the Lord of Malaga asked.

I'd wept, that was the truth of it. Wept in an alley where no one would see me, afraid and alone and a long way from home. And in the weeks that'd followed I'd come close to abandoning my path, until my confrontation with Akua had the Blessed Isle granted me... perspective of a kind.

"There is not panacea to this, Razin," I told him. "You grow number to the losses, eventually, but it never entirely goes away."

"Some wisdom, this," the younger man scoffed.

"Remember tonight," I told him quietly. "Beyond the bruise. Remember the mistake, how it felt as it rippled out into the world and took something dear from you. And use that to never make the same mistake again, Razin."

His jaw set, and slowly he nodded.

"There will be other mistakes," I said. "Other defeats. Own them too, Razin Tanja, use them to rise – or you'll be mourning a great deal more than a cousin."

He chuckled, though the sound was mirthless.

"The more I gain, Black Queen, the more I am afraid," he said. "What was there to fear losing, when I had nothing?"

You and me both, kid, I thought. Yet I had said all that I had to say, and if there was someone who would ease his grief it was not me. The most kindness I could offer was to leave and make room for them to step into the space I was occupying. I rose to my feet, feeling my leg throb and offered him a nod. He did not object to my departure.

"Black Queen," Razin of the Binder's Blood said, sending me off with a sharp nod.

I hesitated, fingers lingering against the table.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I finally said.

The silence followed me out.

—

Hakram's people found me before I'd even made it out of the officer district, before my feet had found a destination – I felt too restless for sleep, even this late – and the news were whispered directly into my ear. I thanked the messenger absent-mindedly, my thoughts already racing ahead of me. Finally. It was about time he arrived. That they'd not caught sight of him before he was already deep in the stronghold was not unexpected, if hardly pleasant to hear, but his destination at least was predictable. It was always the first part of any camp he visited, unless prior demands on his time had been made. Night settled on me as a veil as I limped out, not to make me invisible to eyes but to mask my presence.

It was a weave taught to me by Andronike herself, a use of Night inspired by a spell that'd once been a favourite of the Twilight Sages: I would be seen as unremarkable, and details of me would be difficult to remember. Adjutant had called it a *poor man's Scribe*, which had the benefit of being both amusing and pretty accurate. In the soldierly parts of the stronghold I would not

have bothered, for my face – or more accurately my mantle and staff – was a key that opened gates and lowered wards. But no stronghold as large as Neustal, whose span occupied several tortured miles, could be filled entirely by soldiers. We had cooks, launderers, sutlers and peddlers.

A few brothels as well, though after a few incidents where laundresses were harassed by soldiers we'd confined them all to a particular district. That way there could be no confusion as to what services were by offered by whom, and there would be no qualms about flogging anyone who didn't understand what 'no' meant.

The Legions of Terror and the Army of Callow both forbade camp followers, which these people effectively were, as they slowed marches and drained as much resources as they provided. Here it would have been a fool's errand to try the same, though, considering Proceran armies had them in spades. I'd first believed the Lycaonese didn't, but it turned out they just armed them like they did essentially everyone they could afford to. These *helfer* and *helferin* only fought under specific circumstances, and otherwise essentially served the same purposes. The Levantines had brought few aside from warriors up north, but their rank and file had been eager enough to partake of the creature comforts.

If the civilians were to stay then there could be no question of them staying outside the walls where they might would be vulnerable to raids by the dead, so Neustal had whelped civilian quarters to stash them away in. It was towards these I headed, limp and all. In particular towards the long loghouse that was the busiest brothel in the stronghold, though I did not take the entrance a patron would. I went to the back, and slipped past the hired toughs guarding the entrance. The man who was arguably the most famous hero of our age was smiling and laughing with the brothel girls and boys as he deftly wove Light to heal their pains and sicknesses.

The Grey Pilgrim looked utterly at ease around them, and more surprisingly they around him. I'd started near enough the bottom of the ladder to know that just because some smiling highborn was comfortable around you didn't mean the feeling was reciprocated. *Peregrine* was the name they used for him, so they knew who he was, but for all that they did not seem intimidated. And they really had no reason to be, didn't they? Unlike kings and Named, they were not of that small slice of the world that Tariq Fleetfoot kept a wary eye on. They really did have nothing to fear from him.

Not unless their deaths would prevent a greater evil, anyway.

I waited until he was done. Unlike soldiers, these people wouldn't have the benefits of priests and mages to call on for

healing – not by right, anyway. If the Pilgrim wanted to do a little good here, far be it from me to stand in his way. The night was long, and I was not yet tired. They pressed a cup of wine on him before he left, which he only half-drunk, and when the Peregrine wandered back onto the streets I was but a step behind him. There was no question that he had not known of my presence, for even if he'd somehow missed the Ophanim would not have. He did not turn or look at me, but something in his bearing acknowledged my presence.

"There are others in need of healing," Tariq said.

"There's always people in need of healing," I replied. "Hurt is tireless."

"Too often it is those who offer comfort, north of Levant," he said. "It is shameful how the occupation is treated by some."

"We're not targeting the brothels, Pilgrim," I sharply said. "Or even civilians. But I won't assign healers to these districts that would instead be with patrols or manning our infirmaries."

We already had too few, be they priests or mages. I'd not forbid any volunteering their hours, so long as it did not result in exhaustion, but I'd not command the death of soldiers fighting Keter to accommodate people who'd come here knowing this was a war front. We were a stronghold, not a town. I was not unreasonable for denying something they had no right to ask for.

"Then do not deny me my works, Catherine," the Peregrine replied. "If I can allay suffering, I will."

"No lack of that going around, these days," I grunted.

"Denial or suffering?" he asked.

"No danger of either running out, I reckon," I shrugged. "But they're not why I sought you out. We're overdue a talk."

He cast a searching look on me, and I was unsurprised to realize that my veils of Night were nothing more than puffs of smoke to those eyes.

"You have held to your word when it comes to young Razin and Aquiline," he said. "I take it you now want them removed from your care."

"That'd be nice," I said. "Though on occasion they forget to be a pain in my ass, so I don't mind lending the equally occasional hand."

"Headstrong youths can be troublesome, it is true," the Peregrine said.

I eyed him, almost amused. How many decades had it taken him to get the art down of saying something like that without even the faintest hint of irony?

"So I've heard," I said. "But your headstrong lordlings aren't why I'm here."

"Ah," the old man calmly said. "It's to be that talk, is it?"

"Yeah," I grimly replied, baring my teeth. "Let's talk about the Wandering Bard, Tariq."

caoimhinh

I just wanna point out that I feel tricked that today's chapter is not called Interlude: Flow.

Well played, EE, well played.

ruduen

Anybody want to place bets on if it's going to come within the next couple of chapters, or if it's going to be a long enough gap that we forget about Ebb before it comes?

alele

Wouldn't even be the first time it happened.

Miles

You know what else isn't the first time? When reading the intro quote I thought this would make a great Votey, but I couldn't think of a good set of attributes so the riddle answer would be "a vote."

My last hope is to leave this link here so I ctry to read the chapter without being distracted by every line.

Ok I admit I fibbed a bit: this hasn't happened to me before, I'm just pretty new at making these.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

ctry is what you get when both the n and the space get fatfingered into the backspace key.

Now go vote already so I can stop telling embarrassing stories about myself in public for your enjoyment.

Salt

Should be hanger, because that's what every chapter ends on

WuseMajor

I give even odds the next chapter will be Hanger or Flow.

Well, or they'll be slotted in near the climax of this part.

[boballab](#)

Or it can be Tide as in Ebb Tide, that period of time between High and Low Tide as the water flows out.

shikkarasu

10 Denari that Flow is in the double update on the 4th. A further 5 that it reveals some plot that has been brewing behind the scenes for a book and three quarters.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Nah, the next three chapters or so will all be the first half of a well-known word or phrase, then the chapters will finally start completing the names in the reverse order from when they were introduced 😊

[Javvies](#)

This talk about the Wandering Bard with Tariq is due. Possibly overdue, considering he's the one who swore Bard wouldn't be a problem.

It may also be a discussion that should involve others. But maybe they can be brought in later, depending on how things go.

On the other hand, there's a lot of egg on Tariq's face over Bard.

Although, since it's Tariq, I'm half expecting him to try to come up with some sort of justification and/or excuse for Bard. And possibly the other Heroes involved in her plots. Not sure if he's had the "pleasure" of being introduced to and getting to know Mirror Knight yet.

Pethrai D'arkos

Except he had. They were both at the Battle of the Camps. Granted we don't really get a sense of how much they interacted and Mirror Knight came off as less knight templar-y back then but still; good judgement backed by the Ophanim

should have provided him with a reasonable idea of what to expect.

JJR

Ophanim aren't the Judgment choir though, they are mere seers.

Eleron M Pfoutz

I think they meant personal judgement, not the Choir. But I suspect Peregrine will certainly temper Christophe's stupid willingly.

[TeK](#)

I think "headstrong youth" just about explains Mirror Knight to Tariq. And to me, if we're being honest.

Pethrai D'arkos

Sure, it's a known heroic archetype and a damn good one when it comes to monster slaying or smashing flying fortresses. The problem is that it doesn't work here. He incited a brawl among Heroes that almost got one of them killed, has taken a pretty heavy swing at the foundations of Calernia's first long term international coalition, and I'll be damned if there hasn't been at least one case of his coursing after a flashy target leaving entire companies to get slaughtered because he was out of position.

ethericsentinel

Perhaps for Interlude: Flow we'll need to wait until just after Chapter XX: Hanger.

danh3107

The riddle's answer is stars, if anyone was curious.

[onedollargum](#)

I was thinking "darkness" myself.

hakureireimu

Dreams makes more sense.

[TeK](#)

What about "only seen when blind"? I thought it was darkness or somesuch.

Decius

I thought it was "I am seen only when I am blind" not "I am seen only by those who are blind"
Omens make me think of a comet or planet.

[TeK](#)

Oh comet, devil's kith and kin...

Vortex

I think darkness, oblivion, or night make more sense. The last line does not make sense with stars. At least stars give light.

Zggt

Huh, I went with the moon, since as opposed to stars, it only reflects the light of the sun; which, without an atmosphere is blinding, also playing into the "face" of it.

Rob

Pretty sure it's a Dream. Like you know, the dreams Cat is talking about in the chapter?

Ninestrings

Tariq just chilling in the brothel healing people and talking shit is pretty up there on the wholesome scale.

Dude's just got chronic dadfriend syndrome.

LizAris

It—it's a chapter!? What is this??? I feel robbed. EE you totally did this on purpose.

Not that I will complain about more Cat! More Cat is always welcome. As is Cat giving advice. Was kind of expecting something like this to happen to Razin given what we've seen of his approach to the undead. Also, the more tidbits we get on the Lycaonese the more I love them. Free swords for everyone.

I've also been waiting to see Pilgrim, and will be excited to hear what he has to say. Although the real fascinating interaction this chapter was with Akua, who steals the show more often than not...Cat will have to wield the power of not-friendship very carefully. I'm also starting to wonder what reins Akua in if she does decide to get back-stabby...she's pretty powerful and independent now, so I will just have to keep hoping for the completion of this redemption arc. I'm nearly positive Akua has some idea now of how Cat used to memory-wipe her in the Everdark. Wonder if she's ever resented that? Does Cat have any (albeit smaller) measures like that still in place?

[TeK](#)

I honestly can imagine Aqua resenting Cat for memory-wiping her. Admire, if anything.

[TeK](#)

Can't*

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Akua*

Frivolous

I don't remember Cat ever wiping Akua's memory, in the Underdark or not. Could someone please link me to the relevant chapters or interludes?

lauatagan

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/22/chapter-66-tremors/>

Search for the word "Marker", Cat deleted the conversation from Akua's memory.

Frivolous

Thank you, lauatagan.

KageLupus

Cat doesn't have any protections against Akua turning on her, which is itself all the protection she needs. You can't half-ass being a friend to someone, especially a Praesi noble trained in intrigue from birth.

Cat showed Akua what she could have had if it weren't for her entire upbringing. The friendship, the camaraderie, without any of the hidden meanings or long cons or anything else she was used to. It does double duty as both carrot and stick. Akua wants to keep that feeling, but it is also a constant reminder that she is the Doom of Liesse and that can't ever be fully forgiven. At this point Akua is as likely to turn on Cat as Vivienne or Archer.

Juff

Typo Thread:

simply too long > simply be too long
concentrate as will > concentrate at will
hold friend > old friend

slightest bet > slightest bit
claim," I > claim." I
old stone were > old stones were
gone from > gone from
out defences > our defences
patrols, it > patrols; it
het nasty > get nasty
Dominions > Dominion's
His stiffened > He stiffened
Akua had the Blessed Isle > Akua at the Blessed Isle had
not panacea > no panacea
news were > news was
were laundresses > where laundresses
by offered by > offered by
might would > would
reckon," I > reckon." I

thearpox23

I'm starting to get worried about Black. Erra's silence is rarely without meaning.

letouriste

i think this is because he is staying voluntarily in the background. I'm not worried anyway, He has Ranger with him. He is probably the happiest he ever been

masterofbones

Maybe he's under the protection of uhhh.... what's their name? Something about writing I think. But they like Black.

thearpox23

Scribe left the party. Black's with Ranger, who as powerhouses go, is the best you can get on the continent.

It's just that the novel's not so simple as counting the powerlevels, and Erra is good at plot twists.

dadycool

Oh, boy. A Precipice! I can't wait for someone to toss her off a cliff and turn away, trusting the fall to kill her. Bonus points if they cut off her head again.

Komplode

If I could pop into the future, the rest of this story isn't the first thing I'd use that power for, but it's definitely up there (along with The Wondering Inn) in the heavy temptations section, I suppose that's partly why I enjoy it so much, the relief from

the agonising wait for the next chapter/book, which is momentarily satiated before it begins again.

Komplode

I wonder if the Wandering Bard isn't unaligned simply because she outlived the social constraints of her society dictating her alignment, and over the centuries as she's collected more and more stories her role has become more and more nebulous thereby freeing her actions in some ways but also constructing them in others, ie only interacting with the named

James Felling

I always saw the Wandering Bard as the one neutral in the game. Not of Light or of Darkness, just a sort of referee there to make sure the rules are followed and to prevent things getting too far out of balance. She and the Dead King are opponents because he is a rules lawyer who is breaking the balance toward one side. She does not like what Cat is doing because she is taking the eternal conflict and nullifying it. I don't think she really has a choice in the matter.

Rey d`Tutto

Autocorrect is not your friend. Or mine, or his, hers, or the rest of them. Cat ain't nullifying the game, she's altered the playing field and rulebook.
Name BS has been muzzled, not killed or exiled.

Burlyraven

I do wonder about the imagery being used in this chapter. Standing on the edge seems pretty simple, and something of a pattern with Cat's power ups, but the fact that it's a fall into an abyss is worrying.

If the dark abyss is meant to be the pool of Night, and the dreams are about Cat embracing her role as High Priestess of Night in full (and possibly making Night worship a true opposite to the house of Light), that's fine, as far as fine can extend to high villainy. On the other hand, the fall could be Cat fully letting go of her heroic tendencies (her fear of heights being a metaphor for the last of her old humanity; a concept reinforced by the fact that her Name holding off for another night is followed by a very human and empathetic moment) and fully diving into the power of Below.

I could be wildly off, but the fact that Akua was present (and in a very seductive role) is very concerning, even with the presumption that Akua is still trying something akin to a redemption arc.

Salt

I think it's a quite literal fear, rather than the fear representing something.

Really I think the biggest fear that she's learned to tolerate but not really face and overcome is the fear that there won't be a payoff at the end. The war a loss, the Accords a failure, no lasting peace, and no "better world". The Evils were always just a means to an end, and if the promised end doesn't exist, then Cat is left with nothing at all.

I think it fits, because the last time she had anything resembling a Name at all was second Liesse. Her single biggest failure that really jarred her out of the thing that, as Black mentioned in the very first chapter, makes Named a Named. "The belief, deep down, that they know what is right and that they'll see it done."

It set a fear in her that maybe what she wasn't correct, if this was the result. A stake made of a hundred thousand lives, pushed further in by almost making another MONUMENTAL mistake right afterwards – if after all that she still nearly made the mistake of allowing the Liesse-weapon to be kept around, then how much was her judgement really worth?

Honestly though, for all that the metaphor is pretty and melodramatic, I think the dreams where she always falls mean shit for all, and that's the entire point of the riddle at the start. Sure she could glean some omens or "hidden truth" from her dreams, but those gifts are all empty. It's not some vision of an unavoidable fate written in the stars, it's just her old trauma and self doubt talking.

The fear is useful though. She should let herself feel it, rather than trying to suppress it or ignore it. Embrace it, overcome it, make it hers. Once that fear really is mastered that way, and she once again has the ironclad belief that she knows what is right and has the will to see it done, the Name will follow naturally.

Frivolous

An interesting worry. I don't see that at all.

My own nerve-wracking hypothesis is that the Cliff of the title refers to the fact that heroes will always survive a fall off one.

Which is to say, Cat may receive a hero's Name, and become obliged to Above and Hanno.

I don't know what will happen if the Black Queen, representative for villains and First Under the Night, becomes a hero. Will Sve Noc reject her then? What does it mean when someone can call upon both Night and Light?

Cat's Name could be Queen of Light and Darkness.

Eleron M Pfoutz

Queen of Twilight.

WuseMajor

"It's time we had The Talk Tariq."

"Very well. When two people love each other very much, or come to a suitable price..."

[vernal.ancient](#)

"Or are just trying to unwind after a stressful hunt, or..."

Eleron M Pfoutz

"...Or have a very tense swordfight in a nearly empty arena..."

Pethrai D'arkos

...have more feelings for a goat than society thinks they should, or...

Komplode

Does anyone think that Cats next Name will be more unaligned rather than 'evil' maybe some variant of neutral, probably chaotic based on the way she messes with peoples 'stories'

JJR

She's messed with the underlying narrative structure if the world so much her new name will be UNDEFINED ERROR.

masterofbones

"My name is... 404? Dafuq does that mean?"

hakureireimu

Unaligned rather than Evil makes it hard for her to be the Villain representative, so

[Javvies](#)

"Unaligned" in the context of Names merely means a Name that can be that of a Hero or that of a Villain, depending on its

current incarnation and bearer.

That is, a Name that is not specifically and explicitly always tied to either Above or Below.

Ie, the Name of Squire is one such Name, with the Villain path typically leading to Black Knight and the Hero path typically leads to a White Knight or a Paladin variation Name.

As is Apprentice.

I suspect many, probably most, Transitional Names fall on the category of so-called "neutral" or "unaligned" Names that can vary between being empowered by Above or by Below.

Thief is reputed to be another such Name.

Ranger likely is as well.

And, honestly, as long as Cat doesn't get an explicitly Heroic Name, which I think we'd all agree is ... unlikely, and as long as she doesn't start throwing Light around or demonstrating other Above-exclusive powers, any Name Cat gets will be assumed to be empowered by Below.

Death Knight

Yeah of course it ends there fuck. I'm seriously considering to stop reading this book until it completes... Ah who am I fooling? I'm fucking addicted. See y'all on Friday.

Shveiran

Ok, Tariq. Buddy.

Here we go.

Just like we practiced.

Just don't drop the ball, ok? No pressure, you got this. You had two years to grow and come to terms with this new reality. You are not the old man thrown into the new world anymore.

You are smart. You are wise. You got Ophanim for eyes.

You got this, you GOT this, you got THIS.

Who's the local wise man? You are, that's who!

Pivotal conversation? Pfff, no big, right?

You got this.

And sure, your record took a few hits in recent years, and sure, you are not without black marks talking with this particular character, but that just means you can pull the heroic tradition of pulling out a win against terrible odds. You got this.

You got this.

Yeah.

...Just don't drop the f*****g ball, alright?

Please, I'm begging here mate. Don't drop the f*****g ball. I'm so sick of hating you people, I can't take the angst anymore, I'm so friggin' tired.

Just don't drop the f*****g ball, alright? Please?

Cos I swear, if you drop the f*****g ball... I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to yell. My bad.

Just don't drop it, ok?

Please.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I heard that sun in a woman's voice aka Disney Musical Classic style.

Please don't sell out to Disney, but if you do, demand a "Musical" Animated adaptation.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Song.

Curse my typing, and autocorrect.

Nathan Taylor

"You grow number to the losses" You may want to consider revising this to more numb, numbed, or numb. While some dialects accept number, in written language it pulls you out of the flow since you have to interpret it by context.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And where is Tariq's new student while he's hanging around the brothel? Or is MK still under confinement?

And It does seem like Cat's name is waiting for a major transition – her fall into the abyss. And specifically linked to her fear of that fall....

Seth Kevorkian

Should this be 'Cliff (Redux)'? Book 3 chapter 43 is already 'Cliff'

Cap'n Smurfy

Pretty noticable error in this chapter. Back in Book 1 chap 8 its fairly explicitly stated the Legions of Terror have about their

own number in Camp Followers with them on the March. Doesn't match with the forbidding of them here.

[Dresden 67](#)

That was in a permanent garrison outside Summerholm though if I remember correctly. Not actually an army in the field.

Cap'n Smurfy

Yes but the piece in question is Catherine recalling a passage from one of her books on standard Legion doctrine. She wasn't talking about Summerholm specifically.

mavant

I certainly didn't notice, but I admire your encyclopaedic memory.

mavant

~s/v/c/

superkeaton

I wonder what the fallout will be if Cat finds out Tariq kneecapped Masego's magic on the Bard's orders.

agesbe

But he didn't really. Bard told him to delay his actions by a few seconds, but he had no way of knowing what the repercussions of doing so would do, so he trusted his long-time ally to not lead him astray. For all he knew, acting too early would mean Masego dying as the Dead King might be killed before fully leaving Masego's body.

The fault lies with the Bard and the Dead King. Tariq is not to blame for Masego's magic loss.

Mirror Night

Not to mention it works politically because Masego would have been a real pain point if he walked from that affair with no personal fallout. Cause plenty wanted him punished for his actions and losing his Magic blunted that.

Kaedon

Just caught up after a couple weeks of reading. Mostly just posting so I can get notified of new posts

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Friday & Tuesday, currently

mavant

Sometimes, when the fall kills you, you fly.

Time1ock

Regarding Akua's eventual fate, would her aid against the Dead King help mitigate it? If the Dead King is defeated with her help, she would have helped save far more than one hundred thousand lives, including Callowans.

jamesc9

So this is: if you steal an apple from a Callowan, what do you have to do, in order to be square with his or her grandchild?

Given that Mercantis was not invaded by the Watch, it seems to be possible.

Satan

Imagine the Dead King creates a living army and plants orders in their brains so that after they join the Alliance's army they destroy it from the inside during the big battle. Maybe he just spent 2 years of undead to reinforce the idea that he will only use monsters.

Chapter 45: Progress

"- one might then wonder if a kingdom's sufferance of a tyrant for a decade is not worth the inevitable successful uprising by an usurped relative and the golden age it will usher. Given the frequent petty cruelty and mediocrity of kings, might it not be worth inducing a great tyrant so that a great ruler will follow them?"

– Extract from the controversial treatise 'Ethics of Fate' by Kalchas the Gadfly, Atalantian philosopher

The tavern had closed hours ago, as it was the middle of the night, but the Peregrine had a knack for getting into places he shouldn't and I had a Night-trick decent with locks. I snapped my fingers and a few streaks of black flame sputtered to life in hanging lanterns, revealing a dirt floor to the large room. Just like the one we'd had in the Rat's Nest. Feeling just a tad nostalgic, I limped up behind the bar – a nice large oaken piece

– and went looking through the bottles after leaning my staff against the side. Whoever ran this place kept a cudgel under the counter, I noted with approval. Good form.

I snatched up a bottle of what looked like genuine Neustrian schnaps, pulling the cork and taking a sniff. Apple, maybe? It'd do. Klaus Papenheim loved the stuff, and he'd offered it to me enough I'd acquired a taste for it. I took up one of the wooden cups and filled it, cocking an eyebrow at Tariq when he sat himself on the other side of the counter.

"What's your poison, Pilgrim?" I asked.

"I don't suppose there's a pear brandy lying around?" the old man asked. "Alavan, if possible."

I looked through the stock but there wasn't, sadly enough.

"Closest they've got is some sort of berry brandy," I told him, "and it looks Arlesite, though Gods only know from where beyond that."

"Now you have me curious, I'll admit," the Pilgrim said. "If you don't mind?"

I deftly set the cup down on the counter without turning as I took the bottle – some things never quite went, huh – and poured him a finger. I sniffed the bottle discreetly afterwards and almost gagged. It smelled like a whole bush had died in there along the promised berries. This might be the Grand Alliance's camp but I wasn't a robber queen, so I placed two golden crowns where the bottle I'd taken had stood. I cast a look at Tariq, who looked faintly embarrassed.

"I have been travelling light," he admitted.

He wasn't so crass as to actually outright request I pay for his drink, though, I noted with amusement.

"Heroes," I sighed, teasing.

I was actually out of crowns by I had a Praesi *aurelius* and a Proceran *gran*, which should more or less cover the costs. The gran was less pure, and so worth less, but some places refused imperial coinage as they believed it to be cursed. I vaguely remembered that one of the Dread Emperors *had* in fact tried to drive a chunk of Callowan nobility mad by cursing coinage a few centuries back so I couldn't even blame them.

"You're covered for the bottle," I said, and raised my cup.

He matched it with his, and the drink went down. I laughed after it went down, my throat aflame. Damn, but the Lycaonese liked it

with a kick. Orcs would actually enjoy drinking this, which was a standard rarely met.

"Business, then," I said.

"Business," Tariq agreed.

I said nothing, only cocking an eyebrow as I leaned against the counter.

"I will assume," the Grey Pilgrim said, "that your intent is not to gloat."

"I like to think I'm above such things," I lied.

"Naturally," the Peregrine seriously agreed.

A beat of silence passed.

"That said," I thinly smiled, "I fucking told you so."

He sighed, but did not disagree. That was already promising. I'd not been sure exactly what to expect, as the silence and eventual assent from the Dominion when I'd gotten the Wandering Bard to be designated as formal enemy of the Grand Alliance had only told me he'd abstained from getting involved. His actual thoughts remained unknown to me.

"It is possible that the attack on the Arsenal was meant to aid in the long term," Tariq said, then grimaced and poured himself another finger of brandy. "But that is irrelevant. She has forced us to take her as an enemy through her actions, regardless of whatever intent might lie behind them."

"There's precious few acts you can't justify by saying they'll help down the line," I flatly replied. "That does tend to be the convenient thing about using the future for proof."

"Peace, Black Queen. I am not attempting to justify the Wandering Bard's offences against us," Tariq tiredly said. "Merely struggling to reconcile the woman I have known for a very long time with the one who is now my foe."

Much as I hated it'd taken him this long to get here, it was starting to look he actually was there so I swallowed the many barbs still on the tip of my tongue. Rubbing salt in the wound would get me nothing save a fleeting moment of satisfaction.

"Then we're in agreement that she's kill-on-sight," I said. "And that an order ensuring as much comes down on both your side and mine."

"You are unlikely to actually kill her, using such means," Tariq said. "But I do not disagree with the principle: her power comes

from access to and influence over Bestowed, stripping her from these strengths is sensible."

"Sensible," I slowly repeated. "Yes, I believe so. Another sensible thing would be, for example, how you came to be so certain she won't die. I know why I think that, Peregrine, but you've been less than forthcoming about your ties with her."

"Should I complain to my representative under the Terms and being so clandestinely approached?" the Pilgrim drily said.

I filled my glass, conspicuously.

"This is just two old friends having a drink and a chat, Tariq," I toothily smiled. "Not an interrogation. Skirt around the letter of the law, me? Perish the thought."

He cocked a brow.

"Perish is the right word," the old man said. "How does the Red Axe fare, these days?"

"I believe they went with decapitation," I said. "'twas a little late to boil her alive, admittedly, and a brisk hanging would have been good fun but little else."

I suspected that Hasenbach had been amused, in that discreet way of hers, that from now when the execution by sword of the Red Axe was spoken of there would be a great deal of trouble over the nomenclature. Mind you, that it would add a dash of confusion to any rumours about the execution in the Arsenal was a more likely culprit for why she might have arranged that.

"You lost trust when you arranged that," Tariq said. "Some with our Bestowed, more with the man who leads them."

"Tell me something I don't know," I replied, almost rolling my eyes. "You disapprove, I take it?"

He sighed.

"No," the Grey Pilgrim finally said. "It helped stave off the collapse of Procer at otherwise minor costs. I only wish it had not forced a distancing between yourself and young Hanno, though perhaps it is for the best."

I drank of my cup, silently inviting him to elaborate.

"The cordiality of the relationship between you two has much been commented on," he said.

"If this is going to turn into another polite request I don't sleep with him, I'm going to get miffed at having to repeat I'm not interested," I warned him.

"I believe you," Tariq replied, sounding like he meant it. "But friendship is already seen as dangerous enough. You represent interests, the both of you, and those interests are often at odds. Friendship complicates that."

I waved him down.

"Bullshit," I frankly said. "If anything liking him made dealing with him significantly easier. But it's no longer an issue anyway. Let those fears be buried, and instead of dealing with fish market gossip we can perhaps deal with the endless undead armies trying to kill us all."

"I have yet to witness any power in this world or the next that quell gossip," Tariq amusedly said, "but your point is taken."

"Good," I said. "I believe we were talking about the Bard?"

The Grey Pilgrim conceded with a nod.

"We first met in the Free Cities, when I intervened in a spot of trouble within the Helikean royal family," he said. "I took her for a simple Bard, that first time, but recognizing her under a different face a few years later put paid to that notion."

Yeah, that'd do it. I still wasn't sure what his reading aspect exactly was, but it was frighteningly sharp even when the Ophanim weren't actively whispering secrets into his ear.

"And you knew she wasn't strictly one of Above's," I pointed out. "You weren't surprised when I told you I'd seen her work on Below's behalf."

Blue eyes sad, he nodded.

"That much became beyond dispute when she disrupted my pursuit of a villain in Lange within a decade of our first meeting," Tariq said, "forcing me to retreat from the Principality entirely and so lose the trail."

I whistled.

"And you didn't, you know," I delicately said, slicing a finger across my throat, "try to Mercy her afterwards, so to speak."

I glanced atop the hero's sparse crown of white hair apologetically.

"No offence meant, fellows," I added.

I didn't get smote, so I decided to ascribe a passable sense of humor to the Choir of Mercy. The things you learned, huh?

"None was taken," the Pilgrim informed me. "Though after your... colourful conversations with Contrition and Endurance, that could be seen as favoritism."

I winked above his head.

"Don't spread it around," I loudly whispered.

Long-suffering, he sipped at his drink and sighed.

"I did, in fact, try to kill her," Tariq said. "It did not take, evidently, and the misgivings of my patrons in pursuing her demise gave me pause. As did the eventual realization that the young villain she'd helped escape me had within the year died fighting another villainess, in the process exposing her schemes in Penthes."

Ah, I thought. There it was, the first of the missing pieces. Tariq trusted the Ophanim, and we'd already established that the Intercessor could affect angels.

"You thought she was another like you," I realized. "Only subtler and older."

"It was my belief that she was not a willing servant to Below, and so that she ensured all the victories arranged in their name would lead to starker defeats down the line," the Pilgrim admitted. "I suspected her forced service to be a consequence of the nature of her Bestowal, a storyteller's duty to attend to the foe as well as the hero."

"She's not like us, Pilgrim," I said. "Named, sure, but I get the feeling there's a lot less between her and the Gods than there is for the rest of us."

"The sufferings she attended to are on a scale we can hardly imagine," Tariq softly agreed. "And so I did not judge, Catherine, to borrow another man's words. Even with the wisdom of the Ophanim close to me, I cannot begin to understand the crushing burden of her purpose. Weighing the suffering of a century knowing it might spare another, patching and bleeding nations to prevent greater horrors – a millennia of ugly choices, one after another."

He looked grieved.

"And still she did good whenever she could, I have seen this," the Pilgrim said. "It was she who led me to heal Laurence after her duel with the Ranger, did you know?"

I blinked.

"I had no idea," I said.

I'd known about the duel between a younger Saint of Swords and Ranger, since Indrani had told me what she knew, but I'd never known the Pilgrim to be involved.

"I trusted her," Tariq admitted, "to see a path out of the dark even when I did not."

I'd never really had that kind of trust in me, but then I supposed there was a reason I'd become a villain and not a heroine.

"I still believe she seeks a better future for Calernia," the Grey Pilgrim admitted. "But that is not enough. I have seen the world we would make, through the Alliance and the Accords, and I am willing to fight for it. If she seeks to darken that path, then she is my enemy regardless of her intent."

Not exactly the ringing endorsement of killing the Intercessor first change we got I'd kind of been hoping for, but life was all about tempering your expectations. I'd settle for a grief-stricken fight between past comrades if that was all he had it in him to summon up.

"More will be asked of you," I bluntly said. "I know there are dangers, but by the White Knight's sentencing you've gained a pupil in Christophe de Pavanie."

"I am aware," Tariq frowned.

"What you're not aware of is how he's tied to that mess in Cleves," I said. "You know, the House of Langevin being made to eat crow."

"He's the reason Prince Gaspard abdicated in favour of his son?" the Pilgrim asked, sounding surprised.

Hasenbach had wasted no time spending the political capital she'd gained through the trial, though at least she'd been subtle about it. Gaspard Langevin had, officially, taken a bad wound and passed the burden of leadership to his younger and more vital son. It'd been an unpopular move in Cleves, where the man was respected, but Hasenbach had privately marshaled the Highest Assembly using his ties to the Mirror Knight as an anchor around his neck instead of the trump card Gaspard had likely seen them as. The army under General Rumena then leaving regardless of protests had made it very clear to him that he'd made more enemies than his house could afford, driving the final nail in the coffin.

"Not exactly," I said. "But he was involved."

I elaborated quickly, laying out the concerns Sve Noc had brought to me along with the plot and the difficulties the situation had

represented for the First Prince: stark consequences to acting, worse if she did not.

"I'm assuming Hanno will speak to you as well when he arrives with the Mirror Knight," I said. "But I wanted you to know the nature of what's being dropped on your lap. He needs to be straightened up before he blunders into another mess like this, Pilgrim."

I grimaced.

"He's still the best match we have with the Severance," I reluctantly admitted. "And I'd be a lot more comfortable trusting him with that power if you were able to first look me in the eye and promise he wasn't going to shit the bed with it."

If anyone could do it, mind you, it was the Peregrine. As far as heroes were concerned, he was *the* mentor. To Tariq's honour, he did not balk or try to pass the responsibility to another.

"How long would I have with him?" the Pilgrim asked.

"If things go well, we want to try Keter next summer," I said. "I know it's not long, but..."

"I will do all I can," Tariq simply promised.

"Hells," I grimly said, "that's all I can ask, isn't it?"

And on that we toasted, cups rising in accord and going down with the same.

—

It was probably a good thing that our attendants were far enough behind they couldn't hear us speak as watched over the entrance of the reinforcements into the stronghold with threadbare ceremony.

"I don't know what my niece has been bribing the Levantines with, but I hope we have more in stock," Prince Klaus Papenheim appreciatively said.

The older man was eyeing the rows of heavy Alavan foot with an almost hungry look. I snorted at the sight. I'd found it difficult not to like the grizzled Prince of Hannover from the start, even knowing he'd almost been one of the leading generals in the invasion of Callow. He was from a mould I was familiar with, that I'd spent most my life around: an old soldier, a veteran who'd spent almost as much time on the saddle as reigning in his capital. My reputation with Lycaonese tended to be decent, for a servant of wicked power, but I'd not expected the old prince to take to me as well.

"Having infantry envy, are we?" I mused. "That ought to be a familiar feeling by now."

More a tease than a truth. An open ground exercises my army tended to trounce his own, but the moment the terrain got difficult the balance tended to swing harshly the other way. It'd been about as I expected, given the difficulty of using classic Legion tactics in the mountains when they'd been designed to win wars on the plains of Callow. On those plains, though, Black's war machine still reigned queen despite the best efforts of the opposition. The Lycaonese were good, but they hadn't mastered the tactics of the Reform yet.

They'd find it difficult to catch up there, since their lack of mage was even worse than my own. Unfortunately for them, they wouldn't have the workaround of having stolen a Legion or two as I'd done when founding the Army of Callow.

"Talk to me when your lot use a goat path without waking up all of Ashur," the one-armed prince scathingly replied.

The obligatory trading of insults having been seen to, I took a better look at the six thousand troops Lord Yannu Marave had sent our way. Most of them Alavan, by the colours on the shields and faces, but I was hardly complaining about that: the Champion's Blood coughed up to arm its heavies in good mail and plate, and they fought ferociously with their swords and shields. Two thousand of the Levantines were lesser captains sworn to the Holy Seljun instead of Alava, though the pattern for why they'd been chosen was neither the size of their warband nor their origins. Instead they were all, in majority, made up of slingers. Less a boon than the heavies, these, but still very much a boon.

The Dominion's armies were inferior to those of Procer and Callow in several regards, but they were also the only standing force that still fielded slingers – whose thrown stones had proved to have a great deal of bite against the undead than arrows.

"That was the last major force we were waiting on," I said. "The White Knight will arrive with Named and the latest from the Arsenal in a few days, which has us almost ready to begin the push."

"Weren't you waiting on some sort of Levantine bounty hunter?" the older man asked. "I was warned she might be trouble by the Silver Huntress."

"The Headhunter's a prick," I conceded. "But they're a prick with the finest tracking chops in the Grand Alliance. Archer went to fetch them, and they should both be here by dawn."

The Prince of Hannover cocked a brow.

"They?" he asked.

"Fluid," I explained.

He grunted in understanding.

"I want to split the Dominion forces between the armies when we move out," Prince Klaus said, "You know their discipline holds better when they're kept apart."

"I also know it'll be a cold day in Ater before you get Tanja and Aquiline to split," I snorted.

"They listen to you," the older man said.

"When it suits them," I shrugged.

"Then take them both with you," the Prince of Hannover said. "And leave me the Alavans."

"Fat chance," I replied. "I'd get both a guaranteed headache and fuck all slingers, Papenheim. Aren't your people supposed to be all about giving people a fair shake?"

"And yours are supposed to spend their days trampling Praesi out in Streges, but it's a strange new world," he grunted back. "I'll take the larger slice of fantassins and give you with Princess Beatrice if you agree."

Now *that* was a tempting offer. My officers just didn't have the knack for dealing with Proceran mercenaries without it going badly – falsifying a report in the Army got you caned and demoted, when it was considered common practice among those fantassin companies who even bothered with reports. Some poor Arlesite bastard had even tried to bribe an orc lieutenant, which got him his throat ripped out and ten more people hanged in the aftermath of the vicious brawl that ensued.

"Gods, you must really hate dealing with the Blood," I said.

"That leaves you who to run the Alamans, Prince Arsene? The man's got all the boldness of a wet towel and I've never seen him send out his soldiers when he could pass the fight to others."

Never to the extent that it was insubordination or harmful to the war effort, but the Prince of Bayeux was very clearly trying to make sure his forces suffered as few casualties as possible even if that meant other forces would suffer instead.

"I'll have Mathilda breathing on his neck and fill his days with petty mercenary squabbles, it'll keep him too twitchy to be a load," the Prince of Hannover said. "I can't do either those things with your lordlings."

I hummed pensively, the two of us watching the brightly painted ranks of Dominion soldiers streaming in. I'd theoretically be leading the Second and Third Army on my prong of the offensive along with the lion's share of the Firstborn, so in truth I wasn't badly in need of more heavy foot. If I got the army of Hainaut I'd get what I considered to be the cream of the Alamans forces in the region as well as their finest cavalry captain, which gave me a solid force to work with.

"If I were selected to lead one of the offensives," I said. "That might be a tempting offer."

The older man spat to the side.

"You'll get one prong and me the other," Prince Klaus said. "It's a done deal, and I won't hear it otherwise. The lordlings are still too green and the only other one I'd trust with a large force is Volignac."

Prince Beatrice Volignac wouldn't be getting a command that size, though. Not only was most of her principality already occupied by the dead, the appointment of two Proceran commanders would go over... poorly with the coalition forces in Hainaut.

"You didn't agree outright," he said. "So out with it. What more do you want in the stew?"

"I want first pick of the fantassin companies," I said. "If my flanks are held by Levantines, I can't afford runners in the mercenaries."

"You're a cold one, Foundling," the grey-haired man said. "Sticking me with both the company dross and the Brabant conscripts?"

"I'll cede General Rumena in return," I offered. "It'll keep your sigils in good order."

Unlike the Prince of Hannover, I could handle the Firstborn just fine on my own. Mighty Jindrich could hold field command and I'd handle the rest. Offering General Rumena was not a small concession to make, given its known power and its standing as the finest commander among the drow, and I could see the older man was tempted.

"Agreed," Prince Klaus said, and spat into his palm.

I did the same and clasped his hand.

"May the Heavens strike a liar," the Prince of Hannover said.

"Crows take the oathbreaker," I replied, and we shook on it.

I could feel he was just as eager as me to get started on his planning, but to our common frustration there'd be no going anywhere. The Levantines had yet to finish coming into the stronghold, and it'd be poor politics to slight them by leaving early.

Gods if it wasn't boring as all Hells, though.

—

"Glaring won't add lines to the report," Hakram said. "Though I praise the quality of the effort."

I sighed and dropped back into my chair, blowing at an errant strand of hair that'd slipped out of my loose ponytail and gotten into my face. Sinfully comfortable as the seat liberated from Arcadia was, it did not improve my mood.

"It's ridiculous that we still have so little reliable information on the fantassins," I complained. "I know we're thin on Jacks, up here, but this isn't even bare bones. It's bare *bone*, maybe, and even then I'd argue it's not a full one."

I'd sent for all we had on the fantassin companies of the Hainaut front after returning to my tent – which I still used for work, if not always to sleep in – and even as the parchments flooded in my despair at what little we actually knew increased. Half of this was rumours – many reported by our soldiers, sure, but that didn't magically make them more than rumours – while the solid information was... sparse. Company names, captains and numbers. A few records, including who had gotten commendations for bravery, and a few bits about which companies were known to hate each other or to have bad blood with the Army of Callow. The three largest of the companies had a little more on them, a bit about the leading officers and their reputations, but I had to admit this was largely a pile of nothing.

"I fucked myself negotiating with Papenheim," I noted. "I might have first pick of companies, but I can't even be sure what companies I should pick."

"Neither would the Iron Prince, dearest," Akua said.

Where Hakram had claimed a corner of the tent with several smaller tables set around his wooden wheelchair – though it was not all wood, and Masego had laid so many enchantments on the thing that wards sometimes confused it for a mage – Akua had instead claimed a seat around the table Indrani was still carving for me, and was lounging on it with a cup of wine in hand.

"Useless consolation," I replied in an irritated tone. "My favourite, how did you know?"

"I shall endeavour keep this revelation in mind, my heart," Akua silkily replied, "though it has nothing to do with the point I was making."

"Ah," Hakram exclaimed. "Beatrice Volignac. Clever."

I frowned. What did the Princess of Hainaut have to do with – *oh*. Shit, I hated it when Akua was right just after I'd gotten snippy with her. The Lycaonese weren't that much better at dealing with Alamans than my own officers, so the Iron Prince usually delegated that sort of thing to his most trusted among the Alamans royals, the Princess of Hainaut. The Prince of Hannover wouldn't be able to pick the companies any better than I, but Beatrice Volignac very likely could. She'd be assigned to my part of the offensive, too, so she'd have motivation not to be half-hearted about this.

"Set up a meeting with her, Adjutant," I said. "It's the kind of thing that needs to be asked in person. Tomorrow morning – wait, no, early afternoon."

It'd break one of those unspoken Alamans rules to ask her to do me that favour before she was officially folded under my command by our morning war council, even if the matter was effectively already settled.

"I'll see to it," Hakram said, his long and skeletal fingers jotting notes down on parchment. "You still need to decide where you'll be addressing the villains, Catherine. The earlier we settle that the better."

I grimaced. I'd wanted to wait until the White Knight was here to hold that, to ward off the perception that we might be plotting, but now that the last two of my lot were arriving with dawn the Named I represented under the Terms were due a proper council. Some were getting restless, too, so I was wary of delaying further. So far I'd put them off by saying all was best addressed after the war council settled broader affairs, but that excuse would be expiring tomorrow morning as well. That meant I'd be meeting with the villains assembled in Hainaut before sundown, like it or not.

"I would suggest far from anything expensive," Adjutant dryly suggested, a peek of fangs revealing his amusement.

His face hadn't changed much, I thought. So when he was seated, when the fold of his clothes hid the missing arm and leg and meat, it was almost possible to forget. Almost.

"Outside would be best," I agreed. "Though I don't want eavesdropping, which limits our options. There's not a lot of places here warded up right for that."

Most of them were war rooms, personal quarters or other places of import. None of which I particularly wanted to shove a bunch of rowdy villains into.

"Make a request to borrow wardstones from the Gigantes," Hakram suggested. "This is Terms business, not personal, so you would be within your rights."

"There any left so spare?" I asked. "I know we restricted who can make requests, but they still go fast."

"I'll know within the hour," Adjutant promised. "If it is feasible?"

"Then do it," I ordered.

Which handled the privacy issues nicely. Leaving actual location as the last hurdle.

"In the country will have to do," I finally said. "I'd rather not do this in the stronghold proper, if I have a choice."

Obviously we wouldn't be doing this on the Dead King's side of the trenches, so it'd have to be south.

"Akua?" I asked. "You've flown over the region often enough."

"There's a large hill with a fire pit perhaps an hour away from Neustal," she noted. "Formerly used by shepherds, I believe. No other larger significance."

Mhm. Using somewhere with a little more weight to it would please those who liked to feel important – the Rapacious Troubadour and the Summoner came to mind – but I didn't necessarily want to encourage the perception that this was a council momentous in any way. It was a relatively large assembly of Named, but it should be nothing more than that.

"It'll do," I said, then sighed. "All right, what's next?"

The night was still young, and so there was still work to be done.

[Javvies](#)

That seems ... slim to base such trust in Bard on, Tariq.

And you're going to have a tough job in pulling Mirror Knight's head out out his ass. And that assumes he's doesn't go all

stubborn and resistant to being taught by and actually learning from you.

And preparations for the offensive. Only two lines of advance? Hmm. On the one hand, that's easier to defend against, but on the other, they can only afford to split their forces too much.

Hmm. On the one hand, Rumena not being with Cat means that we'll see less of them. On the other hand, that means we'll get to see Rumena in an Interlude, possibly even having a Rumena PoV Interlude.

Hmm. I'm conflicted.

[Adrian V](#)

To be fair MK has suffered so many slaps in the face that maybe he is starting to change, if only from the concussion at least

[Javvies](#)

Oh, come on.

Concussions don't make anybody smarter.

Through, I will admit the concept of beating the stupid out of Mirror Knight is one that provides entertaining mental images.

[TeK](#)

Selective brain damage has been known to treat certain mental disorders. Not that I advocate for lobotomy.

Raved Thrad

To quote from Hellraiser II: "The Doctor is in. I recommend amputation." 😊

caoimhinh

True, but spansks *do* make people more disciplined.

Christophe doesn't need to be smarter, he simply needs to stop misbehaving.

Shveiran

They work on children, to some extent, not on adolescents.

The receiver needs to see the punishment as the ire of someone greater (aka, a child's parent in the early years) whose displeasure is not just feared, it is considered a wrongness in the world.

I doubt Cristophe sees anyone's displeasure as an unbearable thing, or we'd not have come to this point.

Cicero

Except maybe the Grey Pilgrim still has that level of weight.

Your wise old grandfather, who always had a kind word and support for you, now is terribly disappointed in your recent choices.

And, let's not forget that the Mirror Knight has figured out that he screwed up pretty bad in how he dealt with the White Knight.

[Javvies](#)

Nope.

I'm pretty sure Mirror Knight is one of the ones who believes that Grey Pilgrim has been critically compromised by Cat, what with her "resurrecting" him, among other factors.

And then there's the fact that Grey Pilgrim is a Levantine, and thus automatically inferior to a Proceran like Mirror Knight, or so Mirror Knight thinks.

Remember, Mirror Knight is the asshole who was trying to justify Proceran atrocities committed against the Dominion to Levantine Heroes.

Also, we don't know how deeply Bard sunk her hooks into Mirror Knight, how far she got inside his mind. Other than "too far", of course.

Plus, I'm willing to bet his "girlfriend" was pushing pro-Proceran, anti-non-Proceran propaganda bullshit into his head too. That's not going to help any either.

I don't think there are any Heroes that Mirror Knight views as a proper/true superior, far less one that could count as a genuine Mentor figure.

Salt

The mirror knight was already proven to be more willing to admit and fix his mistakes than the vast vast majority of characters in the story, so him starting out with prejudiced beliefs is hardly a sign of being irredeemable.

In the span of a single day, he

- walked into the arsenal believing Catherine was plotting something terrible
- re-evaluated into believing someone was trying to set him and Catherine against each other, at the miscellaneous stacks
- apologized to Catherine for being wrong about her involvement in the plots at the Arsenal, before asking for her cooperation in uncovering the *real* traitors

His POV showed him recognizing and crucifying himself for every mistake he made during the arsenal attack as well

Zero idea where you're getting the idea that the Mirror Knight won't be willing to learn from the Pilgrim either. He actively cursed at himself for not having the magister's tact in speech and recognized/ was jealous of Hakram's social skills.

Considering we have hard proof that he's open minded enough to recognize superior personal qualities even in one of the most notorious Villains on the surface of the continent (who is also a literal man-eating orc), it's rather difficult to argue that he won't be equally or more open-minded about learning from arguably the most venerated Hero currently alive.

Especially since said Heroic mentor has made a decades-long career out of guiding troubled headstrong youths.

Shveiran

First off, he didn't say he would be unwilling to learn. He said that he likely doesn't see the Pilgrim as a superior.
And I concur.

Second, you say "the mirror knight was already proven to be more willing to admit and fix his mistakes than the vast vast majority of characters in the story"; but while he chastises himself a lot in his own mind, he never acts to FIX his mistakes or perceived flaws.

He still walks out on Catherine, he still draws on the White Knight, he still keeps the Severance. He has never, ever used these epiphanies to grow as a human being.

He chastises himself, then takes a new, rushed decision that causes more pain.

He says he realizes he knows shit, but that never seems to move him to listen to anyone else, or to stop him from acting without considering the ramifications of his actions.

The only growth the Mirror Knight has ever experienced is one in power.

Salt

Bruh, the Arsenal arc was like, one event that didn't even last a few weeks in total.

As far as before the Arsenal arc goes, he spent the large majority of the time prior to it being tossed at endless waves of undead. No shit he hasn't changed much before the Arsenal.

Are you really telling me some kid not changing his stripes with almost zero supervision, over a timeline that's a small fraction as long as it physically took the chapters to come out, proves he's some kind of irredeemable menace? That's goes so far beyond any realistic standard that it's not even in the same plane of existence anymore.

Tariq himself took ages longer to change his behavior than the length of the Arsenal arc. Cat got her more-power-doesnt-solve-anything lesson over several YEARS.

The Mirror Knight, of all people, is supposed to improve faster than Tariq and the Catherine? My dude, you out of yo mind

[Javvies](#)

Except for that two year timeskip.

Where, if things went more or less as they did in the Interludes where we saw Mirror Knight ... he spent the entire damned time offending his nominal allies with his attitudes and statements. And only realizing he offended them after he did so spectacularly.

Actually, given the two year timeskip, he ought to have learned at least a little about how to do better, so the relatively "current" Interludes are after two years of "recognizing the problem" and "improvement". I am not impressed.

Plus, Mirror Knight was one of the Heroes that went into Callow ... so he already had time with

Grey Pilgrim and other Heroes that he could offend. Although, it's possible that after the first time Saint of Swords just told him to shut up, instead of turning it into a teachable moment.

Also, it could just be me, but I'm going to say that trying to justify atrocities, and excuse them as the right, proper, and Good thing to do, to the people they were committed against is basically never going to go over well.
Mirror Knight still hasn't figured that one out.

It's not like the Witch of the Woods just randomly decided to use Mirror Knight as a projectile weapon one day on a whim.
He straight up earned that kind of treatment with hard work and effort.

Mirror Knight is, philosophically speaking, a hardline Proceran Supremacist.

Jago

"And, let's not forget that the Mirror Knight has figured out that he screwed up pretty bad in how he dealt with the White Knight." And how much he craves that power, instead of being an indestructible battering ram. He craves Severance as it is the kind of power he lacks.

Jago

"And, let's not forget that the Mirror Knight has figured out that he screwed up pretty bad in how he dealt with the White Knight." I would bet that he will blame that on the White Knight for "not doing what was the right thing". Someone want to take the bet?

RoflCat

Isn't the whole respect your superior the core of Proceran (or Alamans? Whatever MK is from)? Like how Callow have their long price thing and Praes forever backstabby.

Christophe's issue was that at best he is a Big Guy who would follow order and smash into whatever need smashing, but his reputation/charisma create a followings that push him into being a Leader, something he's absolutely horrid at doing and fumbled so much it's become a trauma of sort.
Oh and the Black/White world view instead of seeing the grey that is reality.

And nobody was around who could slap him into line. White wasn't going to do it because 'I do not judge' and MK doesn't feel like White is his superior after losing Judgement

MK doesn't trust Black Queen because Villain, even though her lessons are very much the thing he needed. the Proceran prince wanted to use him as a tool to cheat the Drow of their land other heroes like Antoine looked up to him with idol worship which push pressure on him to act like a Leader more.

Basically Tariq should be the first mentor figure that MK wholeheartedly accept as his superior. ('should', because we don't know how much MK still linger on the whole Tariq got revived by Catherine thing)

Javvies

Except Grey Pilgrim isn't a Proceran, he's a Levantine, and thus automatically inferior to a Proceran like Mirror Knight. Or so Mirror Knight's mindset goes.

And I'm pretty sure Mirror Knight is one of the ones that believes Greedy Pilgrim has been critically compromised by Cat.

Remember, Mirror Knight is the asshole who was trying to justify Proceran atrocities committed against the Dominion (and others) to Levantine (and other) Heroes.

Liliet

You see that as a personal failing. I disagree. It's a spiral: wherever his more gross views come up, people they concern start avoiding him. So he gets ever more isolated in the company of people who believe in that shit and reinforce it.

There is a reason education is a significant part of modern activism. A person who's never exposed to alternative views will not spontaneously develop them within two years while still in their old environment.

And most of Christophe's problem is that he was surrounded by people whose views his very existence as a hero he's reinforcing, and pretty much completely isolated from other heroes socially.

It takes a specific effort to reach out from someone deeming it worth it, be it because of seeing something in him and wanting him as a friend, because

of a personal mission of education, or because of being his superior and needing to fix this shit for pragmatic reasons.

It's kind of like being in a cult. Not easy to leave.

Jago

Pro-change:

"I have skewed up, crippling one of the heroes of the coalition."

"Hakram is smart and charismatic."

"Apologized to Catherine" But then was totally unwilling to put down Severance at her and White request, even if it was their right to ask for that.

Against-change:

"He had to renounce to Severance."

"There were already traces of him blaming the "need" to wound White on him."

"His girlfriend's father had to abdicate."

"Wandering Bard and Tales: the Hero tats fall for want of a greater power." Never discount the WB.

Miles

Maybe the bard's displeasure. Or his fling's. I could see him being extremely weak to the sound of whimpers.

'Ladi Williams

Bah. Shock therapy used to be an effective and sworn by treatment for behavioral conditioning.

I'm sure it would work wonders on him. Come to think about it. His plate would transmit electricity wonderfully.

Salt

You'd probably need enough lightning to turn a small city into ash, to use it as corporal punishment against the mirror knight. The kid is a walking fortress that gets catapulted into armies as a form of transportation

Most likely the Mirror Knight will feel a mild tingle, while some poor cabal of mages loses a lot of confidence in their lightning spells

Clmineith

I'm not sure it's the lack of 'smart' the problem. MK is doing OK for his INT score, it's WIS that he's lacking. And possibly CHA.

Shveiran

People keep saying that.

I have no idea how "the guy never bothers to consider consequence or how logic a theory is before donning is tin-foil hat" translates into "the guy is smart enough".

I mean, I don't want to attack anyone here, but I'm very curious how you'd define "smart" if those are not black marks against him.

Clmineith

It's a good question. I admit, it doesn't seem logical, but it's RPG logic.

INT / intelligence is how he will solve a problem, or how well he will plan to make happen whatever aim he has.

WIS / wisdom is what make him choose that aim in the first place, considering consequences, and so on.

MK has very low WIS (as you said, fail to consider consequence, tin-foil hat, etc) but average INT. Not great, mean you, but not especially low. Or: once he's decide to do that tin-foil hat thing, he actually has not such bad strategy about it.

Of course, it's RPG logic, real life is different... but PGTE works on RPG tropes, so...

[Javvies](#)

Yeah ... except that if Int is problem solving ability ... I refer you to his plan to replace Hanno as the Heroic Representative by killing him, and also his plan to kill the Grand Alliance leadership if they didn't agree with him (or, rather, as he put it, not needing to kill the Grand Alliance leadership who agreed with him). Also, his plan to force the Villains to replace Cat as the Villain Rep with the former Hero (and currently not Named) Vivienne.

I'm finding it difficult to interpret any of that as quality problem solving.

No.

Mirror Knight used all his mental stats as dump stats. And he dumped them hard.

Pethrai D'arkos

Another way to think of it is that Int is your ability to come up with a plan (solidly average).

Wis is your ability to tell a good plan from a bad plan (a bit worse than sub par).
Cha is your ability to sell your companions on following through with a bad plan despite their better judgement (above average, not at Cat levels but who is).

Clmineith

I disagree.

His purpose is to replace Hanno: Low WIS tells him he can do that by killing him. Average INT tells him how to kill Hanno.

I'm not saying he has a GOOD INT. I'm saying it's not a dump stat. Or at least, it only became a dump stat after he got it average.

I'll place y about 18/22 to physical stats (and increasing with time), 2/3 to WIS (NOT increasing) and CHA, and INT at 9/10 (not increasing either). (And high LUK, because Hero).

Again, not great. Certainly, 90 percent Chosen have at least a couple more INT points than he does (from, say, Archer 15 to Masego 25). But he's not the village idiot.

Remember, having both very low INT and very low WIS make for a person barely articulate. Like, a troll or something.

MK is not THAT bad.

Mirror Night

I would say he has high STR and CON...Decent CHA and DEX...Average INT and Dumb Stat WIS

caoimhinh

No one is saying he is a genius or an intellectual, I think we can all agree that he has been shown that he is an average guy in that area.

Sure, he has made mistakes, but his mistakes are not fruit of stupidity, but rather immaturity.

Christophe is a stubborn guy with a fragile ego who is constantly pained by his social awkwardness and sought validation and authority by having strength.

It is not his IQ that is the source of the issue, but his EQ.

The issue has never been about Christophe's intelligence.

He doesn't need to be smarter, he needs to stop misbehaving.

[TeK](#)

I dunno bro, he did bot place his trust in Bard per se, he placed it in Ophanim. That is quite a difference.

KageLupus

I think that Tariq's point was that was the first time he noticed the Wandering Bard playing the long game, and it all turning out as a net Good in the end. I guarantee that the same pattern played out multiple times during the time he knew her, each one reinforcing the idea that when she looks like she is helping the bad guys, it is just to screw them over worse later.

Between that and the angels in his head whispering not to kill her, it doesn't seem too farfetched for Tariq to develop a deepening sense of trust towards the Wandering Bard over the many years he was a Hero.

Salt

Ironically, the Pilgrim likely saw the Bard in a positive light for the exact same reasons that he currently sees Catherine in a positive light. He has a tendency to approve of people who are willing to commit lesser evils for the sake of greater goods that way.

He even attempted to kill the Bard initially, before later admitting that her lesser evils appeared to have a greater good purpose, exactly like his relationship with Cat.

Rather difficult to call him an idiot for trusting the Bard back then, without also calling him an idiot for trusting Catherine now.

Charlie Hegarty

I mean /I would/ him call him an idiot for trusting Catherine frankly.

Salt

Somewhere out there, the Saint of Swords is smiling on you
Points for consistency, at the least

Jago

"That seems ... slim to base such trust in Bard on, Tariq." The apparent trust or respect of his Choir seems a big basis for trust, from the point of view of the Pilgrim.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

"It was a relatively large assembly of Named, but it should be nothing more than that."

Oh Cat, you should know better than that.

WuseMajor

Yeah, and then thinking that too. Especially after talking about the Bard within the last week.

I mean, are you trying to turn this into a Thing?

[TeK](#)

I mean, what can *possibly* go wrong?

Sun Dog

Nothing. Nothing can go wrong. Soon she will be invincible.

caoimhinh

It would be nice if that meeting came in 2 Interludes like the one with the Heroes. I really like when Catherine is seen from other people's POV, they always say how amazing, cunning, and terrifying she is.

Like that time in the Arcadian Campaign when Cat was always struggling to handle the officers from Praes and the Duchess of Daoine, then when we got chapters from Kegan and Ranker's POV they were both scared of her and were *absolutely sure* that she had expertly manipulated them all during their meetings.

Shveiran

I know right? I can't get enough of those. They are an amazing ride.

[Burlyraven](#)

So should we start throwing names down for what that hill is going to be referred to after this meeting or wait to see what sort of meeting it turns into, Cat's intentions aside?

I'm liking the ring of "the Dark Summit".

dadycool

"Gathering of the Ravenous Shepherds"? "Circling of the Wolves"?

AbraKadabra

Parliament of rogues? 😊

I stole that one from world domination in retrospect.

caoimhinh

That name sounds pretty cool, but when I read that I imagine something like a gathering of the top brass of the Thieves' Guild or a meeting of several Pirate Captains.

[Adrian V](#)

I just want them to devolve into mad laughter and scare everyone else shitless xD

"Hill of doom", "Damned Hill", or something with madness

caoimhinh

"It is said that the Black Queen gathered over a dozen Damned for covenant on that hill, and used the sorceries of the Gigantes to ward off all prying in the vicinity. What was spoken in those dark hours is still unknown, but the eerie stillness never left that location ever since. Even birds and wolves are afraid to chirps or howl near it. Hence it is now called, the Silent Hill."

Aotrs Commander

insert that Doctor Evil and cohorts laughing scene from Austin Powers

Salt

"Gods below and everburning, it was just a routine meeting on a random hill in the middle of nowhere. Indrani, if you keep feeding the historians this bullshit I swear to crows I will have you han-"

– The Black Queen, covering up the events of the first Council of Deepest Terror (widely believed to have been held on the Dark Summit, year 13 B.A)

Insanenoodlyguy

"The fact that every single one of the fires that day started in the time period of the first Council of Deepest Terror, where each and every Villain is verified as being on the Dark Summit and thus nowhere near the fires, is not a collective alibi. Rather, it was the Black Queen's bold challenge to

friend and foe alike: "You all know I did this but none of you can figure out how. This is why I lead."

Elvera Tanja, the Passionate Accuser, defending her 2nd year history essay at Cardinal University, "Unconstestable Dominance: The Black Queen's inscrutable power-plays forming the Council."

[sengachi](#)

"After all, they were goblin fire."

Pethrai D'arkos

I figure the meeting will go down as something like "Convocation of Hollow Souls."

[sivarajan](#)

The Dark Summit on the Dark Summit?

[Burlyraven](#)

Indeed. It has such a nice ring to it.

caoimhinh

How about the Damned Summit? The Summit of Damnation? The Council of Damned?

beleester

It's a recurring meeting (although this is the first one we've seen), so it's not going to get a title unless something really terrible happens. It's just Meeting #37 of the Official Council of Villains.

That said, I'm sure the villains would give it a super-chuuni name like "The Dark Summit" anyway, just for fun.

caoimhinh

It is the first happening before such an important offensive, no?

And maybe she does these meetings with smaller numbers of Named gathered, since the Grand Alliance tends to send them in different assignments and different fronts.

Of course, this could also just be "Session #13 of the Dark Council" or they may even call each large meeting that Catherine has with Villains a new particular Chuuni Name, partly just to annoy her XD

mamm0nn

Obviously it's going to be the "Yeah it's still on fire. I know it's been 20 years."

Miles

The ashen lake.

Miles

It's been foreshadowed, there's even a fire pit.

Sir Nil

I'm worried about the epigraph, hopefully it means that the current events are merely the necessary evils needed to achieve the Accords, or that something will go horrifically to shit so that eventually something will turn up to fix it.

hakureireimu

It might simply be referring to the Bard, who has a longer planning horizon.

Big I

I assumed it was referring to the Bard's/Heavens' M0: let the Villain win at first so the plucky teenager has someone to beat.

Miles

Atlantian philosopher. I think the point is that those games don't work. I mean we all know what happened to Atlantis

Isi Arnott-Campbell

It's Atalante, which probably isn't the same thing. If EE was gonna do Atlantis, he'd probably do it more unambiguously by drawing off of the original myth (super-wealthy island nation smote for its hubris), not just a sound-alike name. Based on my half-hearted googling, Atalante is probably named after a Greek heroine (it's also a far-right group from Quebec, apparently).

That being said, the specific Atalantean being quoted is called the Gadfly, i.e. Socrates, whose student Plato made up Atlantis to begin with for allegorical purposes.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Atalanta>

[Liliet](#)

I think this comment was a deliberate pun.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Regardless, Kalchas is clearly trolling at least a bit.

Konstantin von Karstein

The Atlantis of this setting was Kergel, an advanced civilization that thought itself superior and was destroyed for its hubris by the Gnomes.

SpeckofStardust

So we can all agree that the mercs have a crap-ton of spy's in them right?

dadycoool

Sadly not Jacks.

Juff

Typo Thread:

the sude > the side
crowns by I > crowns but I
said," I thinly smiled, "I > said"—I thinly smiled—"I
look he actually > look like he actually
example, how you (maybe "revealing how you")
Tariq," I > Tariq." I
that quell > that quells (or can quell, or change power to
powers)
first change > first chance
aware," Tariq frowned > aware," Tariq said with a frown (or
something like that)
promise be he > promise me he
as watched over > as we watched over
An open ground > In open ground
lack of mage > lack of mages
great deal of bite > greater deal of bite
them," I shrugged. > them." I shrugged.
give you with Princess Beatrice > give you Princess Beatrice
Prince Beatrice > Princess Beatrice
seat liberate > seat liberated
endeavour keep > endeavour to keep
left so spare > left to spare

Miles

Went a bit overboard to make the list long there. A lot of these aren't typos, just style choices.

>aware," Tariq frowned > aware," Tariq said with a frown (or something like that)

Bit late to start complaining about this one. Gestures and expressions have been used as alternatives for speaking words since ch 0.

>lack of mage > lack of mages

Mage is shorthand for mage lines. Again, been the convention since book 1.

Fake typo corrections are annoying.

Ninestrings

I didn't realise how much I was looking forward to Klaus and Cat meeting until just now. Peas in a pod.

dadycoool

I love Tavern Wench/Bartender!Cat. That encounter had all the feel of "Sit, drink, and tell me about your troubles." Cat picking favorites among the Choirs is hilarious.

It's fascinating how she gets along so well with the Lycaonese, both the people and the drinks. Hagglng generals are hagglng.

Hakram is on one side giving his advice and Akua is on the other giving hers. All is right with the world.

[Adrian_V](#)

Maybe is the lack of sleep, but when reading Cat and Klaus part i suddenly had this image of both of them hooking up for a bit, then Cordelias likely reaction xD

Also villain meeting yay! normally i would say something is bound to happen but maybe it won't since already the heroes had a meeting that devolved into fighting so it could be a weird way to show them up if their meeting ends ok, of course Bard could always just drop in the middle of it....

'Ladi Williams

It's the lack of sleep.

Ewwwwwwwwwwww

Big I

It just struck me to wonder whether the Red Axe is going to go all Mimir, with her decapitated head still able to talk and offer advice. It'd add to all the Odin imagery Cat's got already.

[TeK](#)

I think Aqua is pretty much a Mimir to Cat's Odin, if with more homoeroticism than strictly necessary.

Pethrai D'arkos

Akua Crows damn it! I'm tired of seeing people refer to the Doom of Liesse as water!

ruduen

"‘I did, in fact, try to kill her,’ Tariq said. ‘It did not take, evidently, and the misgivings of my patrons in pursuing her demise gave me pause.’"

You know what might cause misgivings? An aspect which interferes with the senses of the creatures you're checking with. That seems like important information to make sure Tariq knows.

Miles

Yes but that wasn't a moment where would have heard it like that.

[Liliet](#)

Black swan problem. It's perfectly reasonable to assume something isn't a factor in a specific situation if it's vanishingly rare and you've never encountered it nor heard of it before, and there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for what's going on already.

When you see truck tracks on the road, assume a truck, not an alien spaceship masquerading as one.

Bard's a bit of an outside context problem, being the most direct instrument of Gods and whatnot.

And I think by this moment Tariq's heard of the ability. It's kind of critical to his sadly saying he still believes in her good intentions instead of vehemently insisting he *knows* she does.

Xinci

Also, an important factor is that she seemed to be able to mess with how Light targetted things. This doesn't necessarily mean that the Angels were acting out of order when they whispered that it may not be good to kill her.

ninegardens

Hheeyyy Tariq! You Aced it!
Good job!

And his reasons for trusting WB are... pretty damn legit. Specially if many of those things have happened multiple times. The detail of WB bringing him to save Saint makes sense- I always DID wonder how she survived fighting ranger. ... *sigh* such a cute and sad detail. The memory of the woman Cat killed. Even if she had reason, She was still one of Tariq's oldest friends...



caoimhinh

It had already been said that Tariq had saved the Saint of Swords after her fight with Ranger, one of Tariq's POV parts of a chapter showed it as the reason she hated Ranger. And during the fight between Saint and Rumena, she had a flashback showing us that Hye let her live, simply walking away after cutting her along the torso and apparently disappointed at the Saint's skill. According to Laurence, Ranger gave a look that said "is this all that you are?" before leaving her lying on the ground.

What we didn't know was that Tariq got there in time to put her innards back inside her opened torso thanks to the Bard's telling him.

Shveiran

What's that, Tariq?

You didn't drop the ball?

...Buddy, I'm so proud of you!
Well done! Heavens, what a relief that is.
Good job, Pilgrim, good job.

...

...You are going to die now, aren't you?

Godsdamn it, you are going to die.

'Ladi Williams

And it's probably the mirror knight that kills him. Cementing the fact that Cat has to kill him horribly and inconsequentially like a stray dog.

ninegardens

It's probably the fuckign Bard that will kill him. Using his trust in her... enough to make him hesitate... along with MK stupidity as a weapon.



Konstantin von Karstein

Probably not directly, but by being his usual stupid self. And he will learn his lesson while holding in his arms the bleeding corpse of his mentor.

Darkening

Well, it'd take something with the weight of a mentor's sacrifice to get Cristophe to stop being an idiot.

Salt

Careful what you wish for. That kind of mentor sacrifice + personality redemption tends to be accompanied by an equally dramatic and somewhat inexplicable powerup in terms of competence/overall success.

Which on one hand might be great, a halfway sensible Mirror Knight after a passing a personal crucible would be a genuinely huge asset against the Dead King.

On the other hand, he'd become an absolutely terrifying Hero in the prime of his life, who is thematically all about reflecting evil upon evil eye-for-an-eye style. In a story where your main protagonist is all about Necessary Evil.

The scariest antagonists aren't the ones that are comically misguided, it's the ones that in one form or another have a valid point

Jago

Or instead, it will be his fall from grace. He wants Severance, and the WB has a tale of a hero corrupted by the desire for power to leverage. Or one of a Hero redemption for his great sin.

The choice, for the WB, depend on how she can point those against the DK and Cat.

The only saving grace is that I think that the WB still feel that the DK is her greatest enemy.

Pipie

Nice to see Cat's still just talking to angels. Reminds me of Tyrant's inner monologue during his grand exit,

Djinn O'Cide

Only 222 votes this week, which is the lowest I've seen. Why not go vote now?

KageLupus

You know, I actually really appreciate the way things like gender fluidity are normalized in this story. Not just because i think they deserve more representation in literature in general, but because of the specific implications it has on this setting.

Cat just has to mention that the Headhunter is gender fluid and Klaus gets it. That means it is a common enough phenomena that people generally understand what it means and don't make a fuss about it. And why would they? Headhunter is Named, and sides with Below. Are you going to tell someone with superpowers and loose ethics that they are wrong about which pronoun they should be using?

I am probably reading way deeper into this than is necessary, or even reasonable, but I really do like the idea of Named having such wide ranging effects on the world around them. Named are the stuff of legends and stories and are known to be incredibly independent people. They are like celebrities that can punch people. It wouldn't surprise me at all if the setting's views on gender and sexuality wasn't at least partially influenced by centuries of Named saying "This is how I am and nothing in the world can stop it."

'Ladi Williams

I actually do not like the fact the EE felt it necessary to include modern gender issues into his story. But then its his story. He can write it any way he wants. It's still fucking awesome

John Doe

I think it's nice he doesn't try too hard to draw attention to it. It's just so accepted in the world that there seems to be no stigma against it. Nobody looks down on/attacks/needs to defend villains (or heroes, civilians, etc) for their gender/sexual orientation, it's not even an issue, and people's preferences are treated with the same amount of laissez faire as their favorite alcoholic beverage.

caoimhinh

Yeah, I think that's the best part of how EE gives them representation. It's just a natural thing, and they are people like all others, no big deal and **it is not the defining trait of the person.**

Way better than so many stories where it's just plain obvious how a character's introduction is simply for the sake of "representation" rather than for the story, and that ends up feeling forced to many readers.

In Practical Guide to Evil, a character's sexuality is background information, just one more detail of what makes

the person. Basilia's defining trait is that she is the most badass General in all of Helike, Wekesa was the best mage Praes had in centuries, Yannu Marave is the top military commander of his nation, and so on with every single major character who just happens to be LGBT.

They are interesting and defined characters who simply happen to be LGBT, they are not some LGBT character that's forced into the setting for the sake of representation. The difference is important and not all authors do it right.

Something similar applies to skin color and ethnicity, here it doesn't go beyond "so this person from that nation" in most cases and the "discrimination" shown between ethnicities is more accurately the animosity born from the previous years of war between the nations, which has whole different connotations than the racism we see on Earth. In Calernia, every generation is a post-war generation.

Anyways, the point is that EE is awesome and has done an amazing job.

soulpaintedblack

This is why I still keep reading Guide, and why I dropped The gods are bastards. It's a good story people follow, not some propaganda. It is just... every time diversity is shoved in my throat, my patience wears down and so my tolerance. I would love to read a good story without gender politics.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yannu is lgbt? I didn't catch it 😊

[Liliet](#)

He was checking out Razin

caoimhinh

Not Razin, but one of the sons of Ifrima.

[Liliet](#)

I could swear he commented on Razin too somewhere but I wouldn't go looking in those interludes if you paid me so I'm going to take your word for it lmao

caoimhinh

The one I remember is when he was checking out Moro in Interlude Congregation III.

"The heir to Vaccei had gained a few fresh scars, fighting at his mother's side against the Marshals. What had already been a hard face on a hard man was now frightful to behold, the red marks left by goblin steel running jagged through the umber-brown and basil-green face paint of his line. The effect was strikingly attractive, though Yannu was careful not to let his gaze linger. He was over a decade older than the other man, after all."

[Liliet](#)

Hmmm. Maybe this is what I remember.

KageLupus

That is kind of my point though. In the story they are not issues at all, it is just considered a point of fact that is accepted by every character. And the real thing I was trying to get at is how I feel like the big driving force for that in-universe is almost definitely thanks to Named like the Headhunter.

My favorite thing about any kind of speculative fiction, whether sci-fi or fantasy, is an author going "What happens to the world if X is true" and then really digging into all of the consequences and changes caused by that thing. And I really think a case could be made that "What if people who took on a story role in real life got super powers" at least has the potential to lead to "People are more accepting of lifestyle choices because who is going to tell a Named they are wrong".

panic

I agree on this. It was subtle in the first few books in a way that was inclusive without appearing unnatural or distracting. Now it's just getting plain distracting to read.

[sengachi](#)

1) That's the thing though. These aren't 'modern' gender issues. They've been a standard part of every single culture we have relevant records for since people first started writing stuff down. Whether that's shrugging and being chill, assigning specific cultural significance or roles, or actively stigmatizing / outlawing it, it's been around forever.

So when one's making an entirely novel world with novel cultural practices, there's no sense assigning modern gender politics to it. One could as easily pick classical Rome, or a Native American tribe, or a pre colonial African tribe, or

pre colonial imperial Africa, or one of the Pacific islands, or ancient Sumer, or any one of a thousand cultures and times to root a story's gender and sexuality politics in. Most of which **didn't** have a problem with this stuff. "Bringing modern gender stuff into it" is actually making a fuss about it or pretending it doesn't exist, and **not** making a fuss about it and having those people exist is "**not** bringing modern gender stuff into it".

2) Being inclusive is a good business decision for word of mouth and community based media. Minority groups tend to be starved for stories which include them, **especially** stories where their humanity isn't up for debate at all. So stories like that (like PtGE) get a **lot** of word of mouth spread in those communities. Those groups also tend to be aggressively positive and welcoming of new members, traits you want in a community fandom. Whereas the kind of bigots who'd stop reading a story because of this stuff, you might actually **want** to stop reading. They tend to be more gatekeepery and likely to harass other fandom members, creating a more toxic space. Which can drive down readership.

TL;DR: Active inclusivity gives a story appeal in story-deprived communities and drives out some of the most toxic would-be members of. It's a win-win as a business decision.

3) Lastly, have you ever considered that EE might be bi? Or ace? Or trans? Or any one of the identities represented in the story?

Saying "I don't see this as necessary" assumes that it's not important to EE on a personal level. When you're a cis straight allosexual person it's very easy to say "this isn't necessary" because it's not important to **you**. But not everyone who writes stories is like you, and sometimes including people like oneself and one's loved ones can feel personally important to a writer.

Xinci

I mean its pretty logical if you have people in a world where magic needs to factor in literally everything that things like sexuality and gender would become normalized.

pault52

I completely agree. Also it's really awesome to have enby/fluid rep that isn't alien or a shapeshifter

Daniel E

That's just what Dread Emperor Traitorous wants you to think.

mamm0nn

"A woman, the diplomat saw, then his gaze lingered on her throat. Not that she had always been that.
"Sire," the general said, dismounting hastily and kneeling.
"General Basilia," the Tyrant said, patting her armoured shoulder affectionately."
-Prologue 3

That said, it does seem that this setting implements the modern ideals a bit heavily at times. Ironically though, EE being much more heavy-handed with it in the first books makes this story pretty much Good white people vs the Evil coloured people because no country is quite a hotbed of not-Europeans the way Praes is while the most Goodish country is also decisively the most caucasian in both appearance and culture.

caoimhinh

I am fairly sure that the initial point of "the white guys are the Good Kingdom and the black guys are the Evil Empire" was a point of parody and playing with stereotypes.

Kind of like the Black Knight is a short white guy, and the White Knight is a short black guy, where it is a subversion of the stereotypes. Neither of them is the stereotypical Knight that people on earth usually think of when they hear their Names.

mamm0nn

Oh yeah, no discussion there. It stays much a jab at fantasy tropes which either stem from a more racist time or which are directly ripped off from the LotR. And no hate about this being a more deconstructed case here.
But when adding these lggpt elements to the story though, such acts hold consequences of making the tropes stand out starker and hold weight where they're otherwise easier considered a stab at the tropes.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, same for sexism. Praes was sexist in the past, until one Dread Empress « fired » a director of the War College. And telling Wekesa that his an abomination would be a bad idea for you and the city you're in.

Honestly, I don't see this kind of wide representation in a lot of fiction. It's a really nice touch, and it makes me feel good.

caoimhinh

It's not because they are Named.

It's simply because in Calernia no one gives a damn about other people's sexuality or gender identity. That's it, pure and simple, there was just no discrimination to begin with.

Named aren't given the privilege of living their sexuality the way they like, but rather everyone is. There are plenty of other situations we have seen through the books that show us that Named have a variety of privileges in their respective societies and countries of origin (military rank, authority, nobility title, etc), liberty of sexuality is not one of those, it is a self-evident right that everyone in Calernia has.

Javvies

I think the case was being made that the current culture of relative equality and openness likely has origins in the presence and activities of past Named.

And, to be fair, we do have at least some evidence that that is true.

There was that Dread Empress who fired somebody from a catapult for opposing the gender integration of the Legions at the Academy. And Amadeus pushed the Reforms through, resulting in species equality inside the Legions, which are a stepping stone towards broader species equality.

Jago

Note that "gender fluid" can be literal.

The Assassin has no known gender. The Dark elves don't care for sex after their power increase. I don't doubt that there are other examples in the setting.

Javvies

Assassin has always been referred to as male, well by using male pronouns, by Scribe, other members of the Calamities, and those close to them. That is, those who ought to be in a position to know.

It's just that Assassin also has some kind of super disguise power, probably Aspect based, that may or may not be shapeshifting, that includes female forms and appearances.

mamm0nn

"It is possible that the attack on the Arsenal was meant to aid in the long term," Tariq said, then grimaced and poured himself another finger of brandy. "But that is irrelevant. She has forced us to take her as an enemy through her actions, regardless of whatever intent might lie behind them."

"So what you're saying is that I've been Acceptable Good all along and that you were being a retarded fuck-up for fucking invading Callow with an Proceran army and a godsdamned Lawful Stupid paladin _after_ the Praesi occupation of twenty years ended, and kept at it after finding out I'm a decent person?" Cat hisses. "Because if you consider the notion of a Villain doing bad things for the eventual greater good _at all_, that's pretty much exactly and unarguably what you're saying. Fuck you and fuck your double standards, we wouldn't be in this shit if you told Procer to fuck off after I told you of the demon egg and took the Levantines with you on the way out."

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hey, could you not use the r-slur? It's dehumanizing to mentally ill and developmentally disabled people, myself being both.

[Liliet](#)

What Isi said.

And Tariq did privately mourn with Laurence having to fight Catherine. The pattern matches: believe in good intentions, recognise they are not magic and fight those you have to fight based on your own and your allies' understanding.

[pirateddesigns](#)

"...he was [i]the[/i] mentor."

Oh, shit. I did not catch the gravity of this back at MK's trial. Poor Tariq, killed by his well-meaning companions.

laguz24

He's been the "mentor" for years and he's still around, that is what makes him terrifying. Though, he is still so so dead.

agumentic

Tariq pretty much accepted that he is not going to survive this war, so even though he could avoid the dangers involved with the position of mentor, I am pretty sure he will lean into the role and accept story-given death to propel MK further.

JJR

"I have yet to witness any power in this world or the next that quell gossip,"

Demon of Absence should do the trick. Though it is understandable that he couldn't think of it.

Miles

This again. Those. Don't. Exist!

Salt

There is plenty of unverified gossip about them existing though

laguz24

There is most likely a demon of gossip or a villain under the Name: Malicious Gossip.

panic

Is it just me or has EE marketly increased the amount of PC nods at trans and gay people in this book? In the first few books it was just, there every now and then. But now it seems that each chapter we get some nod that X is trans and X is gay and X identifies as a bottle of brandy. Getting a wee bit distracting.

Daniel E

Oh man. The prospect of Catherine giving an 'independence day' speech to the largest group of Villains ever assembled has me grinning like mad.

Tom

> Mighty Jindrich could hold field command

I didn't have the impression that Jindrich was particularly tactically-minded

Also, can Hakram use Rampage to do paperwork really fast?

Daniel E

lol. Even if he could, I doubt there is a quill & parchment capable of withstanding the incredible forces being applied again them.

disappointed in CAT

Is Catherine more and more Stupid Evil?

It could be a function of her adopting roles like First Under the Night and Representative of the Villains, but Cat has seemed much more Classic Evil without the wit lately. Doing things like haunting nightmares, threatening ruin, etc. are invitations to get smacked.

Yes, she makes some quips while raiding the bar, and pays for her drinks here, but big picture I think something fundamental has shifted. She used to be commented on that she was a Villain but not one of Below's. It was more that she was unGood. Now though she leans hard into her reputation for being Evil, and I think it's problematic. I'm not sure whether she comes back from this.

ninegardens

Can you give any examples ASIDE from haunting nightmares of Mercantis?

In this chapter we have her... having a reasonable conversation with Tariq... another reasonable conversation with Klaus... and trying to organize her side of the war.
In previous chapters... she uses necromancy on a criminal to avoid civil war levels of danger (which Tariq agrees with)... and messing with the WB *after being attacked*.
None of that exactly screams "stupid villian ball"... unless there was something I was missing?

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Is Catherine more and more Stupid Evil?

No, she's always been willing to pull out the scary shit *when it's needed* – dropping lakes, ripping up that Everdark city (and stranding sigil-holders in Arcadia until they knuckled under), and for that matter undead exploding goats probably already qualified in context.

The nightmare business was tightly contained and non-lethal, just leaning hard on the Mercantis folks – who were being themselves being Dastardly-level assholes. ("Hey, if you wanna keep holding off the Dead King, well, you're gonna have to give us what we want.")

Satan

Didn't Cat already learn the purpose of the Bard? I thought she was a tool of the Gods to make sure that none of their creations can ever grow to threaten their positions. And she was selected for the job by being particularly "annoying" to the imposed order they created.

[aran](#)

"They?" he asked.

"Fluid," I explained.

I love the casualness there so much. Like, the people of Calernia – Good or Evil – might butcher each other by the thousands for

simple political expediency, but *damned* if anyone will give anyone shit about their gender or orientation.

Mental Mouse

I do have a slight gripe with the brevity here, simply because swapping genders may be accepted (if only for self-preservation), but it doesn't seem common enough that "gender-fluid" should be a well-understood reference. "Changeable" would have been better, though "they change depending who they've eaten lately", would be a bit much.

On the other hand, that might well be something of a "Tiffany problem"...

Chapter 46: Vestibule

"I make it a habit to kill all the people at court who do not want to usurp me, as they are principled fellows and so eminently more dangerous than your average conspirators."

– Dread Emperor Iniquitous, first of the 'Mayfly Emperors'

As of dawn there were eleven villains in Hainaut, if I was considered to stand among their number even with my Name not yet fully formed.

We didn't even make up half the Named currently in the principality, though at least we did count for more than a third, yet I honestly couldn't think of many occasions where so many villainous Named had gathered together in the same place at the same time – much less while being on the same side. Not unless Revenants counted, anyway, which in my opinion they did not. It was a lot easier to herd cats when they were dead. This was not the sort of thing to approach half-cocked, but I found there was a remarkable scarcity of knowledge on affairs this: even more than heroes, Below's lot clutched their secrets tightly.

Fortunately for me, I had to the former heiress to Wolof in my service. And considering that Akua had once intended to rule all of Calernia, she'd paid even closer attention to the underlying currents of villainy that your average Sahelian scion would have. She'd wanted to avoid the mistakes of her predecessors, after all. Her ambition itself might have been foolish, but I had to

concede she'd not gone about pursuing it foolishly. Save for one or two exceptions. When I brought up the subject in my tent early in the morning, over my breakfast, I found her almost eager to talk about it. It was subject of long-standing fascination for her, as it turned out.

"Alliances between villains have not been studied in great depth outside of Praes," Akua told me, still sounding pleased by the line of inquiry. "And aside from the Tower itself, there are none who can rival the records of Wolof on the subject. It was of great interest to my predecessors, as you might imagine."

Wasn't hard to. I'd seen enough corpses I barely needed to try.

"I recall hearing the Sahelians haven't raised the most tyrants, among the old families," I noted a tad more diplomatically. "Though you're up there for Warlocks, right?"

"The Mirembe of Aksum are not far behind us on the latter count," Akua said. "Six less, I believe, though it might have changed since I absented myself. They raised very different practitioners from my family, however, and their arts have not well adapted to modern warmaking."

I cocked an eyebrow, curious as to what Praesi highborn might consider sorcery aging poorly. Devils didn't exactly get dusty.

"Impractical?" I asked.

"Aksum was once known as the Cauldron of Beasts," she said. "The Mirembe have long been known for their interest in the crafting and alteration of life."

Monster-making, she meant. Charming.

"They dabbled in heredity as well, and created the first known stable breeding program," Akua continued. "The practices have since shifted, of course, but their work remains foundational."

I could see why their specialties had not aged well. In the old stories the Praesi always came at Callow with a few horrifying monsters that one of our heroes ended up killing, and the stories about the orcs that could breathe under water and the sentient tigers were infamous even out west. Not a lot of those had been successes in a more than marginal sense, though, and the Reforms would have been the final nail in their coffin – especially so after the Conquest proved that the Legions as envisioned by Grem One-Eye and my father were highly effective. And since every High Seat and more than a few lesser lords now ran their own breeding programs, it'd not given the Mirembe a lasting advantage.

"That aside, I would caution you to think of raising too many tyrants as a crown worth contending for in the eyes of the High

Seats," Akua said. "The Yeboah of Nok once succeeded at claiming the Tower three generations in a row, but none of the old families were willing to allow rule of Praes to be clutched too tightly. Their lines was exterminated to the last, and the Sesay were installed to rule the city."

"I get your point," I drily said. "It wasn't in the interest of the Sahelians to win too much, even when they could."

"Exactly," Akua smiled. "Though even over periods of relative humility my ancestors were not the kind of people to suffer lack of influence. As the Empire often boasts the largest concentration of allied villains on Calernia in any generation, grasping the nature of such alliances was a necessity."

"Allied might be a bit of a stretch," I snorted.

Back in the old days Praes had usually counted more Named than the kingdom, but they'd so frequently lost in part because they were as interested in backstabbing each other as actually stabbing Callow.

"Perhaps not to the extent of the Calamites," Akua noted, "but you would be surprised. The most famous example would be the Black Knight and Chancellor of Malignant the Second, who all histories agree loved him deeply. It is why the man reigned a full decade and a half while his handling of the Empire can most charitably be describe as occasionally benign ineptitude."

There'd been a sprinkling of occasions like these throughout imperial history, she told me, but the pattern that emerged to my ear was that the bonds were usually between smaller groups: a pair or maybe three Named, often who'd come up through a transitional Name together. About half of the time they ended up offing the ruling tyrant and putting one of them up on the seat instead. Being a tightly bound band of five, and one essentially loyal to the ruling Empress to boot, was where the Calamities had broken fresh grounds.

"The Empire usually waxes and wanes between three and eight villains at any time," Akua said. "Though only four Names are considered to be part of the fabric of Praes."

I didn't need her to tell me which. *Dread Emperor, Chancellor, Warlock and Black Knight*. The four roles that'd been at the core of the Empire's way of life for centuries, Yet I was now learning that there were much more nuances to those roles than I'd believed. For one, not all Names came with every generation. Praesi highborn usually saw which had had come and which had not as an indication of what should be expected from a reign.

"It is usually seen as the mark of a weak tyrant to have a Chancellor but no Black Knight," she told me. "On the other hand,

one who claimed the Tower with both a Black Knight and a Warlock but no Chancellor will be expected to aggressively contest influence with the High Seats – often with a measure of success, historically speaking.”

“But you get other Named as well,” I said. “There’s been other Assassins – in other places too, but more in Praes – and old Callowan histories speak of Necromancers too.”

Unfortunately the skill of Praesi in that branch of sorcery paired with the relative magical ignorance of my countrymen meant that old records could often only guess at if they’d been dealing with a necromancer or a Necromancer.

“Indeed,” Akua nodded. “Before the Wars of the Dead it was common for a Lich to exist, and since the heyday of fighting arenas in Maleficent the Second’s reign we’ve had recurring Gladiators. The latter is even more common in Stygia, however, and so somewhat looked down.”

“Of course it is,” I sighed “I take it Names without much precedent are also considered pedestrian?”

“The Captain and the Scribe were once underestimated for this very reason,” Akua said, then looked chagrined. “I was not immune to some shade of that foolishness, I’ll admit. I once thought very little of the Scribe.”

“She cultivates that impression actively,” I said with a kernel of sympathy, though it really *had* been a mistake.

The Scribe’s spies had been instrumental in keeping her contained, back when she’d been Governess of Liesse, and that was just a drop in the bucket of the quiet work done to hasten her downfall. The bloody coup against Hasenbach in Salia was a good example of what Scribe could when let off the leash, and its aftermath was *still* haunting the First Prince even years later.

“So I’ve head,” Akua neutrally said. “Regardless, the Empire’s traditional position as the leading light of villainy-”

Did that count as blasphemy, I wondered? Probably not unless she was talking about Light.

“- has meant that foreign villains whose defeats were not mortal have often fled to Praes for refuge. Treatment varied according to who held the Tower, but some rose quite high when the Dread Empire was expanding and looking for champions. Sorcerous, in particular, opened his court to many and gave them great authority.”

My brow rose.

"I don't recall hearing of any foreign villains in Praes during my lifetime," I said. "Which surprises me, considering the Grey Pilgrim has been terrorizing villains out west and south. There were bound to have been a few who wanted to get out before either he or the Saint strolled into town."

"The end of the last two gave pause to any possible takers, I expect," Akua drily said.

A beat passed.

"Black killed them, didn't he?" I bluntly said.

"They came in the decades preceding our births – the Reaver from Penthesand the Blue Mage from Ashur, to be specific – but they were brought in as helpers for the Purebloods," Akua elaborated. "Naturally the Carrion Lord brutally murdered them at the first halfway decent excuse and extended the purge to anyone associated with them. An entire branch family of the Niri of Okoro was forced to eat until their stomachs burst in what he called a warning about 'overly ambitious appetite'."

I coughed to hide the way my lips were treacherously twitching upwards. She noticed.

"It's considered one of the reasons for the later succession crisis in Okoro," Akua reproached.

"Very sad," I got out soberly. "Not at all ironic, or in any way cathartic to hear about."

I changed the subject before that woeful look she was giving me could lead to a reproach about the importance of *not* killing Wasteland aristocrats in amusing ways. Talk about not knowing your audience.

"Praes isn't the only place to have had villain alliances, though," I said. "We had the Sable Order, in Callow, and the Free Cities were whipped by the League of Rogues for a while."

The Sable Order had been a chivalric order led by four fallen heroes who'd gathered a lot of disaffected knights, bandits and penniless soldiers in an army and brought the kingdom to its knees. They'd had the run of the countryside for years, until the Albans managed to finally beat them on the field. The League of Rogues – although they'd never called themselves that, and the name had come with later histories – has been even more successful, the seven villains having occupied half the Free Cities for over a decade and cowed even Ashur for a time. About two centuries back, I figured?

I remembered them in part because they'd surprised me, as a kid. They'd been unusually steadfast allies even when they began

losing ground, supposedly because they'd taken oaths of mutual loyalty to each other guaranteed by devils. I'd wondered why every villain do that for two months, until I got my hands on the second volume of Wicked Deeds and learned about the very ugly way the last two had died when the devils came to collect.

"The Iron Kingdoms are arguably a greater success story than either of these," Akua replied.

I blinked in surprise.

"Those collapsed almost immediately," I slowly said. "And they were a refuge for villains, but hardly led by them."

It'd been one of the history lessons from the orphanage tutors instead of one of my private forays, but I distinctly remembered being told this.

"That is what Proceran histories insist, yes," she amusedly told me. "And so most everyone believes. Fortunately one of my ancestors, Elimu Sahelian, served as court mage to 'Queen' Alandra so we reliably know otherwise from his memoirs."

"He served as what now?" I flatly asked.

"Court mage," she repeated. "It is an old practice of my family, dearest. We've gathered many secrets and artefacts this way, leaving with them when the cause collapse. We did the same thing with Theodosius the Unconquered himself, and a dozen other lesser hegemons."

I was quite itching to get my hands on the memoirs of whoever the Sahelians had sent to advise the man that was arguably the greatest military mind in Calernian history, but that could wait until later.

"So the Iron Kingdoms were a villain alliance?" I frowned.

These days some scholars even argued that the name 'Iron Kingdoms' was meaningless, that it'd simply been a very chaotic period in Proceran and Levantine history where rule of law had frayed nearly beyond repair in a certain region, but that wasn't yet the traditional view. Properly speaking, the words referred to a bunch of bandit fiefdoms that'd briefly seized control of most of current Valencis as well as the adjoining Brocelian Forest and Cusp.

"It was led by nine bandit and raider Named," Akua agreed, "the remembered kings and queens of iron. And while three of the 'kingdoms' collapsed swiftly, as you said, others fared much better. It was nearly nine years before Valencis was fully reclaimed, and it took over two decades before the five kingdoms in the Brocelian were brought down by heroes."

I let out a thoughtful noise. Yeah, I could see why Procer in particular would have wanted to keep that story quiet. These days the Principate went all Damned this and Damned that when Named got inconvenient, but it'd been a lot younger back then. It would have been a bad blow to its prestige if a pack of villains had been able to seize one of its principalities. The kind of blow that made fresh conquests consider rebellion and borderlands mull independence. The histories I'd been taught would be a lot more palatable to the Highest Assembly, and safer to own up to.

"Neither Praes or these alliances really fit what we have as a precedent," I finally decided.

"This is true," Akua easily said, "but attempting to establish direct precedents when multiple Named are involved is foted a fool's errand regardless. Valuable insight can still be gained from observing what led to the victories and the failures of these arrangements."

"Infighting," I drolly said. "And heroes. Occasionally armies paired with the previous too."

"Yes, very clever," she replied, rolling her eyes. "About what I might have expected, given your terrible essay on the Licerian Wars."

I gaped at her. Wait, *what*? Shit, no, it actually made sense that she might have read that at some point. Sure, it was a piece of homework I'd written half-drunk in the backroom of the Rat's Nest, but Malicia's spymistress had gotten her hands on it back in the day – she'd even mentioned it, when we'd first spoken in the Tower. The Sahelians had infiltrated the Eyes and the Tower, back in the day, though I was never sure to quite what extent. Merciless Gods, though, was this the only piece of writing that I was ever going to be known by?

"At least Hasenbach won't know about it," I mused.

"Mother sold quite a bit of imperial intelligence through Mercantis when her coffers ran low, so she actually might," Akua amusedly replied.

Goddamn Sahelians, I uncharitably thought. Given my luck, that fucking thing was going to end up my only written work to be passed down the ages.

"Regardless, my heart, you are correct that infighting is a recurring pattern," the shade mused. "Arguably the most important. It has been the end of many a skillful reign in Ater, and certainly precipitated the fall of the Iron Kingdoms."

"That's the nature of villainy, to an extent," I said. "You don't become one without being hard-headed, and unlike heroes we tend

to see each other as potential threats instead of potential allies. That's a recipe for blood on the floor at the first disagreement."

Heroes did kill each other on occasion too, I wouldn't ignore that, but it was significantly rarer.

"Ah, but there lies the area of interest," she smiled, golden eyes alight with pleasure. "What aspect of villainy in particular drives us to conflict amongst ourselves? I have pondered this long, Catherine, as when I dreamed of empire still I believed that the governors of my Calernian empire must be villains. It was imperative that I understand how to keep them from turning on each other as well as myself."

I drummed my fingers against the table absent-mindedly as I thought. Villains tended to be more prone to violence, broadly speaking. They also tended to just be worse people than heroes, but that was a weak argument. Most people on Calernia were worse than heroes, by the same measure, and they weren't as prone to infighting as villains. Names did tend to magnify your flaws as well as your virtues, but that was a weak argument as well. Villains weren't all cut from some universal cloth, in either personality or objectives, so the consistent infighting of their alliances couldn't really be traced back to some universal flaw we all shared.

But then that was looking at the individual, when one of my first lessons had been that the system often had the greater impact.

"Villain stories tend to reward conflict and acting decisively," I finally said. "It's an incentive. If it makes you stronger, helps you to win, most people will lean into the traits. When unchecked and become reflexive, that tendency results in poor decisions like backstabbing a nominal ally while heroes are at the gate."

"Squire to the end, I see," Akua murmured, sounding thoughtful. "An interesting answer, and not one I necessarily disagree with. Yet I arrived to a different conclusion myself. I believe that *ambition* is the keystone."

"Not all villains are ambitious," I pointed out. "It's not like every Black Knight eventually made a play for the Tower."

"Ambition can be a nuanced thing," she replied, leaning forward in animation. "A Black Knight's ambition could be to stand the greatest hero-killer of the age, or to lead the Empire to military victory. Rule need not be the driving force of them. Ambition is, to my eye, the seeking of excellence. The nature of that excellence varies with every Named."

There was a refrain of old Praesi pride in there, I thought. The old guard of tyrants had often claimed that they were seekers of excellence, that their philosophy was one of advancement while the Gods Above were enemy of all change. Like most philosophical arguments preached by people who practiced mass human sacrifice and casual assassination, I tended to be skeptical of their claims. If anything it was the Praesi circular circus of usurpation and civil war that was stagnant, whatever the adherents of 'iron sharpens iron' might claim. I didn't entirely disagree with her assertions, though.

"I'll agree that Named tend to be driven people," I conceded. "But I don't buy the rest of that. There's outliers, sure, like the Tyrant of the Hierarch. But someone like the Harrowed Witch isn't trying to be the best anything – she's trying to not get eaten by the brother she murdered and bound, and maybe trying to move up in the world when there's nothing more pressing."

"She improvised the spell that bound her brother's spirit, highly advanced necromancy, with few resources at hand and no margin of error or time to spare," Akua stated in reply. "One might argue that her ambition is survival in difficult times, and that she has proved highly able in pursuing it."

"Or she was already skilled, and just got desperate and inspired," I replied. "But fine, for the sake of argument let's say I agree with you. Where is this headed?"

"Conflicting excellences are the cause of strife between villains," she said. "Unlike Above's champions, who seek not excellence but a particular outcome, rivalry is natural between us. And given the rewards of violence, as you have put it, villains are more prone to disposing of rivals and obstacles than reach peaceful accords even when these might be more practical. It is why Procer can be the region that has the most villains on Calernia, by simple numbers, but alliances between them are nearly unheard of."

I took me a while to place the expression on her face. She was enjoying this, I realized. The discussion, the debates. I did not let it distract me, or allow my thoughts to meander down the path of who she might have been if she were not the Doom of Liesse.

"Without a common framework keeping us bound," Akua continued, "like the Dread Empire or a greater common ambition in the vein of the League of Rogues and the Iron Kingdoms, villains will nearly always default into competition."

Mhm. The argument somewhat held even when looked at closely, I decided. The infighting in villain alliances tended to crop up when the shared ambition was collapsing, not in the initial string of victories that most villains got to taste before their comeuppance.

"And how did your great Calernian empire propose to get around that flaw?" I asked.

It'd been idle curiosity that made me ask, but suddenly there was a weight to the tent. To this conversation. We had not often talked of the Doom of Liesse, of her plans when she had been the Diabolist. And never this explicitly. She did not openly show hesitation, but her silence and calm face made it plain to me anyway. The golden-eyed shade knew me well, these days, but that blade cut both ways.

"By making more of you," Akua eventually replied. "Client queens and kings that were genuinely invested in the rule of their province, and capable of dominating Named within their realm. So long as my fortress stood, fear of Greater Breaches being opened in retaliation to treachery would have prevented most forms of rebellion – and I believed myself capable of triumphing in the inevitable ensuing shadow wars."

"It was a shit plan," I frankly replied. "You gave yourself a single point of failure and left each of your 'clients' a powerbase to consolidate. The moment the fortress was out, your entire empire would immediately collapse."

"Which was why I intended to build several more," Akua admitted, "once I had the resources of Callow and Praes at my disposal."

I breathed out. Shit. I'd never actually considered that. Would it have worked? No, I eventually decided. The moment she got Malicia and I to surrender, Diabolist would have stood as a beacon for every hero on the continent. I'd had to bend over backwards to avoid that, and she wouldn't have been able to manage while standing atop a fucking doomsday weapon. She'd not last long enough to make a second fortress, or it'd get destroyed while still incomplete. The Diabolist would still have made a horrid mess on the way out, though, possibly afflicting several parts of Calernia with permanent Hellgates before dying. Gods, Second Liesse had been a nightmare but it was still better than... this. I forced myself to think of something else.

"A framework," I evenly said. "The Truce and Terms are one of those, arguably. As is the war against the Dead King."

"The Truce and Terms are and should be considered a construct to help to wage war against Keter," Akua said.

It was quiet, but I could hear the muted relief to her voice. Like we'd both stepped away from a ledge.

"It is the war that has gathered Named," she continued, "and in my opinion it should be considered the 'alliance' within which villains will be jostling for position."

"Jostling only to an extent," I reminded her. "I've avoided a lot of fights by having such a strong position that potential rivals didn't want to take the risk of a challenge."

More than a few villains coveted my seat as our representative under the Truce and Terms but they were also aware that I had an army, Named allies and the Kingdom of Callow's power backing me. It wasn't full-proof, of course. Some had tried to take that swing anyway, unable to deal with being the second in anything. The Red Reaver had been one, and I'd made an example of him. Others, like the Barrow Sword, had picked a fight to test my strength and then fallen in line almost amicably when I'd proven I was not to be trifled with.

"Several sources of your current influence are temporary," Akua pointed out. "Your position as representative, your queenship over Callow, your positional advantage within the Grand Alliance. They can serve as a defensive asset, prevent others from striking at you, but they should not be confused for a way to make people listen to you. If you want obedience of the villains you have gathered here, and for them to bind themselves to your Accords, you must find a way to help their own ambitions within the frame of your own greater one."

I did not immediately reply. As it happened, I was not under the illusion that my current influence among my kind would carry beyond the war against Keter. I was in a unique position at the moment but sooner or later the stars would fall out of alignment and my authority would wane. For now, though, I still had it. And I fully intended to use it as much to carry out the war as to prepare the peace that'd follow it. Akua was still thinking of this as a warlord would, though or perhaps a Dread Empress – like a centerpiece binding important assets to her by giving them what they wanted, and pairing that fulfillment to service.

But I couldn't think like that, not if I wanted my work to survive me. If I wanted villains to embrace the Liesse Accords, that meant convincing them that submitting to some rules was worth the benefits the submission would earn them.

"Turning wolves into wolfhounds," I mused.

"One piece of meat at a time," Akua Sahelian softly agreed.

—

The morning's war council yielded no surprises. The Iron Prince and I would hold command of the two offensives, and General Pallas broad authority but not actual command over the reserves. I'd wasted no time in politely requesting of Princess Beatrice of Hainaut, freshly under my command, that she 'make suggestions' about the fantassins companies that would best suit our needs. I made it clear I wasn't trying to leave Klaus Papenheim with only

dregs, but that she shouldn't feel shy about taking the better cut either. She was amenable to the request, and gave the impression she amenable to my being in command period. I had hopes of a good working relationship.

Mind you, she was an Alamans of royal blood. I fully expected she'd be able to put a smile on surrendering to Malicia.

With that settled, I turned to the looming matter of the council of villains. The hill Akua had told me of turned out to be more than serviceable, and so we went ahead with using it. The firepit was cleaned and deepened, then ten high seats brought out in a broad circle – Hakram would not need one, bringing his own. Seating would be assigned, I'd decided, to avoid chaos breaking out immediately instead of eventually. I considered the known tapestry of grudges in silence, looking at the seats. The Barrow Sword and Headhunter couldn't be too close without fingers being lost so I put the fire between them, and leaving the Summoner by either the Beastmaster or the Berserker was a recipe for a snide comment preceding bloodspill so they'd have to be split up.

Hakram on my left and Indrani on my right was only to be expected, but the seat to their sides would be taken as signs of favour so I had to be careful who got them. The Rapacious Troubadour would have to get the seat by Archer, I thought. I'd left him to handle Named-finding out here with little prior warning and he'd done well, so it was owed. It would be the Berserker by Adjutant's side, though, I eventually decided. She was fresh to Hainaut, and I'd only met her the once before leaving – just long enough to send her beyond the trenches to hunt with the Silver Huntress – but during my absence she'd apparently killed a Revenant and wounded another, which merited encouragement.

That made five seats settled, and I leaned on my staff as I worried my lip and considered the rest.

"Where do you intend to place the Headhunter?" Akua asked.

I did not glance back, having known she wasn't far. I would have brought Hakram as well, but he wasn't exactly in a state to make the trip quickly. Indrani was currently sleeping, having travelled a full day and night over the last stretch to get here in time, so of my inner circle it was only the two of us here.

"Between Berserker and Beastmaster, I think," I said.

The Levantine villain wouldn't be able to easily mess with either, considering neither was a slouch up close or a stranger to violence. She nodded, eyes pensive.

"Barrow Sword by the Rapacious Troubadour?" she suggested.

I hummed. Ishaq tended to get along with people who weren't of the Blood – or whose savagery he did not consider to be damaging his own chances of becoming one of the Blood, namely the Headhunter – so I was actually wary of placing him too early. He was valuable because of that relative lack of enmities. Still, he had to sit *somewhere*.

"Then Concocter by him," I said.

'Cocky' was both sharp-tongued and not physically powerful, so I had to be wary of where I placed her. If she mouthed off to the Berserker she was liable to lose a few teeth, not to mention the bloody scalp the Headhunter would be after. The Concocter would likely have pockets full of poison, I further considered, so if she retaliated the escalation would be steep and immediate. Best to avoid the trouble entirely by giving her mild-mannered neighbours.

"Summoner by her," Akua said. "He will enjoy word of the Arsenal, no?"

The man was still miffed he'd been assigned as a combat sorcerer instead of a researcher, as I recalled, but he'd never hidden his continuing fascination for the Arsenal. It was a good pick. With a little luck he might even be too busy talking to her to insult anyone else for at least *part* of this council.

"Agreed," I grunted. "Which would leave the Harrowed Witch between Summoner and Beastmaster."

"She was in Archer's service for some time," Akua noted. "That should ensure civility of the Beastmaster."

Or encourage him to lash out at the Witch as indirect vengeance on Indrani, I thought, since her connections made her very risky to take swing at these days. It'd not escaped me that Archer's fellow pupils under the Lady of the Lake did not have the fondest memories of their time together, though Beastmaster had always struck me as indifferent where the Silver Huntress and the Concocter had been venomous. It was a measured risk, I decided. The worst the Summoner would send the Witch's way was likely to be a few snide words about hedge wizardry, and I trusted her to be able to ignore that. She'd struck me as being steady of temperament, back in the Arsenal.

"It will do," I said.

My gaze swept over the seats. It would have to. Soon enough we would be going to war, and I wanted every sac of venom emptied before we were on the march.

[vernal.ancient](#)

“ten high seats brought out in a board circle – Hakram would not need one, bringing his own.”

Ah, a fine mix of dark humor and understatement.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Also, typo: “board” there should be “broad”

[308924810a](#)

Huh, aren’t there also ten High Seats of Praes?

[Liliet](#)

Seven IIRC? Wolof, Aksum, Nok, Okoro, Thalassina, Foramen, Kahtan.

Letouriste

Probably less now. Thalassina is a pile of rubbles and several others got heavily bloodied/destroyed

Darkening

Huh, new formatting on the quotes? Interesting. Gotta admit, I really enjoy these humanizing scenes with Akua. Need to get us and Cat really invested before Cat has to brutally murder her for the second time.

[Liliet](#)

Akua is a fucking nerd.

IMHO, if you want to see who she would have been if she wasn’t a villain, look no further than Blessed Artificer. Not because they’re cousins, though that’s a nice narrative move, but the actual similarities: they both focus on building things, they both devote themselves fully to a cause they utilize that focus for, they both... well, Akua *used to be* about as arrogant and short-sighted without actually being stupid in any sense of the word.

I honestly want to see them in the same room / on the same team for a prolonged amount of time. That’s gotta be delicious, because I’m pretty sure Akua would in fact be actually jealous.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh past jealousy into envy here. After all, BA proved successful in getting laid with the villain she wanted to bone.

Darkening

When did akua express interest in the hunted magician?

Pethrai D'arkos

Pretty sure he's referring to Cat there.

Matthew Wells

Pretty sure Insanenoodleguy was referring to Akua's crush on a different villain, as we've been reminded over the last couple chapters.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, right.

Pretty sure BA doesn't have a *crush* on the guy though
lmao

Insanenoodlyguy

What the others said.

[Liliet](#)

...wait, what?

Evgeny Permyakov

> before Cat has to brutally murder her for the second time.

First, it needs to be excessively cruel and elaborate, so brutal is out of question.

Second, she still can dodge the bullet on technicality. The wording Vivienne used leaves some place. Take out pieces of Akua's soul one by one and assemble again – Akua would still be snuffed out with full understanding what is taken from, but still continue existing. Could even be a repeat performance.

shikkarasu

I'm hoping for Akua to willingly sacrifice herself for someone else. It would be the destruction of her mind, soul, *and* her personal values. If that isn't victory over your nemesis we need to redefine terms.

agumentic

Cat is no longer Fae, there is no need to dodge oaths on technicalities. She could break it if she really wanted to – she just won't, at least in spirit, both because Vivienne matters to her and because she is a Callowan herself, her long price will come. I doubt it would be anything so crass as murder, and it might hurt Cat more than Akua, in truth, but it will happen.

Bellower

who knew villainous seating arrangements could be so fascinating.

I wouldn't be surprised if the Harrowed Witches ghost brother doesn't throw something to start a fight in hopes of getting his sister killed.

LarsBlitzer

I agree he'd likely take a swing at it, but the Summoner is right beside her and would be in a position to wrangle him back under control for practicality if nothing else. The Witch would be in his debt, and being able to showcase his power in front of his peers, to prove he's more than "just a battlemage" and therefore worthy of contributing to the research at the Arsenal. The benefit outweighs the drawback of letting her be dragged to Hell or wherever.

mamm0nn

Brother's ghost shows up and Cat just steals him with Night before any other Named can strike him down and de-Name the Witch.

Ninestrings

It's like arranging seating for a wedding. An Evil wedding.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Oh my god, the quote formatting changed!

Not sure why I'm so excited about this, just am. Time to read the chapter.

Djinn O'Cide

Go. Vote. Still in the lead, but under 200 votes right now. Never saw that before.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Xinci

I am so happy Cat and Akua finally got a talk about Villain frameworks. It makes sense if Below truly did have a bet against Above that a sufficiently constructed framework could support multiple Named for multiple functions just like Heroes serve specific functions(even if the source of them being willing to serve differs).

Javvies

Cat's right, Akua would never have been able to last long enough to establish redundant summoning installations. Even ignoring Malicia's plan to steal it from her, and there were probably contingency plans for Malicia's retaking of Liesse (and the artifact) that didn't involve Amadeus capturing it for her.

Villain seating charts. Good to see Cat is putting more thought into preparing for this meeting than Hanno did into the Hero meeting.

Liliet

To be fair, the heroes didn't fight over the seating.

Salt

Eh, let's be real, the Heroes squabble was just that – a squabble that was pretty unfitting of the title "Hero". No need to dress it up as anything but the massive disappointment that it was

It's just that, the reason the Heroes /single/ attempted coup nearly unraveled the truce and terms while no one batted an eyelash at the Villains /multiple/ attempted coups – at least one of which cat made a gruesome public example of – is because Heroes are usually rather decent people who are expected to be rather decent. Villains are generally giant assholes who are expected to be giant assholes.

The part he's wrong about is that Hanno wasn't wrong for not expecting that level of incivility out of the Heroes – the brawl was a big deal precisely because it was a thus far *unprecedented* case of Heroes falling so far below their namesake during the Terms.

The Villains? No one is under enough illusions to be surprised at backstabbing and general stupidity, and no one really cares as long as they're (at the end of the day) still under the heel of rather reasonable and more-or-less sane Black Queen – because what more can you really expect out of Villains?

Catherine takes those precautions because while Hanno is herding cats, she's herding cats doused in goblinfire. Her

job is just more demanding in that area to begin with, and it's only smart of her to realize that she has to tailor her approach after having already ultra-violence'd her way past several attempted insurrections in the past.

Liliet

Yep, aaaaaall of that. That's why I'm pointing out that Hanno didn't take this kind of who-hates-who precaution because HE DIDN'T NEED TO. There were no foreseeable-solvable-with-seating-preparation-type problems among heroes.

Also, I don't think the heroes' brawl nearly unraveled the Terms – the tension from Hanno's POV was whether he'd need to execute Christophe over this or manage to salvage the dumbass.

Javvies

The Hero fight didn't unravel the Truce and Terms only because Mirror Knight and his faction lost outright.

If Mirror Knight had won, or even just been taken down after killing Hanno ... things would have gone to hell. If he successfully killed Hanno, he likely would have either taken it as a sign from Above of his rightness and Hanno being in the wrong, or he would have been in shock, which would likely either allow him to be taken down or kill the Hero trying to take him down as combat reflexes took over (thus confirming his rightness in his mind). That's if Mirroe Knight killed Hanno inside the meeting room.

Out in the hallways where most of the fight between the two of them took place? If Mirror Knight killed Hanno, again, he'd either see it as proof of his rightness or be in shock ... resulting him either surrendering or fighting being taken down ... and remember who Hanno saw next, immediately after beating down Mirror Knight? Cat and a bunch of soldiers ... and Mirror Knight would not surrender to Cat, which means he'd either run again (and thus need to be hunted) or he'd fight, breaking the Truce and Terms, and he'd probably only be stopped by killing him at that point. And Hanno would be dead, and unable to work to preserve things from the Hero side, and there'd probably be a Hero killed by Cat and soldiers under her command. Or worse, Mirror Knight doesn't go down (dead or unconscious) at all, or at least, not before he successfully kills or severely injures Cat with the sword.

Things would probably not have gone particularly well at that point.

[Liliet](#)

OK, yeah, Hanno just didn't take the possibility of him killing him seriously.

Mostly because he believed that unless he attacked first or drew a weapon, he'd be unwilling to.

Which brings us back to the heroes vs villains comparison.

Shveiran

... And Hanno was wrong? MK did draw his weapon and came fairly close to killing a hero, even if it wasn't Hanno. He was also ready to use the Severance to "defeat" the Wk, but that weapon is kind of like a lightsaber. It doesn't really do "non - lethal". At best, you can permanently maim someone in a way that allows them to keep living if they are immediately healed by pros.

Any assumption on heroes defaulting to keeping it nonlethal because they were Heroes was... kind of misplaced.

[Liliet](#)

True, *someone else* came pretty close to being killed. In which case it would be the headsman's axe for Christophe, too. Which is what Hanno was worried about.

Hanno himself was secure enough to *never draw his weapon*.

Mirror Night

Also its not like seating arrangements would have stopped that fight. Since Blacksmith flips the table to open the brawl. MK was not sitting next to Blacksmith, Roland or Frederic. Also Hanno used self seating to help figure out who was friends and on good terms with who. So its not like self seating didn't have it uses.

Salt

It's actually kind of an unintentional burn on the Villains that Cat actually thinks they might break out into violence, for absolutely no reason other than sitting next to each other

[Liliet](#)

Yeah lmao.

The seating, both Hanno and Catherine handled right.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I deeply empathize with Catherine's horror about being known for her old essay. I wrote a paper on purple giraffes for AP Lang in high school and I'd rather commit suicide by undead goat than have it shared.

Salt

On the other hand, it'll probably spawn tens of pretentious scholarly papers analyzing the ways that it is actually hidden genius

shikkarasu

Fortunately we know that she writes a holy book for the Drow, even if future Drow Priests consider it heretical. I give even odds that she writes it purely to distract from The Essay.

Salt

If she's actively a dick to the crows in said holy book, and the holy book is understood to be the word of the crows, does that mean that they're going to get a reputation for being self-depreciating?

Anonymous

It will be amusing if it turns out that her essay is part of the reason why Hasenbach considered Catherine a dull brute of a warlord back in the day.

mamm0nn

Obviously Pilgrim read it and that's why he was so convinced she was Triumphant returned.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

If give even odds the Dead King has read it.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I'd, not If.
Required: earn autocorrect!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Damned. Damned autocorrect.
It but me twice.

Burlyraven

I'm wondering if the Barrow Sword might not take being denied one of the perceived seats of honor as a slight, considering he has a track record of success against the Revenants, and the Berserker seems like new blood. Hopefully he's smart enough to read that Cat's extending something akin to trust in his direction by having act as a buffer.

Salt

LMAO, that'll probably depend on whether he's a typical grug-smash type berserker or if he's a normally-chill occasionally-hulk type of berserker

Juff

Typo Thread:

occasions were > occasions where
affairs this: even> affairs like this; even
had to the > had the
caution you to think of raising too many tyrants as a crown
(maybe "caution you against thinking that raising too many
tyrants is a crown")
oldfamilies > old families
"Exactly," Akua > "Exactly." Akua
had had come > had come
I sighed "I (missing fullstop)
could when > could do when
I've head," > I've heard,"
Penthesand > Penthes and
form Ashur > from Ashur
has been even > had been even
every villain do that > every villain didn't do that
aswhat > as what
cause collapse > cause collapses
foten > often
still gained > still be gained
atcuually > actually
is recurring > is a recurring
a many a > many a
interest," she > interest." She
Tyrant of > Tyrant or
reach peaceful > reaching peaceful
I took me > It took me
to help to wage > to help wage
prepare the peace > prepare for the peace
fantassins companies > fantassin companies
she amenable > she was amenable
board circle > broad circle
bloodspil > bloodspill
take swing > take a swing

[onedollargum](#)

"It was a shit plan," I frankly replied. "You gave yourself a single point of failure and left each of your 'clients' a powerbase to consolidate. The moment the fortress was out, your entire empire would immediately collapse."

Barring the prequels, it feels like this is most Star Wars movies.

Finn .-. .

'She'd not last long enough to make a second fortress, or it'd get destroyed while still incomplete.'

This fits surprisingly well too.

[Liliet](#)

Pretty sure that was at least half the inspiration for the Praesi "flying fortress of doom" trope.

thearpox23

As someone who was always lukewarm on the Star Wars, it seems odd to me for it to be the originator of the "flying fortress of doom" trope. Perhaps it popularized the concept, but the thing seems too archetypal for it to have a proper origin.

[Liliet](#)

A single archetypal thing can be made out of several previously existing archetypal things.

thearpox23

Yes yes, that is obvious. Still don't see the connection to Star Wars. If anything, the concept of a flying fortress is obviously a progression on the ancient myths of flying islands/flying cities meets post-enlightenment magic system. Because magic output = expensive workhours + exotic materials the thing has got to be expensive, and once you have a flying base it seems a shame not to drop heavy exploding things from it. The other uses of your antigrav construct can come naturally once you start considering how to apply the above-mentioned post-enlightenment magic system.

The whole thing seems too natural to need inspiration from pop fiction. Of course, Erra could pop in here himself and tell me wrong, but needing to tie in every naturally occurring concept to some pop culture classic seems unnecessary to me.

Darkening

I mean, giant flying thing with a doomsday weapon attached certainly makes *me* think of the death star, but I'm sure there's other examples.

beleester

"Flying fortress as a mobile weapon system" is a different trope from simply "floating island where adventures happen." I think the first person to do "Drop heavy things from it" was Jonathan Swift in Gulliver's Travels.

thearpox23

You might be right on that, though I wouldn't be surprised if some Indian myths had a precursor to that. Either way, as expected of the enlightenment period writer to have to go "how would this thing function?" when making his setting.

Salt

I mean honestly, the concept of a complex anything with a single point of critical vulnerability has been considered impractical as far back as you care to look.

If you're considering modern influence and pop culture though – and story tropes are just that, writers-world pop culture as far as current common trends in writing go – the Death Star is almost certainly the first thing anyone thinks of nowadays when describing the trope of some complex monstrosity brought down by being poked in the weak spot.

So while you can't exactly consider it the originator for a set of concepts centuries old, it makes little sense to chastise people for conflating it with the concept, since it's arguably the most iconic and well-known modern example of the trope, and one that played a pretty major role in popularizing it in modern culture.

I doubt the concept of "never going to give you up" was invented by Rick Astley either, but you'd hardly criticize someone nowadays for conflating it with Rick Astley when discussing how I'm never gonna let you down.

[*Liliet*](#)

I agree very much with your last sentiment. I don't think a star wars type flying fortress inevitably attracting heroes to find and exploit its weak spot is

all that naturally occurring a concept, but it's possible I just don't know stuff.

[sivarajan](#)

Laputa, from Gulliver's Travels?

thearpox23

I think the hypothetical question here is whether you think flying fortresses/cities would exist in fiction today if Gulliver's Travel's weren't written. To me, the thing seems natural enough that it'd get invented and popularized in fiction guaranteed, just like how Irem wasn't the only lost city to be conceived of in the ages prior.

[sivarajan](#)

I had never heard of Irem, but mention of Atlantis precedes it by a millennium (which I guess illustrates your point). However, I would caution against assuming ideas that are obvious in hindsight were so before they were invented.

caoimhinh

That trope is actually something that was popularised by Japanese videogames. Literal flying fortresses of doom are a setting we can see in the early RPGs from SNES, especially for the last stand against the main villain.

thearpox23

That... seems to have much more of a connection to what we have in the story than Star Wars. I haven't played those early SNES games, so I suppose one could make the argument that they themselves drew from those movies, but that's two degrees of separation already, so eh. Always an interesting reminder of how much of an influence on our fiction there was from those obscure niche games. I chalk it to a new medium allowing for different perspectives discovering for us new low-hanging fruit.

Jago

It was used by Japanese in anime well before the SNES games. Zambot 3 is a 1977 anime, the same year of Star Wars, and the aliens have a space fortress base. From what I recall besides deploying mechas they did orbital bombardment of Earth. Probably there are even earlier examples, I would bet than

that Ming the Merciless in the Flash Gordon comics had one or tried to build one.

caoimhinh

Definitely, I'm sure there are earlier examples. It's just that those are what comes to mind for me when I think about that trope. Because "flying fortress of doom" invokes in me a sense of Fantasy rather than Sci-fi, so I imagine a dark castle flying in the sky rather than a spaceship in orbit.

caoimhinh

Yeah, when I see the term "Flying Fortress of Doom", my mind instantly goes to things like Dracula's castle from Castlevania, the Sinistrals'... well, fortress of doom, from "Lufia & the Fortress of Doom", even some floating islands and stuff from the Zelda games, Breath of Fire, and other games from that time that must have been a huge influence for the popularization of the trope in anime and manga for the coming years.

It became a popular trend that you would have to face the main villain in their castle near the end of the game, and the confrontation would commonly cause the destruction of the fortress, it is a concept that became widely popular in games and fantasy stories, especially in Japan as they are the biggest market for that.

It's come to the point that nowadays in mangas/anime it is expected that the "Demon Lord" must have some sort of dark castle or flying fortress where the Heroes must have their final clash against him.

Personally, I think that my mind goes to those types of stories rather than Star Wars because the term "Flying Fortress of Doom" invokes Fantasy for me rather than Science Fiction.

Some people will immediately think of the Death Star when the term comes up, but I seriously can't. My mind will almost immediately imagine something like Dracula's Castle coming out of a dark cloud in the night sky with a blood-red moon on the background.

Jago

In fantasy, there are thousands of examples of fortresses of doom that are destroyed by the end of the book, but generally, they aren't flying fortresses. The flying ones are more common in SF. Probably because the Journey that makes the Hero Grow is more a fantasy trope

than an SF trope and journeying to a flying fortress is somewhat different.

[*Liliet*](#)

Ooh, huh, nice. Not familiar with that genre.

Also, may I ask about the timing?...

Jago

Interesting. Will this be the catalyzer for Cat getting her new Name?

A Name that helps her manage the Villains would be in line with her desires.

Abrakadabra

I thought that too. Queen of Villains perhaps?

Jago

The Mastermind!
Bhahahahah

But it is an extremely dangerous name.

James Felling

The Xanatos Chessmaster....

lucnation

I was thinking a more general title like Principal or Overseer, Administrator maybe

Sam

Cat, the Herder, with the obvious reordering of that.

[*Black Spiral Dancer*](#)

As always, a pleasure to read Akua Sahelian's dark wisdom.

Берти Вустер

So Akua is unholy trinity of Emperor Palpatine, Wilhuf Tarkin and whoever designed the Death Star in the current canon in one?

[*Liliet*](#)

I really like the "thesis/antithesis" format of the epigraphs.

Daniel E

Only 10 Villains? I thought there would be a lot more. Wasn't there mention of there being something like 80+ Named assembled? Cat's mention of a third here should put the Villains at least firmly above 20.

Miles

Masego won't be there so it's not all the villains.

[Liliet](#)

Most villains are assigned elsewhere. Twilight's Pass, Cleves, Arsenal, administration, hunting threats in the back, I think there were two with Kallia? they're in Mercantis

etc

Daniel E

Ok, that's a fair point. Although, assuming every warm body gets pulled in for the big summer campaign, I'm hoping we'll more Villains en masse.

[Liliet](#)

Sounds like they cannot do that.

mavant

What? No, there's only nine. It's always been eight. How could you imagine there were more than seven?

Miles

It occurs to me that Akua is the Bard's villain counterpart.

They have a lot of similar qualities and even where they're different it's in a way that pairs well like the whole antihero/antivillain thing they have going on.

Miles

Villain stories tend to reward voting early and voting often.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Liliet](#)

Oooh, this is a good one.

ByVectron!

Between Akua selecting the site, and her being part of the ordering of villains, I have a bad itch that she is up to something. Like, she is all about the long game, and I wouldn't

put it past her to have figured out a way to create enough strife or the proper conditions to break out or take control or... something.

I dunno, but I want it on the record that my hackles are up. Hakram? Write that down.

Miles

Write it with your face

mavant

I like Akua, and I'll be sad if she gets Ghostbusted.

Interlude: Reprobates

"And so Dread Emperor Irritant did shout thus: 'Leave him to me!' And then he did ignore the Knight Errant, and brawled with a common soldier instead, and triumphed over him."

Extract from Volume IX of the official Imperial Chronicles

He'd been among the first few to arrive after the Black Queen and her attending pair, so the high seats were still largely empty, yet he was not disappointed in the slightest. Instead Lucien Travers, who some knew as the Rapacious Troubadour – though he personally left the epithet out of the introduction unless pressed – studied those empty seats circling the crown of the hill with great interest.

Many of his fellow Damned would not spare a look for the arrangements beyond learning where their seat had been placed, but Lucien would not make that mistake. The Rapacious Troubadour knew himself a feeble enough sort compared to many among his kind, and so it behooved him to always consider the undercurrents of the situations he involved himself in. Lucien was all too aware that his skill with the sword was no match for the likes of the Red Knight, or his dabbling in sorcery more than a pittance compared to the arcane powers of a man like the Hierophant. He'd always been a man of scattered interests, and so while his learning was broad it might be said to be comparatively shallow.

It was his eyes he'd paid for with his travels, his ability to read a room and the underpinnings of it.

Some arrangements were only to be expected. The mark of favour he'd earned through his labours in Hainaut, the seat by the Archer's own, was one such. The Black Queen was not shy in offering honours to those that served her purposes well, so long as they played by her rules as well. The rumoured red hate between the Headhunter and the Barrow Sword had led to them being split apart, and the Troubadour was amused to see that the Summoner had been neatly contained between two scholarly sorts. Dear Cedric did have a sharp tongue, it must be admitted. That his Callowan ancestry had failed to bring about favoritism at his advantage remained a frustration to the wizard.

It was the layer beyond the obvious that was interesting. Once it was grasped who their common shepherd saw as the individuals in need of containment, from their surroundings it could be deduced who she saw as reliable – the true favoured, not those merely honoured in public. The Concocter and the Harrowed Witch, it seemed. Both of which had ties to the Archer. Ah, how he admired the Black Queen's cleverness in expanding her influence: if she'd gathered attendants herself it would have had the Chosen up in arms, but who would suspect the Archer? The Beastmaster was still out of favour, which was pleasing, but the Berserker's placement was what drew his attention.

She was fresh blood, and her seat of honour not unexpected given her record against Revenants, but that was mere window dressed. She has been seated by the Adjutant, who was now a mere crippled shadow of his old self. A test of restraint, perhaps, of attitude? It would pair nicely with having given her the notoriously unpleasant Headhunter as a neighbour on the other side. The Berserker might just be undergoing an audition for greater trust and responsibility, Lucien mused. That made her someone worth keeping an eye on.

The Rapacious Troubadour strolled to the highest of seats, the Black Queen's own, approaching under the calm, cool stare of the greatest villain of the age. Two great crows were perched above her shoulders, their feathers as if woven from shadow. The slight tension at the knowledge he was occupying the full attention of the same woman who'd been the architect of both the Princes' Graveyard and the Salian Peace was delicious, for all that the fear behind it was genuine. Lucien was not a man who'd been born for dull times, for pedestrian appetites or the safety of righteous choices. What worth was life, if not lived on the razor's edge? He swept back his long hair as he offered a deep bow.

"Your Majesty," the Troubadour smiled. "It is ever a pleasure to be in your presence."

"Rapacious Troubadour," the Black Queen replied as she cocked her head to the side, her Chantant easy and lightly accented. "You seem in a pleasant mood. Finally back in familiar waters, yes?"

Seen through already? He'd been in too fine a mood, it seemed. Gods but how delicious it would be to have but the slightest taste of such a soul, barely more than a nibble really – Lucien felt the attention on him, and turned to meet the Archer's unblinking gaze. The sharp-faced woman offered him a lazy grin, all the while idly tapping the side of a knife against a finger. He doubted that grin would waver in the slightest as she slit his throat. Ah, he'd ben forgetting himself.

"Who would dare claim familiarity as such a gathering, Black Queen?" Lucien smiled. "I am simply looking forward to the night's festivities."

—

The Berserker did not know how to read. Had the servants not told her where her seat was she wouldn't have known, and she thought she saw a mocking glint in the man's eye. Her fist was already clenching when she remembered who was looking at her, that small woman on the seat with the huge dark crows and the dead wood staff. Temper, Zoe reminded herself. There would be better fights to pick tonight than some mouthy nobody. She dropped into her seat, sending for ale. The sooner they got to grievances, the sooner she could crack her knuckles on some fucker's jaw.

—

The Summoner's lips thinned in anger. He was not late, he *wasn't*, but everyone else had come early and so he'd been made to look in the wrong. Again. Just another injustice in the long line of them forced onto Cedric Ackland. He never got his dues, always got cheated of what was rightfully his. He gathered his robes and hastened up the hill onto the last empty seat, between a disturbingly silver-haired woman and that idiot peasant who'd cursed herself with her own brother's ghost.

"Is he always that slow?"

The Summoner turned a glare onto the person who'd spoken. Some ruffian in cuirass and cloth, with knotted brown hair freed from an ornate spiked helmet and three leathery heads hanging from their belt. The Headhunter, he realized with distaste. Their reputation preceded them.

"Silence is preferable to empty words," the Summoner sneered back. "A lesson you ought to learn."

The savage – only now did he realize the brown lines sliding down the edge of their hair were brown paint and not dirt – laughed, reaching for one of the dozen knives and hatchets at their side.

“Insult was given twice, once for lateness and once by wagging tongue,” the Headhunter said. “I will collect on your behalf, Black Queen.”

Cedric’s magic roiled at his fingertips. The things he was going to unleash to discipline that wretch would... his anger was interrupted by a slight sound, fingers being drummed on a wooden seat’s arm. The Black Queen was studying the Headhunter with a mildly bored and irritated look on her face, as if displeased by the noise someone’s dog was making.

“And who are you to me, Headhunter, to be collecting anything on my behalf?” the Queen of Callow softly asked.

The savage’s cheeks reddened and the Summoner grinned. Finally he got the support he was due by virtue of his Callowan blood. Has his own father not once been a lord under the Fairfaxes? Cedric should have a seat at her inner circle and his pick of assignments, not this mere pittance, but it was a start.

“I only meant-“

“We know exactly what you meant to do, Headhunter,” the Archer smiled. “So shut the fuck up, yeah? Before we decide it’s worth taking issue with.”

The Levantine prick rose in anger, baring a long knife and reaching for a rope.

“I will not be threatened by the likes of you,” the Headhunter barked. “A hound gone tame-“

“Sit down,” the Black Queen said.

The Headhunter turned their gaze to her and hesitated.

“Sit down,” Catherine Foundling mildly said, “before I *make* you sit down.”

They swallowed their pride and did.

Perhaps there had been advantages to have arrived last after all, Cedric decided as he smugly settled into his seat.

—

The Barrow Sword silently cursed.

The Headhunter hadn’t been enough of an idiot to get himself – for the shape of the face paint told Ishaq they were a him, at

the moment – killed to make an example, or at least crippled, which was a damned shame. It meant the old dogs in the Majilis would still be able to point at the Headhunter and then wag their finger disapprovingly at the bloodlust of those Bestowed by Below, helpfully ignoring anything the Barrow Sword himself had ever done in favour of tossing them all in the same cauldron to boil. There just weren't enough of them that weren't head-cutting lunatics for the Blood to hesitate at crossing them, to his continuing frustration.

The Marauder was a lot more careful than her Bestowal would imply but she'd still killed an Osena – on behalf of the Bandit's Blood, she said, but it couldn't be proven – so she was easy to dismiss, and the Grave Binder was both reasonable and amenable but also... less than personable. The smell of living rot could be off-putting, not that Ishaq was one to judge for the consequences of going barrow-raiding. The closeness of the Bestowal to that of the Binder's Blood had also triggered harsh enmity from the Tanja, who considered it a desecration of sorts, but they'd not dared push the enmity too far when their young lord was so close to the Black Queen.

The Foundling Queen was known for keeping to a hard sort of honour, after all, and she was not one to lightly cross. She was also beginning to speak, so Ishaq set aside the thoughts and pricked his ear.

"There's only been a few times in the history of Calernia," the Black Queen said, "where so many of our kind have gathered. Consider that, before we begin addressing grievances. Remember that the last time so many villains were gathered around the same firepit, nations trembled."

Ishaq grinned, watching the dark-haired queen closely as she spoke. All knew that the Queen of Callow had been the one to tame the lord and the princes, to force the hand of the Peregrine and the Sword of Judgement, and so the achievement she called eyes on reflected glory onto her. *You sit here fat and safe instead of hunted because of me*, she was reminding them. That dangerous little bastard the Rapacious Troubadour was leaning forward on his seat to Ishaq's right, as if getting closer would let him get his paws on the soul of the villainess, but he was hardly alone in that. The Black Queen had a fine speaking voice, and a reputation that demanded attention.

"There's enough skill and power assembled here tonight to topple a kingdom," the Black Queen said, a hard smile touching her lips. "That it has been not been enough to break the Dead King over our knee should serve as a reminder of what still lies ahead of us."

"War on Keter," the Archer called out, baring her teeth.

Ishaq laughed and joined his call to hers, as did half a dozen more. The shouting would buy him time enough to figure out how to bury the Headhunter all the way to his neck instead of merely his knees.

—

The Beastmaster eyed the great shadow-crows again, biting his cheek in irritation.

Their form, the power he could feel pulsing within them, it all called to him. Yet Lysander had found that he could not **Master** them, not even the slightest bit. His power was no immediate yoke, taking time and skill to settle properly into the beasts of his menagerie, but when he used it there was always a... bite. Not here, though. He had heard it said that the crows were shards of drow goddesses, not true living creatures, but he'd not truly believed it until now. Wild gods sometimes touched animals with their power, remaking them into something more without fundamentally changing their essence, so he'd expected this to be case here.

Not so, it turned out, and now the shadowy things had turned their black eyes on him. Had they noticed? He could not tell, but caution was in order. This was not the Woods, where he knew the paths and dangers. Boldness had to be measured, lest it cost him more than he was willing to give. The Beastmaster drank from the ale horn the servants had passed him, wiping his mouth afterwards and listening without much interest as the parade of grievances began.

"- deferred to her even though she is fresh to the front, and I was in command," the Summoner whined. "There must be punishment for this."

Gods, Lysander thought, *what a useless prick*. His dislike for the man had grown stronger with every comparison between them. The Beastmaster brought servants to the fight as well, but unlike the mageling he wasn't useless if someone got to him – he fought *with* his menagerie, not *behind* it.

"Are you," the Barrow Sword said, tone slightly disbelieving, "complaining about Dominion warriors deferring to the *Valiant Champion*?"

The Beastmaster grunted in amusement. Ishaq had a good head and a better swordhand, a respectable man. Too close to the Black Queen's party for comfort, but without having turned into a minion.

"I held command," the Summoner insisted.

"No one who has to say that holds anything," the Headhunter dismissed.

There was a murmur of agreement around the fire. The Headhunter wasn't liked – no one wanted to ally with someone who'd stick you in the back for your head and a shadow of your power – but he wasn't wrong. Lysander glanced at the Black Queen, who was lounging on her throne and idly sipping at a cup of wine. She seemed less than impressed.

"What's your exact grievance under the Terms?" the Queen of Callow asked.

"It was disrespect," the Summoner angrily replied. "Against the Terms."

"Disrespect is not against our laws," the Black Queen said. "Were your orders disobeyed or contradicted?"

The Beastmaster chuckled under his breath, as all here knew the answer to that. The Summoner went on to bluster for a bit before it became clear the villainess patience had been exhausted. She glanced at Indrani, who cleared her throat loudly and called for the next grievance to be spoken. Lysander's eyes narrowed at the sight. He wasn't Alexis, to rage at the sight of that or even Indrani at all, but it was still hard to believe Archer had bound herself to others in such a way. The Beastmaster had long believed that Alexis might have inherited the Lady's thirst for challenges but that it was Indrani who'd learned their teacher's restlessness, her wanderlust. It was a belief difficult to pair with the reality of her serving as the Black Queen's enforced, and it had done much to unravel the respect he'd once held for Indrani.

"I have a grievance," the Concocter spoke up.

Lysander's brow rose in interest. Cocky was not one to dip her toe into these things without reason, so this ought to be interesting at last.

"Did you lose a cauldron?" the Headhunter jeered. "It's not like you know how to use anything else."

The Beastmaster's knife came down on the arm of his chair, blade biting into wood with a hard thunk, and the Levantine's own hand twitched towards his blade as he turned to match eyes. Lysander shrugged.

"My hand slipped," the Beastmaster shrugged.

Fucking Dominion shithead. Lysander wasn't some sentimental pissant, but there were lines. Cocky was a lot more useful to

have around than a second-rate tracker who used an aspect to make up for lack of skill.

—

The Harrowed Witch winced.

Merciless Gods, why did all these people have to be so violent? Julien's shade muttered angrily in her ear, his half-heard imprecations rather distracting, but she focused. If this turned into a brawl, she'd throw herself backwards and flee under cover of illusion – the latter part of which would take some concentration. Although, she thought, it was not the Archer who led here but her own mistress. Unlike Lady Indrani, who enjoyed a spot of mayhem between 'comrades', the Black Queen was known for her stern disposition and sharp tongue. Perhaps she'd take this all in hand.

"Your grievance, Concocter?" the Queen of Callow asked.

That bear of a man, the Beastmaster, ceased glaring at the Headhunter and they returned the favour. Both pretended nothing had ever taken place between them. Sweet Providence but Aspasia had lucked out with her seat, having the rough woodsman between her and the Headhunter. Even Julien's shade avoided getting too close to that one.

"I have had supplies brought in from the Arsenal," the Concocter said. "And twice now the crates have been opened and inspected by Proceran soldiers before being passed on to me."

Aspasia felt it more than she saw it. Like the weight in the air before a storm, a pressure had gathered atop the hill. The fire dimmed and breaths came shorter as the Black Queen straightened from a lazy sprawl to sharp-eyed alertness. The Witch had seen it once before in the Arsenal, the subtle metamorphosis that turned a mouthy young woman into the Arch-heretic of the East. It was all in the way she held herself, in the intensity of her. The roiling power around them that had them all shuffling uncomfortably in their seats, those dark eyes – almost black, in the evening light – growing cold with displeasure at what she had heard.

"Those crates, had they been inspected and sealed in the Arsenal?" the Black Queen asked in a clipped tone.

"Yes," the Concocter replied, tone admirably steady.

"You will pass on descriptions of those soldiers to Adjutant," the dark-eyed queen said, drumming her fingers against the arm of her seat. "They will be swinging from gallows by dawn, and your supplies will never be touched again."

Aspasie shivered, for she did not doubt the other woman's word in the slightest.

—

The Rapacious Troubadour weighed his options.

While he'd be most pleased by a greater monthly supply of Binds to take from – their souls were ancient but worn, tasteless and colourless – he doubted that the Black Queen would be amenable to the request. She'd never hidden her distaste for his inclinations, and she'd been quite blunt in warning him of the costs of returning to his old practices. A restriction that he chafed under, even knowing it was only temporary. Still, Lucien was not an unreasonable man and he knew that the Terms and their looming successor, the Liesse Accords, were much to his advantage.

He thrived in society, when navigating hierarchies, and the Black Queen's ambitions would herald the creation of a society of the Damned. The sheer *potential* of that had him giddy, sometimes. So long as he was able to limit his predations to victims deemed acceptable under the rules, heroes would have no real call to hunt him and he'd even be able to move through the civilized world without fear of being hunted. No, the prize was well worth a few years of lean and tasteless pickings. He ate more than enough to avoid desiccation, and he'd begun to pick out the people that would be of use after the war.

Gluttony would not help him here. It'd be much more useful to earn a favour or two from his fellows, and he had just the trick for that. One need not be brilliant to realize that the Berserker was itching for a fight, and she was not so thuggish as to fail to understand when she was being helped. It'd give him an in with the Barrow Sword as well, if he played it well.

"I have a grievance as well, if we are to clear the air," Lucien drawled.

Rather obvious bait, but given the precedents...

"A bard insists on speaking," the Headhunter snorted. "There's a surprise."

Like a fish on a hook.

"This," the Troubadour airily said. "This is my issue, Black Queen. The constant pricking from the prick, so to speak. Can they not be disciplined into a semblance of politeness?"

The Foundling Queen eyed him for a moment, and Lucien felt naked. As if seen through once more. It was exhilarating, in a terrifying sort of way.

"I'm not here to hold your hands," the Black Queen acidly said. "Petty disputes are not breaches of the Terms, they are yours to resolve."

"Ha!" the Headhunter sneered, "You-"

Lucien discreetly winked at the Berserker, whose flat face and broken nose split into a brutally gleeful grin as she grasped the chance she'd just been given. A heartbeat later the Headhunter's jaw popped with a beautiful sound as the Berserker's knuckles smashed into it, the seats of the two warriors toppling as they brawled.

—

That Troubadour was a useful sort for a fucking singer, Zoe approvingly thought as she let out a hoarse shout and smashed the Headhunter's head through the seat even as they slipped a knife into her ribs. She'd remember the good turn and return it in kind. As she was thrown off by the Headhunter the Berserker felt her back begin to crack as the Haze seeped into her, shuddering into her limbs as the strength and anger hardened her muscles.

The Headhunter got to their feet again, as did she, and Zoe ripped out the knife in her side before letting out a blood-curling scream. *Finally* she could cut loose and just **Rage**.

—

The Barrow Sword turned to study the man sitting by his side, a dark-haired sort with insolent good looks and slightly crooked fingers. The cithern strapped to his back seemed as natural to him as the sword on his hip, and though the Rapacious Troubadour did not have the reputation of a great swordsman, there were many kinds of battles. The way the Berserker was spasming wildly and turning red even as the Headhunter stuck her full of knives and hatches to little avail made the point plainly enough.

"Have you ever been to the Dominion, Lucien?" Ishaq casually asked.

"I've not had the pleasure," the other man replied with a slender smile.

"You should visit, one of these days," the Barrow Sword said. "I'm sure you'd find much there to your liking."

If he could not find enough allies within Bestowed of Levant, Ishaq thought, then perhaps it was time to broaden his horizons.

—

The Summoner laughed at the brawling fools, voice high and mocking. The Headhunter had been thoroughly obnoxious and the

Berserker was a rude thug, so he had no horse in this race. Let them smash each other to pieces, for all he cared. His mood significantly improved, he offered a charming smile to the silver-haired woman at his side. The Concocter, she was called. She'd taken his rightful place in the Arsenal – her or one of her *colleagues* – but Cedric was willing to set that aside for the sake of polite conversation.

"I am told you have spent much of your time in the Arsenal," the Summoner said.

Her eyes, he only noticed then, were not of the same colour. One was silver, the other blue. It was disturbing to behold, though he was well-bred enough not to comment on this.

"I have," the Concocter said. "And I am told you sought admission there yourself?"

He grit his teeth.

"Mere rumours," Cedric dismissed. "My talents as a war mage are too precious to squander, I've always known this."

"Are they?" the Concocter said. "I have not been told of the shape of your Gift in any detail."

Was she doubting him? Cedric scowled. A demonstration was in order, then. Hand rising, he seized the threads of his sorcery and pulled out one of his lesser summons. He might as well force apart the two brawling idiots while he was at it, and establish his skills for all to see.

"Come forth," the Summoner intoned.

—

Merde, Aspasia thought.

Magic to her right and a violent death match to her left: the Harrowed Witch had no intention of staying in the middle of this. She tipped back her seat until it fell and crouched behind it, just in time to see some sort of leonine creature in a shimmering ghostly glow leap out of blue circle hanging in the air. The summon would have tackled the Berserker – now red-veined, hulking and screaming – from the back if a sinuous thing had not suddenly struck at it in midair, sinking fangs into its flank. It shimmered out of existence. A snake, Aspasia realized. The Beastmaster had hidden the largest snake she'd ever seen under his furs, and it'd attacked the leaping summon without hesitation.

"You trifling sneak," the Summoner snarled.

The snake, striped and sinuous and looking all too smart for such a creature, retreated and loosely coiled around the Beastmaster's neck.

"Say that again," the large man challenged. "See what happens."

At the bottom of the hill, Aspasia felt creatures begin to stir. The Harrowed Witch began to weave the strands around her, ignoring the furious wails of her brother's shade even as she drew on the essence of his death to hide her existence. The two who'd begun brawling, the Headhunter and the Berserker, had almost tumbled off the edge of the hill. Though the Berserker had clearly hurt the other villain, punching in a rib, the Headhunter had sunk over a dozen blades in their opponent's flesh. Even now they were trying to tie the villainess limbs with some sort of rope, though the Berserker's strange spasms made it difficult to achieve.

Something was slithering along the grass atop the hill and for a moment Aspasia thought it was yet another snake, but in the heartbeat that followed strings of shadow shot up. They latched onto the Headhunter, who jerked in surprise and tried to rip away their hand only to find that the string moved with them. Yet it tightened, after, almost like taffy. Within heartbeats the Dominion prick was covered in shadowy strings and vainly struggling on the ground, mouth covered. The Berserker milled about uncertainly, then let out a furious scream and turned towards the nearest target: the Adjutant. The crippled orc in his wheelchair did not so much as bat an eye while on the ground under the Berserker a shimmer passed. The Witch caught a glimpse of something and the Berserker was *gone*. As if fallen into the ground.

Dusk had arrived, Aspasia saw. The world was dimming. And nowhere was it darker than around the Black Queen on her throne, looking bored as she rested her chin on her palm and watched them all.

"Summoner," the Black Queen idly said. "Beastmaster. The two of you appear to have left your seats, no doubt by mistake."

The magic that had been sharpening the air with the smell of ozone winked out. The creeping creatures that had been making their way up the hill froze, then withdrew. The Beastmaster offered a jerky nod and slumped back onto his seat: the snake disappeared under his furs, as if it'd never been there at all.

"Your Majesty-" the Summoner began.

There was a sound like a rope being tightened, and the Headhunter hoarsely screamed.

"I dislike," Catherine Foundling said, "repeating myself."

The Summoner sat down. The Harrowed Witch dragged her seat back up and sat down on it, hoping no one had taken notice.

—

The Black Queen had seen through him.

The thought struck the Rapacious Troubadour and would not leave him even as he studied the Headhunter's futile struggles against the shadow bindings. Her putdowns had been too smooth, too perfect. The gate beneath the Berserker had already been woven, just left dormant. She'd known Lucien was going to incite a brawl and let him, so that she might use the erupting chaos to her own purposes. What these purposes were he did not know, but he was hungry to find out. If she'd planned it all ahead this far... A dangerous woman, this orphan queen. She'd played the oldest living hero of Calernia like a fiddle, it was said, and so far they were faring no better against her wiles.

A dragonbone pipe in hand, she leaned to the side so that the Adjutant might strike a match and light it for her. Taking a deep breath, silence falling among them as she did, the Queen of Callow spat out a long stream of smoke. She flicked a wrist. A slit opened in the air to the side of the hill and the Berserker came out screaming, hitting the ground as if she'd been thrown down from a cliff instead. There was a crack of broken bones and the villainess ceased moving. Not dead, he thought, but her legs had broken even with all the power of her rage strengthening her.

"Archer," the Black Queen said, "drag that enthusiastic young woman back to her seat. I still have a use for her."

The tall villainess rose to her feet with a lazy grin.

"Nothing like two broken legs to put things into perspective, I've found," the Archer mused.

The Berserker was dragged by the crook of her neck, hair gone wild and looking in a great deal of pain but not entirely displeased with the way her evening had gone regardless. Shadow strings dragged the Headhunter back onto the wreck of their seat, and only then left withdrew. The armoured villain cast wild-eyed looks all around, as if trying to find where the strings had gone, and their breathing was unsteady. It'd escaped absolutely no one's notice that it would have been trivial for the Black Queen to snap their neck, if she'd felt like it.

"I find myself disappointed in you all," the Queen of Callow slowly said, trails of smoke curling up above her. "The information's there to be found, I made sure of it, so it must mean that not a single one of you thought to look."

The Archer leaned back in her seat, looking amused. The Adjutant remained the same mirror he always was, unreadable. Lucien watched the others, but found only puzzlement and veiled faces. No one was quite sure what she meant, then. Good, he'd not been left behind.

"How many villains have signed onto the Truce and Terms?" the Black Queen asked. "Does a single one of you know?"

Lucien hid a frown, counting silently. At least twenty, he thought, but he was uncertain of the numbers in Cleves so it was likely higher. Besides, had the First Prince not taken one of the Damned as an adviser? She had kept this quiet, but not so quiet the likes of the Troubadour could not find word of it.

"Twenty eight," the Adjutant said, his voice like rough gravel.

The Troubadour blinked in surprise. Was this true? It seemed...

"Some of you are putting it together, I see," the Black Queen thinly smiled, eyes passing over him and then to his surprise onto the Headhunter. "There are seventy-four Named who have signed onto the Terms, you see."

Less than half. Lucien would admit he was surprised. He'd expected, if not quite even halves, then at least something close to it. This was sharply imbalanced in their disfavour.

"And what is that to us, Black Queen?" the Beastmaster replied.

"Look around you," she replied. "Then think of the heroes and their own firepit. How, unlike you, they are *making allies*."

—

"Let them hold hands," the Headhunter dismissed. "It will not save them when the night gets dark."

The Barrow Sword almost laughed, for as usual Saidi was missing the point. All that power, all that skill, but not a bushel of wits to go with them. When the war on Keter ended, things would not return to what they had once been. That was what the Queen of Callow was telling them. How many of these Bestowed by Above would have met, if not for this war? Now they knew names and faces, had struck friendships and alliances. When the war ended, when the truce came at an end, the heroes would prowl in *packs*. Magelings from Ashur allied with duellists from Procer, priests from the Free Cities with the Blood of Levant. They would be fighting an enemy that had learned, that had grown, that was *ready for them*.

"You warn us of annihilation," Ishaq bluntly said.

—

"Petty alarmism," the Summoner said. "They cannot turn on us after we carried the war against Procer. It would be dishonourable."

The Harrowed Witch swallowed a hysterical giggle. They were going to bet their lives on *honour*? The man was blind. She'd not thought it before, but the Black Queen was right. They must come to terms with the Chosen, or perhaps band with a few others for protection. If they were too many to be easily slain, or perhaps hidden...

"The Grey Pilgrim would poison every single one of you and lose not a wink of sleep over it," the Barrow Sword flatly replied. "We all know what the years before the Uncivil Wars were like. The Peregrine and the Saint, picking every flower before it could bloom. They'll do the same now, only with bands and training and coin."

—

"There's no need to fight them," the Beastmaster said.

And meant it, too. Lysander saw no need to spill hero blood, or have his own spilled by them. What did they have to fight over? Let them keep their cities and their temples, his own home was far beyond their reach.

"We can keep to our places, and they to theirs," the Beastmaster said.

"And so we go back living in a fucking hovel in the woods?" Cocky said.

He blinked in surprised. Had her years in the Arsenal truly softened her so much, *weakened* her so much?

"They'll keep it all," the Concocter warned. "The Arsenal, the secrets and the libraries and the wonders we made. If we disperse back into the wilds, after the war, then they keep the world and we exile ourselves to the fringes."

"The Accords ensure they cannot simply hunt us," Lysander sharply reminded her.

"You depend on *ink* for safety, now?" Cocky replied just as sharply.

—

"The Accords don't say we can't fight," the Berserker said. "They only say *how* we can't. They'll come for us, Beastmaster."

Zoe would never have considered signing them, if they did. It was a pack of rules about how violence could be done, and much about

magic, but the only parts that concerned her were no different from duelling rules. She could stomach that.

"She's right," the Headhunter said, to her surprise. "There are some among them who will want to hunt. They'll follow us, wait for an excuse."

"And they'll have backers in the courts," the Rapacious Troubadour added. "Nobles behind them, soldiers and safe places. We all know the Mirror Knight was in bed with the House of Langevin, and he won't be the last."

Fucking nobles, Zoe thought, anger welling up. With their tricks and their lies and their... biting into her lips, she forced herself to push down the rage. The Black Queen was likely to do more than just break her legs, next time.

—

"They know who we are, now," Ishaq said. "Don't forget that. They know our names, where we rose to power. They will know where to look for us."

That struck home with more than a few, he saw on their faces. It was a dreadful thing that'd been revealed to them, the Barrow Sword thought, but it was also an opportunity. There were some here who would make useful allies, and to who he would be of use in turn. Bargains could be had, favours traded.

"It's worse than that," the Concocter flatly said, pushing back her silver hair. "Think of the weapons the Arsenal has been able to make in just a few years. They have the numbers and the coin to keep making such things, greater ones. What do we have, a handful of forges and libraries dispersed across half the continent? How many of us even have a roof to sleep under?"

Ashen Gods, Ishaq thought. A grim truth, that. He had territory in the Brocelian, but it was only his so long as no other Bestowed came to take it from him. He looked at the three on the other side of the fire, the dark-eyed queen and her hands on each side — the fang and the steel, waiting and silent and expectant. They had known all this from the start. Where this would lead them. The Black Queen was waiting for them at the end of this road.

"You have shown us a doom, Black Queen," Ishaq said. "Will you also show us how to avert it?"

—

Lucien leaned forward, eyes alight. Now was the time for the reveal, he thought.

"After the war, under my auspices a hall will be founded in Cardinal," the Black Queen idly said. "It will have workshops and armories, libraries and artefacts. Its doors will be open to any of Below's who sign the Liesse Accords and agree to a few additional... rules of engagement."

The Summoner began to speak, but the Archer's black glare silenced him.

"This hall will also offer its services as intermediary between all who belong to it," the Queen of Callow said. "Should they seek allies within our kind, or to trade favours. It would serve as guarantor of any such deal made, naturally."

And so enable the making of alliances through the threat of the Black Queen herself taking offence at the breaking of a pact made under her auspices, the Troubadour thought. He could not resist, letting out a soft peal of laughter. This would not disappear all their troubles, but it would give them the tools to solve them by their own hands. And all it would require of them was to follow the Black Queen's rules, to heed her Accords so that they might all reap the benefits of her peace.

All hail the queen, Lucien Travers amusedly thought.

"I might be interested in such an arrangement," the Troubadour said.

—

It could be of use, the Summoner thought. Since the Arsenal was barred to him, and likely to remain so...

—

If nothing else it would make the trading of favours a more reliable thing, Lysander admitted to himself.

—

Word of who to hunt, and who to avoid, the Headhunter thought. Always the hardest of knowledge to gather. It would depend on these rules, but as things stood...

—

The Concocter would have opened a newborn for what was being offered, what were a few damned rules to her?

—

The Berserker frowned. More rules. Not pleasant to hear, but if this let her avoid being hunted by the White Knight after the war she would have to consider it.

—

It would let her find another band, the Harrowed Witch realized with a sigh of relief. Safety in numbers, with a powerful patroness behind them.

—

“Oh yes,” the Barrow Sword grinned, all sharp teeth bared. “This would be of interest to me as well.”

—

As the pieces fell into place Catherine Foundling blew out a stream of grey smoke, and smiled a devil’s smile.

caoimhinh

Hah! My wish was granted, Interludes from Villains’ POV! And with titles that contrast with those of the Heroes’ 2 chaps!

Hell yeah! This is awesome.

Zggt

Nothing like a threat of extinction and the hope of having anything permanent to motivate people to gather up and defend themselves. This is literally how nations are born. And of course Cat is the only possible queen here. Black might just shed a tear of pride at that.

RoflCat

There’s an...ideal? for the women of a certain region in another series I’ve read (it’s not translated that far yet) that sum down roughly to “Get what you want while making everyone happy while at it”

In that region, the ideal of men are the courageous knights that triumph over anything thrown at them, while the women are the cunning schemer.

Then again one of their proposal method is to literally pin down their target and ask for his conditions to accept the marriage.

[Adrian V](#)

Ok what novel is that (i am assuming is LN or WN) and can you link translation and source?

RoflCat

Ascendance of Bookworm

<https://www.novelupdates.com/series/ascendance-of-a-bookworm/>

source WN (there's LN as well)

<https://ncode.syosetu.com/n4830bu/>

Just keep in mind that given how this series mostly follow the main character, we don't get to see those madlad folks that often.

You first get to meet them early in arc 4.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Thank you for extending the list of "to read" webnovels.

Dome Zasrekh

Where?

caoimhinh

This chapter was utterly delicious. The Villains have much more interesting personalities and way more dynamic in their interactions than the Heroes.

It had me grinning and enjoying throughout the whole reading. The quirks of personalities, motivations, and ideologies simply flowed much smoothly and feel much more fleshed out than the Heroes, despite how much exposure we'd had to the Heroes.

This was a gathering of rogues with marked personalities and ambitions, misfits with their own agendas working together, and the resulting dynamic is much more entertaining than when we have seen the Heroes' gatherings, where they feel more like a bunch of self-righteous pricks and immature kids.

Oh, these guys would be at each other's throats and die due to falling in the mistakes of classic villainy at the drop of a hat without Cat herding them, but the reading was really way more enjoyable.

I'm really hoping for more chapters like this one. Also, reading from their POV how they have this sort of admiration-fear relationship with Cat is exquisite.

[wipncrowell](#)

gorgeous chapter.

Hav3n

Beautiful, just beautiful.

Sir Nil

I would follow Irritant into battle.

Sir Nil

"Remember that the last time so many villains were gathered around the same firepit, nations trembled." Leading them from the beginning.

dadycoool

Find a path and put your feet in the prints. It's how she rolls.

shikkarasu

I would follow Irritant *to* battle, but I think the spectators get the best deal out of what happens *in* it.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

Always a treat to get an external POV of Cat's shenanigans.

Derpman

You know every once in a while I feel like apgte is starting to wain a bit, but then a chapter like this comes out and just fall in love all over again

excession638

It has it's slow spots, but they're necessity.

This chapter is a masterpiece.

NerfGlaistigUaine

That poor soldier, he never signed up to brawl with the greatest Dread Emperor of all time.

erebus42

Honestly if you signed up to serve under Irritant, you really should have had a plan in place on the off chance you ever had to bash your boss's brains in in self defense.

Darkening

Honestly I was thinking an enemy soldier, but it's even more funny if it was one of his. Man, I've been a Traitorous loyalist from day 1, but irritant makes a strong case for himself.

Sir Nil

If both of them existed in the same era, it would've been entirely likely, nay, periodic that they try to dump the throne on the other while the other pursues a career in shoemaking.

Sir Nil

They will probably fight over the same shoemaking shop as well.

medailyfun

Nope, one of them would definitely betray the shop.
At least one.

nimelennar

And periodically you'd find out that the current reign of Dread Emperor Irritant was really the reign of Dread Emperor Traitorous in disguise all along, you fools!

And maybe vice versa.

Finn .-. .

I would like to point out the irony of the phrase "Traitorous Loyalist."

Sir Nil

There is no irony. As a Loyalist to Traitoourous I make sure to betray him on a biweekly basis. It's just my civic duty.

[Liliet](#)

Does biweekly mean twice a week or every other week?

Sir Nil

I tell the Dread Emperor twice a week, but in actuality, I betray him once every other week. Such lies and deception are simply the sign of a strong empire.

[Liliet](#)

An excellent solution!

Sir Nil

This is a secret but in truth, my greatest betrayal to the Dread Emperor is that I never betray him at

all! Hah! He'll never suspect that it was I all along!

NerfContessa

You made my day.

And well, I still think traytorous. And irritant might have been the same person somehow.

[Javvies](#)

Heh.

Villains will buy into the Accords and then more because they realize the advantages of organizing under the Accords, for their own protection, comfort, and support.

Berserker (and Troubadour) are lucky that Cat saw this coming, and so never got close to Hakram. Cat would not have been so mild in her response if Hakram had been subject to collateral damage in the fighting.

Also, Cat prepared well. Everything in the meeting has gone more or less as she anticipated and planned for.

It's always nice to see how other people see Cat.

WeeMadCanuck

I think whoever touches Hakram isn't in for just a less mild approach. They would be launching themselves full speed into their graves.

Anomandris

Yeah, the only more surefire way of suicide in Calernia would be killing Black?

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, that one I think Cat can breathe in, breathe out and let go. Not easily, but she can. She IS aware of what he did throughout his life.

Of course, it does depend on WHO did it...

Sparsebeard

Cat probably could let it go.

Ranger though...

[Liliet](#)

...also could tbh.

I don't think she cares that much)=

Wonder

I started laughing the moment Berserker turned her attention to "the cripple" .

shikkarasu

I'm keep expecting Hakram to **Stand** up, missing 40% of his body or not, and open a can of **Rampage** on some fool.

Lox

Rampage is amped up Rage after all.

Axel Rafael

Even if Catherine didn't do a thing, they wouldn't have been able to touch Hakram... Not with his Masegoed Up wheelchair!

caoimhinh

Although, they didn't exactly realize that, Catherine had to point it out to them.

But the pieces were already there, so the moment they even considered the issue, they were all like "oh, shit. How did I not see this?"

LarsBlitzer

I think the main reason they hadn't foreseen this is because they simply hadn't had the advantage of perspective. Cat, Hakram, and Indrani have. It's been pointed out here that Peregrine, Saint and many others have made it their mission to strangle any and all of Below's nascent Chosen in the cradle, sometimes literally. Above's entirely too well-acquainted with "The ends justify the means" and "It's for the Greater Good" to excuse entire rolls of butcher's bills and atrocities by the literal boatload. It's a minor Infernal miracle that there as many as they have. Add to that being signed up to fight a war against the literal antithesis of life, and I'm not surprised they hadn't pondered the question of what happens after the Big Bad is Dead dead.

nick012000

I don't think that Hakram would have been in any danger, even if he's in a wheelchair. Remember, two of his Aspects are Stand and Rampage. If he has to fight, I expect that he'd be able to weave replacement limbs out of shadow easily enough, even if it

would tire him a lot more rapidly than he would have tired had he been whole.

dadycoool

I bet if the two of them were alone and she turned to him in the midst of RAGE, he'd be like "Heh, that's cute." and then stomp on her.

Mennolt van Alten

> Stand

Oh god, I hadn't realised this yet, but that aspect until now has always been 'hold my ground in a battle' but I wouldn't be surprised if it repurposed itself / augmented itself into growing Hakram temporary legs. Until now the aspect has basically always given him magic strength and resilience to hold the line, and I wouldn't be surprised if the aspect realised 'he needs legs to do so too' and just gave them.

Agent J

He's also grown strange, ethereal claws before. I fully expect to see him get out of his wheelchair to straight up wreck shit in a fight before Book's end.

[sengachi](#)

Let's be honest, even down three and a half limbs Hakram still doesn't need Cat to fight his battles for him. The Berserker was fool enough to lose situational awareness and I'd pit Hakram's Rampage against her Rage any day.

That fight probably would have ended with Hakram's wrestling her to the ground with stumps and one working prosthetic hand, and then fastening his teeth on her throat.

Gareth Hughes

While reciting poetry. We need another poem brawl!

Anomandris

All hail the Queen!!

[TeK](#)

Like weaving a tapestry. You arrange the strings in shape, pull at a few, and a pattern is done.

Daniel E

I just got home from work and am sleepy, so I misread this as 'weaving a pastry'. Suffice to say, I am now both confused and hungry.

erebus42

A berserker in the style of Cú Chulainn and a delightful soul eating silvertongue, truly wonderful additions to the tale. The Witch and Abigail need to get a drink one of these days, I'm sure they'd get along swimmingly. The Summoner is lucky he's useful. He seems like the sort Cat would love to gut on general principle and who no one would get too upset over.

Navi-Hank

He got warp spasm from somewhere

Xinci

Well, it was once again, useful to see the palpable of the effects of having a lot of narrative weight, truly a lovely demonstration. As is her seeming to now have a bigger reason to get an enforcement branch for Cardinal. I originally suspected she might rotate in Cabals from the Drow for that, as a way for them to expand the Night in a cooperative fashion. Her goal has been for things to run on their own after all, so I am quite curious about what met methods she will use to help supply those of a darker shade.

Rapacious indeed, I am sure he is a lovely font of data on all these new developments, for the Gods, one way or another. I am honestly fascinated by how he might function and how his soul consumption works. He found older souls tasteless and colorless so he seems to desire new essence like a devil/demon. Presumably, he is adding their souls to his when he "feeds", which is quite natural but it seems that he isn't fully retaining them. Fitting for a rapacious being to have unending hunger, I wonder if Masego will ever not anything about him, he is rather similar to a devil...

I am rather curious if the Head Hunter is using those heads to bind souls or is just taking some form of copy that is bound to the heads. I do wonder if they can take on the forms of those they kill, I mean we do have a Skinwalker already but mimicking things with souls seems to vary a bit. Like Summoner may be doing something similar to the Binders, or perhaps its just Diabolism? Though the difference there seems a matter of perspective or origin of whats being summoned.

Black Spiral Dancer

I always read the Headhunter as the old movies, haven't you watched... the guys who used swords and fought battles, immortals

until someone CUT THEIR NECKS and so let the other one collect their power and memories...?

Highlander, anyone?

Abrakadabra

There can be only one!

[Adrian V](#)

Ok i think this may be my new favorite chapter, the look into all the villains heads and how they see Cat was great, plus the whole thing was fun. And the clever way Cat united them was superb.

Now who was that villain Cordelia took in? I can't remember if it was that duelist (or even if he was damned) but even if so i thought he was more of a bodyguard.

erebus42

I believe he was referring to the Forgetful Librarian who appears to be take the role of the exasperated secretary to Cordelia.

Sir Nil

I believe there was also a luck manipulator, I forget their name but Cat took a few of their fingers after he tried to steal a few soldier's luck,

Earl of Purple

The Pilfering Dicer is in Cleves, I think. A pity, I wonder how he and the Rapacious Troubadour get on. Both small villains who need to blend into society rather than stand truly outside it. One steals luck, the other souls. They either get on well due to the similarities between them or hate each other as rivals.

Or both.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Great chapter for sure, but my favorite still is and likely will always be Kairos' swansong

Darkening

The Gods Below clapping for Kairos' show was a hell of a moment.

Black Spiral Dancer

I seem to remember another great one of... these kind of chapters, so to speak. The one where the Seer and the Bard kept talking to one another while in the end Cordelia rejected her name of Warden of the West but for a slightly change in timing and the possibility of choice where before wouldn't have been.

That was also a Great chapter, with capital G.

[Liliet](#)

And Yet We Stand iirc

checks

[yup!](#)

Bellow

this was a beautiful chapter. I loved seeing all these different takes on villainy and how they react to the accords and Catherine. From the stupid arrogant, The blood thirsty and the ambitious social climbers to the little witch who just wants to survive. It was a ton of fun.

Also... ALL HAIL EMPEROR IRRITANT!!!

Death Knight

Carrot and stick... Works every time.

Abrakadabra

Except when someone really don't want to do what you want, and Tell you to stick your carrot up yours. 😊

[Liliet](#)

You just need to pick the right carrot.

And if that doesn't work, the right stick 😊

Juff

Typo Thread:

his eyes he'd paid for (should this be "his eyes that had paid for")

at his advantage > to his advantage

he'd ben > he'd been

as such a > at such a

was a mildly > with a mildly

Has his own > Had his own

personable.The (missing space)

barrow-raiding.The (missing space)
villainess patience > villainess' patience
enforced > enforcer
hatches > hatchets
of blue circle > of a blue circle
snaked > snake (occurs twice)
villainess limbs > villainess' limbs
spams > spasms
in surprised > in surprise
to who he > to whom he
silence him > silenced him

Joel ~~DELETED~~

Absolutely beautiful

dadycoool

And thus we behold the Black Queen BREAK half the Villains west of Praes and TAKE their souls for her own. As both the White Knight and Mirror Knight once prophesied, those who find themselves within her area of influence find themselves drawn to her like moths to a flame, unknowingly allowing themselves to be chained to her will until they are like dogs called to their master's heel. Even the Concoctor and Beastmaster, who see the effect she has on one of their own, the one who would never settle down with anyone, are unable to escape the allure of the Devil's Grin. Even the Berserker, an unstoppable force of RAGE, found herself reigning in her temper for fear of the Queen's displeasure.

[Liliet](#)

Reining in. Reins, like horse. Pulling on reins to call to a stop.

Not ruling a country.

dadycoool

Oops. I hadn't noticed it before. Damn context-blind spellchecker.

[Liliet](#)

Really, *really* glad to help.

(Thanks, tumblr post I barely remember that alerted me to several sets of words like this lol)

dadycoool

Reigning, reining, raining?

Liliet

I don't think I've ever seen raining confused with these... But free rein, rein in, phase vs faze, horde vs hoard...

Liliet

(I'm sorry, this is just SUCH a common mistake, I couldn't hold it in anymore)

Darkening

Remember when cat thought bards were all bumbling comic relief? Ah, how things change.

Black Spiral Dancer

That might have be EXACTLY the reason our steemed Author decided to create Bards surpassing such antiquated and, frankly, monochromatic view of what a Bard truly is. No matter what Order of the Stick made you believe, bards can be a soul of any team, like in Looking for Group, where there's that Minotaur bard – and I don't remember if the Elf was a bard or a ranger initially, but he COULD have been a bard. Also, the anti-team Stick has a bard for Team Leader AND the father of Stick's Bard still IS the team leader of a strong and ancient band of villains that have settled down.

Catherine seems like she's letting go of the Fighter Mantle and accept a more varied position of a True Mastermind she always was, and Bard fits her much more now – exactly for how multifaceted Bards always are (kinda like the Gemini sign, my own Moon sign, that has the same properties).

Clumsy

The hamfistedness of the virtue signalling intensifies, huh?

Matthew Wells

?

Big I

I found a lot to unpack in this chapter.

First, the Barrow Sword. If/when Cat steps aside, he's the logical replacement for leader of Team Villain. He's got the most respect and the least grudges. He also struck me, if he were Praesi, to be most likely to be Dread Emperor in a Villainous band. He forges alliances and keeps his eye on politics.

The Summoner, funnily enough, also struck me as a classic would be Tyrant. One of the useless, ineffectual ones. More Cobra Commander than Emperor Palpatine.

The Rapacious Troubadour is classic Chancellor material. I can't help but wonder what he and the Barrow Sword would be able to get up to in Levant, especially with the Grave Binder and the Maurauder (Dominion version of Warlock and Black Knight maybe?).

And finally, what stuck me most about this chapter is how Cat turned the whole "meta-narrative" of the Villain stories on its head. Now THEY'RE the ones banding together for safety, worried about the implacable, ruthless, well resourced enemy out to kill them. Now THEY'RE the underdogs. It's a total role reversal.

Oh, and it also struck me how this meeting resembled a Bond Villain meeting with their minions, e.g. Blofeld or Dr Evil. Cat even trap doors someone who displeased her! Classic.

Black Spiral Dancer

Oh yeah, thanks for your precious remarks! And I hadn't even noticed about the trap doors that makes someone fall under! Old but gold.

MarcusAurelius

Using they for singular is grammatically dubious and just plain confusing, would not "it" work better?

Sinead

Do you ever refer to someone's possessions as "their possession"?

It is usually seen as dehumanising (and is probably why drow culture uses "it".)

Context is always required when using pronouns, gendered or not. And it pays to be respectful, even if you are not dealing with a divinely empowered serial killer.

Big I

No. My understanding is that "it" is an offensive term for non-binary people IRL. The preferred pronoun is "they" (again, so far as I understand).

Sinead

Preferred pronouns vary (in Headhunter's case, note how Ishaq can read contextual clues to be specific about pronouns, while everyone else defaults to they. Interestingly, Lysander (Beastmaster) also seems to be able to pick up on the

Headhunter's gender presentation. EE's yet to write anyone as a bigot when it comes to gender or sexual orientation, so Beastmaster referring to Headhunter as "he" is either a typo or a demonstration on how Lysander can read people.

RandomIntenetStranger

Imo it must be hard being a bigot about anything when a divinely empowered murderer may take offense, add to it a few hundred years of it on repeat and it would get beaten out of any culture, besides if we are to make parallels the main reason queer people get the treatment they do in our society can be reduced to the way religion (any) is ingrained in it, so again it becomes difficult to accuse anyone of being blasphemous when that person or someone like them are endorsed by the gods.

Black Spiral Dancer

True enough. And that's why religion is cracking slowly, like an Iceberg melting, and it's gonna melt down in a few centuries, max. There's just nowhere for it to grow, only to DIVIDE.

[Burlyraven](#)

Using "they" in the singular has been recognized in professional literary circles for coming on 2 years now, and been acceptable in most less than formal instances for centuries. "It" is typically used for inanimate things or as a form of derision, which is why the Drow preference for "it" is so unusual.

[Erik V. Smykal](#)

solid point.
additionally, if one needs a form of direct address that is non-binary, 'Sia' takes the place of 'Sir', or 'Ma'am'.
This is definitely one of the best chapters in the whole saga, for sure.
Beautiful.

Morgenstern

"They" has been used for centuries in real life in cases of "gender unknown" when speaking about people. Also, for mixed groups.

Never trust (old) grammar books on spoken language and gender issues. 😊

Speaking as one who has studied linguistics and done some research in this specific field: Historically, grammar books

have been written by old white males, though, who can (by their own letters at the time) be PROVEN to have *consciously* put in terms that “will probably be offensive to women” – but who cares, as well as left out usages of centuries before them that were (and still *are*) very much in use when it comes to spoken language.

Morgenstern

Ugh... how I hate hitting “post” too fast and not being able to edit comments. As well as other posters’ comments being randomly hidden from view, even when they are literal days older... -.-

Morgenstern

I would so love to scratch that about ‘mixed groups’... no idea where that came from *lulz* I was thinking of the gender being given as “mixed”, “undefined” etc. ... Sometimes my brain does strange things.

Abrakadabra

Sadly, english has this kind of strange tendency for gendered words, which some of us WHO are not native speakers cannot get used to easily. For example in my native there is a Word for ‘it’ and there is also a Word for he/she which can be either male or female cause it is undefined.

[Mental Mouse](#)

If singular “they” was good enough for Shakespeare and Chaucer, it’s good enough for me....

[Burlyraven](#)

I’m finding myself liking the Barrow Sword more and more with each of his appearances. He’s obviously fully team Evil, but he seems more on the rebellious faction of Evil over the malicious side of Evil. Obviously he’s got a bit more darkness than the Woe if he’s willing and eager to work closely with the likes of the Rapacious Troubadour, but he’s most dangerous in the fact that he knows how and when to pick his battles, and even accept his defeats.

xGarudax

What a bunch of cowards and weaklings, deeply disheartening to see.

mamm0nn

True, though they were good character designs I was missing some notable and terrifying characters. I like Cat, but making

all the other Villains come off as second-rate or greenhorns doesn't quite endear me further. Where are the Old Monsters that have been around for hundreds of years even if they are not nation-shattering, the Villains that could beat Cat or at least make her get up from her chair, the ones smart enough that a whisper can spell doom ten chapters from now? I hope there were more present than the handful we saw here who were just quiet because they knew better, or that the Villains elsewhere have a few superior specimens.

Earl of Purple

Saint of Swords spent what, seventy years running around Calernia killing any villain she could find. The ones she missed are either young, weak or excessively subtle. Or Praesi, since she left them alone. Any powerful old monsters she didn't tackle are ones that stayed hidden long enough to get missed, or Horned Lords.

Villains don't age, but they don't get to live long either. Most are slain by heroes, other villains or their own hubris long before they reach a point they would die of old age. The Calamities are an exception- pretty much **the** exception, at that.

mamm0nn

One hero cannot resolve everything when we've just heard that there's at least 75 Named around right now not including the ones we know aren't in the Accords like Ranger and Malicia, and there probably being another fifty Villains around on top of that. And that's at a time when all the focus is on the war with the Dead King, when I assume that new Named with their own tale are unlikely to rise because it'd simply be overshadowed. By taxes stifling opportunity and growth alone, if nothing else. More likely, right now Named either rise in relation to the war or not at all, and the war already has all its main players in place. So it's probable that there's usually actually more Named running around even if of a lesser quality.

As Pilgrim said way back, Saint was the one sent if Evil festered too long and too wide (presumably also limited to Good lands). Not necessarily if a Villain appeared at all or if they hit only one of those two conditions. She's Above's answer to either Cat or Akua riding too high and succeeding once too many or sticking around too long in the Good Callow, but not for Squire fighting her first Hero.

She seemed to have a clear and narrow Role for her foes and application, straying from it would still work by brawn but she wouldn't have Providence on her side. So her hunting Villains and her finding them without Creation's handholding

are two different things, though she may stumble into a Villain from time to time the latter she probably only gets when the Villain hits her criteria.

In this, Pilgrim would've been much more devastating thanks to having a narrow Role but one that supports a great many Heroes to stack the odds in their favour in the early stages. Him, I can see a trend of Above having more champions than Below coming to be. But not by that much, as many a Named may start with a mentor or doesn't have a story where Providence notices correct danger early enough for him to step in and save the Hero in the nick of time. Providence isn't all-knowing with future-sense and Named still retain a semblance of free will, so if it sees a pattern where the Hero needs a last minute mentor a week in advance when Pilgrim is two weeks off, they have to use another mentor or see the Hero die.

All in all, I don't see 'Because Saint of Swords' or even 'Because Pilgrim' as a good example of why there would be fewer Villains. The gods Above and Below are still in a balancing act where Below too gets their Due, and Above already has a lot of advantages so they must have limitations. We haven't seen many of Below's boons because Cat hasn't gotten the chance to use them or doesn't realise them as everyone in the Interludes does, but Below gets more than just the successful first act. They'd have to, given Above's many advantages.

On your second paragraph, that's an assumption and trend, but definitely not the rule. If what you were saying is true, people wouldn't even have known of that boon until the Calamities did it, which wasn't the case. Most villains don't live for long, but that hardly means that they all do. And the very point of this boon is that the ones that survive stay at their peak and never disappear by old age.

If even just 1% of all the Villains survive long enough to really make their immortality work, and those odds are probably higher because we're still talking about Named, that still means that if there's 100 villains over 30 years one will stick around for a while. And that tends to accumulate over time, even if their average lifespan is only a century. There should be more old monsters, even if we're not talking city-busters, on Below's side than just the Dead King.

Javvies

Pilgrim probably did more of the cutting down any new Villains that arose than Saint did, at least, once he wasn't tied so tightly to Levant.

But it has been explicitly established that between the

two of them, plus the other Heroes, they kept a boot firmly stomped on the neck of Villainous Named outside of Callow and Praes for the past several decades.

However, those “old monsters” you say should be around? Those are exactly the kind of people Saint would be cutting down in droves.

Also, they are far more likely to decline to become involved, even if they’re around.

Villains tend to have shorter life expectancies than Heroes, despite the Villainous immunity to aging. That is, most Villains never see any actual benefit from their immunity to aging.

Most Villains usually lose to the first Hero or Heroes that they run into, while the Hero(es) usually survive. Maybe not right away, of course, depending upon the Story(ies) they’re in.

It’s also worth keeping in mind that Villains usually only arise in the singular, while their story can contribute to spawning multiple Heroes, and is nigh guaranteed to spawn at least one Hero. While Heroes can also arise in the absence of active interaction with a Villain’s Story.

Also, as regards the balance of power between Above and Below and the Names that they empower ... the Dead King counts ... but he is usually dead weight on the side of Below.

In addition, there is the nature of each – Above can be a lot more proactive in distributing Names, even if the recipients haven’t actually done anything to warrant getting a Name, in addition to giving Names to people who earned them based on the merits of their actions. Below doesn’t just hand Names out, Below only gives out Names when somebody actively does things to warrant getting a Name.

Villains outlasting multiple Heroic entanglements is an exception, and extraordinarily rare.

Just think about how many Heroic bands took a run at Cat between the Doom of Liesse and the Crusade being declared. Five Heroic bands ... in less than a year.

Villains have to survive every encounter with a Hero in order to continue surviving. The Heroes only need to get lucky once in order to end a Villain ... and Heroes tend to get lucky in that manner. Remember, there’s Narrative weight swinging just about every Story in favor of the Heroes against the Villain – “Good always wins over Evil in the end” after all.

mamm0nn

There are a couple of misconceptions here, and the most erroneous one is that you're forgetting that Above and Below are equal and that the one intervening allows the other to intervene equally without retribution.

We see this story from Cat's perspective where she's usually on the receiving end of the stick and well out of her league, but remember that her perspective is very much unreliable when it comes to herself. We see that in every interlude that involves her. As much as she may see the deck stacked in the heroes' favour, we don't know what the balance truly is and it's quite likely not as much in the Heroes favour as she thinks it is.

But that's of course the question, and one we cannot answer ourselves. Only EE knows the answer there, while we are left with the perspective of the woman and her mentor who howl against the heavens about this very topic of unfairness.

Yet in the end, when Above does anything then Below gets its due. That's the way it works as has been explicitly stated. This already counters that there would be more Heroes than Villains, I don't even know where you got that notion from. Villains might create a Hero, but a Hero is just as likely to create Villains to oppose them.

On the Dead King, it's been explicitly stated before that one side's due isn't continuous but once paid always gained. See "Villainous interlude Cadenza": Black and Scribe ponder that the Wandering Bard might've been Heaven's due in response of Triumphant or vice versa, meaning that as far as these Name-experts know one can die while the other persists. Thus the Dead King too is a once paid all yours deal.

Which is, of course, assuming that a Named doing things themselves counts as Due to the gods at all. Though there is the due of his Name, the Dead King didn't get the power from Below rather he performed the ritual himself. He might've even not had much of a due for Above to use. Meanwhile Providence and all those hero-helping tricks are directly from the gods Above, so they accumulate and should come with an equal but opposite reaction from Below somewhere.

No telling what that balance is, but as the rules of this story have stated there has to be such a balance. More Villains but lower quality perhaps, the gods Below using more champions and see what sticks? Maybe? Or something else. No telling what that would be, though, once again only EE can know.

On the comment that Saint would've killed those Old Monsters, seems you didn't properly read what I said. Those Villains have to be both old and active, probably in Good lands too. Saint didn't go to the Underdark either, despite its many potent Evil monsters, because it's not bothering the Good lands. If such an old monster is in hiding or more subtle, she might have no providence backing her to find that Villain at all, turning things in a wild goose chase probably. And some of those old monsters may have considered what Cat is trying to do for them and came to see if it would come to fruition.

Not sure where you got your ideas about Heaven being able to dish out Names willy nilly while Below demands them to be earned. I don't recall Black and Cat earning their Names, nor Archer and Masego earned his at most earned through study and talent.

No, it's been established that being already extraordinary in what you are and can do is a big factor of getting a Name on either side, none of the things you're suggesting here.

However, that aside you should really take the most important point from this: This story is told from a heavily biased point of view in this very regard. More likely the Heroes aren't actually as overpowered when not in the context of "How will Creation screw over Cat today?", and you are adding several additional powers to them that the story never mentioned.

Things that have been properly established though:

-Cat, Black and many of our known friendly Villains are actively weaker than what they could be because they go against the grains. Black isn't a powerhouse like the previous Knights because he doesn't act the Villain, while Warlock was very potent because he very much was acting the Villain as intended. This has been explicitly stated by several people, including Black and the Wandering Bard.

Cat too works against the grain, so she too is less powerful than she should be if she were a cackling madwoman. Where she has a lot of power to slug around with and probably fits the grooves better than Black, Creation likely screws her in other departments. Meanwhile most Villains probably don't nearly have the kind of trouble she goes through, and perfect Villains like Tyrant could easily go toe to toe with a full and fully fletched band of Five still winning.

-Most of the Heroes we've seen Cat go up against are the higher class ones. Just like how the Villains introduced here are more second-tier, many a Hero will be more one-note and weaker. We just don't remember the Heroes that are easily beaten in one chapter as well, because they've only been around for one chapter before Cat moves on.

-Evil can win. If Good goes about it wrong and doesn't force one of their Stories by attrition, or if Evil is simply too powerful, then the whole 'Good wins in the end' is just a hopeful tune by the Heroes. If the Villain kills the Hero before a Story even forms, doesn't let it all come down to a pivot point, or doesn't want to play with their food, they can win. Again, we see this from the perspective of Cat who's always defending and reactionary, never from the perspective of a real Villain. For all we know, even the lesser Villains like the Headhunter can get three heroic heads on their belt before the fourth gets a Story able to make that willpower attrition schtick work against someone that hunts and goes for the kill.

Abrakadabra

You Just love your own voice aint ya?

mamm0nn

Yes, because why use arguments and words when you can just 'win' like that? Surely you just showed me, good show...

Frivolous

I found it interesting that the non-Woe villains all overlooked how dangerous Concocter was. Not one of them thought, as Cat did in the previous chapter, that Cocky is a poisoner and her poisons are instantly lethal.

I suspect that, in the end, the villains will be more powerfully organized than the heroes. The heroes have to be virtuous and respect each other and individual liberty. The villains, on the other hand, might marshal together more ably simply because violence is a respectable option among them.

For instance, Hanno couldn't have forced his companions to behave during the hero meeting the way Cat did at this villain conclave. He had to use moral suasion, at least until the brawl broke out, and then he and the other heroes lost a lot of extra-group face and intra-group respect.

The fact that there are many more heroes than villains is mostly due to Tariq and Laurence, right?

I agree with Burlyraven that Ishaq is one of the more easily liked villains. He has ambition and a clear and non-self-destructive idea of how to achieve his goals.

I'm guessing Cat's "additional rules of engagement" probably involves agreeing not to destroy Cardinal's facilities or buildings or attack anyone on its grounds.

Mental Mouse

> I'm guessing Cat's "additional rules of engagement" probably involves agreeing not to destroy Cardinal's facilities or buildings or attack anyone on its grounds.

Also something to the effect of "don't make us look bad..." – that is, an all-purpose restraint on anything that would mess with Cardinal's reputation.

Frivolous

I wonder if Cat will make one of the rules, "No honor duels. Ever."

Ishaq might balk at that, but Cat has zero liking for that Levantine practice, and she might tell Ishaq that it's one of the easiest ways for him to get himself killed, and she won't bother to help someone who won't agree not to avoid such a suicidal practice. It would make him a rotten investment of her time and energy.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, it would be « arrogant Villain challenge righteous Hero ». Even if it's a non-combined Hero, if he manage to kill him another martial one will definitely avenge him

Mental Mouse

The thing is, "no honor duels" is a tough sell exactly because honor duels are already serving to channel and limit fights that could easily involve whole families; that is, their purpose is to short-circuit vendettas.

nimelennar

Not only that, but she was the only one who thought to bring a legitimate grievance as a host-gift.

sengachi

And so does Catherine take one more step towards ensuring that the only villains who survive the new age will be those who can place nice with others.

letouriste

welp, it was fun.

" for the shape of the face paint told Ishaq they were a him, at the moment"

interesting. so the headhunter could be collecting heads for changing his face?

the "at the moment" tend to say it, right?

Shveiran

It is certainly possible, though I read that as "the face paint carries gender-related implications. The Headhunter wears different face-painting depending on how he perceives himself in a given moment."

[Javvies](#)

I would tend to agree with this line of thought.

That is, I interpreted it as indicating that there are gender-identity-specific patterns and/or color combinations in the Levantine face painting practices.

Aotrs Commander

Irritant was a true genius.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Irritant or Traitorous?

That is the Question.

Whether it be Nobler to the mind to

Subvert the slings and arrows of misfortune,

Or to Be them.

Hellspirit

Perfect.

Shveiran

You know what's better than an Interlude where we get to see how a different character perceives Cat's actions?

An Interlude where we get to see how a shitton of characters perceive Cat's actions and eachother.

Heck, it was even conveniently broken up in multiple, small sections I could read as a brief interlude (pun inintended) between the various parts of a depressing day at work.

A marvelous chapter, even more than usual.
Thank you kindly.

Frivolous

It occurred to me just now that Cat has a trove of knowledge on how the most notable living heroes think and operate.

Most people, maybe not even most heroes, don't have a clue as to the Grey Pilgrim's aspects, or how much information Behold and the Ophanim give him. But Cat does. She even knows how to block it, or at least, she can probably broker a deal between a villain and Sve Noc for that gift.

Most people don't know how Hanno of Arwad thinks. But Cat does.

Cat is also the only living villain the Choirs tread warily around. She is the only living villain to outwit and thwart angels.

Cat has basically an expertise when it comes to heroes and heroism, and also angels and their powers, and she has demonstrated she can defeat them all. This would be is a priceless survival tool for the villains after the war. And Cat will only teach those villains that she likes and trusts.

Cat can thus mold villainous behavior by offering to them yet another carrot: the carrot of information and influence over the greatest threats to their survival.

KageLupus

"The Concocter would have opened a newborn for what was being offered, what were a few damned rules to her?"

Rule number 1: Don't do that thing you just said

Frivolous

"I have the heart of an innocent baby. I keep it in a jar of preservative."

M0och123

This.

This is everything I love about this series.

Miles

"Vote," Catherine Foundling mildly said, "before I make you vote."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Black Spiral Dancer

Haven't see the link for a while... always forgot to vote. Thanks for the reminder, specially after a TASTY chapter like this. Although I'm not sure if the listing provides monetary benefits for our author or just bragging rights.

Either, she got my vote, as always.

Miles

It's mostly a way for new readers to find this story.

[*ironvale*](#)

This reminds me of the Unsili accords in dresden, with Kat as Mab...

Ben Serreau-Raskin

She was even a Winter Fairy Queen for a stretch.

Daniel E

This chapter is officially tied for my favorite of the entire series. Reading about the continuous shenanigans of everybody's favorite Dread Emperor just makes it all the better.

Frivolous

Some more notes:

I believe the constant mentions of Berserker's spasming is meant to allude to Cuchulainn's warp spasm.

I am skeptical and surprised that Summoner thinks that he's entitled to anything from Catherine because his father was a Callowan lord. Doesn't he talk to anyone else from Callow? Cat's famous, and surely most people by this time know that she's anti-aristocrat. How can a Callowan not know this?

Concocter talks about being shut out of the Arsenal. It brings to mind a question: If the alliance wins the war vs Keter, what happens to the Arsenal? Who gets it, who gets to keep using it?

Given Cat's tendency to make plans well in advance of needing them, and given that Masego was one of the primary people who made the Arsenal, I suspect that the Woe has a way of shutting everyone else out of the Arsenal, if there was need. I suspect

that Cat would never allow the heroes or Procer or anyone else to take over the Arsenal. Cat thinks like a soldier, Masego is more brilliant than anyone else, and it's too powerful and useful a stronghold.

For all we know, Cat has a way to instantaneously evict everyone else from the Arsenal at a moment's notice.

Javvies

I'm pretty sure Arsenal is going to get rolled into or otherwise absorbed by Cardinal in the post-war/Accords era. Or, at least, that's what the plan is.

Frivolous

First, I guess it depends on how politically powerful Catherine sees herself in the Age of Order.

Concocter thinks the heroes and the nobles and the Good nations will hunt the villains. Will Cat be one of those hunted? Cat already knows Rozala said that most heroes think she won't survive the war. If she survives, the heroes might think to rectify that.

I believe Cat has planned for most obvious contingencies, including that the Good will try to drive the Evil out of the Arsenal. Having a button that will kill or evict everyone else from the Arsenal in case of treachery seems like a really obvious contingency.

Cat has to know that Procer and Cordelia won't remain very grateful once the Dead King no longer poses a threat. She remembers being threatened by Procer and Levant. She's the Arch-heretic of the East. The Liesse Accords won't prevent heroes from dueling her, or heroes or nobles using political or legal maneuvers to limit or weaken her.

I don't believe she has any trust at all in the honor of others outside the Woe.

Second, I don't believe the Arsenal can be absorbed per se. It's not even in Creation. How do you absorb a place that is so difficult to get to?

Javvies

Break the existing entrances and put a new one where Cardinal gets built.

Also, I was speaking in more of a figurative sense than a literal one. The Arsenal and its assets are almost certainly going to belong to Cardinal, once Cardinal is founded.

That said, while Proceran gratitude is notoriously shortlived, I expect that it will last more than long enough for the negotiation and establishment of the Accords and Cardinal, as long as Cordelia or someone similarly minded is in charge.

Also, Procer literally won't be able to afford anything other than rebuilding and recovery efforts for years.

And while some of the Heroes (especially if Mirror Knight survives and Tariq doesn't successfully reform him) might want to go after Cat after the war, I think more of them are going to buy into the Accords, Cardinal, and letting Cat contain the Villains in the Accords and Praes.

Also, there's the Drow to consider, most of whom would likely consider it a signal honor to hunt down and kill anyone going after the First Under the Night. And free entertainment. And free powerups.

Plus, the Dominion, judging by Yannu, is not going to approve of going after Cat, Callow, or many of the Villains who have signed on, until/unless they do something specific to warrant it after the War.

Most of the Heroes will probably accept the Accords, however grudgingly, and Cardinal because it puts fewer explicit limitations on Heroes than on Villains and the Villains that don't abide by the limitations are not protected, and nobody wants around.

Especially if the theory about the consequences of successful suppression of Villains by Tariq and the Saint of Swords for decades gets shared. If it's impossible to eradicate Villains on a lasting or prolonged basis without a major backlash, it's a helluva lot better for everyone if the Villains that exist are not the mass casualty lunatics and instead are more restrained.

Point is, Cat is planning both for the war effort and for the post-war reshaping. And as much as possible, activities to support the war effort are also designed either to directly or indirectly support or lay groundwork for the Accords, Cardinal, and the post-war era.

She also has at least some buy in in this effort by Cordelia, the Dominion, and several major Heroes.

Frivolous

We don't know what the Accords say about property. Cat seemed most concerned about issues like weapons of mass destruction and angels and demons, not theft via declarations.

Procer being poor in the post-war era only increases the chances that Cordelia will attempt to seize, whether by force or by lawsuits, the assets at the Arsenal, because those can be sold for coin.

Javvies

Cordelia isn't that stupid. Or ungrateful. Or suicidal. She knows full well that seizing the Arsenal and/or its assets for Procer would backfire horribly and end in a lot of bloodshed.

I'm certain that the Arsenal and its assets will belong to Cardinal, and I'm confident that there's an agreement to that effect, however unofficial it may be at this point, given that it is somewhat premature to be officially negotiating the Accords.

Worst case scenario is that there's an agreement that any Arsenal assets get returned to their prior possessor after the War, pending negotiations for their contribution to Cardinal.

More likely, everything stays in the Arsenal until negotiations are finished and everything gets turned over to Cardinal.

Konstantin von Karstein

Cordelia will definitely remain grateful, she's trying to stop that habit the Principate has to backstab their allies. And Rozala swore her entire line to prevent Proceran treason.

Anyway, Procer will be in no shape to attack anyone for a long time after the war. Or at least not without being spanked hard.

Frivolous

Konstantin, could you pls remind me again where Rozala swore that? I vaguely remember her doing so but not exactly when.

I really hope Javvies is correct about Cordelia being worthy of trust, and that her love of Duty won't make her rethink her priorities when Keter isn't huffing and puffing to blow her house down anymore.

Konstantin von Karstein

She swore it when Cat and Tariq came back from the TW, at the end of book 5.

Javvies

Rozala's Oath was made after the Prince's Graveyard. After Cat and company returned from the creation of Twilight.

As for Cordelia and duty ... she sees part of her duty as rehabilitating Procer's reputation. Part of that involves putting an end to the Proceran habit of backstabbing people and betraying its agreements made with other countries.

Remember, Cordelia is Lycaonese first. The Lycaonese Principalities are also known as the Proceran Callow. The Lycaonese have traditionally stayed out of Proceran politics, imperialism, and adventurism abroad. They are culturally focused on defending the against the Chain of Hunger on one border and the Dead King on the second, while keeping a cautious eye on the rest of the Proceran Principalities, specifically and especially their immediate neighbors, to watch against being stabbed in the back.

Cordelia's upbringing ensures that her priority is to maintain the defenses of Procer, and one of those defenses is not being viewed as an enemy by as much of the rest of Calernia as possible.

Betraying the rest of the Grand Alliance for the sake of seizing the Arsenal and its assets would be far more trouble than it is worth.

Sure, a lot of the materials are rare and expensive ... but there probably aren't that many places they could actually be sold. And there are only so many possible buyers ... most of whom would either be not a good idea to sell magical texts and supplies to (the Praesi) or members of the Grand Alliance/Truce and Terms/Accords. Plus, most of the Named inside the Arsenal? They would not accept Procer taking over. Actually, I don't think any of them would, even the Proceran-origin Heroes. Okay, maybe one or two of the Proceran Heroes assigned to the Arsenal wouldn't fight it much, but they wouldn't be helping a Proceran takeover either.

One of the reasons Cordelia is not happy with Mirror Knight or his girlfriend's family? It wasn't just that they were planning to depose her as First Prince of Procer, though that would be plenty on its own. It was also that they were planning on betraying the agreement made with Cat and the Drow about Drow settling in the lands north.

Cordelia knows how Yannu reacted when he found out about the plot, and the rest of the Dominion, at least most of the rest of the Dominion and the Blood, would react similarly to such behaviour. Actually seizing the Arsenal would be even worse than just plotting (but not

carrying out) a betrayal of a third party – after all, part of the Arsenal's assets come from the Dominion. In addition, Cordelia knows that Sve Noc knew and informed Cat about the plot to betray the Drow. Cordelia would have to assume that the Sisterd would know and inform Cat about any plot to seize the Arsenal, unless perhaps Bard was running interference for it. Cat is reasonable, yes, but she also has an earned reputation for ruthlessness and brutality as a Villain – betraying Cat is not something that Cordelia could possibly conceive of as ending well.

No, there's no real upside and massive amounts of negatives, involved in Procer seizing the Arsenal to try to cover its debts after the war. Cordelia isn't foolish enough to try something like that, though I will grant that the dumbasses who were plotting to depose her and betray the Drow might also have tried to lay claim to the Arsenal while they were at it.

The Mirror Knight might be dumb enough to try to claim the Arsenal for Procer as well, but he'd get no help from any other Heroes, and there'd be no way for Hanno to avoid needing to execute him, assuming there was anything left to be executed. And Mirror Knight would have no sanction or political cover either.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Rereading this chapter today it strikes me as ironic, considering how last chapter Cat was specifically thinking she wasn't going to follow Akua's advice in setting herself up as Queen of the Damned.

Obviously she wants her 'hall' and it's effects to be a long term thing, to give villains an additional incentive to keep to the Accords, but also as long as she lives to manage this hall she's set herself up as arbiter for their affairs, which is basically Queen of the Damned with a different coat of paint.

In the end, Cat's story is that she ends up in charge and her followers benefit. No changes here.

Sinead

What I am wondering is if this Hall will see The Crows grow in influence outside the Drow. It would be interesting if First Under Night ends up becoming the figurehead of the Below's Coalition. How different is Cat's plan for the Villains any different to her work with the Drow (turning "the worthy take, the worthy rise" into something actually stable)

nightedge

In many ways it a blessing if she gets a Villianous Name, given that she'll then be immortal. That is if she isn't already. Means that unless she's killed or fucks off, the threat of her reprisal to a slight will always be good.

Though this does of course run counter to her intentions, I find it difficult to believe given the story that she'll accomplish her every goal in the end.

Rey d`Tutto

This is, hands down, my favorite webnovel.

mamm0nn

During the second heroic gathering:

Tariq: I've just seen the discrepancy between Heroes and Villains in the Accords realised that once this war is over, we'll have several packs of well-acquainted Heroes hunting lone Villains.

Now I wish I wouldn't have to but know I need to tell you all this; that's a terrifying prospect and it will be very bad if this comes to pass. We currently hang on a thin balance between Good and Evil where we can stop the Villains and preserve the peace and status quo, with things stacked in our favour to win most of the time. Providence and winning the third act are on our side.

But when we Heroes have such a massive advantage over the Villains for a generation, it will leave grooves that shall screw us over for centuries.

The tale of the lone Villain hunted down by a band of Five without sufficient provocation slaying them all. Of Heroes unrelated to the story being told getting slaughtered without a hint of Providence protecting them. Of the Heroes with society and numbers on their side making Villains the underdog requiring the Heroes to truly have superior strength, wits and cunning to prevail instead of just willpower. That is what I see over the horizon.

This one generation of bullying Villains shall see the scales bend to our side too much and Below rectify it with a Long Price. For that is how the game between Above and Below is played, and if we do not prevent it Below shall see the Story turn a hint further in their favour.

beleester

A villain is traditionally opposed by a band of five, so a 2-to-1 ratio of heroes to villains is actually better than historical levels. Which makes sense, since villains are currently enjoying an unprecedented amount of legal protection.

superkeaton

What a delightful Legion of Doom. I wonder if it'll take on a similar name? The Black Council has a ring to it.

Frivolous

ErraticErrata – I noticed just now that there is a discrepancy in the name of the Harrowed Witch's brother.

Here, in Reprobates, he is named Julien. In Spectral, he is referred to as Timothee.

Hope this helps you avoid further continuity errors.

Miles

Julien is the Harrowed Witch. Timothee is the brother.

Frivolous

Pardon me, but the Harrowed Witch is Aspasia. Multiple mentions confirm it.

Hakram's Dead Hand

Haha, yes! I just wanted to heap onto the pile saying that I love seeing Cat be badass from others perspective. It's so cool to see the power that we've seen her work for flexed on the other characters of the story.

Satan

Harrowed Witch is the new General Abigail

Chapter 47: Methods

"A plan of war is the inevitable victim of circumstance; methods of war are superior, for they are the mother of many a plan."

Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First

Seventeen fantassins from three different companies hung from nooses, the wind making them swing slightly as the sun rose. *Bloody fools*, I thought at the sight of them, not a single speck

of sympathy emerging even at this late hour. The lot of them had been from three middling companies, not one of them numbering a thousand men and each of them with several cases of corruption on their record. It'd not been difficult to track them with what the Concocter had told us, not once Adjutant put his army of helpful hands to the task. Names were obtained within the first bell, though I had to send in armed companies to make the arrests as the mercenaries were reluctant to give up their own.

Interrogations had been brisk, and hadn't even required much coercion. The idiots hadn't known they were trying to rob shipments earmarked for a Named, they'd thought they were just skimming Arsenal equipment. The part that'd infuriated me was when I'd realized that guards had been bribed for the fantassins to get access, and some of those had been mine. Two Callowan legionaries were being flogged as we spoke for trading shifts without officer permission, and the Third Army had lost a sergeant when it turned out she'd been in on it from the start. I'd let her captain handle the discipline, but I did not need to look to know she'd be hanging from our own gallows about now.

The regulations were crystal clear.

"I do not question the justice of this, Your Majesty," Princess Beatrice said, "but it will not help relations with the companies."

The Princess of Hainaut was a better rider than me, though given Zombie's undead placidity an outside observer would have found it hard to tell when we weren't moving. I'd not expected that when I first met her, as Beatrice Volignac was also very much overweight. My people did tend to look down on those wasteful enough to grow fat, but I'd since revised that first opinion of her: while I didn't share Prince Klaus' high opinion of her as a general, it couldn't be denied she was a fine lance and probably the finest cavalry commander in Hainaut. She was also my intermediary with Proceran mercenary companies, at the moment, so I'd best not ignore her warning.

"They had to hang," I bluntly said. "They broke into sealed crates, if they *didn't* hang the effects on discipline would be disastrous."

"I'll not argue this," the Princess of Hainaut agreeably replied, "but it plays into common fears that you intend to treat the fantassins as you would legionaries, subject to the same rules. It is a highly unpopular prospect and there has been grumbling of contract breaches."

My brow rose. If they tried to pull that it'd not go over well, since the Highest Assembly had decreed that abandoning mercenary contracts during this war would be legally considered the same as desertion, but I knew better than to ride unwilling soldiers too

hard. Pressure on soldiers with good spirits got results, but it broke those who were already demoralized.

"I have limited concessions to offer them," I admitted. "I'll not compromise in ways that weaken us ahead of hard battles. Can their appointed representative in my councils not address their troubles?"

The Princess of Hainaut only smiled politely, which I took to mean she'd tried to lead me to a conclusion and I'd failed to get there on my own.

"If I might make a suggestion, Your Majesty?" Princess Beatrice asked.

Yup, I amusedly thought. *Definitely missed a hint there*. On the other hand it meant she was treating me much like she would Proceran royalty, which was good even if I was missing subtext that royalty would grasp. It spoke to a degree of respect, which was a good sign coming from a woman in whose hands I'd placed a lot of influence.

"Please do," I said.

"An appointed representative is a Callowan manner of approaching this," she delicately said. "Orderly and efficient, but relying on trust that is absent. Expanding the fantassin seats in your war council to two and allowing the companies to elect those who will fill them would do much to assuage fears of... overstep."

I squinted at her a moment. They could have a dozen seats and it'd give them no more influence in the decisions, we both knew, since this was very much to be my campaign. On the other hand, it would be a gesture and it'd give them a degree of power over their own situation – which the Princess of Hainaut had gently been trying to explain to me they were afraid I'd summarily strip away from them.

"Agreed," I sighed. "Though make it understood I'll not suffer foolishness even if it is *elected* foolishness. I expect either skill or silence."

"A reasonable request," Princess Beatrice said, inclining her head. "And if I may ask about why the corpses will not be returned to the companies?"

The Concocter had lost several ingredients through the actions of greedy idiots, which had caused her to run late on some brews. For that inconvenience I'd given her leave to harvest what she wanted from the hanged mercenaries before their corpses were burned.

"You don't really want to know the answer to that question, Your Grace," I calmly said. "Actions have consequences, let's leave it at that."

It was a grim note to start the day on, but no less true for it.

—

It would have been a lie to say that particular reunion wasn't one I'd been looking forward to.

"Ivah," I smiled, offering my arm to clasp. "It's been too long."

My Lord of Silent Steps's fingers lightly touched my forearm as I returned the gesture affectionately, and only then did it retreat a step to offer a respectful bow. Ivah had not changed a whit since I'd last seen it, still tall and slender with an ageless youth to its face under the silver and purple paint of the Losara sigil. Its soft leather shoes had not made a sound when it stepped back, and never would: the title it had gained during my days of warring against the Everdark had left its mark, which would never entirely fade.

"I am glad to return at your side, Losara Queen," it replied. "It has been too long since I warred besides you."

"Oh, I don't doubt we have plenty of that ahead of us," I drily said.

I then flicked a glance at the other drow in the tent, who returned the gesture with silver-blue eyes and a cocked hairless eyebrow.

"I see you've yet to get yourself killed," General Rumena said. "Odd, given your fondness for the opposite practice."

Rumena the Tomb-maker was still a striking sight, in these sense that it was one of the only Mighty I'd ever met who actually looked *old*. Standing stooped in his ringmail of obsidian, the old drow was a deep well of Night as well as one of the finest tacticians of its kind. It was also kind of a prick, and one I'd yet to get the better of through words.

"One of these days I'm going to make you into a vest," I told the bastard. "Crows know you already look like you're made of leather."

It respectfully bowed.

"It will change nothing, First Under the Night," the Tomb-maker replied. "As you have never needed an opponent to lose."

In the back of my mind, I heard Komena let out a snort of laughter. Godsdamned goddesses, I thought. They shouldn't play favourites unless that favourite was me.

"It's beneath my station to argue with a subordinate," I airily replied.

"Your skill in retreat remains unrivaled," the old drow praised.

That fucker. I flipped it off, which only got a cackle out of it.

"Enough pleasantries," I said afterwards. "I did have a reason to call on you two."

The old drow nodded.

"Sve Noc has told me of your pact with the Papenheim," General Rumena said. "The sigils are to be split between your armies when we sally out."

"I don't intend to meddle in the details of assigning the sigils," I said, "but you'll be personally leading the third that goes east with the Iron Prince."

It didn't look surprised.

"Some of the fighting to the east will be done underground, I understand," the Tomb-maker said.

"Once you get to Malmedit, yes," I agreed. "Ideally you'd collapse the tunnels the Dead King is using to keep funnelling in troops, but the decision will be left to the Prince Klaus' discretion."

I couldn't think of a decent reason why we'd not want those tunnels shut as quickly as possible, but it didn't pay to tie the hands of your commanders before they even set out. The Prince of Hannover knew his business and had been making war on Keter since before I was born, there was no need to breathe down his neck.

"That is pleasing to hear," General Rumena said. "It has been too long since we have fought beneath the Burning Lands. Do you intend a particular Mighty for command in my absence?"

"If you don't have a recommendation, I was considering Jindrich," I said.

It shook its head.

"I would take Mighty Jindrich with me," Rumena replied. "It is a skillful vanguard, and less likely to grow... unruly than it would away from my gaze."

I hummed.

"I could see that," I finally said. "You have a commander for me, then?"

"Several," the old drow replied.

"All qualified?"

"It is so," Rumena agreed. "Shall we discuss them?"

I bit my lip. I wasn't unaware that one of the reasons Sve Noc had been on board with the Firstborn serving in Cleves instead of Hainaut was that it'd let the drow grow into themselves on the surface without my meddling too much in the process. The Sisters could still call on me when there was trouble, as they had when the Langevins had been caught scheming, but it'd always been pretty clear that I was to be a herald and an advisor and not Queen of the Firstborn. Much like with Callow, part of my use would be bringing about my own uselessness.

"Let them choose their own commander," I finally said. "As they now choose their own sigil-holders."

The grey-skinned general studied me a long moment.

"You have grown, I think," the Tomb-maker thoughtfully said. "This war has done more than simply scar you."

"Don't get sentimental on me now," I teased.

It snorted, dismissing me.

"It will be as you say, Losara Queen," Rumena said.

"Good," I sharply nodded. "Ivah can keep me informed and serve as liaison."

Though my Lord of Silent Steps had remained silent as I spoke with the general, as Firstborn ways... discouraged intervening in the conversations of one's superiors, it now nodded with visible pleasure.

"It will be good to resume my duties," Ivah smiled.

—

I spoke with the White Knight at least once a day as he approached Neustal, bringing with him the last few Named who'd join the campaign as well as the latest goods from the Arsenal. Much of it was enchanted weapons and wardstones, but there were some greater prizes as well: Unravellers, tested successfully and so brought to the front by the crate, as well as a set of five pharos devices. Most of the latter would be going to the Iron Prince's host and the reserves, since they'd be of greater use

there, but my own forces would get one. It was the kind of the trump card that could tip a battle our way, if used well.

Most of the conversation covered how Named should be assigned, and where. Hanno himself would be going with the Iron Prince, but there would be villains with that host as there would be heroes as part of mine. We wanted to be able to field multiple bands of five should the situation on either prong ask for it, but not all Named were field capable so in practice the numbers did not quite align even though in principle there were twenty-eight Named in Hainaut. Hagglng ensued, since some of our kind were a lot easier to place in band than others, and though on paper I won by securing sixteen Named in reality I got the bad end of the stick.

I'd gotten most the Named who could not fight and two of three transitionals, not including the one who was actually good in a fight – the Young Slayer, although apparently he might have been trouble with Aquiline so it might be for the best – so my fighting numbers were actually smaller than Hanno's in reality. Still, when it came to Named it was all about finding a use for talents. At least I'd gotten Roland as part of my lot and got the White Knight to take on the Grey Pilgrim – and so the Mirror Knight, his latest pupil – so it wasn't all bad.

Archer would be happy I'd secured the Vagrant Spear, too. I'd even managed to leverage a half-hearted effort to claim the Witch of the Woods into keeping all the heroes that'd spent time on the Hainaut front over the last few years, which meant the core of my heroic lineup would be one I was familiar with and on decent terms: the Silver Huntress, the Silent Guardian and the Sage. A shame I'd lost the Barrow Sword, but the logic that Hanno needed someone to lead his villains was hard to argue with – and got Ishaq away from the Blood, which was probably for the best.

By the time the White Knight's convoy left the Twilight Ways and began its way up the road to the stronghold, I had already begun to plan the best use for my Named. It was not one day too soon, for before long we would all be on the march.

—

As far as war councils went, I found twelve a reasonable number of people to seat. The great table Indrani was still carving for me – the latest addition being Hakram's fight with fae at the Arsenal – could handle that many, though given the amount of maps I'd had stretched over the surface of it it'd been necessary to set down smaller side tables for drinks.

That Adjutant would be seated at my side was a given, but occupying the rest of that side of the table were the foremost officers from the Army of Callow that'd hold command in the coming offensive. General Hune of the Second Army, towering above us all with those intelligent eyes set in a brutish face. General

Abigail of the Third Army, already into her second cup of wine and her third attempt to let Hune represent the entire Army of Callow contingent. Last but not least Grandmaster Brandon Talbot of the Order of Broken Bells, ever impeccably groomed and currently eyeing the fantassin part of this council with barely-veiled contempt.

For the Dominion stood the rulers of two lines of the Blood, Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osená, in full war paint and armour. Both of them were taking this seriously enough that they'd even ceased flirting, which was nice to see. By them sat the representative for the drow, silver-eyed and calm. My suggestion that the Firstborn elect their own representative – it was only fair, if the fantassins got to as well – had paid unexpected dividends when they'd chosen an old friend: my own Lord of Silent Steps, Ivah of the Losara Sigil. The intricate beauty of the paint on its face was a rival for that of the Dominion pair, to my quiet satisfaction.

As in most things the Procerans ended up the complicating part, for while Princess Beatrice Volignac of Hainaut held sole speaking rights for her army the fantassins companies had elected two very different people to stand for them. Lady Catalina Ferreiro, a beautiful scarred woman in her thirties, was the Captain-General of the *Ligera Bandera*. It was the largest of the fantassin companies, numbering two thousand and three hundred. Captain Reinald of the *Folies Rouges*, on the other hand, was soft-skinned nearly as fat as Princess Beatrice and his company numbered only six hundred foot. The Folies Rouges were an old and respected name, however, and their captain was known for his shrewdness.

Last of all, for the heroes, the Silver Huntress had come. Alexis had been the natural pick, even the White Knight had agreed. We'd worked together in Hainaut for more than a year without any real trouble between us, I'd entrusted her with independent commands out of my sight several times and my force's path into Hainaut would be encountering more hardened defences than the Iron Prince's – which would make her skill with a bow even more valuable. The Huntress was rather plain-faced, a tall redhead with blue eyes who kept her hair in a bun and whose nose had visibly been broke several times. She had a startlingly girlish voice, high and sweet.

Archer would be coming with me and the two of them couldn't stand each other, so I'd have to be careful to keep them apart, but aside from that little complication I was rather looking forward to having the Silver Huntress along.

The first half hour of the council was spent in idle talk, which I tacitly allowed. The Procerans lived and died by this stuff, so it'd help bring them into the fold, but there was a little more

to it than that. The officers in my tent would be side by side in the field for months, and in a coalition force like mine I'd learned the hard way that if a degree of trust and amicability wasn't maintained between the leading commanders it led to blunders. I took the moment to study the officers myself, noting the ties and attitudes. Both my Dominion ducklings got along strangely well with Hune, and had for some time now, so they gravitated towards her. To my lasting amusement the two of them were also subtly intimidated by Genera Abigail's reputation, and usually avoided her. Princess Beatrice was trying to engage the woman in question in conversation, which had my fellow Callowan regularly shooting me anguished looks as if to assure me that she was not committing treason by plotting with foreign royalty.

Captain-General Ferreiro had worked with the Silver Huntress before, which I vaguely remembered hearing about, but I was surprised to hear that the heroine was also acquainted with Ivah. A few warbands out raiding under the Losara apparently pulled the Huntress' team out of bad spot when she'd gone out to Suifat to have a closer look at enemy landings – an early run-in with the Stitcher, by the sound of it – and they'd left on good terms. The other fantassin leader, Captain Reinald, approached Brandon Talbot to my surprise. The Folies Rouges, I overheard, had apparently fought at the Battle of the Camps.

The Grandmaster of the Order admitted to recognizing the banner, and visibly warmed to the conversation when the mercenary good-naturedly admitted having been whipped by Nauk's soldiers on the right flank – to his luck, he claimed, as he'd pulled out just before the Hellhound's water trap and goblinfire ate up the company that'd advanced in his stead. Reinald then adroitly manoeuvred the conversation to the respective merits of the Liessen charger and the Aisne destrier as a fighting horse, correctly betting on Callowan nobility's endless appetite for speaking of horses, and my brow rose. That man bore watching.

Hakram's wheelchair was not great in such small spaces, despite Masego's best efforts, so he was limited in speaking to the Army officers and the Blood. I put my trust in his eyes to catch anything I'd missed and went around. I traded an anecdote about shortly fighting the Stygian Spears at First Liesse with the Silver Huntress and Captain-General Ferreiro, since it turned out the Ligera Bandera had fought against Stygia when the League invaded in the run-up to the Graveyard. I commiserated about College war games with Hune to the amusement of the Blood.

Apparently Hune's tenure at the head of Tiger Company had been a mixed bag, as an early winning streak had seen her consistently targeted by rivals afterwards.

Eventually Adjutant caught my eye and I heard the unspoken signal that we'd tarried long enough, moving back to my seat at the

carved table. The most socially aware among the gathering – which included all three Procerans, to my mixed amusement and exasperation – followed suit, which was enough to begin a chain of the same. Within moments most everyone was standing before their seats without my having had to say a word.

“I’ll spare us a meandering speech,” I said. “We all know why we’re here. Not all of you will be aware, however, that we’re to set out early next week.”

I flicked a glance across the lot of them, finding mostly practiced calm and the occasional sprouts of eagerness.

“I will be holding the command for our section of the Grand Alliance forces,” I said. “And so it is my responsibility to brief you as to the nature of this offensive.”

I waited a beat, then pulled my chair to sit and gesture for all others – save one – to do the same.

“I can’t and won’t claim to be the mind behind our campaign plan,” I told them. “It was crafted through the labour of many of our strategists, foremost among them Marshal Juniper of Callow and Prince Klaus Papenheim.”

“Your humility does your honour, Your Majesty,” Princess Beatrice said, “but the Iron Prince has claimed your hand to have been as much as work here as his own.”

My brow rose in genuine surprise. The old flatterer. I’d helped tinker with this some, but I’d not consider this plan to be my baby. Mostly I’d served as a bridge between him and Juniper.

“Far be it from me to contradict Old Klaus, then,” I drily said. “Especially if he was in a pleasant mood.”

That got some laughter, though most of it polite, and at least one muttered saying in Tolesian about ‘something Lycaonese tooth iron something’? My Tolesian was, well, to be honest it mostly *wasn’t*.

“The forces represented by the people in this room will number around seventy thousand souls,” I said, “but we are to be only a single prong of the offensive. The other will be commanded by the Prince of Hannover, while a third force will remain behind as a strategic reserve under General Pallas of Helike.”

Under was a bit of an exaggeration, since no one had really wanted to give her command over their own countrymen, but I’d left the Fourth behind with orders for General Bagram to support her within reason.

"Apologies, Your Majesty," Captain-General Ferreiro said, "but I was under the impression that the sum total of soldiery in Neustal numbered one hundred and fifty thousand?"

"One hundred and sixty," I corrected, "but yes, you've put your finger on the pulse of this. Our will be the largest force of the two setting out by a fair margin, because we're expected to be hitting the harder targets."

Also because seventy-five thousand was the apex of what we believed to be capable of feeding through our supply lines. And that was an estimate, so when the Princess of Hainaut had come to me with slightly fewer fantassins than expected – none of the smaller forces were worth the effort, in her opinion – I'd not argued against it. Best to have too many supplies than too few.

"None of you are fools," I said. "So you know what that means: we'll be going up Julianne's Highway."

There was a rippling murmur. Not of surprise, for it'd not been empty flattery when I'd gauged that a room of hardened veterans would be able to guess our path upwards, but of... consideration. Everyone was aware there would be rough battles ahead.

"Prince Klaus' force is to serve as a distraction?" General Hune asked.

I nodded at the towering ogre.

"That's part of it," I acknowledged. "He'll be taking fifty-four thousand up the old mining roads to the east, and taking his time in doing so. The reason for that is the latest scouting report from the Silver Huntress, who once more deserves our thanks."

The redhead looked awkward when all eyes turned on her, jerkily nodding back.

"I took the Sage and a war party of Osenal slayers," she said, slowing her words so her voice would sound less high-pitched, "to have a closer look at the fortress-town of Juvelun. The withdrawal of the dead towards the north was an opportunity to venture further than usual."

I offered her a sharp nod.

"The Huntress confirmed what we've been suspecting for some time: Keter has amassed a large force in Juvelun, at least a hundred thousand with several Revenants to lead them," I elaborated.

Idly I wondered where I'd put the markers we used for enemy armies, but when I turned to look Hakram was leaning over in his chair and handing me the black iron blocks. I smiled in thanks as I took, plopping one down on Juvelun. By now everyone was

starting to put it together. Neustal, the stronghold where we currently stood, was more or less in the centre of the Hainaut lowlands and sat astride Julianne's Highway – which would go all the way to the capital, up north. Meanwhile our other army would go up the eastern path of the mining road, further along our defensive line, and begin a quick march up into northeastern Hainaut.

The Iron Prince's target was the small city of Malmedit, since the Dead King was using it to funnel troops into our eastern flank through old tunnels, but the road would take his army past a branch that led to the fortress-town of Juvelun slightly to the west. We were hoping that would draw the undead army there into a battle, since losing Malmedit would be a major setback for Keter. If the dead gave battle, and we expected they would, then the force there would not be able to reinforce the closest strategic location: the city of Hainaut itself, the capital that was the ultimate objective for my own push.

"We've identified four other large Keteran forces," I continued. "One is holed up out west, in Luciennerie, where it sits defensively on the blue road. We believe it's between one hundred and one hundred fifty thousand. It's also getting steady reinforcements, and we're not sure from *where* exactly. "

I'd simplified a bit there, I reflected as I set down the corresponding block of iron. While that army was strategically defensive, it was also the force that kept flooding the western side of our defensive line with raiders and small attacks. The only reason the Dead King hadn't pushed further was that if he did there was a risk the armies under Malanza would sally out from the town of Coudrent, to its west, and try to anchor our flanks together. It'd take a lot of pressure out of the both of us, which was why Juniper had originally wanted to split our forces in three and take a swing at Luciennerie as well.

Talks with other strategists and fresh information had since made us revise that first plan she'd suggested, but the bare bones of it were still essentially the same.

"Another large force is north of the previous and beyond the highlands, in Suifat," I continued, placing the black iron. "Though it was previously around seventy thousand, they've had a flood of reinforcements and we now believe them a match for the Luciennerie force in numbers. Thankfully for us, that army is now on the move and marching to try and retake Trifelin."

It was the Dead King's armies that would be in for a rough time there, for once. Malanza has suffered a stinging defeat there early in the war for Cleves, so when she'd finally taken back the town she'd fortified every nook and cranny of the region. Gods smile on whoever tried Rozala Malanza on those grounds, because she ready and she was *angry*.

"We've all been aware of the army waiting between the Hollow and the Sister for some time," I said, easily plopping down a block there. "We still believe it to be a little under a hundred thousand, and it has been keeping a purely defensive stance."

It would be our first opponent, one way or another.

"The last known force, and we believe it to be the largest, is somewhere north of the capital," I continued. "Two hundred thousand, some of the finest troops in the service of the Dead King. We last saw them around the Prisoner's Mercy, but we're not sure where they might have march since – save for one detail, we are *certain* they're not in the capital."

We had the Augur, the Wise Astrologer and the Enigmatic Prophet in agreement on that, aside from our own risky Named scouting through the Twilight Ways.

"The offensive's basic shape is as follows," I said. "To the west, allied forces based in Coudrent will go raiding down the blue road to pin down the army in Luciennerie, while a significant slice of the Grand Alliances forces of Cleves concentrates in Trifelin to hold it."

It'd be tight, given that Malanza had lost some forces to us, but so long as there wasn't a major offensive through the lakes – and we'd not seen the build-up for one, not for lack of looking – then she would be able to succeed at both those tasks.

"Out east, Prince Klaus will march up the mining roads and attempt to bait out the army in Juvelun," I said. "If it refuses to give battle he'll move against Malmedit itself, which will at the very least force pursuit by the Juvelun army."

Ideally he'd take the old mining city quickly and then hold it against the pursuing dead, but I doubted it'd end up that clean.

"Meanwhile, at the heart of it all, we'll be marching on Lauzon's Hollow," I continued. "We'll be doing so at the quickest pace we can manage, to threaten to take the Hollow before Keter can move its nearby army to hold it."

"That stratagem worked last year," Lady Aquiline said. "Which means the Hidden Horror will expect it now."

"That's our intent," I bluntly said. "Once that force moves to defend the Hollow, it will leave the Cigelin Sisters vulnerable. Our reserve of twenty-eight thousand will then strike out from the Twilight Ways and seize it."

"If they split their forces?" Hune asked.

"Then we force the Hollow," I shrugged. "They won't be able to bleed us with so few."

General Abigail looked at the map and frowned.

"What happens if the undead in Luciennerie ignore the raids and attack our defensive line instead?" she asked.

"The reserve defends," I said. "It only needs to hold for some time, as we have reinforcements from Callow and southern principalities already on the way. Then Keter loses Luciennerie and we pincer the attacking force between Cleven reinforcements and our own defenders."

It'd mean a very different campaign, but it was also one we were capable of fighting.

"It would still mean no reinforcements for the battle at the Hollow," Captain Reinald pointed out.

"In that situation," I replied, "we would reassess and consider if Prince Klaus' army using the Ways to attack the Sisters instead would be feasible. If it is not, our objective would change to securing the east and Juvelun in particular."

It'd give us a shot at the capital, and from there we'd be able to muster a truly brutal offensive against the Hidden Horror on three sides. A siege of Hainaut would become inevitable, it was true, but while we'd wanted to avoid that we couldn't always get what we wanted. Would that war were so polite. My gaze swept the table and found a great many questions, but no one outright disbelieving that this could be done. Good, I thought as I cracked my neck.

"All right," I said, "if you have inquiries, now is the time. We can move on to the marching order afterwards."

It was going to be a long night, but better to talk now than to bleed later.

[ErraticErrata](#)

First update of the month, so there's an extra chapter in the tab of the same name. This one is titled "Five Stories" and it's from multiple POVs.

In other news, a new map has been added in the art section that covers the principalities of Hainaut and Cleves as they are in

Book VI, since things have been happening in that particular region Enjoy!

Black Spiral Dancer

Oh, nice! I was just going to scream I WANT A NEW MAP before I read your comment!

Tom

Some discrepancies between map and chapter:

> One is holed up out east, in Luciennerie,

This is west of where this chapter takes place (Neustal)

> Malanza would sally out from the town of Coudrent, to its east,

Coudrent is west of Luciennerie

[ErraticErrata](#)

Fixed.

[Javvies](#)

I'm kind of surprised that one of the Army of Callow/ex-Legion was actively involved in the theft of stores. They had to know how it would end if and when their activities were discovered.

Things never quite go as planned or expected. That they have lost track of one of the major concentrations of undead is troubling. Because it's bound to turn up where they least expect it and/or where they can least afford it to surprise them.

Shveiran

I liked that touch, honestly. It's always good to see that even Callowans can be morons, you know what I mean?

Ninestrings

General Abigail's character arc is gonna culminate with her accidentally climbing the tower.

I can just picture her giving a speech to the nobles.

Dread Empress Abigail: Someone please come and take this position from me, I am happy to abdicate, please literally anyone.

Nobles: This is definitely a trap, best behaviour everybody.

Halinn

All hail the Dread Empress Reluctant

Ninestrings

Only Dread Empress known to have died of old age.

Shveiran

I'd point out that it is impossible, but quite frankly Abigail would find a way.

[Javvies](#)

She'd probably abdicate, and try to retire to some comfortable estate/manor, and have no interest in reclaiming the position, but no one would try to replace her, both because of her own reputation, and because everybody remembers Traitorous and Irritatan. And probably because Cat is (trying to) turn Abigail into a protege, and Cat left a reputation and memories of her own – and anybody who the Black Queen personally mentored and turned into a protege is not someone to be crossed ... especially when it looks like they're putting a target on themselves, that usually just means they're setting a nasty trap for anyone taking a shot at them.

shikkarasu

'She's been living in a summer home for 7 years, delegating every decision; why don't we just take her out?'

"Fool! She must have spent every moment digging in and preparing. What's worse, she's avoided the public perception of being unassailable."

'....Preventing hopeless last stands against her. No, I see what you mean, now. She's a genius.'

NerfContessa

Oh God, erratic, 0legse write that omake.

Please?!

[sengachi](#)

The first Heroic Dread Empress.

Eleron Pfoutz

Dread Empress Reluctant, the Accidental Empress, the Utterly Assailable, First and Last of Her Name, May Gods Above and Below Keep Her.

Insanenoodlyguy

Dread Empress Abdicant: "C'mon Chancellor, take the crown. It's right in my hands. This is... a wager! Yes! A very arrogant wager I'm sure I cannot fail If you can snatch the crown from my hands, you'll be the ruler! Oh, and if you fail, no retaliation, I'm making an oath to that! Even if you try and fail, there will be no retaliation to you, o-or any of your family or loved ones or friends or.. or pets! And the same goes for everybody else in the room. Even the guards!"

Noble 1:I mean, she is Named, and she just made oath, I'm kinda thinking I should at least go up there and give it a shot.

Noble 2: *dryly) Yes. She just spoke aloud an oath that as near as I can tell, leaves her completely vulnerable to losing everything she's worked for, with no penalty to us that we can figure out. I honestly believe this time she wants us to take the crown.

Noble 1: Gods Below, of course! She's pulling an Irritant! Fuck that, whatever she see's coming she can be right there to take!

2 weeks later:

Noble 1: ... How do you think she made the demons and the Fae fight each other like that? Do we have a new Warlock?

Noble 2: They fought across the lands of the two foremost conspirators to dethrone her. The real question is how did she know they were coming at the same time?

Noble 1: If we take the crown they come for whomever wanted to take the Tower from her most. If not she makes them fight FOR her. Nobody's seen power plays like this since... OH. OHHHHHH.

Dread Empress Triumphant the 2nd: Hey why is everybody changing my name on all the stuff?

NerfContessa

You madey. Day.

Though I would go for irritant the 2nd, the oddly triumphant.

Beau Richards

I wonder if Hakram can use the spectral limbs to move around and fight like he did when he was gonna rip out scribes eyeball...

[Liliet](#)

He needs a suitably dramatic moment to unlock it first!

Zggt

I'm thinking that he will get a new Name for it. The narrative seems to be pushing Ivah towards Adjutant, which would be fascinating

[roseocean2012](#)

Hakram will murder Ivah from where he sits for considering it.

caoimhinh

Two hundred thousand of some of the finest troops in the service of the Dead King have suddenly disappeared right before the Grand Alliance's attack, eh?

Oh, Catherine, you should already know where they are going to appear... It's a classic story in horror: when you are looking at a monster and then you blink and it disappears, *it is behind you now*.

Konstantin von Karstein

I am afraid that it makes perfect sense🤩

[doominator10](#)

"To my lasting amusement the two of them were also subtly intimidated by Genera Abigail's reputation, and usually avoided her."

To my and all the reader's everlasting amusement too. Abigail continues to be a delight.

"which had my fellow Callowan regularly shooting me anguished looks as if to assure me that she was not committing treason by plotting with foreign royalty."

At this point I had to put the story down just to laugh for a few minutes.

[Liliet](#)

Oh my! Both Alexis AND Concocter on the same front with 'Drani? Looks like this arc is a go and BOY am I down with that!

dadycool

Time for a Girl's Squabble!

[Liliet](#)

Hey, Beastmaster's there too!

Juff

Typo Thread:

these sense > the sense
one if the > one of the
his kind > its kind
the trump card > trump card
place in band > place in bands
sastisfaction > satisfaction
soft-skinned nearly > soft-skinned, nearly
Beatrice and > Beatrice, and
been broke > been broken
Genera Abigail > General Abigail
of bad spot > of a bad spot
shortly fighting (is this correct?)
gesture for all > gestured for all
your honour > you honour
much as work > much at work
Our will > Ours will
believed to be > believed we were
she ready > she was ready
have march since > have marched since
Grand Alliances > Grand Alliance's
forces of Cleves > forces in Cleves

[Liliet](#)

Luciennerie was mentioned to be to the east, while it's actually clearly to the west.

Wonder

Godsdamned goddesses, I thought. They shouldn't play favourites unless that favourite was me.

Aww, Catherine ,never change

[Burlyraven](#)

Huh, so Ivah seemingly remains the only Drow to truly like Cat. It even seems to be unusually personable to others. Ivah for next First Under the Night after Cat's inevitable abdication from that position as well? Could become something of a prophet if it does.

[Liliet](#)

I get a strong impression Rumena also likes Cat a lot.

Shveiran

Also Jindrich, remember his POV in Sarcella? Honestly, I got the impression that most drow are kind of satisfied with Cat? I mean, I'm not sure why they wouldn't. Even racism doesn't really work when your bona fide Goddesses come down (up) from

the sky (from the ground) and say "I like this one; you listen to her now, kids. Or else."

I don't think they ALL like her, let alone adore her like Jindrich or Ivah, but I'd bet most at least respect her?

Burlyraven

Satisfaction is not affection. You can be extremely satisfied with a boss, but that doesn't mean you're going to be tender with them when you get back from a business trip.

Shveiran

Granted, but affection is... kind of personal.
Cat doesn't have the affect of many drows because she doesn't have a personal relationship with most.

It's not that they don't like her enough, it is that she is a religious figure and not a friend.

Burlyraven

Rumena seems fond of Cat, but I wouldn't put its fondness on the same level as Ivah's affection.

Rey d`Tutto

Thanks, again.
You write beauty.
Cat is more than proactive. She is a Story Name, soon.
Dark Herald? Blasé.
Weaver Something?
PractiGirl?
Influencer +?
Trap +?
Dagnabit. She is Claiming a Name.
What Shall it be?
Warlord.

Cap'n Smurfy

"General Abigail of the Third Army, already into her second cup of wine and her third attempt to let Hune represent the entire Army of Callow contingent."

Abigail continues to be a treat. My hope is by end of the story she'll be Named Reluctant Admiral.

dadycool

Admiral? But that's a naval position. I totally agree with the adjective, though.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Exactly: she finally gets a chance to escape her job, and takes to the seas for other lands. But on the way, the ship she's riding gets attacked by pirates, and before anyone else knows what's happening Abigail is head of a fleet of former corsairs, now known for finding and eliminating Calernia's problems before anyone else even knows about them – mostly by running as far as they can from whatever conflict is taking place at the time, and then stumbling across hidden machinations when they finally reach safety

Cap'n Smurfy

Abigail received a secret promotion back in Book 5 chapter 21. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/03/15/chapter-21-intervention/>

The Dead King stands no chance against Cat's secret weapon, for the element of surprise is with her!

dadycoool

How will she get the fleet from the Tyrian Sea, though?

Cap'n Smurfy

whispers A fleet of flying ships. Top secret. The Dead King will only learn of them when they sail over the horizon, at the moment all seems lost.

dadycoool

whispers Oh, right. /Those/ ships. I forgot about them.

dadycoool

The races from beneath the earth are my favorite. The Goblins, Dwarves, and Drow are just such a treat, as we can finally see again here. The blending of the forces was very interesting here. It's nice that everyone was able to pair up, except for Beatrice with Abigail, but that wasn't her fault.

letouriste

i'm kind of wondering why the drows and the dwarfs are not mentioned in the battle plan. It's obvious there is dead armies facing them and these armies could send reinforcement during this campaign after all. An army coming from underground would shatter the plan

Darkening

The dwarves have been mentioned to not be willing to commit to fighting Keter until it's already on the ropes, since they'd rather the surface people bleed instead of them. And the drow that aren't part of these armies are waaaaay to the north fighting Keter on a whole different front in a war that sounds like it's a whole different scale than the human side of things.

Djinn o'Cyde

2nd place. Closer to 3rd than to first. Go Vote. Here:

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

"I see you've yet to vote," General Rumena said. "Odd, given your fondness for the opposite practice."

heroessucklmao

If a plan is mentioned in detail, it must fail. But if Abigail says stuff, odds are she's right because she's a big genius.

Chapter 48: Hilltop

"Faith is not an act of surrender but of conquest, for doubt lies within us all."

Daphne of the Homilies, best known for ending hereditary rule in Atalante

Arranging it had been simple, in a sense. Just a matter of timing, of sensing what people would want and how they went about getting it. When you had that, as I'd once been told it was all just... objects in motion. And it'd had to be that, because more direct manipulation would have been sniffed out in a heartbeat by the people involved. That was the trouble with trying to beat people at a game they were better at than you. I wanted answers, though, and I wanted them in a way that wouldn't scar what I wanted achieved. And so here I was, in the darkened warehouse standing before an open crate and holding an artefact in my hands.

It didn't look like much, for such a dangerous thing.

A Callowan knight's lance was usually around nine feet in length but the *kataphraktoi* used longer ones, closer to twelve. The unraveller I held in my hands was shorter than either, perhaps a little over six feet in height, and lighter as well. It was easy enough to see why, as unlike a lance of hardened wood the unravellers were partly hollow: at the heart of them was a tunnel that went from the top to the bottom, with a thin wire of cold iron hung up. The outside of unraveller was touched with coin-like patches of metal, mostly bronze and brass, which themselves were connected to thin metal wires within the wooden shell.

The most expensive part was the sculpted amethyst ring at the bottom of the lance-like artefact, like a pommel to the wooden handle, which even at rest hummed with magic. The rest was runic carvings in the wood to stabilize the product, and a steel tip at the end of the unraveller that was very carefully linked with the central cold iron wire without compromising the artefact's ability to, well, be used as a weapon. It needed to bite into bone or flesh before it disrupted the sorcery, which was unfortunate but couldn't feasibly be fixed.

It wasn't that we weren't *capable* of it, just that the materials required would multiply the cost of production by at least ten. We'd not be able to fill entire crates with unravellers, which would defeat the entire purpose of that artefact's existence: having an answer to necromantic constructs that we could mass-produce.

In the lamplight of the supply warehouse I studied the artefact closely, testing the weight and the way the grip handled. Archer would need to tinker with hers before she found a way to fire them by her bow, and likely the Silver Huntress as well – whose own silver recurve was shorter than Archer's absurdly large longbow, but only in the sense that it was the size of an *actual* longbow. I'd need to have half a crate set aside for them to tinker with, and maybe lend them Roland when they got to it: the Rogue Sorcerer was only a passable enchanter, but even Masego praised his artefact-handling.

"I don't get the cold iron wire," I admitted out loud. "I've done the readings you suggested, I get why the patches are there and at different metal purities: it pulls at the spell structure in different ways, makes it unsteady. But cold iron isn't supposed to be conducive to magic so why put it at the centre?"

The stuff hurt fae, because having it worked without the heat of a forge meant it didn't lose properties through the transmutation affect – which I'd been chuffed to learn even Praesi recognized had been discovered by a Callowan wizardess, Blaine Caen! – so it was still 'of Creation' in a way that forged or wrought iron just wouldn't be. But all I'd read about the stuff said it was kind of

standoffish to magic, which was why people used it to make boundaries in rituals so often.

"Because the Hierophant is a singularly brilliant mage," Akua said, frank with her praise.

She'd chosen to stand at the edge of the lamplight and the shadows, where the play of light and dark on her form was almost like a veil thrown over her clothes. Tonight she'd chosen a simple sleeveless, neckless silver dress in a wavelike pattern interrupted by slightly more ornate stripes – all of it covering a base of dark cloth. A thick silver choker and a hat of silvery tinsel stripes ending in dark gauzy veil completed the ensemble, making for a striking sight. It was one of her finer picks since I'd known her, and by the occasional smirk she'd clearly noticed my appreciation.

"I'm aware Zeze is a genius," I replied, rolling my eyes. "If I could get an actual explanation, though?"

She smiled.

"Cold iron is resistant to magic, not repellant," Akua said. "And it is an unnaturally stable material, in the sense that it will take to all forms of power by the exact same proportion – Cosmas' Constant. In this case the wire serves two purposes. First it stabilizes the magic coming from varying metal purities as it is sucked into the amethyst ring, which is why the unraveller does not simply explode in a shower of shards when it is used. Secondly, it actually *enhances* the destabilizing effect on a necromantic construct: the iron wire's resistance to magic means more of the construct's invested magic is sucked in without it ever reaching the amethysts, and some of the runes carved ensure that 'wasted' magic does not turn to heat."

Akua paused pushing herself off the wall and more fully into the light.

"It is an *inspired* solution," the woman who'd once been the Diabolist admiringly said. "And not one I would have considered in his place. I've always sought the elimination of waste in artefacts and rituals, it would not have occurred to me to actively pursue it instead."

"Masego has his moments," I agreed.

I set down the unraveller atop the open crate, over the eleven remaining ones cradled in cloth and straw. The real breakthrough had been the amethyst ring though, or so Roland had implied, and that'd been a contribution of the Blessed Artificer. It was a relatively cheap precious stone, in Procer, which was why some Ashuran ship mages liked to buy them in bulk in Valencis and enchant them to hold winds. The ring structure was even an

invention of her own, though it'd had to be slightly reworked since it was being used to anchor an enchantment instead of Light. While I might not get along particularly well with Adanna of Smyrna, I was not complaining that she'd ended up as one of the heroes assigned to my army.

"The Dead King will know we have these," I finally said, "or at least suspect. We've done enough field tests he can't have missed it."

It was hard to notice something the size of a beorn or a tusk get struck with a lance and then... collapse, barely a heartbeat later as the necromancy animating it shattered like glass. We'd been afraid that the Dead King's necromancers would be able to raise them right back up, but we were pretty sure by now they *couldn't*. The Arsenal specialists believed it might take as much as months of rituals to raise those creatures, imbuing the different parts with different spells as they were being assembled. It just wasn't something that could be done in the field and on the fly, not even with massed mages.

"You were careful to use the prototypes only sparingly," Akua pointed out. "Hiding we have these was always a fool's errand, but we can still take him by surprise with the sheer amount that can be fielded. He will be expecting these to be Named-work, not a pattern that trained mages and artisans can make on their own."

Named were still arguably the source of the labour, since they'd been the one to train these mages and artisans when it came to making these, but her point stood. By now almost a full third of the Arsenal was dedicating its time to producing stockpiles of these to send to the fronts. There'd even been talk of starting workshops in Procer, though I'd balked: the Dead King and Malicia both had spies, and if either got their hands on the plans it'd make it much easier to figure out a countermeasure. I wanted to extend our window of effectiveness with the unravellers as long as possible, especially if it coincided with the offensive for Hainaut.

Ideally, the Gigantes would then raise massive wards on the coasts that'd keep the dead out and we'd have breathing room to make a counter-countermeasure in time for the assault on Keter itself.

"We'll see," I finally said.

We'd only caught the Hidden Horror flatfooted a handful of times since we'd unveiled the pharos devices, so while I was hoping to repeat the experience I wasn't going to be relying on the hope. I cast a last look at the lances, snorting.

"Something amuses, my heart?" Akua asked.

"For all the cleverness that went into these fucking things," I said, "they still have to be stabbed into the enemy. There's something almost reassuring about that."

Even when you put all the brilliance in the world into an artefact, in the end you still had to find some thug to stick it into your foe. At least folk like me would never be entirely out of work. I felt a tug against my little finger, and I knew my patience had finally borne results. I'd traced tripwires of Night around the warehouse entrances – though no more than that, or I'd risk irritating the wards – so I knew it the moment the door opened even without needing to turn. Akua cocked a brow in my direction, her superior senses having caught the sounds without needing any such tricks. It was two people who were joining us by navigating through the darkened maze of crates, it was easy to tell when I pricked my ear.

I hoisted myself up to sit on the edge of the open crate before as they strolled into the lamplight, Akua moving to lean against the side to my left. Covering my bad leg as well as implying she was my left hand all in the same gesture, I noted. *Fucking Praesi*, I then added, but not without fondness.

"I'll take it as a courtesy you tripped the wire at all," I called out.

Especially given who I was addressing.

"You overpraise me," the Grey Pilgrim drily replied, stepping into the light.

"There is no point in skulking around allies," the White Knight pointedly told him before following suit.

Tariq had a way of slipping past any and all measures I wove around myself with Night. He couldn't fool the Crows, at least, but the Peregrine's habit of turning up unexpected and without warning was not abated by anything else I could call on. He'd not been anywhere this good at it back around the days of the Graveyard, but then if I could learn about heroes they could most certainly learn about me.

"Though I wonder that you saw fit to place such a measure at all, Your Majesty," Hanno said, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Named are a nosy breed, Lord White," Akua smiled. "And there are a great many of them in Neustal. As always, it is a pleasure to see you."

"Lady Sahelian," the White Knight blandly replied, inclining his head the slightest bit then turning to me. "The Adjutant pointed me here when I sought a conversation with you. Is now an agreeable time?"

Of course it was, I'd picked it.

"If you don't mind my shadow," I shrugged.

"Such sweet things you call me," Akua drolly noted.

"Could you not send her away?"

I turned a steady look on Tariq, who did not look apologetic in the slightest. And though I could have chided him, as it was rude to ask audience and then quibble over the given terms – even more so for two heroes to corner me in the dark and ask me to send away my only nearby ally – I held my tongue. I'd gone to a spot of trouble to arrange a pit fight between two of the finer speakers I knew, so I was in no hurry to spot it. Akua took my half-beat of silence as the open field it was, and took to it without any visible hesitation.

"I assure you, Peregrine, that no disease will come of addressing me directly," Akua smilingly replied.

I kept my expression blank. The danger with getting answers Akua had always been that she was a better manipulator than me – it meant I couldn't put my finger on the scale, try to guide an outcome, without her likely noticing it. But Tariq was perfectly capable of matching wits with her, and in his own way Hanno could be said to be even sharper. It'd taken me long to learn the lesson that sometimes doing nothing was the best way to get what you wanted, but I'd gotten there eventually.

"If you'd prefer," Tariq politely acknowledged, turning to face her. "I distrust you, Akua Sahelian, and do not want you to be part of this conversation. Please leave."

She hid the surprise skilfully, but I knew her well. A Praesi blind spot, this one: the Pilgrim just wasn't proud in that way that the Named of the Dread Empire were. On the contrary, in his own way he was humble enough he was perfectly willing to make a request like this without batting an eye. It made a lot of her usual social arsenal effectively useless, since he simply did not care about the hierarchal nuances she was so adept at using. Now came the interesting part, though, how the shade would deal with the challenge. Conflict was always told the tales that smooth faces hid away.

"I recall no reason for there to be distrust between us, Grey Pilgrim," Akua replied. "And your companion's silence beg the question of whether your opinion is shared."

Mhm, I thought. Better than kicking this back to me as the person who could dismissed her – not that I'd expected her to, she'd be well aware that if I'd wanted to intervene I already would have – but I wasn't entirely satisfied with the answer. The first part

floated, but the second still smacked too much of trying to turn heroes on each other. But was this old habits dying hard or just social ploy to suss out where the White Knight stood? I couldn't quite tell yet.

"You are a criminal, Lady Sahelian," Hanno frankly replied, "but your sins were committed against Callow and you are in the custody of its queen. It is not my place to meddle in this. I would caution you, however, against confusing respect for your warden as tolerance for the most egregious mass-murderer of our age."

The Sword of Judgement wasn't one to pull his punches, it had to be said. But there was a reason I'd wanted him as part of this conversation: unlike the Grey Pilgrim, whose own dabbling in horror might have made more wary of bringing up the Doom of Liesse, Hanno absolutely could and *would* go there. That was a sting I'd wanted Akua to feel so that I might see what it brought out.

"I neither seek nor expect your esteem, Lord White," Akua said. "But I had hopes for courtesy, at least. Or is it too much to expect of a hero?"

Good, I thought. She'd not countered by going after the bloody records of heroes like the Saint or the Pilgrim, even though it was the easiest and most effective parry. Tariq would answer he'd killed to prevent suffering, the debate would get religious – for lack of a better term – and enter grounds where no one could truly win. It also meant that, deep down, Akua did not think of the Folly as something on equal footing with Tariq seeding innocents with the plague to catch Black. Or, at least, she recognized it was not an argument that could be made and be considered to hold water.

That'd be a lesser prize, but still a prize. A few years back, she wouldn't have *cared* that people believed her to be wrong when she was espousing Praesi – more accurately Praesi highborn – philosophies. She would have said the words anyway, and should circumstance prove her right down the line pointed to that as evidence of the Wasteland's dark but undeniable wisdom. Now she was avoiding that sort of talk even when trying to win the argument by other means. Her definition of winning, of how it could be achieved, had shifted. And not because she was being coerced or fearing punishment.

It'd sunk into her, the act. Maybe no more than the slightest drop, but that was all it took.

"It is unpleasant to talk of butchery," the White Knight calmly replied, "but it is not impolite. The burden of snuffing out a hundred thousand lives is yours to bear, Lady Sahelian, and your discomfort with the truth of that is of little import to me."

"You know very little of what you speak of," Akua quietly replied, "yet display great certainty. There are many sayings on people who behave in such a manner. What do you know of my follies, save what others have told you?"

"I know enough," Hanno simply said. "And this conversation is waste of time."

"Is it?" she mused. "The two of you have decided I am to be dismissed, and there is nothing more to be said of the matter?"

She clicked her tongue.

"Though my hands are dripping red, White Knight, and I'll not deny this or quibble over it, I have dealt fairly and openly with you and yours," Akua said. "I have no expectation of ever seeing the scales of Liesse settled, but that sin is not yours to ask answer for – so what have I done to you, to deserve this scorning?"

Ah, I thought. *And there it was.* I'd been right, then, this conversation had been needed. The nudge over the crest of the hill was still required so that she'd finally be able to see the slopes on both sides. Some part of her, perhaps the same that she allowed to enjoy the companions she'd made, still thought that so long as the mountainous horror that'd been the Folly remained far away and she was good and loyal and lovely she could have her warm place in the sun. She spoke the words as I'd said them to her, but it'd not really sunk in that Liesse *wasn't something that could be atoned for.*

That even if she saved ten lives for every one she'd taken, she would still be the same woman who'd murdered an entire city.

I couldn't be the one to lead her there, though. I couldn't deny it either – it was true, all other considerations aside – but to keep my role I could only agree to this and not be the one that brought it up. Otherwise she'd know there was a deeper game, beyond the one I'd admitted to. The long price that had yet to be paid. I couldn't be the one to blot out that hazy hope, otherwise she'd ask herself *why* I would do that. Why, if I was manipulating her, I'd do away with the mirrored oasis that was being genuinely one of us. And I couldn't have her ask that question, not yet.

I reached within my cloak, the gesture drawing no attention.

"I've known a great many monsters," Tariq pensively said, "but in your own way you are among the most tragic – how you were raised, how you were shaped, it robbed you of the ability to understand what you did even as you did it. But it has begun to dawn, I think. The scale of the evil in something like the Doom, the way it ripples out into the world. How ugly such a thing fundamentally is, so unlike the stories of glory and triumph."

The thing that made Tariq dangerous, I thought, was that he was being sincere. This wasn't a veiled insult or a threat or some stratagem: he was genuinely grieved by what he saw in Akua. How accurate what he saw might be remained debatable, but the way the shade's face went solid for the fraction of a moment – as if she was locking it by will – told me she'd read his sincerity and it'd struck deep. I'd been in her place before, as it happened. There'd been a reason I wanted Tariq here.

"Fair dealings and courtesy change nothing, Akua Sahelian," the Peregrine said, almost gently. "You killed a city. There is nothing to be done, in the wake of that, that will buy you trust."

She did not look at me, but I felt her attention shift my way. I forced my face into stolid blankness but just a beat too slowly – not even on purpose, it'd been simple luck.

"I believe you might even care for a few others," Tariq said. "But there is nothing redeeming in this, my dear. Even the most terrible of us can love."

"I am not your anything, Peregrine," Akua replied, tone forcefully cold.

Overcompensation, I decided. She didn't control her voice anywhere as well now that she was a shade, though she'd gained in other ways.

"Then I withdraw the address," the old man said. "It is not enough to avoid doing evil, Akua. You have to do good. Even when there is no reward. *Especially* when there is no reward."

I almost smiled. There went the last piece I'd been waiting for. Selflessness, the greatest of virtues in someone like the Pilgrim's eyes – a virtue he clutched most desperately, I expected, considering some of the things he'd done over the year at the behest of the Choir of Mercy. And Tariq had spoken of it just after effectively telling her that the Folly was not something she should ever expect to dig her way out of. *And now, I thought as I watched Akua Sahelian, you see the view from atop the hill. One slope goes back down the way you came, into the beliefs of the Truebloods. But the other one feels just as pointless, doesn't it? Because you know there'll never be a payoff, a redemption, a settling of accounts.*

But she stood atop the hill now and her eyes had been opened to the choice. She knew she'd have to make it, sooner or later.

That'd been what I needed from these two. I'd been... lenient, perhaps. I'd let us get comfortable, too used to tiptoeing around the lines while indulging in the unsaid. It would have been too easy to stay there, if the bleak light of truth hadn't been shone

down on all of this again. But it didn't feel good. I'd not really grasped, when I first conceived of my revenge, that it would punish me as well. Maybe it was better this way, I decided. A long price should cost you something to, require that you put something of yourself in it. It was too easy to get drunk on the bloodletting otherwise. What I'd wanted from this has been delivered, though, so there was no need to drag this out any longer. I struck a match on the side of the crate, lighting my pipe and pulling at the mouth.

It got their attention, shaking them out of the conversation.

"You wanted to talk," I told the heroes, blowing out a ring of smoke. "So talk."

Hanno looked mildly irritated, but spoke up anyway.

"There are two major matters," the White Knight said. "The first is the missing army of two hundred thousand undead. The Iron Prince mentioned that our oracles were all in agreement that it was not in the capital, but there are ways to fool soothsaying."

"There are," I agreed.

I was hardly unaware, given that Black had run a game against the Augur for months by moving his army fast and picking his battles at the last moment. I raised an eyebrow, inviting him to elaborate.

"An army unseen is the blade of fate," the Pilgrim said. "For those Bestowed by the Heavens most of all, but any Bestowed can try that luck."

Meaning that force was bound to appear where and when it'd fuck up our plans the most. They'd come to me instead of Prince Klaus with this worry because I'd been Named, and understood the tricks of fate. The Prince of Hannover would listen to them, he was not fool, but not necessarily believe or understand in the way that I would.

"It was kept in mind when the campaign was planned," I assured them. "There's only so many places that army can be, right now, and while I agree it's probably not guarding the bridge as would be most convenient there are limits to the pull a pattern like this has. I'm not dismissing your concerns, to be clear, but you have to understand him having the wind in his sails won't work like it would with a living army."

Confusion on both their faces, which wasn't unexpected. Both of them were experienced heroes, and familiar with war, but neither had ever commanded troops.

"The d dead will get fewer supply accidents on the move and maybe good weather," I mused, "but it won't be a great uplift like it would be with a living army. Undead armies already don't tire and don't have to worry about morale, there's just less for providence to give them. Besides, to be honest the wind's more in our sails than the Dead King's."

I pulled at my pipe, then spat out a mouthful of smoke.

"We might not have a story we can ride," I elaborated, "but we've got a lot of godsdamned heroes to weigh in on our side of the scales. That counts. Believe me when I say that, because unlike everyone else here I've fought armies with that many heroes attached before."

Hanno cleared his throat.

"To be clear," he said, "you have a contingency?"

"Several," I replied.

Not the kind of stuff you talked about at a war council, but I did have pieces in place. Hasenbach had been more than willing to indulge my paranoia, considering our common opponent was the Hidden Horror.

"Then I will put my trust in that," the White Knight said.

Tariq looked less convinced.

"It is a strong story," he reminded me.

"How'd it work out for you, at the Graveyard?" I pointedly asked him.

Thousands of cavalry from all across Procer, readying for a surprise charge out of Arcadia into my forces, had instead been tossed back into Creation in a murderous tumble of panicked horses and broken bones. It was a good trick, I wasn't going to argue against that – I'd used it myself against Summer, during Five Armies and One – but it wasn't as foolproof as he was making it sound. Especially not when the other side had superior mobility, as we did against the dead.

"It took a third party to make it fail," the Peregrine said.

"There is no third party here, Catherine."

"I'm not sharing the contingencies," I bluntly told him. "Lord Yannu was brought in on the relevant ones, as the strategist sent by the Dominion to the Arsenal, but I'm not thinning the secret by further spreading it. If you can't deal with that, take it up with the appropriate authorities."

The old hero sighed.

"You are the appropriate authorities," Tariq reminded me.

"And I'm telling you it's handled, so don't worry your pretty little head about it," I replied with a winning smile.

While no general, the Pilgrim could at least recognize a lost battle when he was fighting one.

"The other matter is the one I would prefer privacy for," he said.

He didn't flick a glance at Akua, but I did. She'd been silent, her face like a mask, but those golden eyes missed little and she'd been listening closely.

"That's nice," I commented.

A beat passed and I cocked an eyebrow.

"So, what is it?"

Hanno looked mildly amused as he answered in the other hero's place.

"We followed the First Prince's suggestion and it bore the results she predicted," the White Knight said. "With a hero handling the scrying ritual and myself serving as the interlocutor, the elves finally accepted to talk."

Unlike when it'd been a hero making the ritual but someone else serving as the diplomat, which got us a beat of connection with the sorcery before it was shattered, or when Hanno had first attempted to make contact through the ritual of Arsenal mages and the elves had simply warded against the ritual. Of course the finicky little pricks wouldn't bother to answer to any less than the appointed leader of Calernia's heroes, with his busywork done by another fucking chosen of the Heavens. They might be even worse vultures than the Choir of Endurance, who'd at least not been so godsdamned pretentious about it.

"Let me guess, they're keeping the Spring crown?" I drily said.

"In essence," Hanno admitted. "They've agreed to make sure their ritual does not destroy the surroundings, or damage the fabric of Creation, but my attempt to discuss alliance against the Dead King were brusquely rebuffed."

Typical. Well, they'd had a border with the fucker for like a millennium so I supposed I shouldn't be too surprised.

"The return of the Spellblade's body was remarked upon," Hanno then told me. "It was implied that to return the courtesy no claim would be made on the crown of Autumn."

"All heart, those elves," I grunted.

Well, at least we weren't dealing with a war on one more front. That was always worth celebrating.

"Ah, and one lasting thing," the White Knight said. "They asked if the Ranger is part of the Truce and Terms, and when I informed them she is not warned us against allowing her to sign them. They would take this as an act of war."

I closed my eyes and sighed. Well, it wasn't like she'd been going to sign those anyways. They involved too much not-killing-strangers-for-fun for the Lady of the Lake, by my reckoning.

"Duly noted," I said, opening my eyes.

As expected, news about the crowns – which I'd learned there would be from Masego this morning in a private chat, hours before this lot got it going – had prompted the Pilgrim to want to expel Akua. I'd not been sure as to what the news would be, but in the end that'd not really mattered had it?

"We're done here, I believe," I said

Neither saw fit to argue the point, though by the look on the Pilgrim's face this wasn't the last I'd be hearing about contingencies. Good luck to him, since he was headed out with the eastern army and they'd be leaving in two days – before my own force set out. I suggested to Akua we return to my tent to take another crack at planning our route, which we'd taken a break from to visit this warehouse in the first place, but she begged off.

"The new wardstones for the Third require adjustment, dearest," Akua told me. "I will see to that first."

Lie, I thought. *You just want to be alone*. I didn't call her out on it. Why would I? My plan was working.

It brought me no joy, but my plan was working.

Dave

First?

dadycool

Yup. Looks like you were the /only/ comment for a good 15 minutes.

[Adrian_V](#)

What???!!!! This must be an end of times sign!!

letouriste

since a few chapters, i've seen more and more people going to reddit to comment instead of here.
Kind of pain me a little.

thearpox23

Reason for that?

Arctruth

The comment section here is comparatively difficult to parse. Especially on mobile, where a long comment chain is reduced to single-letter lines and a mis-tap moves your screen to open a reply.

NerfContessa

Indeed.

Still prefer it here, for the whole package feeling.

Also, can't wait for the White specter of Woe ergo akua as heroics martyr to become a thing.

Someperson

I wonder if Contrition would sponsor her...

layersr

It's probably because here you have to scroll past the obligatory plead to vote, and the 50 replies to that comment that have nothing to do with the post. Makes it such a pain to read thoughts on the chapter.

RoflCat

Easier to follow particular comment chain and being able to find popular comment quickly I guess.

thearpox23

"since a few chapters, i've seen more and more people going to reddit to comment instead of here."

"since a few chapters"

Reddit has been around for years. I get that you don't have the answer, but I was asking if something happened recently.

RoflCat

Just because it exist doesn't mean everyone is aware of it, or thought of using it initially.

People don't have to all go there for the same reason either.

Some might go there because they hate wordpress's comment system.

Some might go there because he can get notified of updates by just following the sub.

Some might go there because their friend who introduce them to the series do it via reddit.

Whatever it is.

Maybe it's not so much something happen, but just coincidence of a bunch of people switching to using reddit for keeping up with updates/comments, the OP mentioned since a few chapters ago but maybe it happened earlier or more slowly but he only just took notice then.

You know what they say, truth is stranger than fiction. If 5 random people can ends up in a Hero-Villain band, what's wrong with reality of mass of people just casually show up there.

Vlatko

Why? Reddit is the superior site to discuss this on.

thearpox23

My issues with reddit are the issues with low site-wide karma coupled with occasional admin mods overreach, where your account can be effectively shackled because of a single cancerous thread in a completely different subreddit.

I could see reddit as usable if I were to only limit myself to one or a couple niche subreddits like the PGuide, or if I had the care to make alts for every subreddit I was interested in, but it's honestly a bother for a stagnating overripe forum.

I acknowledge I the issues wordpress has, but I personally enjoy the stylistics of the UI, and that it doesn't seem to try to draw my attention away from the text with gamification like account levels or other clutter.

Matthew Wells

Terrible moderation is the bane of that site. Besides the whole volunteer mod thing, they're outright awful with how the actual mods behave. I deleted my account a few years back when the site owner nuked someone's account for disagreeing with him.

Tenthyr

Revenge always hurts, otherwise it's not revenge. Just another petty cruelty.

D. S. Oliver

Now I remember who Akua reminds me of. Vivienne of Dragon Age III. I have no idea why I didn't make the association sooner.

[Black Spiral Dancer](#)

"Tonight she'd chosen a simple sleeveless, neckless silver dress in a wavelike pattern interrupted by slightly more ornate stripes – all of it covering a base of dark cloth. A thick silver choker and a hat of silvery tinsel stripes ending in dark gauzy veil completed the ensemble, making for a striking sight."

Vivienne, is that you?!

RandomDude

Cat appears to be trying to pull a redemption in death story with akua, wherein one of the greatest villains of this age slays the greatest villain to date as an act of redemption, possibly at the cost of existence. Interesting story that.

Salt

I think it's actually not a redemption story so much as contrition. It's one of the few "atonement" stories that features no redemption style payoff at all, generally shown by old William's example where the angels were quite explicit from the start that he would never be forgiven, that he couldn't make it right, and he was heading for below-hell instead of above-heaven regardless what he did to atones.

The old "Repent. You will not be forgiven. Repent." line from when Cat herself faced off against Contrition is pretty much an exact summary of the "other side of the hill" she led Akua to understand on her own just now, by arranging the talk with Hanno and the Pilgrim.

Cat is basically putting her in a situation where every road sucks total ass. She poisoned the purity of Akua's old Praesi ideology with her own so that she wouldn't want to go back down

the same side of the hill that she climbed up from, while the only other choice to be made is becoming the kind of wretch that William was, as far as mindset about her past crimes goes.

It says something about how shitty a contrition-style breaking of a person is to go through, considering even the Bard thought was "sordid" when the angels did it for (in her eyes) a worthy greater-good cause. This one isn't even about a greater good, so much as sheer Callowan spite making someone pay the long price.

Evgeny Permyakov

This kinds of choices occasionally blow up into you face when a third option is taken. And the Above is just as bad as Below, it simply has better PR. Cat knows that well herself.

Time1ock

Relevant WOE quote: "The Gods Above and Below do roughly correspond to "lower case" good and evil, as far as entities that far removed from mortals can be understood. That neither side of the equation intervenes directly means there's a lot of room for interpretation in the respective philosophies they preach, but the bare bones are there."

Evgeny Permyakov

The funny thing is, modern society is more aligned with evil than good. "Nothing personal, just business" is definitely not a part of "good". "Good" philosophy often breaks on scale beyond "small village" (or "large condo")

Tomatoking

Not to try to fit this into a trope too much but doesnt this all feel like its leading to a "both sides of the hill suck so let's stay on top forever", custodian of the Arsenal unending choice for Akua?

[Liliet](#)

Nope. Cat's specifically saying she can't stay on top forever and will have to make the choice.

She expects Akua will choose moving forward even without the eventual reward, and that will entail whatever task Catherine might have for her, Arsenal or whatnot.

naturalnuke

'You poor contrition fools break my heart every time.'

Ed

No, Cat has to teach Akua how to feel remorse before she can be punished for Liesse. There is and will be no redemption, Cat is Callowan to the core.

Frivolous

I wonder why the elves were against Hye signing the T&T. Where's the downside for them?

The elves better hope that Hye never learns that the elves threatened to declare war if she signed them. She will probably be offended, and she is so contrary that she might sign them just so she could go to war against the elves.

I liked and was amused by Catherine being high-handed and pleasantly obstinate when dealing with Hanno and Tariq. Turnabout is fair play, fuckers. I remember many many times when GP had been the same to Cat.

Eftwyr

Remember Hye is half elf, her mother was basically considered a traitor and was the one who taught Hye in order to protect herself from them if i recall the various tidbits about her past we've been fed correctly

dadycool

I think for the elves it's more that they hate Hye and everything she stands for. If she stood for the T&T, they would hate it.

LizAris

Correct me if I'm wrong—but don't they just kinda hate her because of who she is? Aka they're extraordinarily racist asshats? Cuz it's not like most of what she does is really all that...repugnant. Or even evil, considering she's one of those names that's not heroic or villainous.

dadycool

Yeah, the only thing worse for a xenophobe than a xeno is a xeno-same species hybrid. Especially one you can't kill.

Saithorthepyro

Probably not rated as evil but from what we've heard of the Sanctuary she was a terrible guardian to those Named raised there. And she's not exactly a moral saint, she mostly just goes around trying to kill stuff because she thinks it would make a good fight. But yeah the elves mostly want her dead because of who she is and because racism.

[Liliet](#)

Refuge, not Sanctuary.

Yeah, Ranger being a piece of shit is thoroughly unrelated to her being hunted by her "relatives". They couldn't do jack to actually harm her, but at least they can poison the alliance well!

naturalnuke

Ranger is like Goku. True Neutral, not a particularly good parent, and only seeks to fight stronger and stronger enemies.

[Liliet](#)

Let's be honest, she's Chaotic Neutral.

Rynjin

Really? Ranger always struck me as textbook Neutral Evil. She is defined as a character entirely by her selfishness and borderline hedonism. All that matters to her is her own pleasure, no matter who or what she needs to hurt to get it. In fact, the inflicting of pain is often the direct immediate goal of her actions.

[Liliet](#)

I'll accept Chaotic Evil too, tbh.

But I do think she's Chaotic. She hasn't been shown to see any value at all in rules and structures and patterns.

shikkarasu

I've always defined Chaotic, in DnD terms, as "views rules and laws as obstacles," whereas Lawful would "view rules and laws as tools."

I agree, Ranger sees no value in any rules other than "listen to the biggest, baddest one," AKA "Do what the Lady says." Also, as a fun aside, it's worth pointing out that she's now agreed to help Maddie tear down the Praesi government *twice*, but left the moment that his power base was established and stable after the Conquest. C/N or C/E.

[Liliet](#)

I can see that interpretation. Honestly, Chaotic and Lawful is an axis that is not only ambiguous based on how much weight you give to which traits, the zero point is also arbitrary, not to mention the divisions between Neutral and either.

I just think Hye fits the Chaotic Neutral archetype of going around doing random shit based on personal gratification, sometimes actually saving people if that is her whim (Indrani), mostly not caring.

The observation about government isn't entirely correct. She stuck around for 20 years of Amadeus and Alaya ruling the Empire and preparing for the Conquest. I attribute her leaving more to self-preservation – the fun was no longer worth the risk of meddling with actually *important* stories and politics. Praesi succession has so little weight for the world as a whole she can do whatever and survive in her own Role, toppling *stable* governments puts her at risk.

Javvies

I think Ranger is more of a True Neutral with some Chaotic and Evil tendencies.

Her take on life, per Amadeus (who ought to know as well as anyone), is more or less “be the best you can be; do whatever you want; kill anyone who gets in the way of that, unless you can't, in which case respect that rule”.

Mix in her age, jaded nature of having literally outlived nearly everyone she's ever met, buried almost everyone she had ever cared about, and can reasonably expect those trends to continue until her own death, and being on the shitlist of the Golden Bloom Elves for her entire life ... it's not unreasonable that she doesn't care about many people and definitely not about normal people – she literally cannot afford to care much and expect to retain mental equilibrium for very long, plus I suspect that she never really had what one could call a reasonable approximation of a normal upbringing or childhood interactions with other people.

On the other hand, she does take in students of various persuasions, even if she's not exactly the nicest teacher.

So ... I suspect that part of her wants more from

life on a personal level but doesn't really know how to get it.

But I digress ... I see Ranger as more of a True Neutral because she's about self-interest, and is amoral and indifferent about how she attains those interests, not immoral.

If you obstruct her indulging her whims, sure, she'll kill you, but she's not going to bother you if you don't bother or interfere with her.

If some random person asked her for help with something specific, she'd probably ignore them, unless they were being insulting or she was in a bad mood or something, but if whatever they asked for help with was something that interested her, she'd help them – that's literally how she met Amadeus (and Wekesa) – they asked her for help getting into Callow.

However, in a way, Ranger's philosophy (according to Amadeus) makes her an atypical Villain, but really an expression of the truest form of Below's philosophy of "do whatever you want, as long as you're prepared to deal with the consequences of your actions" ... which might be a contributing factor to her strength.

LizAris

T&T would give Ranger protection and allies. (Not that she needs either of those, mind you, it's the principle of the thing.) The elves just...hate hate hate Ranger and want her to die. Declaring that she's part of the T&T would then be declaring that Calernia's new system for Named has her back, and the elves can't have that. Cue declaration of war 😊

Agent J

The obvious solution then is not to have her sign the T&T, but rather, sign the Accords instead.

Good luck bullying the continent that just kicked Nessie's teeth in, asshats.

Burlyraven

I really do wonder what's going to become of Akua. She hasn't been truly Evil for a while, but literally all she knows is being evil. Her own intentions and Cat's plans have her setting out on a more noble path, but even now that she's been shown how stalled she's been and for how long, I don't know if she has enough will left to take a step in either direction.

Additionally, she's a shade, and with too much of a debt for a clean resurrection. If she falls back into Evil, I could see her becoming a wraith of some variety, her own will the only thing holding her together. On the other hand, if she does end up moving towards Good might see a restoration of her body, but at great cost, possibly in the form of a sacrifice of her magic and other powers, which could make for a solid hero story, honestly.

Javvies

Eh ... this isn't some remnant of Akua.
It's her actual, original soul.

That pretty much has to leave more options open for her.
In theory, anyways.

She's still going to have to pay the long price, which won't end well for her.

Big I

Since we learned about Cardinal I've always assumed Akua's fate to be tied to it in some way. Ruler of the city, eternal Headmistress of the Named school, spirit bound to the city to protect it, something like that.

The implication I got from this chapter, and Pilgrim wanting her sent away before taking about the Spring Crown, is that the crown could be used to bring her back to life.

Darkening

Considering Cat got her body destroyed and got a new one made from magic when she went winter queen would be a pretty decent precedent to a soul getting a body from a fae mantle.

Frivolous

Genius loci. It would be a useful task for Akua. Waste not, want not.

Javvies

Heh.
Cat's Callowan. She was never going to forget or forgive what Akua's done. And Akua, Hanno, and Tariq all really should know that.

Tariq ... you aren't in charge. And Cat isn't a Levantine or a Hero to nigh automatically defer to your wishes and whims. She's a Callowan and leans Villain. Plus, you've broken your word to her and told her that your word is inherently unreliable. Oh, and let's not forget, you tried to throw Callow under the wheels to be ground up in order to prop up Procer at any cost. Oh, and

there was that time you used a plague as a weapon on civilians and ripped Amadeus's soul out. Cat's not going to forget or forgive any of that, even if she did resurrect you that one time. Tariq, you may be a likeable fellow ... but Cat doesn't actually like you.

Javvies

Oh, right, almost forgot.

Fucking Elves.

It's not like they're going to join the Truce and Terms, so Ranger joining doesn't actually do anything with respect to them.

dadycool

Yeah, he seems to be one of those that has trouble dealing with people who don't fall over themselves trying to help/obey him. It's most likely not on purpose, but the wise tend to get used to being listened to, especially when the only ones that don't trip over themselves are either friends, equals, or opposition that you can exterminate and thereby prove yourself right because they were definitely wrong. I feel like Tariq's only real friend by the time we met him was the Saint of Swords, the only one he considered an equal was the Wandering Bard, and the opposition was basically anyone east of the mountains, villains, or targets. In Cat he finds an equal who genuinely doesn't like him, yet doesn't directly oppose him, and he doesn't seem to know what to do with her, especially after she proved herself a very capable enemy with compatible ideals.

ninegardens

I feel like there's a difference here between "I am annoyed because Cat didn't obey me" and "I am confused/frustrated because there's a manipulative mass murderer in the room and Cat seems to be chilling like it's an okay thing."

This isn't just him throwing his weight around- he has *reasons* to ask Akua to leave. We the readers know Cat's reasoning, but from Tariq and Hanno's point of view, it's just kinda... weird and obnoxious.

Saithorthepyro

While he has every right to feel that way, Cat can't be fully sure how the two would react to the idea of trying to give Akua a redemption and even more that she was going to rope them into it. Better to let it play out on its own, also because Cat felt when Pilgrim was deliberately trying to steer her into a redemption equals death story and probably doesn't want a situation similar where Akua catches

on that he's trying to deliberately steer her towards that. Better to have it be spontaneous and occur naturally.

In reasons not related to Akua's redemption, she's Cat's advisor, Cat can choose to keep her in the room, and Cat needs to not be too conciliatory to Hero's wishes anyway, as what we see with Mirror Knight assuming Hero's friendliness with villains being them getting corrupted by said Villains, Cat has to deal with on her own side, albeit more "I'm going to help protect you and assure you that you all aren't immediately going to be righteously killed as soon as the war ends." And that needs to be made clear to Hanno and Tariq as well, just because she will act friendly doesn't mean she will share secrets or dismiss an advisor just because you ask her too. And given Hanno's distancing after the Red Axe incident it doesn't feel unjustified. Tariq is a little more complicated since he didn't try to distance himself after the Red Axe thing, but he is the one of those two who tried to kill her with a story among other things, so trust being short on relatively unimportant things makes sense.

ninegardens

Oh yeah- I totally agree that Cat has excellent reasons for not letting them in on what is going on, and that she is well within her rights to demand that "advisor Kivul" be allowed to stay. I'm not saying Cat was in the wrong here.

Just...the fact that she is within her rights, doesn't mean it is stupid or unreasonable for GP to be confused and frustrated by the situation. He wasn't exactly making demands, he just asked, twice, and then got on with his day. I was disagreeing with the idea that Tariq was trying to be "in charge."

Frivolous

I loved loved LOVED that Cat told Tariq not to worry his pretty little head over her contingencies.

That's usually said by older men to young women. To witness it happening in reverse was delightful, especially considering how fatherly Tariq tends to appear to others. -She- was patronizing -him-!

Or is it matronizing when a woman does it? I'm not sure.

Loz

Patronizing and matronizing are both father and mother words, but here we need a daughter or maybe grand-daughter word. Any ideas on that front?

Rey d`Tutto

Sororitizing. From Sorority, for daughters
Fratratizing, from Fraternity, for sons.

Mental Mouse

Correction: "Sorority" and "fraternity" refer respectively to sisters and brothers. Per the Free Dictionary, either sons or daughters would be "filial".

ninegardens

Heh.

Using white and Pilgrim as weapons against Akua. Classic. Particularly amusing because of how annoying they found it, despite the fact that she was achieving THEIR goals (running a redemption story, etc etc etc, IE, the work of the heavens).

And keeping Akua around afterwards, while rude to the two heroes was... a solid investment in terms of redemption story: the hilltop is more likely to stick if Akua feels like Cat is actually on her side.

The scheme is just even better because... how to put it. WK and GP aren't exactly lecturing Akua voluntarily. If they were it just feels pretentious. The fact that they did so because Cat FORCED them to interact with her, and Akua FORCED them to justify themselves makes it more... genuine? More sincere.

I like it. I like both Hanno and Tariq here. They make reasonable requests, and get denied for no apparent reason, and run with it anyway. Its not unfair for them to be confused and frustrated by it.

Also, Cat played them like a fiddle.

dadycoool

Genuine is a good word for it. Them giving the lectures as a reaction means it wasn't rehearsed, it was 'ask a question, get an answer' scenario. And yeah, none of it was their idea, so she can't call them out on anything because she initiated everything.

Saithorthepyro

While they have every right to be annoyed, Cat also does have the right under the terms to refuse them, and it's not like

we've been shown any signs Hanno got over the Red Axe incident and has changed his attitude from right after then. And Cat has a very fair point that secrets spread around in the Guideverse are never really a good idea, and as neither really have military command or experience with military campaigns, there's no reason they should know if it's such an important secret. Hanno could maybe petition as head of the Heroes contingent, after which I imagine it would get to a vote much like at the trial?

And also while Cat doesn't mention in the narration it I wouldn't be surprised if she's keeping things secret from Tariq just in case Bard pops in with some really convincing arguments about how what she did was part of her secret plan to defeat the Dead King. Once burned twice shy.

Liliet

Nobody's saying Cat was wrong, as best I can tell. This is just a rare situation where EVERYONE is in the right and a minor conflict is peacefully settled by one side conceding.

It's beautiful, truly.

Frivolous

Tariq still has not and probably never will learn to compensate for his inability to Behold Cat's intentions.

It must frustrate him immensely that someone so powerful and influential (and obnoxious) is a blind spot in his aspect. He got too used to local omniscience.

Mental Mouse

It's a pity that she couldn't plausibly go "shields down" to reassure him that "you done good".

Djinn o'Cyde

Vote

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Juff

Typo Thread:

outside of unraveller > outside of the unraveller

to stabilized > to stabilise

runes carves > runes carved

Hiding we have > Hiding that we have

results.I'd (missing space)

It was two people ("it was" appears twice in this sentence. might

want to reword)
before as (one or the other)
answers Akua (missing word. i'm guessing "with")
Conflict was always (is this intentional? maybe remove the "was")
silence beg > silence begs
could dismissed > could dismiss
just social ploy > just a social ploy
made more wary > made him more wary
is waste of time > is a waste of time
cost you something to > cost you something too
has been > had been
experiences heroes > experienced heroes
The d dead > The dead

MrMaturity

If feel like Cat might just be getting a little too arrogant here.
I worry that there is something catastrophic looming on the horizon because Cat thought she could manipulate the situation.

Agent J

In point of fact, Astrophic is Catherine's middle name.

Tenthyr

That's the point though— cat didn't manipulate. She just placed objects in motion in the position where they'd collide in a way she knew would form the patterns inherent to creation.

Burnsy

Okay I'm pretty sure that a) the Spring Crown can be used for resurrections (which is why Tariq didn't want Akua knowing anything more about it) and b) the elves are planning to use it to rez the Spellblade.

Then him coming charging in at an opportune moment like an incredibly racist Legolas to get some good old fashioned murdervenge on the Dead King is looking likely.

Javvies

The Elves may or may not try to resurrect the Spellblade. I am inclined to suspect that they probably won't.
For one thing, he's an Elf, not Fae, and thus an entity of Creation, where the only source for true resurrections is Above, and not having been empowered by a Fae mantle or Title in life, is not eligible for the cyclical Fae reincarnation process.
For another, the Spellblade was in the hands of the Dead King for centuries undergoing who knows what kind of trauma and

mental reconditioning. Who knows what kind of traps are laid for anyone trying to resurrect him? Or where his loyalties would truly lie if resurrected? With the living? Or with his master for centuries?

The Golden Bloom Elves are, however, definitely going to try to use the Crown of Spring to break their curse of infertility (with each other) that they've been affected by ever since they genocided the ancient Deoraithe out of the Golden Bloom. Which, I expect is the top priority for the Golden Bloom Elves.

I think it's more likely that a last hour surprise assist is going to come from Larat and the rest of the former Wild Hunt who are also former Fae.

Sure, they don't owe Cat anything, anymore, but the Dead King winning is definitely the kind of thing that they wouldn't want to have happen (the undead are neither interesting nor fun). Calernia according to Cat would be a vast improvement, from their perspective, relative to Calernia according to the Dead King.

And I suspect that they wouldn't really like Bard any either.

ninegardens

I am so for the surprise return of Larat.

"Hazah... my treacherous lieutenant... ..

...

... just what we all needed?"

Frivolous

All I know for sure is even a resurrected Spellblade won't have the aspect the Saint of Swords destroyed with Sever, the aspect of Ban that Cat ripped out of him, nor the aspect she destroyed with Ban.

Reference: Pinnacle.

A Spellblade with zero aspects might as well not be Named at all.

RanVor

Okay, I'll be mighty surprised if Akua doesn't backslide into her original self after this conversation. She had one reason not to and Cat has just taken it from her in the name of whatever she thought she could achieve by this.

Shveiran

I'm not sure I see your point: Akua didn't take the chances she had to run away (the Everdark, the ritual at the Graveyard, etc) and start anew because she has become convinced that her

former way of living is empty.

That it made her risk his fatehr, that it made her keep friends at arm's length, that it gave her less happyness than an evening around the fire with people that don't really like her.

She has renounced her ways because she now conider them to be empty and useless.

Now she has simply being informed that the path she is walking now doesn't lead to a place where her past deeds are forgotten. And that hurts.

But it doesn't make her suddenly see the old way as a land of milk and honey.

She has a choice before her, one she must make with open eyes. No more, no less.

RanVor

Except the choice she has is, from her perspective, meaningless. Either she goes back to being who she used to be, but knowing it won't be the same anymore because her perspective has changed, or she throws away everything that defined her in life for nothing. Both paths ultimately lead nowhere, but one of them requires significantly more effort. And if you're going to be a monster no matter how hard you try, why bother?

Geckus

That choice would be far from meaningless; with everything she's experienced since her 'death', returning to her old ways would require her to actually choose to be a monster – even the most evil people don't typically think of themselves as the bad guy. Whereas choosing the higher road, one full of challenge with no redemption at the end, would require her to choose to be better than she was before. She would bother because she's become a better person, not a worse one.

RanVor

Spoken like somebody who hasn't been raised to worship evil. Akua's values are radically different from what you'd expect in a normal person and only recently she's begun to change her outlook. Being a monster is perfectly normal to her. She doesn't have any inherent desire to be a better person – she wouldn't be totally fine with going back to what was, but it would be nothing compared to the commitment required to pick the other path. And since her only real incentive has just been taken away, she might simply not care enough to do that.

Salt

Akua can't go back to her old beliefs at this point without compromising them. Her old beliefs are a hardcore oldschool Below ideology of victory proving beliefs correct, as direct opposition to Above's idea that beliefs are inherently correct or incorrect to begin with. Praesi ideology isn't just "let's do bad things". She worships worthiness being proven through accomplishment, she worships the methods and beliefs that lead to accomplishment. She doesn't sacrifice babies just for the sake of sacrificing babies.

Which means that Catherine's victories – and especially her victory over the old Diabolist – are what makes Catherine correct instead of the old Diabolist, even in the Diabolist's own eyes. It can't be denied without fundamentally denying the core of her original ideology to begin with.

The funny thing about iron sharpens iron is that it only makes sense if there actually is a sharpening. You don't get to believe in that and avoid being sharpened, just because the end result is unpleasant on an emotional level.

RanVor

Look, all I'm saying is, when all roads lead nowhere, might as well choose the easiest one.

Ultimately, this was a test. Cat wanted to see how Akua would react to the notion of being beyond redemption. I believe she miscalculated. Denying someone hope never leads to positive change, even if the hope in question is only an illusion.

RanVor

By the way, why does everybody suddenly think the Diabolist so trustworthy? What happened to "Akua is a manipulative evil demon and can't not tell a lie if her life depended on it"?

Shveiran

Uhm... one doesn't have to trust or like Akua, of course, but it feels like your arguments stem from the assumption that people never change, and that people never embrace a different self for reasons other than personal benefit.

I wouldn't want to argue our respective view of the world, but if we are discussing the Guide that

really doesn't seem how the world and characters work?

RanVor

You're 158% mistaken here (as usual). I'm calling you, the community, out on being ready to change views on characters so quickly whenever convenient. It's kind of funny how my opinion on Akua is misinterpreted to mean different, sometimes completely opposite things depending on the discussion, while in reality, it's always the same – Akua can't be trusted, but that doesn't make her points invalid. Even a hypocrite can be right, but that doesn't make them any less of a hypocrite.

...Actually, it's the same with my opinions on everything. One of the reasons I left this fandom was that I was tired of having to constantly correct people thinking I said something different than (sometimes even the opposite of) what I meant to say.

Shveiran

I really don't think we have argued often enough for you to express percentages about how wrong I am (usually or not).

I'm also unsure about how I somehow became the whole community, let alone what kind of agenda I could have that thinking something of Akua is "convenient".

But if you feel that anyone that disagrees with you shares the same (wrong) opinion, by all means keep at it. I'll be over here, not joining the discussion.

RanVor

1. Fuck the English language, it's the worst.
2. It's always the same whenever I'm arguing with anybody (and I mean *literally anybody*) here.
3. You don't want to talk, fine, whatever. My point stands.

ninegardens

@Ranvor:

>By the way, why does everybody suddenly think the Diabolist so trustworthy? What happened to "Akua is a manipulative evil demon and can't not tell a lie if her life depended on it"?

I mean.... that was like two books ago?
As in, she proved pretty reliable during the Everdark arc...
And then during the princes graveyard.
And then, for the past 2 years of war vs the dead king.

She's had CHANCES to betray them, and demonstrably not taken those chances.
This isn't exactly what I'm going to call "sudden"....

As for why everyone misinterprets your arguments and opinions... ummm....

<https://xkcd.com/1028/>

If you are consistently misinterpreted this might be a problem with how your presenting things.
Communication is a two way street.

And if you go around saying things like "Your 158% wrong (as usual)", people will be less inclined to assume that you are acting in good faith, and more inclined to believe you're a pain in the ass.

shrug

If you say things like that why WOULD people assume that you are taking their opinion seriously? And if not, why would they listen to yours?

It kind of looks a lot less like the fandom ganging up on you, and more like you showing up and picking a fight. (though admittedly, I only have the context of your last couple posts; you have the context of your entire post history, so feel free to disagree)

RanVor

Maybe I am a pain in the ass. What I really am, though, is a fool, because I keep coming back even though it always ever ends with me getting pissed off and leaving again. I just can't get along with you people, you're far too annoying.

I can't help but notice, though, that you keep focusing on an offhand remark I made instead of my actual point.

Salt

It can only be considered leading to nowhere if the ideal destination remains centered around self gratification to begin with.

Which is rather the point. The only denial here is of personal pride or status as achievable end goals, which is far from the denial of any end goals at all. Especially considering a massive number of major characters in the story don't hold those two as critical end goals in the first place, and since Akua has never been a character that lets difficulty affect her choice in goals.

RanVor

Care to tell me what that end goal is supposed to be, exactly?

[marillius](#)

It's called selflessness. Doing good when there is no reward, especially when there is no reward.

Cat just took away the reward.

RanVor

Ah, see, here's your mistake. You think Akua would want to be a selfless person. I have no reason to believe that to be true.

[Liliet](#)

Akua is already a selfless person.

Now, I know how this sounds, hear me out.

She never wanted – for herself, for personal gratification and enjoyment – the things she was working to achieve. Nowhere in her POV is there a single thought of “when I am the Empress of Creation, THEN the true fun will come”. Instead, we have “when I win, Praes will become strong again” and “I will prove my cause right” and “do you ever get tired of what we do”.

She was raised to view ambition as a duty, and never wavered in that until by her own philosophy she was proven wrong in the assumption that made her stronger than everyone else.

By the philosophy she followed up until her death, she is now supposed to loyally serve Catherine and help her achieve her goals.

By her personal desires – well, that's what Catherine's playing with by "not taking away the mirrored oasis".

It's the middle path that Catherine is taking away, the path of not quite committing, of expecting things to circle around to her getting what she expected to get in the first place.

Here's a more detailed analysis of what drives Akua:

[marillius](#)

Woosh And there goes the point of this chapter, right over your head.

Tenthyr

Akua knows the end of that path now, and going back to it is more miserable than choosing a better path, one of contrition.

RanVor

Nope. Cat made a point of showing that each path is exactly as miserable as the other. One is a path of endless disappointment, the other is a path of endless sacrifice. Both can wear an individual out surprisingly quickly.

In a way, it's truly a genius punishment – Akua will have to bear suffering for the rest of her existence, but it will be almost entirely self-inflicted. Catherine just isn't wary enough of the possibility of it backfiring spectacularly.

[Liliet](#)

I think Catherine is very wary, but she's also aware of the momentum Akua is giving to the forward path just through her perfectionism. Akua commits to things, even when they are proven increasingly idiotic over time. It'll take a stronger stimulus than "I won't be getting EVERYTHING I want" to make her deviate.

Akua has been proving her intent to go through with this for nearly two books now, and as she commits more and more – well, she commits more and more. It's a psychological trick that Catherine is completely shameless about – and if she was at any point wrong about it, Akua would have backed out earlier.

They're playing chicken and Catherine's not flinching. She knows the risks, but everything genuinely IS going that way.

Note how this meeting was specifically noted as a means of calibration: she had no doubts about what the trajectory was, but needed to verify how far along it Akua was.

And she was not proven wrong about any of her assumptions.

RanVor

Well, I've said pretty much everything I wanted to say and now that you're here, I guess it's my cue to back off, lest we start another flame war.

Bye, I'd say I hope we won't meet again, but I've already shown that I can't be trusted to be smart enough to avoid that.

[Liliet](#)

RIP. Hopefully we'll be able to talk without you having a bad time sometime. Have a good non-pgte-commenting-time :3

shikkarasu

Real quick, and maybe I missed something, but what the Crows are these "Pharos Devices?" They were brought up in Chapter 2 and mentioned in 47, but I can't find any mention of what they do. Only that 5ish were produced where there are *crates* of unravellers.

Frivolous

No explanation yet what pharos devices are.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's implied they're used to open multiple portals from the TW to make possible for more soldiers to exit them quickly.

Frivolous

I was sleeping, and as I woke up, it occurred to me that the Pharos of Alexandria was a famous lighthouse.

Light-house. It is my vague guess that the pharos devices allow wielders of Light, such as priests of the House of Light, to project that Light with intensity at great distances, to burn undead like battle-lasers, or do other things with Light. Maybe

even long-range healing, or making instantaneous holy ground of battlefields to weaken all undead on that field?

Konstantin von Karstein

From chapter 2:

« It'd been our first use of a pharos device, and the proliferation of gates out of the Twilight Ways had allowed us to take the dead flatfooted. »

I suppose Pharos devices are tools to open several portals at the same time to shorten the time it takes for your soldiers to exit the TW.

Frivolous

Oh interesting. I hadn't seen that. Thank you, Konstantin.

That explains what Cat was thinking about the Alliance having better mobility than Keter. I was wondering about that, since Klaus noted that the dead don't need to rest.

Reader in The Night

People have been throwing around the word "redemption" when it comes to Akua's engineered character arc. I don't think redemption is the right word here, the right word is "revenge".

Maybe Cat wants to also make Akua useful in the process, but the primary goal here is not to atone her, it's to punish her. And if her plan goes well, Cat has done that perfectly, because she made Akua reach a place of self-flagellation for the rest of her unnatural life. Doesn't matter how long Akua lives or what she does, Cat has robbed her of the right to obtain penance.

Daniel E

Repent repent, you shall not be forgiven, etc. I wonder if Contrition's resurrection left an impression, however subtle.

[Liliet](#)

I think it really did. Catherine has been very Like That in a way she wasn't, I think, before First Llesse.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Indeed, she has been marked by each of the Choirs she's faced. The self-flagellation from Contrition has been noticed not only by commenters but by the Woe. Fortitude is perhaps a little iffy on timing, but she certainly clings to that limp now. Mercy has pushed her further towards reducing pain for everyone – not just Callow, but all of Calernia. And Judgement has

strengthened her capacity to pass judgement on not just her subordinates, but the powers of the world.

Miles

"But cold iron isn't supposed to be conducive to magic so why put it at the centre?"

"Because the Hierophant voted," Akua said, frank with her praise.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Time1ock

So it seems that Akua's going to go through a contrition story.

As a side note: it does feel odd that the Choir of Contrition has the whole "Repent. You will not be forgiven. Repent" thing going on when in Christianity, contrition through Christ is regarded as the first step towards reconciliation with God. Was this an intentional choice?

Shveiran

It doesn't seem very surprising, in my opinion. The Guide is original enough that its content isn't a thin-veiled parody of the real world, but something that lives and breathes on its own merits.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Every point against Akua can (and should) be made against Cat as well. Most ironic chapter so far.

Aotrs Commander

And Pilgrim. ESPECIALLY Pilgrim. No amount of "but reasons!" changes that fact; frankly, he's worse than she is, because he beleives himself righteous on top of being a mass-murderer.

J Corwin

It's especially funny because he says there's nothing you can do in the wake of mass murder to be trustworthy, when his whole deal is "I mass murder, but for like, a good reason usually, so trust me with it."

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Hah good point.

Chapter 49: Association

"There are two ways to interpret a prophecy: the way that spells your doom and the wrong one."

– Dread Empress Dismal

I knelt, pushing down a twinge of pain, and squinted closely at the copper wire.

Obviously my quarters had been trapped, but *how*? The wire was of the finer kind Pickler had come up with during my time in the Everdark, but even though pushing fully open the door would definitely pull on it – and so on a contraption tied to munitions, hopefully but not necessarily College-grade instead of military – the angle was all wrong for a sharper or a brightstick. Sure, a full brightstick would shatter my eardrum from this close but I wouldn't be blinded. And I'd lose what, at most a shredded ankle to a sharper? This was amateur hour. Where was the triple-wire spring with the overhead sharper? No, I was being screwed with. This was bait.

The foundations of my house in Neustal, which I didn't actually use all that often compared to my tent, were stone raised above ground-level as was standard in areas where the Dead King might attempt assassination. It meant I had a single 'step' to take going into the house, in reality just a small extension of the foundation beyond the walls. And when I leaned closer and smelled that step, I found a familiar scent: stone dust and sapper's plaster. That little fucker had put in a weight-sensitive demolition charge after hollowing out the step, hadn't he? The copper wire had just been to draw my attention away. Narrowing my eyes, I used my staff to hoist myself back up on my feet.

I wasn't going to let this ambush pass without a bit of a rap on the knuckles, of course. It was good for my sappers to occasionally be reminded I was just as shameless as them and twice as mean.

"Special Tribune Robber," I called out. "Report."

There was a beat of silence.

"It was all Borer's idea," a voice cheerfully called out from inside. "I tried to stop him, Your Maleficence, but with his brute strength he overwhelm-"

"I asked for a report," I mildly said. "Come out and deliver it."

I pulled on Night the slightest bit, just in case. Special Tribune Robber, who'd held his rank for several years now, had visibly aged since I last saw him. That was often the way with goblins, whose lifespan was much shorter than most other races'. How old was he now? Near twenty, I imagined. Over the hill by the standards of his race, who quickly began going decrepit past thirty when they lived that long. He was distantly of a Matron line, I knew, so I held out hope that his face grown even gaunter and the pulls of skin around his yellow eyes were not warning signs.

Deftly the sapper came to stand on the stone, and offered me an offensively terrible salute paired with a smug grin of white needles. I could not help but notice the distinct lack of him exploding. Vexing.

"Reporting at your leisure, Your Wickednousness," Robber cheerfully said.

I cocked my head to the side.

"Fine-tuned it to trigger only above your weight?" I said.

"No idea what you're talking about, ma'am," he assured me. "Although, while we're at it, I'd like to report Captain Borer for wanton mutiny, assault of a superior officer-"

"How long did it even take you to hollow that thing out?" I asked, reluctantly impressed.

"Pickler made this stone-eating acid while we were up north," Robber said. "Works like a charm. Based on some Lycaonese alchemy they use to keep their ramparts clean."

There was a beat of silence.

"Is what I would say were I Captain Borer, who is *obviously* responsible for-"

"How strong are the munitions?" I mildly asked.

"Like the gentle caress of a breeze," he lied.

A slender tentacle of Night pierced through the fresh plaster, triggering the munitions within, and the little bastard fell into the step with little burn but large billows of a pungent black smoke. I took a sniff and almost gagged. Leftover smoker ingredients mixed with something rank, I'd guess. Robber had always been a deft hand with munitions, especially recipes that weren't on the record. Even as the goblin tumbled forward at my feet, coughing, I leaned against my staff and cocked an eyebrow.

"So what have we learned today?" I asked.

"You are an implacable foe to all goblinkind," he croaked out. "And take pleasure in persecuting your poor, innocent, *loyal* servants."

A grin tugged at my lips.

"I did saddle Borer with you," I conceded, "so I suppose an argument can be made for the second."

"You could offer me healing, at least," Robber complained, then faked a few fresh coughs. "Aren't you some sort of fancy priestess these days, Boss? First Into The Pie or something like that."

I knew he was full of shit, because the Sisters were actually wildly popular with the sappers and even goblins in general. It was almost like, culturally speaking, they were very comfortable with the idea of unknowable female eldritch entities of murder and theft standing above them. *Go figure*. I wouldn't call them converts to the Tenets, which were much too drow in nature to ever really find takers beyond the Firstborn, but these days sappers liked to mark their equipment with the Crows and the occasional rabbit or bird was bled in their name before being tossed in a cookpot. Andronike was rather charmed by the practice and had sounded me out on the subject of bestowing Night – I wasn't opposed, so long as she knew what she was in for. Komena was lukewarm at the notion of branching out too much from the drow, though, so it'd gone nowhere.

"You're right," I mused. "Silly of me to forget."

Quicker than he was able to dodge, I rapped the top of his hairless head with the side of my staff. He yelped and paddled back.

"How is that healing?" he accused.

"Well," I shrugged, "you're not thinking about the cough anymore, are you?"

A heartbeat later he was cackling, and I shared in the laughter. He darted in to clasp my arm in a legionary's salute, close but light-touched, before backing away.

"It's good to see you, Boss," Robber said.

"You too," I smilingly replied. "You malevolent little shit. Was this just a heads up you got in, or did you have a reason to seek me out?"

"Pickler wants to see you," he said. "Sent me to get your attention."

I snorted.

"Haven't been able to get more than three words out of that one in the weeks she's been here, but *now* she feels chatty?" I said. "Let me guess: she's finally finished her latest tinkering trip and she wants to show off."

"You're the one who named her Sapper-General," Robber shrugged. "Then you compounded that by throwing a mountain of coin and artisans at her. She'd been on a two-year tinkering binge, Boss. I had to assign someone to making sure she ate."

I winced, though I was not entirely surprised. In theory Pickler was the head of all the sappers in the Army of Callow, which had been made into a separate military order not unlike the Order of Broken Bells – I just didn't have enough sappers to use them the way the Legions did – but she was utterly uninvolved with field command. Even company assignments were largely handled by her second, Commander Waffler, with her only occasionally meddling in matters. Her efforts had been on making war engines for this new war we were fighting, and Twilight's Pass has been her both her testing and proving grounds.

"No one told me was quite that bad," I admitted, faintly apologetic.

Robber had always been sweet on his old commanding officer, in a goblin way. It was unlikely to ever go anywhere, but that didn't mean he couldn't hold a torch. We got moving as we talked, him leading the way as I limped to the side.

"She's pleased as a raider on a moonless night," Robber dismissed. "I'm not irked about that part, just that she's learned some bad habits. Nobody seems to care since she's spitting out wonders keeping to those hours, but it's not good for her health."

He looked at me from the corner of his large yellow eyes.

"She's been wildly happy since you freed her from field command and let her loose, Boss," the Special Tribune said. "And she's grateful, don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Buy you know she's always been like this."

I softly smiled. Look at him, all these years and he was still quietly cleaning up behind Pickler the same way he had back when we'd just been a bunch of kids fighting in College war games. Some things never changed, huh?

"We're all creatures of habit, in our own ways," I drily said. "I know better than to take offence, Robber. Not seeing you two for a few years won't change that."

Hells, I didn't have enough friends left alive to start getting petty with them over little things like, say, Pickler's inability

to pretend she cared a whit about niceties when instead she could be attending *glorious machinery*. Reassured, Robber caught me up on gossip from Twilight's Pass as we walked with great relish. No doubt he was making up half the tales. I choked, though, when he mentioned the supposedly fierce debate among the northern armies about whether Prince Frederic and Prince Otto were close friends or secret lovers.

"You met the man in the Arsenal, didn't you?" Robber asked. "Did you get a read on whether he'd enjoy that sort of lance-handling?"

The goblin obscenely wiggled his hairless brows, startling a laugh out of me. I could have told him that Frederic was actually a more than decent jouster, but that was best kept quiet even among my closest.

"Alas, I only ever got to see him use a sword," I sighed. "A tragedy, Robber. You know what these pretty boys do to me."

He wrinkled his nose in disgust, not even entirely feigned.

"Humans," he sighed. "It's all fluids with you lot – and not even the fun ones, like blood or goblinfire."

I made a somewhat unkind comment about the sexual attraction the average sapper might feel towards a crate of munitions, which devolved the conversation into bickering all the rest of the way to where Pickler was holed up. A shooting range, I discovered, or at least the battered remnants of one. Targets had been blown through in ways experience allowed me to match with ballistas, but it'd been more than just stone that'd done this. The grounds and wooden targets were scorched, like they'd been set aflame. I frowned as I limped to the edge of the firing range, interested enough I didn't stop to chat with the sapper crews fielding the three ballistas on the range.

I knelt slowly, leaning on my staff, and trailed my fingers against the charred wooden remains of a target. Bringing them close to my face, I took a whiff and immediately let out a noise of surprise.

"Aha," Sapper-General Pickler of the High Ridge Tribe enthused, popping out without warning. "You get it, then. I knew you would."

She forgot to tack on even a ma'am at the end, but I was excited enough it barely registered.

"That wasn't done by sorcery," I said. "There's no ozone smell, like there would be with an enchanted stone blowing up."

Having appeared out of hole in the ground – not metaphorically, it'd been an actual hole and she'd been in it – Pickler offered

me an excited grin that was like a clacking mouthful of white needles. Like Robber she'd aged, yet while like him her face had grown gaunter her frame had actually thickened. She was only a little taller than the last time we'd seen each other, but her shoulders and hips had grown broader. Her amber eyes looked even larger, now that the skin was pulled taut around them, and they shone with manic zeal.

"It's Light," she said, confirming my guess.

I let out a low whistle.

"We've been trying to get that to work for years," I said, honestly impressed. "Multiples stones were fired here, Pickler. You really managed to get several shots out without scrapping the engine?"

Stones with a Light infusion weren't new, everyone under the sun had used those at some point. They'd been a known part of Calernian arsenals since the First Crusade, when trying to take heavily warded Praesi cities with inferior mages had forced the crusading armies to find an alternative to simply dying by the dozens of thousands storming the walls. The problem with those munitions was that they tended to wreck whatever siege engine they were thrown out of, as Light was highly unstable when shoved into things. There was a reason the foremost artisan in Light of our generation was the Blessed Artificer, who'd gotten a fucking *Name* out of her skill at it.

Usually larger stones were more stable, so trebuchets and catapults could be relied on to toss a dozen stones before being seriously damaged. It made their use viable. The smaller the engines got, though, the more the Light in the projectiles screwed with them. Scorpions and ballistas were sometimes made unusable by as much as a *single* shot, the javelins and stones having bent the wood they were on. The Lycaonese, who loved ballistas as much as the Legions of Terror – even though they used dwarven models, the poor fuckers – had long been bitter about this, as they could not afford to buy replacements and lacked the mages to turn to a magical solution instead.

"We have to put a copper casing on the stones," Pickler hedged, "but once that safety is observed, yes. It had been an unequivocal success, Catherine. And the amount of Light that emanates is battle-appropriate, it has a decent shot of destroying even a construct."

"Gods Below, Pickler," I laughed out. "That..."

Changed things, to put it lightly. Most constructs were too damned quick to be threatened by something like this, and those that weren't were much too *big*, but the amount of Light she was talking about would utterly wreck most undead infantry. It might

even finally give us a way to deal with the Grey Legion that wasn't 'soldiers praying Akua, the Witch or me got there in time'. Even Hanno had found those fuckers a hard nut to crack.

"I thought it might please," my Sapper-General said, smiling a smile as girlish as goblin teeth allowed.

It would have made a cat flinch, I suspected. And wisely so, given that goblins liked them in a stew.

"It has," I said, almost touching her shoulder before I refrained.

It, uh, was usually taken as an advance by goblins. Robber had been trained out of that by his years rubbing elbows with other races, but Pickler wasn't as social.

"Have supper with me tonight," I said. "You can tell me more about it there. But until then?"

She watched me, amber eyes alight with expectation.

"Take what you need, Sapper-General," I grinned, wolfish. "On my authority, requisition any bloody thing you need to make sure we have as many of those modified ballistas and... copperstones as we can when we march."

She didn't protest the name, improvised as it was, so it might just stick. The two of us grinned at each other again, and it felt like the day had gotten just a little bit lighter.

—

I swung by my tent, afterwards, to follow through on what I'd just promised. I doubted Pickler was going to be shy with requisitions if she was rushing things before our departure, so I'd better ensure she actually had the recognized authority to make those. Thankfully Adjutant was waiting there, seated in his wheelchair and dictating notes to three attendants in the green-and-grey livery that signified they were directly in his service. Two humans and one goblin, I noted, by the looks of it a young Soninke woman and an older Callowan man.

All three bore a discreet painted iron pin in the form of a curled skeletal hand pointing its index, the enchantment laid on it serving only to prove it was authentic. On the rolls these constantly-swelling ranks were called the adjunct secretariat, and their stated purpose was to serve as a mix of my personal bureaucracy and messengers. And while they did serve those purposes, and well, that was only the official part of their duties. In practice people had taken to calling the 'phalanges' after the pins, and they served as Hakram's eyes and hands.

Some of them had been invested with authority on my behalf, able to make inspections of Callowan and Grand Alliance property and soldiers to unearth treason and corruption, but there was also an entire armed wing that'd expanded out of the first tenth of legionaries I'd long ago put under Adjutant to ferret out Heiress' rats in the Fifteenth.

Grandmaster Talbot had approached me and expressed, in confidence, a degree of unease over 'the Adjutant's private army of soldiers, sneaks and scribes'. If he'd know that Hakram had heavily recruited from the parts of the Assassin's Guild that'd not been a good fit for the Jacks, I suspected he would have been outright worried. I'd appeased the commander of my knights by assuring him there were non-negotiable limits to the amount of coin dedicated to the adjunct secretariat, which would restrict its size permanently after a little more growth.

I got the sense Talbot had wanted some Callowan oversight over the phalanges, either through Vivienne or my Queen's Council – though the latter would have probably meant Vivienne also, given that my Council was currently in Laure and answering to Duchess Kegan – but that wasn't going to be happening. When I abdicated I'd be taking the phalanges with me to Cardinal, so I wasn't interested in giving Callow too deep a peek at their inner workings. If I wanted them to survive as a Cardinal institution, I couldn't let them slide into being just a chapter of the Jacks by another name.

The three phalanges saluted as I limped in, but I gestured for them to keep jotting down Hakram's orders as I made my way to my liquor cabinet and poured myself a celebratory finger of aragh. The copperstone munitions were worth a drink for more than me, I decided, so after a moment I poured a finger for Adjutant as well.

"- and have another look into Captain Garrick," Adjutant said. "That's twice now he's splashed coin around, we still don't know if it's inheritance or he's been taking bribes."

The goblin licked her lips, as the others nodded.

"And my own find?" she asked.

"The Jacks have been in touch, she's already one of their informants in the ranks and she warned them of the contact," Hakram said, sounding chagrined. "Start over with another company."

I sipped at my aragh, watching as he finished the last round of instructions and dismissed them. They saluted, first to me and then to him, and within moments we were left alone. I pressed the small cup into his only hand, the skeletal one Masego's father had crafted from him what felt like a lifetime ago. The orc –

still so tall, even wheelchair-bound – let out an approving rumble. We clinked our glasses and drank.

“Pickler’s work proved worth all the mess?” he asked afterwards.

“And more,” I replied. “She managed to get Light-infused projectiles working for ballistas, though she has to tinker up both. Dips the stones in copper, which means they’ll be hard to make out on the campaign trail.”

Hakram’s eyes widened, his fangs clicking together thoughtfully.

“That is fine news indeed,” he said. “We only have enough goblin munitions stockpiled for one last campaign, even used sparingly, so a substitute is long overdue.”

More like two pitched battles than a whole campaign, in my opinion, and I wanted to keep a decent quantity at hand for when we moved on the capital so really more for one battle. Our initial hopes that the Confederation of the Grey Eyries would be able to push out the Matron who’d betrayed them, currently styled High Lady Wither of Foramen, out of said city had turned out to be... overly optimistic. Wither had little Legion support, but the Confederation’s armies weren’t the kind that could take a Praesi city except by surprise.

Which High Lady Wither wasn’t going to fall for, since she’d taken the city this way from both her predecessors the Banu and then the Confederation itself.

The Grey Eyries were hardly at risk of falling, since the traitor tribes couldn’t really afford to chance anything aside from a defence of their seized territories, but without control of Foramen the Confederation could no longer sell us goblin munitions. Some mountain routes had been opened but the quantities that could be taken through them were paltry and the Eyries themselves were full of creatures that preyed on goblins. We still got the occasional wagons from Callow, as much from old Legion caches as what the goblins got to us, but it wasn’t enough.

I’d forbidden use of munitions, lest attrition at the defensive line empty our stock long before a decisive battle could be fought.

“Agreed,” I said. “I ordered her to stock up as much as she can of both ballistas and copperstones, so she’ll need my seal and a Grand Alliance warrant.”

He nodded.

"It would be polite to inform the other commanders in advance, since she might requisition from them," Hakram reminded me. "No need for much, just a courtesy letter."

"I suppose," I muttered.

Might as well smooth the feathers before they ever got ruffled if it could be done. Bone fingers came to rest on the side of the wheelchair, clutching around the grip, and Adjutant wheeled himself to the side. Tried to, anyway – the left wheel got caught on a rock that'd bene pushed into the ground, and while the chair was too well-built to flip it did get stuck. Hakram grunted with effort as he tried to force it, but all it did was get the rock stuck between the wheel and the protective sheathing as earth sprayed. I stood paralyzed, wanting to help but certain he'd take it as an insult. He finally let go with a half-swallowed roar, the dead hand slamming down onto the arm of the wheelchair.

Hakram looked to the side, as if unwilling to face me.

"I can send back for secretaries," I delicately said.

Some part of me dimly suspected that my helping him instead would go over very poorly. It... wasn't how we did things. Never had been.

"No," Adjutant roughly said. "The seal and warrants are under lock, and there's none close that have the clearance to touch them."

"An exception can be made once," I tried. "While we are here."

His fingers clenched until even the enchanted wood under them creaked.

"I *wrote* those safety rules, Catherine," Hakram bit out. "I won't break them because of a fucking rock."

Quietly I drew on Night, wondering if I could slip a tendril near the chair and-

"Stop that," Adjutant sharply said.

Lips thinning, I released the power. I did neither of us the disservice or pretending I didn't know what he was talking about.

"It will be easier when the prosthetics come from the Arsenal," he tiredly said. "I'll be out of the chair, able to walk again. It will take longer to be able to fight but-"

"Hakram," I said.

"There are shields built for men with only one hand, Catherine," he told me. "I have looked into the matter. It will take training, but it can be done."

My heart clenched, but I couldn't just let him keep on telling himself that lie.

"Hakram," I quietly repeated, "you know it can't be like that. It's done, the old fights. Maybe in a few years you'll be able to handle soldiers, but not Named. Not for a long time, if ever again."

He'd have to make a fighting style nearly from scratch, learn to compensate for several glaring weaknesses while having few strengths to call on. It wasn't impossible, and men that had half his courage and discipline went back to fighting after losing a hand, but he'd lost a great deal more than that. Prosthetics relying on magic would make him brutally vulnerable to heroes that could wield Light, which was most of them, and a skilled mage without even a Name would be able to meddle with the enchantments on them.

"I will not be put out to pasture, Catherine," Hakram rasped out. "I won't allow it."

"I haven't stopped relying on you," I insisted. "You lost some aptitude in swinging around a stick with steel stuck onto it, that's all. If anything I'm running you too hard, considering you're recovering from severe wounds."

He studied me for a moment, dark eyes calm and all too knowing.

"You are closing the door," Adjutant said. "To my ever standing by your side in battle again."

I opened my mouth to argue, hadn't I *just* said that – but he raised his hand, and so I swallowed my tongue.

"Maybe not with words," Hakram said. "Or with deeds. But in the back of your head, you have."

My lips thinned. I'd never liked being told what it was that I was supposedly thinking, even coming from my closest friend in the world.

"You know my aspects," the orc tiredly said. "One felt mockery, when it sunk in what I had lost, but then I thought it might instead turn into a key."

Rampage, Find, *Stand*. The last must have felt like a bitter joke after losing his leg. With the way the Severance's cut had carved into his hipbone, he couldn't even try to get around on crutches – even with painkillers the pain was simply horrendous. Only

surgical spells that deadened pain worked, and those could damage nerves if they were kept on for too long.

"But it hasn't," I said.

"It is fading," Hakram replied, then corrected himself. "No, perhaps not quite that drastic. Losing luster? Losing potency, certainly. As if there was no longer a call for me to use it, or a place where I would."

My stomach dropped. He was implying that I no longer thought of him as someone who'd fight by my side – and Gods, I had carefully kept the words out of my mouth but they were not untrue – so his Name, ever so bound to my service, was no longer trying to help him in that purpose. Even when he wanted it to. I drew back as if struck. It was only a theory, this, but Adjutant had good instincts. And it had that damning ring of truth to it.

"I haven't," I blurted. "I mean, I can't..."

I did not quite know what I was trying to say, and an odd shame was eating at me from the inside for it.

"I am not accusing you of malice," Adjutant spoke into my flustered silence. "Or trying to shame you. But you were not going to admit it unless told. And now that you know, perhaps if you shape your thoughts..."

I hesitantly nodded.

"I don't know if it would work," he admitted. "If it *can*. But what else is there but to try?"

Making peace with having lost something, I wanted to reply, but how could I? It was serving me he'd lost it, while I was getting clever playing shatranj with the Intercessor. Now I was looking at the consequences of my decision every day, and it was not a pretty thing to behold.

"You need a helper while we're out there," I forced out. "Someone who'll take care of little things for you and keep an eye out for enemies. Neshamah will come after you, he knows how important you are to the war."

And to me, which would have been enough for the Hidden Horror to aim for his head without all the other good reasons for it.

"I have my secretaries," Hakram replied. "Some of them have better grips on swords than quills."

"You need more than that," I said. "I've talked with the Silver Huntress and then with the girl herself: the Apprentice could be suborned to you for the offensive, to learn from you and lend a hand."

It'd been surreal looking at some slip of a girl from Ashur bearing Masego's Name, much less one who considered herself a heroine, but I'd managed. The Apprentice badly wanted a term of service in the Arsenal, and I'd offered it a bribe after this campaign if she accepted. She'd still get lessons from the Sage, it was the reason she was out here on the front in the first place, but the hours would have been cut while we were on war footing anyway so serving as Hakram's assistant would not be to her detriment.

It also put a skilled practitioner by his side during most of the day. The Apprentice had previously been studying with an eye to become the Silver Mage, one of the Ashuran wizardly mantles, but she'd abandoned the healing arts after most her teachers got killed during the sack of Smyrna. She'd picked up a lot of quick and cheap war magic since signing onto the Truce, and while her spellcasting was still pretty simple it was also swift and highly destructive. Nothing short of a Revenant ought to trouble her if she saw it coming.

"And what did it cost you to convince the girl?" the orc drily asked.

I shrugged. We both knew I wasn't above sweetening the pot for someone when it served my purposes. I could read him well enough to know that the offer wasn't making him happy, but he didn't refuse outright.

"I'll think about it," Hakram finally said. "That's all I can give you."

I bit my lip, tempted to push since I sensed he was leaning more towards accepting than refusing. If I gave him too much time to ponder, though, he might just talk himself out of it. I breathed out. Trust, I told myself. We weren't going to get through this intact without trust.

"Have an answer for me before we set out," I nodded. "I'll want to speak with the White Knight before making the final arrangements."

"I will," Adjutant gravelled, then hesitated.

He sagged into the seat, as if tension had drifted out of him.

"I'll take care of the warrant and seal," he said. "I only need one hand to fake your signature."

"I leave it in your hands, then," I said, then paused. "And Hakram?"

He turned darks eyes onto me.

"I love you," I said. "You know that, right?"

The orc breathed out.

"I know," he said.

I'd not asked for forgiveness and he'd not given it. It wasn't in me to ask, and he'd be insulted if I did. But it was something, to say the words. A paltry offering, I couldn't help but think as I left my tent, but what else did I have to give?

—

When the moon rose, it found me once more standing at the edge of the roof.

Summer heat had lingered even after dark, the breeze bringing the distant scent of the swamplands in the distance. Green and mud and life, all intertwined with something like sweet rot. I stood at the edge, letting the wind curl around me, and closed my eyes. I flinched in pain a moment later. Like nails driven into my temples. It wasn't an attack, I realized, but a Night-working. One I'd laid myself as a precaution two years back. I pulled back the string of it again, but left the working in place.

"The trick's not quite as good," I said, "once you know what to look for."

Her steps were quiet, but not so quiet I did not hear her deftly make her way down the tiles to stand at my side. First time I'd ever caught her out, wasn't it? My contingency must have triggered when I'd closed my eyes, prompted by a power I'd not noticed and had felt entirely like my own whim. What a dangerous aspect hers was.

"The same can be said of all tricks," the Scribe replied.

This, I suspected, was going to be an interesting talk.

Djinn o'Cyde

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Alessandro Ussia

Done. Yet, I would have loved a snippet taken from the chapter. What can I say, I'm a fan of those.

Miles

I made a somewhat unkind comment about the sexual attraction the average sapper might feel towards a crate of munitions, which devolved the conversation into bickering all the rest of the way to where Pickler was holed up. A voting booth, I discovered, or at least the battered remnants of one.

NerfContessa

I wonder, praesi magic of the soul should be able to transfer hakram into another body easily.
Just get an Orc who is willing to sacrifice himself for. Honor of clan and deed, and you have Adjutant back.

Much less morally ambiguous than many a thing cat did.

ruduen

It looks like a reminder would be a good idea...

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Miles

Targets had been blown through in ways experience allowed me to match with ballistas, but it'd been more than just stone that'd done this. The grounds and wooden targets were scorched, like they'd been set aflame. I frowned as I limped to the edge of the firing range, interested enough I didn't stop to chat with the sapper crews fielding the three ballistas on the range.

I knelt slowly, leaning on my staff, trailed my fingers against the charred wooden remains of a target. Bringing them close to my face, I clicked to vote and immediately let out a noise of surprise.

[Javvies](#)

Ooh, Scribe.
This should be interesting.

I expect we'll get an update on events in Praes from her.

I wonder what Scribe's been up to and why she's here now.

That's a very nifty breakthrough from Pickler. And badly needed. From the description, it sounds like while the copperstones aren't exactly cheap or particularly easy to make, and need quality control, they're not too complicated for mass production, insofar as mass production is a thing on Calernia.

Frivolous

Blessed Artificer will probably be furious that the copperstone was invented, not by her or any other hero, but by a goblin.

Shveiran

It seems furious is the Blessed Artificer's natural state of being.

SpeckofStardust

many effective weapons against the undead coming to work before a massive push? That's both good and bad.

Scribe ally or foe?

Death Knight

Heh imagine Scribe as one of Hakram's attendants. The sheer amount of logistical and paperwork that could be done...

Frivolous

Ugh, poor Hakram. Well, if anyone can force her own mind to change so that his Name is strengthened, nor weakened, it's Catherine. This is the same woman who as a girl mastered her fear of heights and of falling.

Also: Yay, finally the Scribe appears. Still unknown where Assassin is, though.

dadycoool

Mastered them by saying to herself "This? This thing you're doing? Stop it."

[Liliet](#)

This one is trickier than the fear of heights, I expect, because I'm not sure Catherine WANTS him to fight by her side at this point. She wants him safe. Any additional fight is one he might not come back from.

She had guilt issues already from his first crippling at Summerholm. She was able to laugh off his losing another hand because she wasn't around for it and it wasn't a result of her decisions – as a matter of fact, it could be said to be a consequence of her not being there, so she definitely wouldn't make things worse by keeping him close.

This? This is reopening old wounds. At this point Catherine might be unable to force herself to *want* him in fighting shape. She doesn't want to lose him.

Shveiran

You know what I find especially worrisome? That this has a tragic ending written all over it no matter what she does.

If she wills herself to see him as fightin-fit and it works, he will likely die in the fight.

If she doesn't, he will likely die all the same by a threat that the Apprentice is unable to overcome.

... I kind of want my Hakram back. This is really heart-wrenching.

KageLupus

I think that there is a middle ground to be found there. Hakram has always been equal parts admin and battle support. Cat has been mentally relegating him to just the first one since she doesn't want to see him get killed in battle.

But if she can think of him as her last-resort-support in a battle I think that could satisfy the narrative drive for his Stand aspect while not putting him in constant harm's way. Hakram would go from being Cat's shadow in a fight to being the thing you see when you know you fucked up. There would have to be some kind of resource limitation that would make fielding him all of the time impossible, but for short and specific fights he could manage.

There is even a potential narrative bump to going that route. It could give Stand a little more juice since Hakram would only use it in dire circumstances. Kind of like Cat getting a bonus against Choirs because she keeps beating them, Hakram would get some providence because the only time he joins the fight is when he has to tilt the scales. Do that enough and the scales get used to being tilted by him.

The end goal for Cat is to beat back the Dead King and then open up her Magical School for Named. As part of that she is obviously going to be relying on Hakram as her admin assistant. But there is no chance that occasionally Cat will have to put the Mantle back on and remind people why they feared the Black Queen in the first place. When she does that, being able to also temporarily empower Hakram for a single fight is going to be a huge boost. That is only going to work if the precedent is set now and the story has time to percolate and congeal.

Frivolous

I have faith in Catherine and her Callowan need for revenge.

The Bard instigated the series of events that led to the death of Nephele and the mutilation of Hakram. I don't think Catherine will allow guilt, of all things, keep her from achieving her vengeance.

And vengeance includes, in part, living well. Not just for herself but for Hakram. She'll demand that Creation gives her and her Woe a happy ending because she's so angry.

dadycoool

"Villains only get the bad endings? Well fuck you! We're going home when this is all said and done."

[Liliet](#)

Oh, I agree 😊

shikkarasu

"I have faith in Catherine and her Callowan need for revenge."

The Sisters would be proud. *wipes away tear*

FableWright

Komena, nooooo! We could have had the Lesser Lesser Footrest of the Night!

Wonder

I keep praying for all of Cat's old friends to get their own Names and move into Cardinal after the war.

Intercessor

oh no, Catherine's boutta get hit in the face with a fifty pound book.

(if u know the tome which im referencing specifically, thematic similarities and all, email me, ill paypal you \$1500)

(fidencio.jiminez232@gmail.com)

Daniel E

Imma go out on a limb here and say "The Necronomicon Livre Des Morts".

dadycoool

Ha, we finally get back to our favorite goblins! Leave it to a goblin to figure out how to properly weaponize Light, especially the way the Legion would.

Oh, Hakram. This is actually a normal, healthy reaction to sudden loss of limbs, isn't it? It has to hurt to know in your bones that your Warlord will never call on you for battle again.

Oh, hi Scribe. Didn't even notice you there.

Frivolous

I wonder/hope that Catherine's impending Name and/or her new aspects allow her to heal or help Hakram.

I mean, aspects sometimes allow a Bestowed to blithely ignore many rules, right? Grey Pilgrim could resurrect the dead, and one time Catherine feared that Saint of Swords could cut the future. Hierarch could Mend the damage a Choir did to his body and also to the chair he sat on.

So it's not outside the realm of possibility that Catherine could develop an aspect that allows her to fix Hakram's injury and utterly negate the effect of the Severity, which was forged from the Saint's aspect. If Laurence could Sever, then maybe, hopefully, my dearest wish is that Catherine might Restore.

zenanii

I don't think this would ever happen for the same reason Catharina didn't remove the stone that was blocking Hakrams wheelchair.

Their relationship is one of master-servant, where Hakrams entire reason for existing is to enable Catharina. I don't think he would ever accept Catharina burning one of her aspects (remember, unformed aspects are trump cards for a free deus ex machina) just allow him to function again.

hakureireimu

Squire2!Cat obtained Take for a very specific purpose. That didn't prevent her from using it on other things.

Sir Nil

There is a way it could happen. Cat has been taking on the role of person who gives people the tools to fix their own problems. Drow democracy, villain alliances etc, I could see Catherine obtaining an aspect that won't fix Hakram outright, but give him the ability to do so himself.

Frivolous

Eh, Cat loves Hakram more than she loves anybody. She'd be very willing to burn an aspect to give him his missing pieces back.

Also, don't forget that Hakram isn't the only cripple in the Woe. If Cat can restore Hakram, she might be able to restore Masego, too.

Earl of Purple

Masego isn't broken. His eyes of summer and sorcery are, whilst vulnerable to tricks of Light, Night and magic are better than his old ones in many respects. He can see through his own head, in the dark, and magic.

Matthew Wells

Pretty sure Frivolous meant the damage the Dead King did to his soul that removed his natural magic supply.

Frivolous

Yep, that is indeed what I meant. And was it to Masego's soul? I thought the damage was physical, to his body.

That's one of the reasons why I believe Masego can be repaired, because the trauma was only physical. Though in the Guide-verse it seems trauma to souls can be fixed as well, since Amadeus's soul-ectomy was repaired by Akua. Still, the body should be easier to fix.

Matthew Wells

There hasn't been any mention of lasting physical damage to Masego, and we already know from Cat that corruption of the soul results in the loss of magical/Name-based powers. Also magic production is evidently not a biological process, since Undead can use it.

Frivolous

There is an episode somewhere where someone, possibly a doctor or Akua, discusses that the loss of magic is not metaphysical but a change to Masego's body.

But I can't find that damn episode. My searches aren't working.

Any help in this regard would be appreciated.

Matthew Wells

In Book 5 Chapter 55 Akua mentions that he is suffering a physical disorder as a result of losing his magic, causing him to go comatose, but she doesn't say whether the original injury from the Dead King was to his soul or his body.

Frivolous

Thanks.

But Seriously Folks

Hakram as played by Samuel L Jackson In the live action series – “I have had it with these motherf’n Break(s) on my montherf’n Name!”

Instant Emmy

Shveiran

Names can do that, but a Name fits the person.

Catherine isn’t a medic.

Whatever the Name is going to be, I doubt it helps with that. Sadly.

Frivolous

I was going to say that you, Shveiran, are correct, but then I remembered Hierarch. He has/had Mend, Receive, and Indict.

Anaxares was a diplomat and from Bellophoron, so I could understand Receive and Indict, but he wasn’t a carpenter, so I really couldn’t see the point or the relevance of Mend until the very end, when he was repairing his body and chair under the assault of the Seraphim.

Furthermore, while Cat might be resisting becoming the rival of the Intercessor, she has been the rival and dark mirror of the Grey Pilgrim. Staff wielder, leader, religious figure. And Tariq had Behold, Shine, and Forgive.

Plus Tariq has been a mentor and, by association, an educator. And Cat is going to run Cardinal, the university city of the Age of Order.

If that story and its trend continues, then Cat might get an aspect similar to Forgive.

Possible?

Matthew Wells

If she does, I’m betting on Pardon.

Shveiran

I mean, "Possible" I can grant with no difficulty. I have been surprised often enough to know my insight is very fallable.

I'd argue that it is not likely, however.

Yes, the Hierarch had mend, but he used mend to keep himself going in the face of overwhelming opposition that he still felt he should be able to face. It fit his character.

I'd have no beef with Cat getting an aspect that fixes herself after grievous harm, especially if it comes with a cost. Girl has always been a bleeder, after all.

But an aspect that fixes others? I don't see it, sorry. And besides, it's not really a thing that Villain Names do.

As for the Gray Pilgrim argument, again, it's not that you come out of nowhere but I'd say we are a bit late for that. Cat is much more than a Gray Pilgrim's mirror, these days, and grows farther from him constantly: she leads the villains and he no longer leads teh heroes, she is losing her homeland while he remains revered, he mentors while she doesn't etc.

They are similar, but that is not what defines her.

Likewise, she has been FUN for about three years now, and she is still Nameless. When she gets her Name, she won't just be a prophet, because otherwise she'd already have a Name, no? She has been Moses all this time, it's not like that is growing.

Also, again, the Night doesn't heal. The Sisters can do nearly anything, but Cat and the drows have never healed OTHERS, only themselves.

I'm not seeing it, personally.

But as I said, I could be wrong.

Frivolous

The aspect of Sacrifice might work. Cat has a history of self-mutilation. She could be willing to regrow Hakram's leg at the cost of one of her own. Even better if she can sacrifice someone else's leg.

I don't see how Cat using Night and being connected to Sve Noc has any bearing on her future Name and aspects. The two seem mostly separate to me. Cat isn't drow, and the Sisters listen to and respect Cat in part because she doesn't bow down to them or fear them.

It's true that healing is not a villainous thing, but there are known and recent exceptions. Sinister Physician, Concocter, .

burlindw

None of Cat's actions since her Name started reforming have been all that villainous. Originally, the reason she became a villain was because she was the Black Knight's Squire, but she stepped out of his shadow a while ago and her motivation has always been to help Callow. She is also currently in conflict with Below's two strongest players, Preas and Keter. Her strongest connection to Below is the Night and Sisters, but the Night was created with the intercession of the Bard, which means that it isn't impossible it was done with the tacit approval of Above (something we've seen happen with Cat's resurrection of the Pilgrim).

The difference between an anti-hero and a well-intentioned villain mostly comes down to perspective (lesser evil vs. greater good) and how successful they are. My theory is that Cat's new Name will be either neutral or anti-hero and tied to her creation of the Age of Order. If her Name is linked to order, then an aspect along the lines of Restore is likely and might be capable of healing, though likely with a steep price, since her usual way of restoring order is rather brutal.

I think her becoming a dark mirror of the Pilgrim is also likely, and doesn't conflict with her having a name tied to order. Both Cat and Tariq have done awful things but with different methods and philosophies (again, lesser evil vs. greater good). Cat will likely end up working from her seat of power in Cardinal, while the Pilgrim is a wanderer as well as the other parallels that have been mentioned so far.

On the subject of Cardinal, Cat (who is probably going to end up the de facto ruler of Cardinal regardless of what the treaties say) having a neutral name would go a long way to establishing Cardinal as a true neutral ground, which is her third largest goal behind beating Keter and protecting Callow.

Frivolous

Not likely that burlindw will ever see this, since it's almost time for an update, but:

Well said. I too think that Cat will have a neutral Name. Something like Peacemaker, or Pacifier, or Queen of War and Peace. Peace seems very likely to me to be part of her Name.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Fighting other servants of Below in no way invalidates Cat's own alignment with them! Even backstabbing the

Gods Below themselves (by working with heroes and heroic tropes, and limiting the ambitions of so many villains) does that – remember that business of Sacred Betrayal?

Hierarch got **Mend** because by his maddened lights, the whole world around him was “broken”, with even the leaders of Bellerophon betraying their ideals on his behalf. Cat... actually could get something in similar vein. Perhaps... **Build**?

[Mental Mouse](#)

“) does that” -> “) doesn’t do that” (dammit WordPress)...

Zach

This isn’t going to happen because it would be bad for the story if it did (and I trust the author to not suddenly make the story bad).

Part of the reason this story is good is that it doesn’t lean into bad fan-service plot-beats (which is what Catherine being able to heal Hakram would be). There’s meaning to someone in Catherine’s inner circle having a genuine loss like this.

Frivolous

Considering Cat has come back from death twice and aspect mutilation once, I’m not sure what would be a bad fan-service plot-beat.

Or is it meaning-full only when she suffers and fixes her own genuine loss, but not the genuine loss of others she cares about?

Masego allowed Cat’s band of five to win against Neshamah and thus allowed Indrani to be resurrected, at the cost of his magic. Hakram cut off his hand to heal Vivienne’s doubts. Vivienne sacrificed her Name for Callow and to become Cat’s administrator and successor while Cat herself prosecutes the war. Indrani admitted she was in love with Masego in front of Tariq and Laurence, which convinced the two oldsters that she was the girl to save him.

Are those bad fan service plot-beats? Because it looks to me that the Woe has plenty of precedent saving each other.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Each of those involved, and in some cases resolved, a full plotline. Hakram’s crippling was itself the result of a demonic damage, which explicitly doesn’t respect

plot – his *survival*, however, was provided by an ongoing plotline.

To restore Hakram, we're going to need a fresh plotline, probably involving growth and sacrifice from both Cat and Hakram. Inb4: The Mirror Knight is likely to be involved, learning that even crippled, Hakram remains worthy of respect.

jworks17

"It might even finally give us a way to deal with the Grey Legion that wasn't 'soldiers praying Akua, the Witch or me got there in time'. Even Hanno had found those fuckers a hard nut to crack."

So Akua is still powerful? We haven't seen her fight in quite some time and I assumed she was more of just a research mage.

Also every time Cat talks about Cardinal I get scared it isn't going to happen, it could be such an awesome story.

Konstantin von Karstein

Would Tariq not be efficient against them too?

jworks17

I would imagine, but maybe since the undead are a construct of sorcery, sorcerers can deal with them with greater effect? But then how is Cat useful? She uses Night not sorcery.

Konstantin von Karstein

Maybe it's a question of firepower? But in this case, why didn't she mentioned Tariq?

SpeckofStardust

He might not be on the front lines very often, finding Named and preventing plagues is very much a duty he'd be good at, further more he really seems to get his heroic arrivals when helping other named rather than common front line troops. And the only thing the three who did get mentioned have in common is large aoe (area of effect) which Tariq doesn't have.

Konstantin von Karstein

I agree with everything you say except the aoe. With **Shine**, Tariq has all the aoe he want. He destroyed the hundreds/thousands zombies attacking the Stalwart Apostle.

SpeckofStardust

When saving a hero yes, every other time its been limited, if powerful, pin-point attacks.

mamm0nn

Tariq's not on the front lines, he's been stated to walk around where the Oraphim guide him rather than fight alongside the others.

I personally think it's because active battle and enemy nations isn't his domain. He's not meant to save the young heroes and guide them when they go into the belly of the beast, only when they're still in their own camp. If the heroes wander into Praes and face a Warlock, they better not be green any more because Pilgrim won't show up there. Something that Black may have unknowingly exploited when he took Callow and turned those heroes-spawning grounds into ones where the Pilgrim didn't tread.

hakureireimu

She wouldn't be on the front line if she wasn't a war mage.

[Liliet](#)

Akua can draw on Night. Sounds like she's got a fair bit of allowance there.

And obviously if anyone can do a lot with a little, it's her.

I am in fact extremely curious of the technical details of how independent her control of Night is, whether she can hide things from Catherine, whether she can hide things from the Crows (theoretically possible if being Catherine's servant insulates her in a 'my vassal's vassal is not my vassal' way), whether Catherine can take away her powers, whether she's capable of surviving if Catherine dies, etc.

Darkening

Cat can strip drow chieftains of Night, I imagine she can do the same to Akua.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but can she do it automatically at any distance or can Akua sneak away / run away? Could Akua resist and stall for time?

Cap'n Smurfy

So Scribe's stealth trick is literally just making people close their eyes without realizing it? The simple brilliance of that suits her perfectly.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's not only that, it also make people (even the readers 😊) forget about her.

letouriste

i didn't tho. I wanted news about her since the start of this book

[Liliet](#)

Oh wow, that would be amazing if so.

But no, it can't be just that. First, Catherine DID notice closing her eyes, it was in her narration before the contingency triggered. There were times when Scribe went unnoticed when no such thing was happening.

Second, Scribe's influence also works in her absence, Amadeus had to snap Cat out of it that one time.

And third, remember when Loius the spymaster was literally talking to Scribe, looking at her, and couldn't remmeber anything beyond ink-stained fingers even literally WHILE looking at her?

Cap'n Smurfy

By not realizing it I mean they close their eyes without thinking they're being made it they don't notice that they've done it. Cat's contingency recognised she was being made to close her eyes when she herself didn't realise she was being artificially made to.

"My contingency must have triggered when I'd closed my eyes, prompted by a power I'd not noticed and had felt entirely like my own whim."

You have a point with Louis though. To expand on it I think Scibes ability is making people physically not observe her without realising it. Louis could only remember her hands not because she veiled it or made him forget but because he never actually looked at her face.

[Burlyraven](#)

The part of me that normally prefers heroic stories shudders at the idea of the goblins gaining access to Night, but the other parts really want to see what would happen.

Robber really needs a Name, but I think he's too submissive (in the way of goblins, anyway) for a villainous Name, and he's almost definitely not getting a heroic one. It just seems like

he's too popular of a guy for him to just die of old age, even if that is quite the achievement for a male goblin.

Also adding Hakram to the list of things that could be fixed by Cat's Name coming into power. Much like a lot of things surrounding Cat, he's losing purpose and practically decaying while she can't or won't step into her Name.

Scribe showing up is interesting on multiple levels, but considering Ranger has been barred from joining the war effort in an official capacity, there seems to be a ready plot related reason for her presence.

[Liliet](#)

Neutral Roles do exist.

Robber's not enough of a specialist at any one thing to get a Name like that, so far, but in principle...

Darkening

The Saboteur lol? I dunno, he seems pretty proficient in setting traps and blowing things up, and then escaping by the skin of his teeth.

[Liliet](#)

There aren't really significant stories about him doing that though, and that's what it's all about with Names, isn't it? He seems to be an able commander more than personally able things-doer, in the grand scheme of things. He doesn't really stand out from his squad, he just leads it well.

Juff

Typo Thread:

fully open the door > the door fully open
her both her > both her
Buy you know > But you know
a traileed > and traileed
All three bore (extra space before "All")
calling the > calling them
disservice or > disservice of
it a bribe > it as a bribe
most her > most of her
darks eyes > dark eyes
Summer heat (extra space before "Summer")

[TeK](#)

Tis is way to depressive from my morning routine.

Oh, who am I kidding, it fits just right.

erebus42

Come now Komena you can't have your religion being too insular. Diversifying a bit with your followers can really only help a relatively new goddess like you and your sister. Sure you might have to give away some power but I'm sure the investment will pay itself off and then some. Just think about the terror and mayham that could be woven in your names by Night bestowed goblins! (perhaps they could be the equivalent of lay brothers and sisters). (Now I want a side story about the first non Drow clerics of Night.)

I always figured the drow and the goblins would get along as thick as thieves but now I'm curious about the other races and factions. Aside for their occasionaly malignant obsession with honor I always thought the Domion and the drow might be able to bond due to certain similarities between their cultures and mindsets.

But Seriously Folks

Infuse Hakram with Night. He could potentially become Adjutant to the Crows

[308924810a](#)

So, it occurs to me that the problem may be that they're thinking too small with these magical prostheses ideas.

Hakram doesn't need a prosthetic leg, he needs a prosthetic body. Do the same thing that happened to Black, cut his soul off, but rather than reattaching it, attach it to a different body.

The ethical conundrum is that you need to ask how Hakram stealing the body of some Orc volunteer or criminal to cure his condition is different to Killian sacrificing some criminal to cure her condition.

Maybe in that said body-donor can be switched into Hakram's crippled body? Or in the lack of the direct involvement of a sacrifice altar?

Matthew Wells

Masego could probably provide a soulless but living orc body if they give him a couple months and some casualties to study.

[308924810a](#)

Actually, new thought:

uhhh, are we sure that Masego won't betray them and take the Fae crown of godhood and invincibility for himself?

It would fulfill his core ambition, and while it would upset his friends, it's not like he could suffer any permanent personal

consequence after becoming invincible , and he can patch things up with them later.

Javvies

Very.

Masego wants to earn godhood on his own ... and it seems likely that the Fae Crown of Autumn would carry limitations, and compulsions similar in nature to that of the Crown of Winter, which he studied extensively. And I expect that he isn't interested in limiting himself and his freedom of action and thought patterns in the way that taking up a Fae Crown likely would.

In addition, his interest is about learning enough about Creation in order to become a god, or the next best thing ... not just picking up a mantle of power stolen from a god.

Also, Masego isn't going to betray his friends of his own free will.

Plus, he knows that the Crown of Autumn is critical to Quartered Seasons, which is a method to permanently put an end to the Dead King. The Dead King, as you may remember, took over his body, and used his magic to kill Indrani, and then in the process of the Dead King being driven out of him, he lost his Gift. Masego probably holds a grudge about that whole series of events, and he's definitely not happy about it. And he's literally killed people over far lesser offenses.

Darkening

Yeah... remember when Masego boiled a couple people's blood for talking shit about Cat and Callow? He's killed for a *lot* less.

Frivolous

Masego's path to apotheosis is very clearly through increased knowledge and High Arcana, not through bothering with faerie crowns.

Not the least because it would require becoming fey.

But Seriously Folks

Maybe he will become an honorary elf...

Javvies

An honorary Elf?

You mean the ultra racist genocidal assholes?

The people who kill everyone except Heroes who come within bowshot of the Golden Bloom?

The people who only barely deigned to talk to Hanno when

there was a second Hero running the magical support for the scrying conversation?

No, Masego might be interested in vivisecting an Elf, or other study, especially if he can get a good look at how they get to ignore a rule of Creation at a time. But he has no interest in becoming an honorary Elf, even if he could.

Frivolous

I hate how I keep having to remind myself that in the Guide to Practical Evil, elves and fae are not the same thing at all. Not even close.

Did we ever find out which one of them, or maybe both or neither, has the pointy ears?

[Liliet](#)

Masego could have claimed godhood for himself with a lot less trouble than that. He already knows how. This is a trick for pushing it on someone else specifically.

medailyfun

I wonder why Cat has not tried to push her soldiers into the vacant Names, like Squire or Apprentice. Should be totally doable with her experience and obvious Roles those ppl can fulfil.

Matthew Wells

Those two, at least are unavailable to her. Apprentice is already taken, and she's no longer capable of taking Black Knight, so she can't make a Squire. Probably another Knight could, but none of them are willing to accept the liability of grooming a successor before the ultimate showdown with the Dead King, for exactly the same reasons Cat didn't want to mentor the Scorched Apostate.

Shveiran

You don't need to be an apprentice to a Knight to become the Squire. Chider, the twins and the racist Taghreb were all in the run for Squire and they had no relationship to Black.

Hanno and Amadeus both didn't start off as the boy wonder of some older Knight, they did it on their own.

I'll grant that Catherine doesn't have a personal connection to the Squire Name like Amadeus did back in the day, but that doesn't mean she can't use story-fu to ease others into it or craft a situation where they are likely to pop out.

Matthew Wells

We were never told that Black didn't know Chider and the others. And Hanno and Amadeus got their names through terrible tragedies, so it would be a bad idea to replicate those circumstances, especially since the Dead King is already causing undead-slaying Names to pop up across the countryside.

Shveiran

Well, yes, we were never told he didn't know them but he certainly wasn't mentoring them? I feel like my point still stands.

As for tragedies... that's just how Names usually begin, don't they? It's not a Squire thing, it's a Named thing. I can't really recall a Named who didn't have a tragedy at the heart of its origin.

medailyfun

You don't need to be BK to lead someone towards Squire Name (just remember other claimants). All you need is the right person and right chain of events. Also mind that many Callowan Names are available atm.

Letouriste

Comments asking who is Scribe incomming! lol
you know this is bound to be one somewhere.

Anyway, this chapter made me think about the sheer spread of concepts and ideas this story tackle on. Infirmary makes perfect sense in a story with as many wars but i realised most would still avoid it because of how hard this is to do right. Congratz EE, i think you nailed it 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect that Hakram's path is not to restore the name of Adjutant, but to move onto a new name. The question is what sort of name that might be.

Shveiran

I don't know, Hakram has always been all about being Catherine's aide. Stepping into a Name that doesn't revolve around that feels forced, since his truth has not changed. Stepping into another Name that still revolves around that would feel ... cheap?

Frivolous

It's possible Adjutant is a transitional Name. Not likely, but still possible, given the lack of precedent.

But Seriously Folks

Majordomo?

[Liliet](#)

Oh hell yeah. SCRIBE SCRIBE SCRIBE SCRIBE SCRIBE!!! *gleeful happy victory dance*

I knew she'd be interested in working with Catherine after Amadeus kicked her out!

Oh, and the goblins are great as always ♥

What rest of the chapter?

ohJohN

> "...the Apprentice could be suborned to you for the offensive, to learn from you and lend a hand."

> We weren't going to get through this intact without trust.

> "I leave it in your hands, then."

jfc, Cat

Matthew Wells

If he hates the idea of her walking across a tent to accomodate his injuries, I'm pretty sure he doesn't want her to remove all hand-related imagery from her speech.

IDKWhoitis

Until proven otherwise, I am still under the assumption that Scribe = Assassin. Either in some sort of alter ego/name or the assassin is an entity that scribe controls through her name. It should be noted, that people close to Scribe always treated the two as separate entities, so either the 2nd hypothesis is true or Scribe kept that secret very well...

I doubt that Scribe is going to just be BFF with Cat or continue in her role of step mother to Cat. Likely this is an in-depth update of Amadeus/Praes for the next chapter.

I'm not sure how I feel about the abrupt transitions between 20 different things the past chapters have been. I know there's a lot to cover, but at the same time we don't need to know every bit...

Javvies

Assassin is male, who grew up in a cult of assassins.

Scribe is a woman who grew up in the Free Cities. And the Free Cities is where she met Amadeus.

They are two different people with two different Names. Scribe was present in Procer while Assassin was in Ashur.

Scribe's unnoticeability trick is an Aspect, and from the Viv-Thief origin, we know that Assassin has a shapeshifting/disguise Aspect.

Where the hell did this idea that Scribe and Asssassin are the same person even come from?

beleester

Because Scribe runs the Eyes of the Empire, and is known for "disappearing" problems, which sounds a lot like the job of an Assassin. And Assassin's "signature kills" are sometimes misdirection to hide his real location, so just because someone got assassinated doesn't mean it's certain that Assassin was there. And Assassin can come back after being killed, which suggests he could be a disposable summon or something.

Weighing against that, we know that Amadeus thinks that Scribe and Assassin are two different people – we've had interludes from his perspective saying as much, and it's hard to believe that his closest aide would keep that a secret from him. But even then, we've never actually seen Assassin on screen, only the results of his actions. When Amadeus gives an order to Assassin, it's not in person, it's by telling Scribe who he wants dead.

But I think the real reason people love this theory is that it just **fits** the character of the Calamities. Creating the persona of "The Assassin" as a diversion from the actual assassins they use, in the same way that the guys in cloaks with eye tattoos are a diversion from the actual Eyes.

Darkening

We've seen assassin twice, once in a Vivienne flashback, and once when akua stabbed him when he was being a stand in fir Black.

Matthew Wells

Correction: we've confirmed his presence twice. One time he was mostly invisible, and the other time he was under an illusion, so we've never actually SEEN him.

Javvies

It's stupid, is what it is.

Assassin usually prefers to make his kills look like accidents, often those that are improbable and that he finds entertaining.

For that matter, we have secondary confirmation from Wandering Bard that Assassin is an actual Named individual.

They've been Villains for 40+ years. That's not the kind of secret that gets kept with that many decades of Heroes and High Lords wanting to dig out information and drag them down. Especially not when Bard is poking around trying to end them.

Names only have three Aspects. Assassin has the disguise/shapeshifting Aspect and Scribe has the unnoticeability/forgettable Aspect.

If they're the same person, they'd have only one Aspect left

...

And non-Named assassins are not capable of the kinds of things that are attributed to Assassin.

We also have Scribe in Procer when Assassin is in Ashur.

Amadeus delegating sending messages to Assassin to Scribe isn't suggestive of anything, other than that it's kind of Scribe's Role. And that Scribe gets along with Assassin and/or is capable of delivering those messages a whole lot more discretely than Amadeus could in person. Remember ... Amadeus is/was the Black Knight, with who knows how many spies watching and tracking his every movement and as many of his spoken words as they could. Relaying messages to Assassin via Scribe is just good security sense. Both in terms of protecting Assassin's cover identities, and in terms of not tipping people off that Assassin has a new target who just might be them.

Anonymous

A little scary how Cat and Hakram's (emotional) relationship is resembling Malicia's and Black Knight's a little. -Skillsets reversed maybe, her the steel and him the subtle clout.

A thought that comes to mind regarding Named acceptance of standard reality in this world: "I recall Masego said something like that to you, once, and then you smashed his construct and made yourself Demigod Queen of Winter for a while instead..?"

Galileo

Well, I finally caught up after binge-reading for a month. It feels like an ending, somehow, but it looks like the best has yet to come. For stories never truly end.

On another note, it's quite interesting to see Scribe reappear just as Hakram loses his combat-related aspects and becomes a glorified scribe. One could draw conclusions.

heroessucklmao

A real villain would have made Robber sample every Proceran wine on top of his charge.

Chapter 50: Mores

"Villains often try to get clever, to stump me with philosophical questions like 'what is evil?' To which I answer 'generally, people asking me that question', which somehow they never see coming."

– Aldred Alban of Callow, the Prince Errant

The moon hung above us like a nasty grin, the drop was precipitously close and past the lights of the stronghold below there was only a dark and desolate stretch: a proper backdrop for ominous talks with a woman that was neither a friend nor an enemy. The Scribe had picked her moment and her place with care, I decided, to frame this conversation in the way she preferred. And what did we do, when an opponent expressed a preference?

"Eudokia," I warmly smiled. "How lovely to see you, it's been much too long. How have you been?"

That's right: slit open its throat and set the corpse aflame. Scribe showed no visible sign of surprise and what little I could see of her from the corner of my eye, ink-stained hands and/

/Gods Below and Everburning but I hated that fucking aspect. Even knowing about it the best I could do was work around the effect. Trying to remember anything about her was like clutching sand, with the same few grains left behind every time. Still, even though I might as well try to read emotion into a puff of mist the beat of silence that followed smacked of surprise to me.

"I have been well," Scribe said, then paused. "... and you?"

"Oh, you know, doing this and that," I drawled. "Been thinking about getting another pair of boots, since mine are a getting worn, but I like the leather better soft."

Befuddled silence in the face of my boot-talk – a real decision in need of making, actually, and one I'd be willing to hear her advice on – followed and I swallowed a grin. When I'd been a girl the Calamities had seemed like all powerful figures of legend, and by the time I'd learned better most of them had died. It was deeply satisfying for the kid I'd once been that the woman I now was could afford to screw with one of them like this.

"I approached you to speak on matters of grave import," Scribe said.

"It better not be the Dead King, then," I idly said. "I won't stand for puns, Eudokia. Debated making them illegal once, you know, but it was a little too Sanguinia the Second."

What a brave soul, that one. I too would outlaw being taller than me, if it wasn't certain to lead to the rebellion of an insultingly large portion of Callow. Aside from the deep satisfaction inherent to pulling the leg of someone I was on less than decent terms with, I did have a purpose to this. Scribe had spent a very long time in Black's shadow, hidden by its span but also *protected*. She'd been the monster in the night, or at least on its side, for so long she'd no longer be used to being toyed with.

That was going to piss her off, I was betting, and anger always made you sloppy. If she was running a game on me, why shouldn't I run one on her right back?

"Lack of discipline was always your greatest flaw," Scribe curtly replied. "I came in good faith-"

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"You came here to use me," I easily corrected. "And that's fine, so long as I also have a use for you. But don't pretend you're doing me favours, Eudokia. We both know coming here isn't your first choice."

A shot in the dark but one I was confident about. Black had decisively cut her loose from his service after learning she'd acted behind his back to ensure he would be forced to fight Malicia, and while I'd not forgotten the low he'd hit that night he wasn't one to walk back a decision so severe. At a guess, she'd tried to mend the bridge with him and been rebuffed. What interested me was what else she might have been up to in the meanwhile: it'd been two years since the Salian Peace.

If I'd been right about her relationship with my father remaining a wreck she didn't show it. With her first approach – the one lending her importance, I now grasped, making her seem if not like an equal then at least someone of power and influence – having stumbled, she smoothly pivoted to another.

"If you are not interested in the information I have to bring, then you need simply say so," Scribe said. "I can depart."

Transparent, but a ploy didn't have to be subtle to be effective. Likely she was well aware that the most I'd gotten out of the Wasteland was wild rumours and some of the ups and downs of the civil war between Malicia and Sepulchral. I was thirsting for news there, and she knew it. But she was after something too, wasn't she? Her first tack tonight had been one that leant her presence, weight, but that wasn't something she'd need if this was a simple transaction.

She wanted something from me, something that perhaps I wouldn't want to give. So she'd puffed up like a bird trying to look bigger for a predator and hoped it'd give me pause. That made it clear what my answer needed to be to her challenge.

"The closest gate is that way," I replied without hesitating, jutting a thumb west. "If you hurry you'll have enough of a head start the Pilgrim won't bother to pursue."

Tension hung in the air in the moment that followed. It'd been a tactical mistake to make a bluff I was willing to call so early in the game. Now there was no recovering her position. I turned a sharp, toothy grin onto the Scribe.

"Yeah," I murmured. "I didn't think so. So why you don't you tell me what you came here to say, only without all the empty posturing."

Anger. I could hardly even look at her, much less read her, but I felt anger wafting off Scribe's silhouette like smoke. Whether it was at me for being bluntly high-handed or at herself for the missteps I didn't know, and probably didn't matter. The gesture stiff, she reached into her robes and removed three small letters. She handed me the first and I opened the fold, scanning the contents. It was tradertalk – the eastern dialect of it, peppered with Aenian terms – excerpts with translations into Lower Miezani.

"Leo Trakas is dead and half Nicaea a ruin," I frowned. "The undead mentioned there, from Malicia's fleet?"

Originally the war fleet of Nicaea, but use of Still Waters had seen to that.

"To an extent," Scribe replied. "Supporters of Strategos Zenobia opened a gate in the night and let in her troops as well as a contingent of Helikeans under General Basilia herself. The conspirators promised them a bloodless victory, so when the wights attacked the Helikeans claimed treachery. In the chaos parts of the city were torched and sacked until Basilia restored order personally."

I hummed thoughtfully. The First Prince's diplomacy had borne fruit, then. I'd thought it drastic to condemn Leo Trakas as an ally of the Dead King, and only reluctantly voted in favour when the moment came, but Hasenbach had been right: it'd moved enough people to turn on him for the stalemate to turn in our favour without troops needing to be sent. Nicae falling wasn't only good news, though. Stygia had been quietly meddling to keep the wars within the League going, but with one of them settled the Magisterium might just come out swinging.

"So Zenobia's crowning herself a princess?" I snorted, reading the last excerpt. "That's new."

That came an intercepted Nicaean courier, so it probably reliable. It was also noted that several of the Trakas from lesser branches had escaped Zenobia's attempted purge of the family after the fall of the city, which was a Name in the making if I'd ever seen one. I found it mildly amusing that she'd discarded the title of Strategos for something more royal, but it wasn't of great import: the office had essentially ruled Nicae like a royal house for decades, and I had doubts she'd make bloodline inheritance stick. Royalty wasn't unknown in the Free Cities, Kairos himself had been king of-

I paused, then frowned.

"Basilia still hasn't crowned herself queen, has she?" I asked.

"She has not," Scribe confirmed.

Was she really *that* ambitious? Zenobia had been backed to the throne by General Basilia, but when she'd given herself a royal title it had only been that of *princess*. Why not queen, if she had royal ambitions?

"Fuck me," I murmured. "That's why Basilia doesn't care Stygia's an enemy, why she sent me all the letters making clear they're the provocative ones. She doesn't want to avoid that war at all, and she's not a queen only because she wants to be a bloody *empress*."

Empress Basilia the First, with her vassal Princess Zenobia of Nicae and whoever she'd end up installing as puppets after she toppled the Magisterium and finished off Penthes. I was impressed but also skeptical. She'd managed the politics of this well,

since no one in the Free Cities could really ally with her enemies without siding with either Stygian aggression or Malicia's southern meddling, but the Spears of Stygia were a fine army and the Helikean host bloodied.

"If we survive Keter," I sighed, "the next great war will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Free Cities."

I took the second letter when it was offered to me. Tradertalk again, but this time towards the Ashuran end of the stick. I couldn't parse the High Tyrian any better than the Aenian, but at least I got the Mtethwa loanwords. We'd known for some time that Magon Hadast, the ruler of the Thalassocracy was dead, that was old news. Killed by Assassin, if the Augur was to be believed. Bitter disagreements had since kept Ashur from recovering from its defeats at League and Praesi hands, but the nature of those had been opaque to even Cordelia's spies abroad, the Circle of Thorns. Not so for Scribe's people, it seemed.

"So it's a glorified inheritance dispute," I bluntly said.

"The dignitaries in the two camps often divide their allegiances by provenance from Arwad or Smyrna," Scribe noted. "It speaks to a deeper divide in Ashuran society."

The Arwad committees mentioned tended to be from slightly lower tiers, I noted, and many sounded mercantile in nature. They were backing a distant relative of Magon Hadast for ascension to their highest citizenship tier by virtue of blood, since the main Hadast line had been extinguished. The man in question had married a noblewoman from Levant, though, which disqualified him in the eyes of the Smyrna crowd. They wanted instead to send a ship across the Tyrian Sea to import a ruler from Ashur's nominal overlord, the Baalite Hegemony.

So far the conflict had seen no battles, only skirmishing in streets and countryside, but by the looks of it positions were hardening on both sides. I could not help but note that by the sounds of it an awful lot of people with the last name Hadast had died not too long after good ol' Magon himself.

"Assassin's work?" I asked.

"Evidently, without orders he went... somewhat overboard," Scribe said. "He was caught and slain by the Blue Mage last year."

I rolled my eyes.

"And I'm sure *this* time it took," I drawled. "Pull the other one. Where is he?"

"I've not been in contact since he set out for Ashur," Scribe replied.

I eyed her skeptically but let it go. If I was to start digging at that particular secret, it wouldn't be in so haphazard a manner. Without a word I was handed the third letter. This time it was Lower Miezán, and a simple phrase 'the crown was obtained' along with a bell and day noted. I mastered my surprise, slowly folding the paper back. Fuck. I'd hoped we would keep the Eyes, if not entirely out of the Arsenal, then at least out of the most critical projects. I now had evidence otherwise.

"It went well?" I calmly said, as if this was not an unpleasant turn.

"I had no eyes at the location," Scribe said, "It was a scried report that was intercepted, and I expect it is making its way towards you as we speak. The ritual appears to have been a success and the nearby gate is still functional."

I pushed down the urge to snatch her by the throat and dangle her above the drop until I got names. It wouldn't accomplish anything, I reminded myself. Angering her was one thing, but an attack was another. I had no need to cement an enmity tonight. Not yet, anyway.

"You've made your point," I noted. "You know our allies better than we do, your people have access places where we don't and you have eyes even in the Grand Alliance's most guarded sanctum. Now that you've proved you have something to bargain with, what is it you want to bargain *for*?"

Scribe went silent for a moment.

"I wish to sign onto the Truce and Terms," she said.

I snorted, ignoring what I suspected was an unfriendly look my derision earned.

"There was no need for the song and dance to get that," I said. "And we both know signing won't open many doors for you."

The First Prince had not put a bounty on her head, but according to Vivienne she'd also put the matter of forbidding such a thing to the Highest Assembly and purposefully lost the vote. Both the Proceran House of Light and more than a few highborn wanted Scribe's head on a pike for the mess in Salia, and the Principate wouldn't stand for her gaining access to Grand Alliance secrets even as a signatory were I inclined to push for it. I was not.

"You picked a fight tonight aiming for *something*, Scribe," I continued. "So out with it."

She sighed.

"I was not picking a fight," the Webweaver replied. "I was making a bid for a position."

My brow rose and I almost laughed until I realized she was deadly serious. Gods Below, I thought, how badly had it gone with Black for her to come to *me*? We weren't exactly bosom friends, Eudokia and I. My reflex was to refuse her, and not politely, but I tamped down on it.

"I have questions," I mildly said.

"Understandable."

Interrogating one of the most skillful living spymistresses of Calernia would require skill and subtlety, I mused. Unfortunately I lacked those, so best swing the other way around entirely.

"What have you been doing for two years?" I bluntly asked.

"Fighting for control of the Eyes of the Empire," she frankly admitted. "I knew Ime would overtake me closer to Praes, so I concentrated on taking over the edges of the network and damaging records in the Wasteland so she wouldn't know what was lost. My agents were purged or suborned most places east of the Whitecaps, but elsewhere I have established control."

Fuck, I thought. That meant Malicia was firmly back in control of the Eyes in Callow, not exactly great news. Still, at least I'd gotten a list of imperial agents in my kingdom from Scribe as reparations during the negotiations for the Salian Peace. Duchess Kegan had sent the Watch to purge everyone on it when I'd passed it on, so at least the foothold of the Empire would be damaged. It also meant that the leader of the largest spy network on Calernia not directly in service of a crown was standing next to me. Worth a second look, that.

"If you're going to try to sell me you didn't reach out to Black, you'll need a better pitch," I noted.

I felt her breathe in even if I didn't see it.

"How casually you pick at the wounds of others," Scribe said. "Of course I sought him out, Catherine. I still have the scar from where Ranger's arrow took me. Half an inch to the side of the heart. She likes to think she's funny, you see."

I shared a moment of silent appreciation with her about just how much of an asshole the Lady of the Lake was. I suspected she didn't even have to try, it just came naturally to her.

"He was quite apologetic about the arrow," Scribe sighed. "But there would be no making amends."

I frowned. That... did not sound like Black. It was a half-done job, and he abhorred those. She was leaving things out. I said nothing, only cocking an eyebrow. Eudokia sighed again.

"He said he had done me wrong, by taking me into his service," Scribe murmured. "That his ambitions had devoured mine, and we'd both suffered for it."

I almost winced. That sounded more like my father, admittedly: genuine care, but handed out along with brutal honesty.

"He won't have left it at that," I encouraged.

"You must find your own way," Eudokia softly quoted, "your own ambition. And I hope that, when you have, one day our paths will lead us to standing side by side again."

I breathed out in surprise. That walked the fine line between kindness and cruelty. And now, having eked out as much of a victory as she could in the war for the rule of the Eyes, Scribe had come here. A colder part of me noted she'd missed Black's point entirely, if she'd come looking for another master to follow. But cold wasn't always right, was it? My Winter days had made that much exceedingly clear. And my father could preach whatever he wanted, but he wasn't the one making decisions for Scribe.

"You think we're going to head east, don't you?" I said.

I felt her smile.

"Or the east will come to you," she shrugged. "It makes no difference."

I thoughtfully hummed. I glanced down at the drop, leaning forward, and felt my stomach clench. There was a weight to the air tonight. Not a pivot, no. It wasn't enough for that. But this would... matter. Reverberate. I let the fear of the fall sink into me, clear away all idle thoughts. It was refreshing, in a way. And it made how the choice needed to be made crystal clear.

"Would you betray me to him, if the call came?" I asked.

"Probably," Scribe replied without batting an eye.

I smiled.

"Ah," I said, "but would you betray me to anyone else?"

She chuckled.

"What would they have to offer me?" the Webweaver asked.

"Good," I said.

I withdrew from the edge.

"I expect you in my tent at Morning Bell," I said. "I'll want a full report on the Praesi situation then. See Adjutant about signing onto the Terms and your assigned lodgings."

Her control wavered for a moment, overtaken by shock.

"You do not jest," Eudokia stated, sounding surprised.

I turned to her and gently smiled.

"I'm not seventeen anymore, Scribe," I said. "I'm already using people a lot more dangerous than you."

I turned my gaze back the night sky, the dismissal clear, and she quietly withdrew.

—

An hour before Morning Bell, my effective royal council these days sat around the sculpted table in my tent with steaming mugs in everyone's hands. It was early, so Indrani looked haggard even as she sipped at her Nicean blackleaf tea, liberally flavoured with honey. She'd been out drinking late, and though not hungover she was a little ragged. Hakram's own mug was filled with a fragrant gift of the First Prince – Hasenbach had noticed he enjoyed her abominably spicy brews and sent him a small coffer full of assorted leaves – and he'd deigned to share with Akua, who these days took more pleasure in scent than taste.

I'd stood on a rooftop like an ass for an hour last night, so unsurprisingly I was now drinking Masego's personal brew for pain and hoping my leg wouldn't swell too much.

"The Crows are keeping an eye out," I said, "so we can feel free to talk."

"Ominous," Indrani grunted. "What are we on about, Cat?"

"Hakram already knows some of it," I said, nodding at the orc. "Last night I was approached by Scribe."

Akua leaned back into her seat, looking interested,

"News from the Wasteland at last?" she said. "I had wondered at the continued silence from the Carrion Lord."

"Not exactly," I said.

"The Scribe has signed onto the Truce and Terms," Hakram said. "Or she would have, if I'd then passed on the parchments properly. They were mislaid."

No one here bothered to comment how unlikely it was for someone with Adjutant's quite literally supernatural organisational abilities to lose anything this important.

"You want to open her throat?" Indrani asked, sounding surprised. "Thought you were keeping a light touch with the east."

More like I couldn't afford to take a hard stance with the east, considering that most of Callow's armies were abroad and wouldn't be returning anytime soon. Vivienne and I had been clear with Kegan: there'd be no rolling over for the Tower, but neither should she go on the offensive. Considering the largest military force still in the kingdom was the Duchess of Daoine's own army, she'd not been hard to sell on that.

"Scribe requested a position under me," I informed them, though Hakram had already known. "No word was spoken of Callow in particular, and I suspect that she is a great deal more interested by my position in the Grand Alliance than my crown."

"So you want our advice on whether to accept?" Indrani mused.

Akua's golden eyes narrowed.

"She already has," dark-skinned shade said. "She is simply uncertain as to whether or not she meant it."

I raised my mug in a toast.

"In an hour, the Scribe will enter this tent to give us a report on the state of the Dread Empire," I said. "I want your opinion on, when she finishes, whether I should give her a position or slit her throat."

That got me some surprise, but I thought more at the bluntness of the statement than the morality inherent. I wasn't a fool, so there'd be no talk of keeping Scribe prisoner and extracting information out of her – she'd escape, sure as night, and be out for revenge. If I could not use her, could not employ her within the frame of the Terms, then she needed to die. Quickly, cleanly and without fuss. I let my words sink in for a moment, then glanced at Indrani with a cocked brow. She sipped at her tea a little longer, then snorted.

"Slice her," Archer frankly said. "She's too dangerous, and she'll never be loyal to you or anything you make. We can deal with that when it's a nobody villain, but she ain't one of those. She's got spies and gold and skeletons in people's closets – best she's taken off the board before you found your Cardinal. We don't really need her, anyway."

"One can never have too many spies, Indrani," Akua chided her.

"Come off it, Dressing Ghoul," Archer replied, rolling her eyes. "I'm not going to pretend the Jacks are the sharpest operation out there or that it's not awkward to rely on Procer for the goods, but what does more sneaks really *do* for us? It's useful, sure but it doesn't bring anything new to the table."

"According to the first reports she's fed us," Adjutant said, "she has eyes in Ashur. We yet lack those, and it is the same for the First Prince."

"Look," Indrani said, "I'm not trying to be an asshole here. I've got nothing against Scribe. But *Ashur*, really? When the fuck was the last time those guys mattered? It scratches our nosy itches to learn what happens there, but the poor bastards are out of the war. Who cares what goes on there? On the other hand, she's the godsdamned Scribe. You let her into something like the Terms and she'll be handling half our villains' money by the end of the year and reading the letters of the rest."

That was a fair point, I mentally noted. Scribe would take to the Terms and their intended successor, the Accords, much like a fish to water. That wasn't necessarily a *good* thing. Archer as underselling her value as an asset, though, in my opinion. Still, I'd decided before starting this talk that I'd hold my piece until I'd gotten the advice I asked for.

"The Carrion Lord ruled Callow for two decades without ever having a formal capital," Akua said. "I have been heiress to a High Seat and Imperial Governess, so believe me when I say that is deranged. That such a nomadic bureaucracy was even attempted is absurd, but that it *worked* is testament to the sheer use that can be had from someone like the Scribe."

"So she's real good at paperwork," Indrani said, sounding skeptical. "Hooray. We get us a shitty, untrustworthy Hakram. There's a coup worth the trouble, Gauzy Ghost."

"We have not yet identified through what agent the Wandering Bard managed to incite the Mirror Knight and his allies to head for the Arsenal," Akua pointed out. "The Jacks don't have the formation to attempt an investigation like this, and the heroes have produced no results on their own. That is already a use for the Scribe, and hardly the only one there is."

"She's expressed enmity for the Intercessor before," Hakram gravelled. "I'd agree we can rely on her against a common enemy, at least."

"Look," Indrani sighed, "I'm not going to argue for an hour we need to open her throat. It's starting to feel like I'm going after her, when I don't particularly want her dead. You wanted my opinion, Cat, and you got it: she's a risk, and I don't see what she brings to the table that warrants taking it."

I slowly nodded, drinking of my herbal brew, then turned an expectant gaze onto Akua.

"Killing her would be unwise," Akua said. "For one, it would have consequences: villains would hesitate to sign onto the Terms, if they knew being snuffed out was a possibility should they be judged unfit."

"The Scribe attempted to infiltrate our camp before the offensive and resisted when caught," Adjutant mildly said. "We had no choice but to kill her. In can have every written evidence otherwise burned within a quarter hour and she's only dealt in person with the adjunct secretariat. Secrecy is possible."

"Hasenbach isn't going to argue with her corpse, that's for sure," Indrani snorted. "She's dreamed of seeing it often enough. The Highest Assembly might even throw us a parade."

"The Dominion has no reason to care," Hakram added. "And even less to investigate. Praesi villainy is largely seen as our backyard, and ours to deal with as we see fit."

"The Terms are a covenant of Named, not nations," Akua replied. "Belief in it has already been undermined by the second trial of the Red Axe and the prior wave of betrayals in the Arsenal. Further fraying the fabric of it without a decent motive, which I have yet to hear, would be irresponsible."

"She has a significant portion of the Eyes, Akua," Adjutant calmly said. "And we have no real understanding of what she wants, or what loyalties she keeps. Her Name will thrive in the environment of both the Terms and the Accords – practically speaking, she represents an immediate threat because she is a way for villains to gain and consolidate power that we have no control over."

"She did not approach as a contender for influence, Hakram," Akua said. "She requested a position *under* Catherine. Scribe can and should be considered a potential threat, but those are thin grounds to kill on. Even more so when those very same qualities that make her a threat also make her a potential asset of great worth."

Which wasn't wrong. Unlike Akua, I'd actually ruled Callow. She significantly underestimated how difficult it had been for Black to rule the kingdom on the move, even with the imperial governors handling most local matters. It was telling that our most comprehensive record of Callowan laws and noble privileges wasn't the old Fairfax records that'd survived the Conquest but a neat set of manuscripts titled with the numbers I to VI in Scribe's personal handwriting. She'd put together the records of half a hundred families and the House of Light so well that even Kegan,

who despised everything Praesi, was in favour of having the books copied and used to govern.

"Thought you'd be all about strangling the viper before it could bite, Akua, I'm not gonna lie," Archer frowned. "This isn't about how we picked you up, is it? Because that's not the same at all. Look, you were a bloody horror back in the day and our resident Callowans are still going to scrape you raw for it – but you're not like *Scribe*."

She leaned forward, earnest.

"We wouldn't off you like that," Indrani assured her. "It's been a few years since we got past that. Hells, I'd probably miss you some if you got your ass exorcised."

Coming from Indrani that was actually a pretty warm endorsement.

"While I am touched, Archer," Akua drily replied, "I am not so confused or sentimental."

"Refraining from killing her out of fear of it being outed *is* acting on sentiment," Adjutant gravelled. "If not in the sense you implied."

"So is acting to kill Scribe out fear of what she might do," she replied without batting an eye. "We do not know her desires, what of it? Few allies are so helpful as to tell us these outright, and we have other Named just as dangerous in our menagerie of the damned."

"If we come in conflict with the Carrion Lord, or he is made hostage-" Hakram began.

"- would we not act in accord with the man regardless, or seek to free him?" Akua interrupted. "Let us not pretend we seek enmity with the Carrion Lord, or that in his own way he is not a reasonable man. Was he not our candidate for the Tower, once upon a time? The scheme might have faltered, but the underpinnings of it remain unchanged."

Which was a solid point, and a reason I'd been willing to consider taking on Scribe in the first place: what did I care if she'd betray me to Black, if I never got in conflict with him? Eudokia wanted nothing to do with either the Dead King or Malicia, my two most prominent enemies, which was a major point in her favour. Unfortunately while I agreed with Akua that she was a very capable woman, that only made it worse that I also agreed with Hakram: we knew fuck all about what Scribe wanted, and with that in mind I was very wary of letting her loose into the Truce and Terms.

I wasn't worried about sabotage, if so she'd already be dead. But I was letting a fox into the henhouse, there were no two ways about it.

"Let's not pretend we can take her in and not use her," Indrani pointed out. "We take her, she's not going to be a messenger girl: it'd be dangerous to use her like that, spit on what her Name's worth. I don't think it's much, but it's definitely more than that."

"Her resources could be used in Mercantis to combat Malicia's influence," Akua said, speaking directly to me. "To hunt the Intercessor's agents, to help provide the Arsenal with exotic assets, and that is only the use of what she leads. As a Named, she can smooth essentially any task she is assigned to. Are we not ever drowning in disasters?"

Archer eyed her with surprise, as if she couldn't believe would care enough about this to speak this vehemently. I was a little surprised myself, to be honest. The Calamities had long been her enemies, and she had no reason to love Scribe,

"If she does become what was described as a threat," Akua continued, "That is, a banker and facilitator for villains, imagine how useful she would be as such a broker yet in your service! It would be *wasteful* to kill her, Catherine. Consider whether the Accords you envision, the Cardinal you would build, can really thrive if you are afraid of letting in talent."

That... was another good point, actually. The counter-argument came easy, that the Accords were years in the future while taking in Scribe was a risk in the present, but that last tirade should have weight on the scales. I'd heard from the other two, so my gaze moved on to Hakram. He'd already served as a goad for the other two, so he was due to actually speak his own mind.

"On purely practical grounds we should kill her," Adjutant calmly said. "Her death would leave a large segment of the Eyes leaderless and easy to pick off for the Circle of Thorns. She would undeniably be useful if properly employed, but that would involve giving her access to our inner workings while she's not been proved to be trustworthy."

I'd argue it was debatable how much access she really needed to be given, if she'd learned about some details of godsdamned *Quartered Seasons* on her own, but otherwise his points stood. I cocked an eyebrow, as we both knew he wasn't done.

"No one here is a saint, Cat," Hakram said. "I won't pretend we're above slitting her throat and disposing of the body, or that showing kindness will make her one of us – she already has a home, a cause. But I hear us talk, sometimes, and wonder how often our words have been spoken."

He bared a hint of fangs, teeth like white knives.

"If Dread Empresses have not sat with their Chancellors and Knights, with their Warlocks, they too deciding that someone needed to die just so they could rest a little easier," Adjutant gravelled. "Did we fight all these years, Warlord, so that we could be just another spoke in the same old wheel?"

I'd been an idealist as a girl, hadn't I? In my own way. Gods, I hardly remembered what that felt like. Too many compromises since, too many ugly choices, and I knew deep down that following principle once would mean nothing. Change nothing. But I looked at Hakram of the Howling Wolves, crippled in his wheelchair because of an ugly choice I had made, and found I could not argue with him. Not for guilt, though that would stay with me until I died, but because he was a reminder of a simple truth: this had to be about more than just winning.

If it wasn't, it would all end as I stood victorious in the ruins of the world.

And so when Scribe stood before us, come Morning Bell, I tossed her a small painted iron pin, in the shape of a curled skeletal hand pointing a finger.

"Congratulations, Scribe," I said. "You are now officially a member of the adjunct secretariat."

Slowly she nodded.

"Good," I smiled. "Now report."

Javvies

That's a terrifying level of penetration into the Arsenal. Hopefully Scribe is correct in best belief in the completeness of her control over the Eyes outside the sections still in control of the Tower.

Heh, Scribe signing onto the Truce and Terms and taking a job with Cat and Hakram is going ruffle some feathers in Salia and among the Heroes.

On the other hand ... there may be carry on effects to Hakram's Name.

And, yeah, Hakram's got a point – they started out wanting to be better, and killing Scribe over what she might do or to make things easier/more convenient for them is very much the kind of

thing they* didn't want to continue.

*Meaning the Woe, maybe not Akua.

Poetically Psychotic

Also, killing a Named that came to you for reasons of convenience... could reverberate in Cat's new Name.

[Liliet](#)

I'll note Akua argued vehemently in favor of letting Scribe stay, with some of the arguments bordering on principle – "what are we even doing if we're not taking in talent".

It's very much possible that Akua feels it too, even if she's far from articulating the sentiment and standing by it.

[onedollargum](#)

It gives Akua a chance to play off of a colleague- someone under Hakram instead of Cat directly. Matching wits with the Webweaver is very much in line with "Iron sharpens Iron", and Akua might be feeling a little blunted after having the the Good Guys put her down.

[Liliet](#)

Akua has told both Cat and Ivah on separate occasions that 'iron is brittle' and 'she has grown tired of iron'.

It's up in the air how much of her old habits is covered by that, but I genuinely think that wasn't one of the motives involved here. Cat even noted she was unusually passionate about this.

naturalnuke

Fuck am I glad Cat managed to keep Hakram alive, he, the orc, is the acting conscious of the group and I love it.

ALM

Okay, was anyone else expecting Scribe to be in there the whole time while they were discussing her fate?

Konstantin von Karstein

Sve Noc herself was watching for her, so I doubt she managed it.

hakureireimu

The Crows were watching. Presumably they could have stopped that.

RoflCat

Doubtful, since Night was able to pick up her sneaking aspect and Cat was able to notice the Shiraori (I'm A Spider, So What?) power of blocking recognition.

And now we have the Sisters making sure nobody could eavesdrop on the conversation.

That said it's probably within her expectations that Cat might just kill her, and despite all that Scribe was still desperate enough to find the 'answer' to returning to Black's side to come here.

[doominator10](#)

Was not expecting that referenced here.

Christian Oaks

For those who didnt get it?

Darkening

I believe they're referring to the So I'm a spider, so what? title drop.

RoflCat

In the series mentioned, the character Shiraori, an arachne btw, weave a magic around herself that prevent people from noticing details about her and generally just think of her as 'white' (her hair/clothing color, and yes her cloth are made via her own threads)

Since it's akin to how Scribe's aspect work, I made the reference.

[wabbitking](#)

"the next great war will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Free Cities."

Paraphrasing Bismark I see, a nice surprise.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, I saw it too 😊

caoimhinh

I didn't get that reference, but that's cool.

For me, it was an echo of Catherine's conversation with Amadeus back in Procer when she was making her sales pitch for the

Accords. She outright admitted to him that she expected the Grand Alliance to be at war with the Free Cities in the coming decade or two. This is just one more piece on the scales leaning towards that future.

[Liliet](#)

Definitely both 😊

ninegardens

Huh...

That was well played.
Having all the arguing about the usefulness or danger of Scribe, and then cleanly cutting it off: Her usefulness was never the point. She's a living person, killing her in cold blood would be wrong.

dadycool

Is that what Hakram was getting at? "We're not them. We need to be better."?

ninegardens

Yip. At least, according to my read, that's what he was aiming for.

'Ladi Williams

That's exactly what hakram was going for. It doesn't matter what use she can be put to. She has done us no immediate wrong and she came I supposedly good faith. It is wrong to kill her and we should be better than this.

samshadar

Yes. That's pretty much it.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think "living person" was a sufficient argument, but "a willing recruit" – yeah.

KageLupus

Close, but I do disagree. I don't think the problem is killing her in cold blood. Cat and the Woe would do that without blinking an eye if it were truly necessary. The point I think Hakram is making is that in this case it isn't truly necessary.

Killing someone because you have to to make the world a better place is Cat's MO. Killing someone because it would be slightly

more convenient for you is the stuff of Dread Empresses. Cat has already decided she isn't walking that path so why go through their motions?

IDKWhoitis

For the new young bloods, hearing a Calamity signed the Truce is going to invoke one of three reactions.

1. Shit, things are getting serious
2. I wonder what I can trade for a favor...
3. Are they weakened? Can I up my cred by picking a fight?

I'm now imagining the next villain meeting. Cat at the head of the table, 'Rani on her right, Scribe to her left, and the poor villains wondering which one of the two would be the least awful to piss off... Because while Archer can beat some sense into someone, the whole prospect of getting disappeared and waking up in a casket is a different level of horror.

[Liliet](#)

Scribe isn't going to be at Catherine's left hand, she's explicitly subordinated to Hakram, that's his place.

Scribe is going to be taking notes at a separate table, and no-one will notice that.

jamesc9

Until they do something that deserves her most special attention, and then they'll notice far too late to do anything about it.

[Liliet](#)

They might never know, depending on the exact flavor of playing with her prey she decides to go for.

Salt

I don't think most Named outside of Praes even fully understand how dangerous she is, tbh. She wasn't an official member of the Calamities, and when Catherine met her for the first time she didn't even realize Scribe was Named until Black gave it away.

Most likely it'll be a small fuss, quickly followed by Scribe being mostly forgotten about, after appearing to do absolutely nothing noteworthy at all and holding no publicly visible position, especially with Hainaut looming over the horizon to distract everyone.

Most of her actual achievements will probably get attributed to Hakram, by operating as a member of the secretariat, so she can effectively act as an invisible walking sucker punch.

Letouriste

i thought Scribe didn't count as a Calamity?

dadycoool

Oh, boy. Now she's got the secretary to end all other secretaries under her authority. Technically that could be Harkram, but he'd have to find out about them first. Scribe would already know about them all.

Tolack

Thanks for the chapter. I'm glad Hakram reminded Cat that there's an idealist somewhere inside her that doesn't want to kill people on a maybe. More so when I agree that the chance of conflict with Black is so insignificant that the bonuses from recruiting Scribe will be so very worthwhile.

Konstantin von Karstein

This is a mistake, she should have kill Scribe. They know nothing about what she want, and it's the woman who would have destroy the Principate in the middle of a war against the DK.

On another subject, Ashur seems to have a Silver Mage, a Blue Mage and a Red Mage. I see a pattern there... From last chapter we know Silver is a healer, so is Blue an hydromancer?

RoflCat

I don't think it's that hard to guess though?

It's Black, or rather to return to 'the place she belongs' by his side.

Losing her place hit her HARD, even so when it was Black himself who cut the tie.

But her last talk with Black have given her...something.

On one hand, he clearly said that it's possible for them to be side by side again.

On the other hand, he's quite clear that who she is right now is NOT the one he will stand with.

But after having basically removed all her other desires, working towards the ideal 'machine' to run with his (that's likely what Black meant by his ambitions devoured hers), Scribe have no idea how to be a 'person' again, or at least one that Black will accept back.

So I think Scribe's intention of being under Catherine is probably after both Catherine and Hakram. Catherine for being the one who... 'humanized' Akua from the Praesi she was. And Hakram for being a near mirror to who she is, but clearly with his own ambitions.

ninegardens

That's also the fact that Cat stabbed Black and said "Come back when you you are a better person"
If Scribe blames Cat for this change... she may also credit her with being capable of making HER a better person in Black's eyes.

[Liliet](#)

Assuming Black told her about that.

Scribe was specifically not present for that exchange.

jamesc9

I'm not sure that there is **any** particular thing that I would **bet** on Scribe not knowing.

[Liliet](#)

Scribe didn't know a lot of things, judging by her behavior towards Catherine.

Scribe has NOT been in top ten of "characters most able at reaching their actual ultimate goals through their actions" of PGTE, I'm just saying. Not even top twenty.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I would argue that they know exactly what she wants: be with Amadeus again. And let's not forget that the mess in Salia started as a countermeasure to save Amadeus. She is a member of a Band of Named, willing to go any distance for her leader, just like Hakram would do anything for Catherine or Indrani would have caused a slaughter and ruin the Grand Alliance if Pilgrim killed Masego.

I would say that so long as Catherine doesn't act against Amadeus, they have a strong, loyal(ish) and extremely useful asset, we all know that Amadeus would rather die than go against Catherine, since he loves her as a daughter and sees his legacy on her, trusting her to make a better world than the one he was building. And Catherine won't go against Amadeus because she loves him as a father and sees him as the man that can put order in the East, the model of reasonable villains of

great power, and the man who set the foundations for the new era by being a paragon of Pragmatic Villainy.

As for the Blue Mage, I was thinking of rather than a Hydromancer, more of a Final Fantasy type of Blue Mage: Sort of "spell thief" that adopts abilities from a wide range of monsters that they fight against. A Blue Mage in Final Fantasy will be able to copy the Skills of monsters/enemies either by witnessing them used or by receiving the attack. In the game, they are very useful because they can use abilities that are otherwise exclusive to enemies.

Liliet

A Hydromancer sounds very much like an Ashuran kind of Name though.

And yeah, Catherine and Amadeus are very close to the same entity politically. They have both taken turns aiming to put each other in charge of the stuff they don't want to deal with personally. Catherine is Amadeus's greatest success, and Scribe should understand that by now.

I think she does, and that is why she came.

Konstantin von Karstein

We already have 2 spell thieves with Roland and Masego, so a third would be much. Also, the Red (associated with fire) Mage was a pyromancer, so I think it's likely the Blue one is an hydromancer.

caoimhinh

It's not necessarily much, since the way their powers work are different and the way they use their magic is way different. Roland and Masego are completely different styles of practitioners, and the way they steal magic (and then re-use it) is completely different too.

The theft of power is also not exclusive to mage Named. For example, Catherine can loot Aspects from corpses through Night, could do so as Squire through **Take**, and implied that she could through the use of Winter as Sovereign of Moonless Nights, while both the Rapacious Troubadour and the Headhunter can steal power from their killed victims.

We also have White Knight, Black Knight, and Red Knight; but that doesn't make it too much, at least in my opinion. Blue Mage could be a Hydromancer, but we shouldn't rule out any possibility, right? I just meant that a FF-type of Blue Mage was what came to my mind when I read the Name, and I think that given the variety of abilities such a

practitioner would have, it would help them to beat Assassin, who is by definition a very sneaky fellow.

Cicero

Perhaps it is a mistake, but I think it is a mistake worth making.

Miles

Hydromancer would be called Black Queen.

Blue mage copies monster abilities.

ethericsentinel

The word you're looking for is Lakeomancer.

[Javvies](#)

That's just one interpretation of "Blue Magic". And "copying monster abilities" doesn't really fit the Guideverse, IMO.

Another, equally valid one is that Blue Magic is primarily mental magics, various forms of illusions and similar magics. Which is probably more consistent with the established setting.

Or something along the lines of Magic: The Gathering's Blue Magic, which is a lot ... broader. Though would likely fit into the guideverse reasonably well.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Another metamagician would be Scary enough that he could believably have put a true end to Assassin, especially since the Calamities' banner has fallen.

Remember that the Calamities in general have run out of their common story, and both Captain and Warlock died of that. Hye evaded that by bowing out of the Calamities as soon as the Conquest was done, and Amadeus picked up an entirely new story (which Hye has signed onto).

Zach

The point Hakram was making is that it's a slippery slope once you start justifying killing people on the basis of them possibly being a threat later. It would be one thing if it were in response to Scribe being hostile to them, but that hasn't been the case since the war started.

Also, I would be willing to wager that, if they killed her, the truth of the situation would get out somehow (and be a huge threat to the Truce and Terms if it did).

Burlyraven

Honestly, as much as I'm usually in favor of giving everyone a chance in stories (if just to see what chaos follows), I was on team cutthroat, consequences be damned. Scribe was too much of a wildcard before being abandoned by her master, and now she's a wounded beast trying to get back in his graces by any means necessary.

Plus, it sets up redundancy on Hakram, putting Scribe this close to things. He's already weakened and losing half his power, so – intentionally or not – Scribe's presence is going to eat away at what's left. The fact that Hakram spoke in her defense has me wondering if he might be trying to commit suicide by story.

Tirielle

I actually wonder at the story logic here – I agree that Scribe makes Hakram rather redundant, but maybe that's what he's aiming for. His role is to be what Cat needs – if she no longer needs him as a scribe, maybe he can ride that into standing by her side in battle again.

Thorium

While they are both administrators and secretaries, Hakram's main Role was always Cat's trusted second. Scribe won't be interfering with what is at the core of his Name by being a spymistress for Cat.

Liliet

Vivienne was the spymaster, not Hakram. That was never his role.

Ratface, then Vivienne, then still Vivienne because they didn't have anyone else even though Vivienne was also the heiress.

This is Scribe filling in a convenient vacuum right under Vivi, not making a bid for anyone's place.

Cicero

It's also preparation for when Cat abdicates, as the Jacks will remain Callow's intelligence agency.

Scribe can become part of Cardinal's power structure instead.

Liliet

Oh yeah, def

ninegardens

Scribe in Cardinal? I am so hype for that.

Morgenstern

.. and if it were different bc. of Hakram's role as spymaster in Cat's future plans for Cardinal, then this plays right into what we learned about Hakram's actual own wishes only one chapter ago: He wants his Name to give him back his *battle* ability to STAND besides Cat, not be that spymaster he only became because she needed *someone* to fill that position and he just scoops up *any* function she needs as her Adjutant. But what he wants to be is NOT a glorified secretary, obviously, no matter how much he seems capable enough to do the job of one. He just asked Cat to stop thinking of his future with her as the man behind the desk, start thinking of him as her shield again.

Juff

Typo Thread:

are a getting > are getting
presence, weight, > presence weight,
That came an > That came from an
it probably > it was probably
said, "It > said. "It
access places > access to places
back the night > back to the night
has," dark > has," the dark
Archer as > Archer was
the formation (is this correct?)
In can have > I can have
believe would > believe Akua would

caoimhinh

Whether it was at me for being bluntly high-handed or at herself for the missteps I didn't know, and probably didn't matter.

Should be: Whether it was at me for being bluntly high-handed or at herself for the missteps, I didn't know and **it** probably didn't matter.

[Liliet](#)

I think it works.

Tom

> The man in question had married a noblewoman woman

Not to be confused with a noblewoman man

Hakram's Dead Hand

I think it would be hilarious if Assassin truly was dead this time, and both the people in the story and us keep pointing at corpses and being like "Could Assassin have done this???" When he's been dead for years.

mamm0nn

I'm still wondering "Might this be Emperor Traitorous in disguise?" with every new character we're introduced to.

[sengachi](#)

If another faceless Assassin rose up and took the mantle, would we even have any way of knowing it was a new person?

Peach

Wait, did Cat just quote Bismarck?

[Liliet](#)

HELL YEAH

This is the best reason to take her. The best tiebreaker: ultimately, it's just not what they DO, killing people after agreeing to take them in. It's not a habit they'll be getting into.

Also, she's one of the few people left that Amadeus cares about, that's also a thing. Nobody mentioned that explicitly as an argument, but Cat would feel like shit afterwards if she'd ignored that.

But that can be secondary to the tiebreaker of "let's just not".

Also, also, also.

I CALLED THIS AT THE END OF LAST BOOK.

I said coming to Catherine would be Scribe's reasonable next move, and taking her in would be Catherine's reasonable next move!

Scribe took two years to get her house in order first, and Catherine deliberated first, but ultimately, I CALLED THIS HELL YEAH I LOVE THIS

I just really love the consolidation of forces :3

Cold Cyberia

This is a perfect opportunity to strengthen the Accords. If Scribe's new "master" isn't Black or Cat, but rather the idea of the Accords along with the new world order, it would smooth out the process a lot.

Liliet

Scribe isn't really an idea kind of person. That's kind of the entire problem with her and Black.

There's potential there, though. It can be Cat at first but then if she gets into it Cat probably can eventually, in Cardinal, leave increasingly more issues to her personal discretion...

jamesc9

If Scribe is coming to Cat to be made into a better person, can that include being a person who follows an ideal, relative to following a person?

Liliet

I am pretty sure Scribe is coming to Cat as a second-rate washed out "working for Amadeus", not to be a better person. That didn't even feature in the conversation.

Zengar

"I thoughtfully hummed. I glanced down at the drop, leaning forward, and felt my stomach clench. There was a weight to the air tonight. Not a pivot, no. It wasn't enough for that. But this would... matter. Reverberate. I let the fear of the fall sink into me, clear away all idle thoughts. It was refreshing, in a way. And it made how the choice needed to be made crystal clear."

Okay, Cat's level of genre savyness is reaching some frankly terrifying levels. Admittedly, it is being honed by playing games with the Wandering Bard who is DEFINED by genre savyness, but being able to SENSE the flow of the story directly rather than having to reason it out? And being able to do it deliberately, so that she may one day be able to do it at will?

I think I need to revise where I think where I think this story is going....

dadycool

I've always been proven wrong whenever I've tried to think ahead on the story.

Mental Mouse

Remember, Cat copied Bard's genre sense out of her shadow in Arcadia – and in the Arsenal, the Doddering Sage helped her unlock it.

mamm0nn

I've mentioned old monsters in the comments of the last interlude, and it never really let me go. And now that they properly put Scribe just next to the spotlight again (we tried to beam it directly onto her but somehow she's always in the features-obscuring shadows just next to it despite her not visibly moving), I can't help but wonder how old she might be.

We know how old Black, Captain and Warlock are/were, and Assassin was always someone either from their generation or a generation or two older than that at most. But Scribe? She might've been Scribing for decades when Black was still in diapers.

So, taking all bets! Who wants to play the Guess Scribe's Age Game?

dadycool

Didn't she and Ranger have a rivalry of some sort? If so, that would have interesting implications on her age.

kinghaart

Wasn't that rivalry more about Amadeus than anything else?

James Felling

Morality and Ethics aside Cat et al made the wisest choice.

Who here doesn't believe that Scribe would not have some sort of contingency set to blow up in their face should things go badly for her, and a reasonable plan for an escape. The Scribe is not unbeatable, but in a time and place of her own choosing, even on hostile ground I for one would be fairly certain that offing her would be at best a roll of the dice, and likely leave lasting scars on her opposition. Maybe not physical scars, but she'd make them pay in blood and treasure.

ohJohN

I suspect Akua has ulterior motives for fighting this hard for Scribe – maybe related to whatever redemption story she's secretly planning for herself? – but I do agree that it would be awfully wasteful not to utilize her.

> "If she does become what was described as a threat," Akua continued, "That is, a banker and facilitator for villains, imagine how useful she would be as such a broker yet in your service!"

I get that there's the issue of trust, but if Cat had someone "handling half our villains' money [...] and reading the letters of the rest," managing her faction would be a breeze with the leverage she'd gain. She's already planning her Office of Villain Relations (or whatever) with a similar function, and Scribe could just... make that happen, quickly, quietly, and effectively, leaving Cat free to work on other problems (as a bonus, her access to ALL THE INFO would make adjudicating contracts guaranteed by the office a breeze).

jamesc9

As long as the Bard stays ineffective enough; otherwise the people who notice that the office has ALL THE INFO will create a campaign to avoid dealing with it.

Jack

>"In an hour, the Scribe will enter this tent to give us a report on the state of the Dread Empire," I said. "I want your opinion on, when she finishes, whether I should give her a position or slit her throat."

Oh? We're just going to sit here and pretend that she's not already in the room?
Cmon.

ninegardens

I mean... pretending like she isn't already in the room is kind of Scribes JAM

jamesc9

Under all normal circumstances, I'm not sure it's even jam; more like bread and butter, and the jam is using that knowledge to manipulate people into killing each other for her. That said, it has been covered in the text, so if the focus characters are wrong, then there needs to be an explanation of how they made a non-stupid mistake.

Darkening

They explicitly said the Crows were watching for Scribe, and while she is impressive at going unnoticed, I doubt she can completely conceal her presence from a pair of goddesses.

ruduen

Knowing that this is Scribe...

I fully expect a new pair of boots to be ready and waiting by the next morning.

[vernal.ancient](#)

I have a theory on how Hakram will develop from here: working alongside Scribe, he will grow more and more content operating in a purely administrative capacity with no front-line combat involved; meanwhile, the other Named will develop more and more awareness of his importance to the war effort, and respond with ever-increasing amounts of praise. Eventually, when the war is over, Hakram will take his place at Cardinal alongside Cat, and transition into a new name: Glorified Secretary.

Thank you, thank you; you're a great crowd 😊

Lox

Dead the Hand and dead the man.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, it's not a fucking confidence that now that Hakram is crippled, fate throws Catherine a discount Hakram for a price of both.

The main problem I see with it is simple. Having a Scribe will shift Hakram's Role even more away from combat, both in reality, and in the perceptions of others. And so his fears and woes will come true, nay, already has: fate itself had judged that he will not stand by the side of his Warlord in the battlefield ever again.

I expect that actually hurts him even more. How his nature shifts away slowly and inexorably from who he once was. Somehow I think that also can be a sort of a death flag. Hakram has a choice, to die in the fight as an Adjutant (with Scribe there to pick up after himself) or shift into something else.

It would be a choice between selfishness and selflessness, and we all know what he picked out time and time again between the two. So now, we will see, what choice he has to make one last time.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Yeah, it's especially hard for Hakram because he's an orc and their culture very much values combat, strength, war, etc. Obviously the other orcs won't give him shit since he's the first Named in forever but I imagine it's very much a core part of his identity.

It suggests to me that maybe overcoming this difficulty will reflect on the orcs in general. Whereas the Reforms transformed orcs from warring tribes into disciplined soldiery proficient in war, Adjutant and Callow might transform them from soldiery into builders, administrators and poets – a cultural step

bringing them closer to what they were before Miezán's enslaved them.

AbraKadabra

My take on Hakram was always that he will become Chancellor. Not in Praes tough, but in Callow.

ninegardens

Huh... that might be an interesting way to Neuter Praes; Arrange for a number of their most powerful names to be filled by people IN OTHER PLACES.

And then, presumably, force them to have names from far off lands.

Empress Basilia anyone?

jamesc9

So, fleshing that out, the High Seats can't lobby the Chancellor without travelling to Callow, which offends them enough that they won't, except at great need.

Zach

This doesn't make any sense, because Catherine wants to eliminate (or at least reduce as much as possible) the role of Named in leading nations.

I don't think there's been a single time when the comments of this story have speculated about Name transitions and it hasn't been completely wrong (which I'm thankful for, because people have a lot of really bad ideas).

Decius

Does anyone really believe that Scribe would be unaware of the movement of paperwork, or lack thereof?

Of course, nobody really believes that Scribe wasn't aware that the discussion about whether or not to murder them happened.

[sengachi](#)

Honestly it would not surprise me if Scribe had asked Assassin to impersonate her for that meeting, so that if they had decided to kill her they just would have failed to kill it instead.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

For everyone speculating here about Adjutant's eventual demise and/or retirement, when he got his Name the narration said something like "And so it ended. And so it began." I suspect this will prove to be one half of a pair of bookends, meaning that

he'll end the story kneeling to her as he did that night. I'd be more confident of this if it'd be the literal starting point of the story, but it could happen.

Chapter 51: Endwise

"And so Maledicta said: 'All the world had denied us, so let it all be damned and we with it. This wasteland of our own making, it will kill us or we will kill it.'"

– Extract from the Scroll of Misfortunes, thirteenth of the Secret Histories of Praes

Before the Conquest my people's maps of Praes had tended towards imprecision when it came to the interior of the Dread Empire, with only the western parts well-known to the Old Kingdom and the details of the eastern coast usually being cribbed off of Ashuran maps. I'd never dealt with that difficulty, as even before my time in the War College had given me access to standard Legion maps I'd been given the luxury of using Black's own whenever I wished – though I'd not understood quite how much of a gift he was giving me, back then.

Only when Juniper and I had gotten around to raising the Army of Callow had I realized how troublesome it was to get any good maps that weren't in noble hands or Legion-made, much less sets as good as those Black had kept for Praes and Callow. Back in the day I'd suspected the cartographers that were an official part of the Legions – under the Kachera Tribune of any legion's general staff – weren't the only reason my father's charts were so exactly precise, and now I was getting confirmation.

The leather-bound scroll that Scribe unfolded across the table was no larger than a saddle length but I openly lusted for what I saw displayed on it: a map of the Dread Empire, showing not only cities towns and villages but also the roads and typical regional weather. The last of these had been the death of many an incursion into the Wasteland, given how centuries of reckless rituals had turned it into a deathtrap of sudden storms morphing into burning heat or freezing cold on a whim. Gods but I wanted a dozen of these.

"When we're done with this, we'll be talking about your upcoming contributions to my personal map collection," I noted.

She shot me a look, a face I glimpsed to be lightly tanned giving me the impression of disconcertment. Had those been brown eyes I saw? Already my recollection was fading.

"Sometimes you do remind me of him," she admitted. "Though nowhere as much as some people like to claim."

"We've all got some of our teachers in us," I shrugged. "And he's been more than just that to me. But I interrupted, my apologies. Continue."

She nodded, then idly set down painted iron blocks – regular Army of Callow issue for our general staffs, I noted with some chagrin – on two cities: one black and over Ater, one white and over Aksum.

"On the surface, the situation in the Dead Empire is a classical Praesi civil war," she said. "Being waged between empress-claimant Sepulchral and empress-regnant Malicia."

"You even us the proper terminology," Akua said, sounding surprised yet pleased.

I snorted. Yeah, I supposed considering how often someone raised a rebel flag in the Wasteland to take a swing at claiming the Tower the Praesi would have been forced to develop a very specific vocabulary to address the situation. Would have gotten real awkward in conversation otherwise.

"I have spent longer in Praes than the Free Cities, Sahelian," Scribe chided. "Few even remember I was not born of the Wasteland. Your preconceptions aside, I was setting out the factional lay of the land. Both empresses have, naturally, gathered supporters."

A single smaller white block went on the city of Nok, where High Lord Dakarai Sahel ruled. Nok was traditionally considered the weakest of the High Seats, as the Kebdanas of Thalassina had long been kings of the sea trade and dominated overland trade towards Ater even though Nok was physically closer. That said, with Thalassina now largely vapour High Lord Dakarai now sat atop the only major remaining Praesi seaport. His support was no small thing.

"Hardly a surprise," Akua said. "Dakarai has been looking for a way to get a foothold into a reigning coalition for decades. It is a matter of pride, for him, and pride matters much to the man. He made sure to oppose Mother in public frequently simply to make plain that the Sahel origins as a branch family of the Sahelians did not mean she held influence over him."

The man had never been a friend to Malicia, I recalled, or at least not been counted among her supporters. Considering the High

Lord of Thalassina had been one of her most ardent partisans, there was little need for an explanation as to why.

"It is as tight an alliance as can be had in the Wasteland," Scribe informed us. "His daughter Hawulti is now wed to Sepulchral's appointed successor to the High Seat of Aksum, her grand-nephew Isoba."

Hawulti Sahel, I mused. I'd heard that name before, hadn't I? I glanced at Hakram in question.

"She was once one of Heiress' retinue, recalled to her father's side after First Liesse," he provided.

"You threatened to have her soul cut out by Lord Masego to coerce her father into supporting the establishment of the Ruling Council," Akua amusedly reminded me.

I had, hadn't I? It'd been a while. I could hardly recall her face, or that of her father's for that matter. I'd only spoken with the man the once. I'd also gotten a little more cavalier with souls in the following years, so the threat hadn't exactly stuck with me.

"Someone we should be worried about?" I asked.

"Ambitious but cowardly," Akua assessed. "A born follower. Her father sent her to me for hardening, as she is the only one of his children to be born with the Gift and he favours her for it."

That'd be a no, then. Probably why Sepulchral had been willing to twine their lines too, which Praesi high nobles were notoriously careful about: they hoarded the secrets of their blood most jealously.

"Malicia's support, as empress-regnant, is significantly stronger," Scribe continued.

Black blocks went down, one after another. Wolof, where Akua's cousin Sargon Sahelian ruled now that her mother was dead. Okoro under High Lord Jaheem Niri, which had been a political nonentity in Praes for most of my lifetime due to the brutal succession crisis that'd eventually put the man on the high seat. Kahtan under High Lady Takisha Muraqib, now the last High Seat in the hands of the Taghreb. The Northern Steppes, where Malicia had raised the chieftains of three southern clans to the office of Lords of the Steppes and charged them with keeping order and collecting tributes. And last of all Foramen, where the former Matron Wither now ruled as High Lady. Pickler's mother had backstabbed her fellow goblins brutally, and gotten an unprecedented title for it.

"She's also still got most of the Legions," I pointed out.

While maybe half of the former Legions-in-Exile had deserted in the wake of the dirty trick that'd brought them home, the forces that'd already been in Praes had stayed largely loyal and absorbed the soldiers that hadn't deserted. As far as military might went, even if you left noble allies out of it Malicia had a larger stick to wield. Sepulchral was relying on a kind of army Black had built the modern Legions of Terror to beat, too, which was one of the many reasons why she would be avoiding giving battle.

"And that's where it gets complicated, right?" Archer said, eyeing the map with mild interest.

Wasteland games were no real concern of hers, unless I made them to be otherwise, but Indrani did like an occasional spot of theatre and even at its worst the Dread Empire tended to deliver on that.

"Indeed," Scribe said. "The first illusion to discard before the situation in Praes can be understood is that there are only two sides in the civil war."

She set down a small red iron block on the edge of the Green Stretch, where thousands of deserters from the Legions-in-Exile had raised reportedly raised a great camp.

"Lord Amadeus' army?" Adjutant asked, dark eyes watching Scribe closely.

I watched them flick away more than once, no doubt prompted to do so by her aspect, but they always found her again. It was the obvious guess, now that I was learning more about the situation. Dread Empress Sepulchral's ability to outwit the Legions on the march, if not beat them, had led many – including me, once – to believe that my father might be behind her. The way this was being described though, made it seem much less likely. Black would have gone for the throat by now, not kept maneuvering in this empty stalemate.

"I'd presumed so as well," Scribe admitted. "But I have found no evidence of it. The leaders, General Mok and General Sacker, seem to have been acting without orders and out of a degree of genuine disgust for Malicia's actions with the control contingencies – though Sacker, at least, has sympathies in the Grey Eyries and rightfully fears being killed by Malicia or Sepulchral if she lays down arms."

It also meant that leadership of the deserters was nonhuman at the very top rung, I mused, since as I recalled General Mok was an ogre. No doubt that was making the two Soninke fighting for the right to rule over them more than a little wary.

"Lots of ogres in charge now," Indrani mused, narrowing in on the same detail. "Isn't the last Marshal one too?"

"Marshal Grem is under house arrest in Ater, not dead," Scribe corrected. "But you are correct that the commander of Malicia's armies, Marshal Nim, is an ogre as well. It is the most influential their kind has been in imperial affairs for centuries, if ever."

"But there's no black block over the Hall of Skulls," I said.

A grim name for the sole ogre city on Calernia but then they tended to be a grim people all around.

"The ogres are hedging their bets," Scribe frankly said. "As they always do. It is why no attempt was made to recall your own General Hune. It has historically been their policy as a people to have someone already lodged within every side so that they have a foot in the winning one, whichever it might be."

And I could see how that spared them crackdowns, I thought, but it'd not really *paid off* for them either had it? Required military service quotas under Malicia and Black had been lower than under Nefarious but they'd still existed, and there'd been no major push to increase their status as a people within the Empire like there'd been with greenskins. Part of that was numbers, since there were so few of them compared to the constituent peoples of the Dread Empire, but those alone weren't good enough an explanation. Hune had always been bluntly frank with about her people being on no one's side because they saw no one as being on *their* side.

"I can understand the deserters making Malicia wary of overextending," I said. "Explains why there hasn't been a serious attempt to siege Aksum yet even though it falling would end Sepulchral. But she should be winning this pretty decisively with this many supporters to call on, Scribe, so what are we missing?"

"Her coalition is fragile," Akua murmured, "and at odds with itself."

Scribe nodded in her direction.

"Kahtan eyes High Lady Wither, now the last of the Taghreb bastions, and begs off committing soldiers to Malicia's war," she said. "High Lady Takisha ponders her blood ruling both Kahtan and Foramen, and supports Malicia only because Sepulchral has no better offer to make. Wither herself is mired in war with the Confederation, while a combination of mismanagement and hatred makes the humans under her rebellious. There have been riots."

Off the map went the blocks for Kahtan and Foramen.

"Okoro backs the empress-regnant, but her freshly-raised Lords of Steppes are pulling at the leash," Scribe continued. "The Niri must keep men out on the fields, lest the Blackspears take to raiding again. Their contributions are measured, mage cabals instead of battalions. And the Clans are pushing back against these lords they did not choose – Grem's old clan, the Howling Wolves, are at war with the Graven Bones and sending envoys to other clans to assemble a coalition. The Red Shields burned the holy grounds of the Stag-Crowned, and denounce them as traitors to orckind. The warbands that were sent to serve Malicia stayed, but there are no more forthcoming."

Only a single block was removed, the one in the Steppes. Okoro was committed, if not as much as Malicia probably wished it to be.

"And so Wolof remains," Akua quietly said. "She owns Sargon, then?"

"I believe she has soulboxed him," Scribe replied.

I'd never head of the term before, so I cocked an eyebrow at Akua.

"It is much like it sounds, dearest," she told me. "His soul was severed from his body by ritual and placed in an enchanted box. It is difficult to kill through this, but by sorcery atrocious pain can be inflicted. It is tradition, however, that the box be sealed for only so many years."

She turned her gaze to Scribe, her silence an unspoken question. Wolof had taken a beating when Sargon overthrew Tasia Sahelian, Akua's mother, and it'd been the Legions of Terror under Marshal Nim that ultimately re-established order there. With Malicia's soldiers in the city the freshly-risen High Lord Sargon would not have been in a great bargaining position, so I doubted the length of time would be small.

"At least ten years," Scribe said. "Perhaps as much as three decades."

Akua sighed.

"He'll try to steal it back," she said, "but with Mother's spies in disarray the Eyes will have gutted them. Sargon will not turn on the Tower so long as she has the box."

"Wolof is still handling demonic taint from its latest contested succession," Scribe said, "and so it has offered few troops, but those it sent are elites. They have been raiding the hinterlands of Aksum with great success, stealing people as much as wealth. High Lord Sargon intends to fill his city anew."

I drummed my fingers against the table, frowning. All right, so I could see how the stalemate had come into being. Sepulchral couldn't afford a field battle against the Legions of Terror, she'd lose and her cause would die. Yet since it stood between Askum and Nok, Ater had to be garrisoned with reliable soldiers – which meant legionaries, not household troops with ever-dubious loyalties. That'd peel soldiers off of Marshal Nim's army, enough she'd be careful about sieging the rebel High Seats and all the nastiness that implied. If she lost too many soldiers storming a city, she risked being caught by Sepulchral and smashed in a war that was frankly hers to lose.

And all the while the deserters were looking on, keeping everyone from taking hard risks lest they intervene and finish off the weakened victor.

The balance of the power was in the south, I thought as I stared at the map. Foramen and Kahtan, the forges and the armies. If High Lady Takisha could be convinced to call on her many vassals and make war for Malicia, Marshal Nim would have troops to throw into the breach when attacking a High Seat. But it was not something the High Lady of Kahtan would be eager to grant the Tower when instead she could try to cement the Muraqib legacy and have her family rule the last two great cities of the south. Which led me to another question.

"How can Malicia afford to make trouble for us abroad, with all these fires in her backyard?" I frankly asked. "She should not have the time or gold to spare."

"Kahtan and Foramen still pay their taxes, fully and promptly," Scribe replied without batting an eye. "So do Okoro and Wolof, though their caravans are larger and armed. The Tower has undertaken no rebuilding of Thalassina, so Malicia's treasury is filled to the brim by taxes and decades of Callowan riches. What can she spend her wealth on, if not trouble for the Grand Alliance? There are no more mercenaries to buy, and the gold does her no good sitting in a vault."

Huh. That was one way of looking at it, I supposed. And from her perspective the Grand Alliance wouldn't stop being an enemy if it wasn't fought, it'd just have more allies and resources to spare when it finally turned its gaze on her after the war with the Dead King was done. But this did raise the veil on a situation that had largely been opaque to us so far, which was more than a little useful. If nothing else, it made it clear what the state of the opposition truly was. I shared a look of understanding with Hakram.

"Malicia's position is much weaker than it seems from the outside," Adjutant stated. "And though the military advantage is with her, so long as she cannot bring Sepulchral to battle it means nothing."

They could keep marching back and forth across the Wasteland for years and little would change. It was hard to tell whether a long stalemate would favour Sepulchral or Malicia, though I was inclined to believe it'd help neither so long as the High Lady of Kahtan kept sitting the fence. I suspected the bribes being offered to Takisha Muraqib were rising by the day, but with riots in Foramen making it clear Wither's grasp on the city was loose there would always be a greater temptation to the south.

"So where's the Carrion Lord?" Indrani bluntly asked. "It's all pretty stuff, this story, but it doesn't mean shit if he and the Lady aren't accounted for."

I glanced at her in surprise.

"You're not that flattering when speaking of him, usually," I noted.

She grimaced.

"If the Lady's stuck with him for two years, they're up to something that caught her interest," Archer said. "Her interest isn't easy to catch, Cat."

True enough, I thought. Though I'd been given to understand there was actual sentiment between them too, which was bound to weigh on the scales.

"The man does command a remarkable amount of loyalties within the Legions and the bureaucracy," Akua warily agreed. "It seems odd he has not called on them."

"I found him near Hospes, on the southern shores of the Wasaliti," Scribe said. "Without attendants or even companions save for Ranger. He was travelling south."

"And I'll believe that's all you know when it snows in Levante," I said. "Go on."

"Before Ime's purges began to seriously hamper my ability to gather information, I confirmed he's been in both Foramen and the Grey Eyries," Scribe said. "I cannot be certain as to why, however. There are also semi-reliable sightings of him much further north, to the west of Okoro."

Which meant close to the Steppes, where he was a lot more likely to find allies than at a High Lord's court. I made sense, but I wasn't buying it. Black had always been popular with greenskins, but stripped of command over his Legions it was almost *predictable* for him to try to raise fresh armies in the Steppes and the Eyries. My teacher was a lot of things, but predictable was rarely one of them.

"He will be using the Twilight Ways, if can move so quickly and discreetly in a war-torn land," Adjutant said.

I nodded in agreement after a moment, gauging the distances involved mentally. Yeah, there weren't a lot of other credible explanations for that. We'd been pretty sure that was how he'd left Salia, as he would have been caught riding through the Proceran countryside otherwise, but confirmation was always useful.

"As for why the two of them have been so discreet," Scribe continued, "I do have an answer. Or at least part of one."

She came forward to offer me a folded parchment, which I opened with impatience. To my surprise it was something I'd heard before: wild rumours from the Green Stretch about pale ghosts being glimpsed off the roads. A number had supposedly been put to them: ten. So it wasn't even Black and Ranger that'd been sighted. I passed the parchment to Hakram, who after a puzzled moment passed it to Akua. She looked equally bemused, and passed it to Archer absent-mindedly. It was Indrani who went still after a casual glance, cursing in what I was pretty sure was High Tyrian.

"Ten. Fuck. You're *sure*?" Indrani asked Scribe.

"There have been several independent sightings," Eudokia confirmed.

"Anything you'd care to share?" I mildly asked.

"There's ten Emerald Swords," Archer said. "And when the Forever King gets in a mood and decides it's time to start trying to kill the Lady again, they're who he sends. He hasn't tried anything since the dwarves told him if his people stirred up shit near a dwarven gate they'd take it as an act of war – it's why people called us a protectorate of the Kingdom Under – but she's left Refuge behind now. It makes sense they'd go for her again now that she's low on allies and the Tower can't do much but complain even if the Swords are seen."

I hummed. That rang true, considering Hanno had just passed along a reminder from the Golden Bloom that they were going to take it very badly if we let Ranger into the Truce and Terms. They'd want the old thorn in their side as isolated as possible, not under the protection of treaties binding together half of Calernia. Considering the general uselessness and unpleasantness of the elves while we'd been waging a war for survival against Keter, I found myself in the surreal position of actually rooting for Ranger a little bit.

Gods but these were strange times.

"The Carrion Lord cannot formally seize command of an army, else the Emerald Swords would converge on it looking for the Ranger," Akua lightly said, sounding mightily amused. "Ah, the fickleness of fate."

I didn't particularly share her amusement, as if my father had seized the Tower we'd have the east settled instead of this fucking mess going on for forever and a half. He could have signed onto to the Terms and brought the Legions of Terror north instead of playing hide and seek in the Wasteland while trying to get something rather nebulously defined off the ground. Mind you he'd had her father killed as she watched, so I could forgive some manner enjoyment at his expense. Akua could claim Praesi mores as the source of her indifference there all she wanted, she'd actually loved the man who'd died.

No one got over that quite as neatly as she liked to pretend she had.

"Anything you would care to add?" Adjutant asked Scribe.

"Not at the moment," she replied.

For a moment I considered dismissing her until we were done discussing Praes, then I figured there would be little point: she'd learn what was decided in here sooner or later, anyway, and we might need to call her back in if we had questions.

"Take a seat," I ordered her.

I didn't bother to check if she did, already turning towards my councillors.

"So," I thinly smiled, "the Praesi situation. Thoughts on what our response should be?"

It was not a long debate that followed, or a particularly contentious one. It wasn't for lack of opinions, though. Archer's take on what our involvement should be east of the Wasaliti was essentially a shrug, with an added suggestion that the Tower should be made aware of the presence of the Emerald Swords – whether it'd harm the elves or Malicia she cared little, since she smiled on both outcomes. Akua and Hakram were both in favour of intervention, but in different ways and seeking different outcomes.

Adjutant suggested Callow begin providing arms to the Clans fighting Malicia's appointed lords in the Steppes, noting that my kingdom had much to gain from closer ties to a victorious orc uprising: it could serve as a point of pressure against whichever empress edged out the other, and broadly speaking favoured a faction that in turn favoured Black. Hakram agreed with me that my father in the Tower was our best outcome in the Wasteland,

though he wasn't as inclined to see him as an ally. If we wanted the Dread Empire at peace with Callow and willing to fight north, though, there was no denying that Black was the best choice.

Akua favoured backing Sepulchral instead, though not enough to make her win. She argued that a bolder, better armed Dread Empress Sepulchral might be tempted to give battle to the Legions of Terror – and that ensuring no one won a decisive victory there was Callow's gain, since casualties and desertions would weaken both sides. She advised leaning on Cordelia and the Dominion to have Sepulchral recognized as ruler of Praes and attempting to broker an alliance between her and the rebel orc clans in the Steppes. Her approach was cheaper on our coffers than Hakram's, but it carried other risks.

Callow couldn't afford to get dragged into fighting out east right now, we just didn't have the men to spare. And adventurism in the Wasteland was brutally unpopular a notion back home, especially now that it'd come out that Malicia's deal with the Dead King supposedly ensured his undead would not attack us so long as she lived. It was only after they'd all spoken that I turned to Scribe.

"Suggestions?" I mildly repeated.

She stayed silent a moment.

"It is my understanding that the Army of Callow is severely lacking goblin munitions?"

My brow rose.

"True," I admitted.

"Then I would suggest reaching out to High Lady Wither," Scribe said. "Who has a large stock of these she is not using, while she *could* use shipments of grain to quell the riots in Foramen. Rationing is one of the causes of unrest."

It also meant helping Pickler's mother, to some extent, while we were nominally allies with the Confederation of the Grey Eyries. Which she was at war with, after having betrayed them. Was I comfortable with that? Not really, but then I wasn't any more comfortable with my sappers having empty hands.

"Something to consider," I acknowledged. "Go on."

"Reach out to General Sacker," she said. "The defeats she inflicted Sepulchral are what made her desperate enough to rebel, and she is close with the same Matrons who rose against Malicia in addition to being an Amadeus loyalist. Neither empress will suffer her to live if the deserters disperse, which means she is very much in need of a patron."

My eyes narrowed. That camp was bound to be full of spies, both Eyes of the Empire and Sepulchral's own, but so long as I didn't actively support a rebellion against the Tower – which the fighting up in the Steppes was, effectively speaking – I doubted Malicia would make aggressive moves against Callow. She'd be throwing away the advantage she bought with making known the terms of her treaty with the Dead King if she did. It also opened the door to recruiting many of those soldiers if things went bad for them in the Wasteland, which they yet might.

Shit, I thought. Akua had been right, it really *would* have been a waste to kill the Scribe. A handful of sentences and she'd both given me a shot at steadying my munition problem and figured out a palatable alternative to being a mere watcher to the mess unfolding in Praes. I turned to look at Hakram.

"Can Duchess Kegan be trusted to negotiate with Sacker?" I asked.

It was tacitly accepting Scribe's suggestion and did not pretend otherwise. The orc's face tightened a moment, but it went away almost immediately. A spasm of pain? I'd thought his wounds under control. I'd talk to his healers tonight about the dosages in his potions.

"I am uncertain," he admitted. "She would see the use in it, but she is less than fond of both goblins and Praesi. I'd advise naming a negotiator ourselves instead and putting them under Kegan's nominal authority afterwards."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"Have five names for me by nightfall," I said. "And forward word to our contacts in the Grey Eyries: I want to broach the subject of buying up Wither's munitions to our friends the Matrons. Just sound them out for now, gauge how bad the fallout would be."

I doubted the Matrons would be all that offended by backroom dealings even with their sworn enemy – those were a proud goblin tradition – but I'd rather keep things above board so they wouldn't suspect I was softening on Malicia. Without Callow's support their situation looked much grimmer, and the Tribes had ended most their previous rebellions by cutting a deal with the Tower when things looked that way.

"Send reports to Vivienne about all of this, please," I added after a moment.

I would have liked her in the room for this, I thought with a pang of regret, but there'd been no anticipating that Scribe would suddenly come to us. And by the time word got to her, we'd be out on campaign so it would be exceedingly difficult to discuss affairs like this – outright impossible, when we got deep enough in the Dead King's territory and scrying was broken up.

"I'm sure those will make for a pleasant reading with her breakfast," Indrani drily said.

I suppressed a grimace. Without meaning to, Archer had reminded me I was slipping back into old habits – keeping Vivienne out of the loop, out of major decisions. I wasn't doing it for petty reasons this time, but I was doing it anyway.

"You're right," I told Indrani, who blinked in surprise, before turning to Hakram. "Arrange a scrying session with her tonight, I'll tell her in person. Tell her it's urgent, worth cancelling prior engagements for."

And we could discuss her suggestions, if she had any, before I handed her the reins on this. Someone was going to have to handle it while I was gone and it might as well be her. She'd be handling the fallout long after I'd abdicated.

"It'll be done," Adjutant said.

I nodded my thanks, eyes finally turning back to the still-seated Scribe.

"So let's talk maps," I smiled.

Adding another few to my growing collection would give me something to ponder about, when we began the march north.

lucnation

Make sure to go vote guys

Miles

Adding another few to my growing collection would give me something to ponder about, when we began the march north.

Miles

Oh and the link

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[*Liliet*](#)

would have been MUCH better without the quote

Shveiran

Come now, that was as far removed from an emotional moment as can be. It has to be ok.

[*Liliet*](#)

It's ok, I'm just not seeing a single thing that it adds.

Rynjin

It adds no more and no less than your constant complaining about it, to be honest.

[*Liliet*](#)

My complaining makes me feel better though, and given that other people's complaining makes me feel better too, I figure it's not an entirely selfish effort.

Shveiran

It bothers me, though, and other people who dislike the constant complaining, just like the vote reminders annoy you and others who are annoyed by them.

Meanwhile, the vote reminders with puns make me and others feel good, just like they annoy you and others.

If your take from this is "then I'm justified and I'll persevere", I won't argue further. We tried that, and it didn't really work. But the idea that the two things are so distinct that what you are doing is "less selfish" than your chosen opposition is, frankly speaking, weak at best.

[*Liliet*](#)

The "less selfish" thing was basically a joke.

I really really strongly dislike these and I don't really see a reason why I shouldn't express that if it makes me feel better.

Also I don't think your "annoyance" is the same as actual visceral feeling sick and not being able to think about the quote without the vote reminder being stuck in your head instead. But hey, it's not a fucking competition.

Frivolous

I want to thank EE for putting in this episode the answers to some questions I've raised in past comments sections, those being how full or empty Malicia's treasury is and/or how much taxes she's been collecting during the civil war, and also why the elves were so against Ranger signing the Truce and Terms.

I do wonder if EE read my questions and decided to demonstrate the answers. I'm grateful either way.

I also wonder if Hakram's spasm of pain was from Cat taking advice from Scribe, in the manner she takes advice from Hakram. He might be hurt over being supplanted. On the other hand, Hakram is notoriously without ego, a veritable Vulcan among orcs.

Cubic

Maybe not personally hurt, but his name might have trouble being redundant with the Scribe.

scottcahoon14

Vulcans aren't /controlled/ by emotions, but they still feel them. Hakram already said he feels like he's losing his place if he can't stand by her in battle. Cats response was he would still be her right hand man with a quill. Then she picks up Scribe and immediately takes her advice over everyone elses. None of this is enough to make him betray her or anything, but she IS weakening his name by doing so, which he basically said is only strong so long as she relies on him. And the weakening of her most trusted ally is never going to be a good thing. Maybe she realizes the problem in time, but it would be wasted foreshadowing to do so.

Insanenoodlyguy

Best case, which is reasonably likely since his aspect is "Stand" is that this drives him right back into being combat ready. If scribe is her woman with a quill, he's the man with a quill in one hand and an axe in the other.

Forsheen

It most definitely is.
He is losing his purpose, he can support cat the way he used.
In fact it looks like he needs her support.
Combined with the fact he feels his name change, I can only wonder how it must feel to see some more capable help cat.

[benthelynx](#)

I definitely think that's part of Hakram issue. It may also be the degree of trust Cat is implicitly putting in Scribe, alongside the competing Names and his own physical impairment

preventing him from having as much to offer in other supporting aspects. Possibly even Name shenanigans depending if there was a shift in Cats unconscious view of his role.

dadycool

So, he's feeling even more obsolete in having another thing Cat depended on him so entirely for being shared with another.

[impolitic](#)

Don't forget that Hakram is having a Role crisis right now. He's normally unflappable, but not when his entire raison d'être is in question.

Cicero

I think it's more simple than that. Hakram was hoping for Callow to take a position supporting the Orcs. Cat decided that was too risky.

He probably understand why, but he was hoping for the Orcs to achieve a position where they could ally with Callow against the Praesi, something that would significantly effect Callow and the Orcs going forward.

If not for the Scribes ideas, that's probably what Cat would have done.

[Liliet](#)

Fun fact: Hakram could have proposed to ALSO help the orcs in addition to Scribe's ideas.

Like, I'm just saying.

Dsylexic Wofl

It would even be that hard, shes already entering in contact with Wither about munitions, and with The remains of the Legions. Steppes is just, right there, pull them along and you have both Orcs, Munitions and Legionaries.

Miles

Yeah but money is tight.

Maybe she can support the orcs with wheat. I'm sure they'll find an immediate use for it.

[Liliet](#)

He could still raise the notion, and then they'd discuss the budget.

Maybe Cat would pick up on it being personally important to him THEN.

Note-Taker

Part of the appeal of Scribe's plan though is that it is not supporting anyone in open opposition to the Tower. By sending aid to the openly rebelling orcs, Cat loses the fig leaf, and thereby the "the DK won't attack us" clause of his deal with Malicia.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, that clause explicitly relies on her being alive period.

Shveiran

That was my reading as well, yet I don't think we were ever given the precise details of the pact between Keter and Praes.

Thinking about it, doesn't it make sense that Malicia would have a clause that prevents Catherine from rallying Callow against her? Especially given that she knew she was reaching out to the Grand Alliance (to no effect, but still).

[Liliet](#)

Nah, too complex. She had to talk the Dead King into monitoring whatever criterion that was, after all.

And Catherine had technically already rallied Callow against her in a sense, so... yeah. I'm pretty sure the agreement is exactly what we've heard it is: conditional on Malicia's continued aliveness status.

hakureireimu

Why are the Emerald Swords a problem now, but not when Ranger was part of the Calamities?

Ninestrings

Because the Calamities would have bounced the Emerald Swords off the walls and laughed about it.

Just Amadeus and Ranger though? more tempting a target.

More fool them.

dadycool

I feel like Assassin and Captain would've killed them reflexively, to the point of forgetting about them, Black would've killed them and asked Scribe about them, she'd have shrugged, they'd both have put it out of their minds as a curiosity, and none of them would've mentioned it to/asked Ranger because they never got close enough for her to notice.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, no.

Elves are fucking absurd.

My bet is on "elves actually had no idea Ranger was hanging out with the Calamities until Black had already won the civil war, and the Dread Empire is the kind of crazy they don't want to touch."

Mirror Night

Yeah even with their Names...Fighting 10 Elite Elves is no laughing matter. I am not even sure Assassin can fake being an Elf to try his usual tricks cause Elves aren't normal and faking it wouldn't let him speak Elvish. Antigone and Maybe Hanno are probably the only humans outside of Bard who can speak it. I am also not sure Captain's Raw Power would match up well....Black is Clever and Warlock is dangerous. Still the Elves tend to play it safe and play the long game.

Ninestrings

Warlock is probably the major deterrent there, I doubt there is any force on the planet that could have shrugged him off if he decided to go all out on a large scale, he was pretty much a fantasy nuke.

Konstantin von Karstein

The Gnomes, the Dead King and the various Choirs definitely could shrug him off.

Shveiran

I think Thalassina showed he had the potential to be in the same neighborhood as a Choir (once per lifetime), though your point stands. I don't think the Emerald Sword are that powerful? or ratehr, I don't think they are the right sort of powerful. The Revenant Elven Prince could probably survive the fallout, but I don't think the Emerald

Swords are capable of surviving that level of arcane onslaught.

heroessucklmao

I agree, they don't have a country behind them now either

Letouriste

Praes is at war. There will be no response coming from the tower. I doubt these tens elves could travel so easily in peace time. When ranger was at refuge she was protected by the dwarfs and before that she was always around Black and the rest of the calamities who kept an eye on them. Scribe in particular should always have eyes there.

Dsylexic Wofl

Because the Calamities had a man that could not be killed, a woman that could not be found, a literal monster, the worlds strongest named and a man that could make fore rain from the sky. All of them under the command of the fucking Black Knight.

Sometimes we need to remember that they were a big fucking problem

[Liliet](#)

Ranger was still one of their biggest guns though, and the implication of the way Indrani worded it is that it's the same Emerald Swords there have ever been after her – she never managed to kill a single one.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Did she even notice them, though?

[Liliet](#)

...I mean, Hye and Amadeus appear to currently be on the run because of them, so, y'know.

Dexapocalypse

I really want to know when cats going to get her name, I'm hoping it isn't black queen because as soon as she abdicated for Vivienne she'll lose it again

Hellspirit

Back them Praes was a united (as can be at least) force, and the Calimities was at Full strength and had the full backing of Praes.

Liliet

I would say this, yeah. Elves could probably shrug off the Calamities as a band, but they could not shrug off a multitude of demon summonings in the middle of their forest or whatever else Praes is liable to pull when pressed.

Javvies

Well ... the Emerald Swords actively hunting Ranger is a pretty good reason for her and Amadeus to be discrete. And mean that there's no reason to think that Amadeus is going to solve things in Praes for Cat while she's busy in the West.

Accurate maps are important.

I'm not entirely surprised that Cat isn't supporting the Orc Clans yet. On the other hand, some support for them might well be in order, but locking in an alliance with the Legions in Exile/Black-loyalist Legions needs to be done first, to help protect Callow from Praesi retaliation.

Might need to talk to the ogres, too. If they can be convinced to commit to one side over the others, or even just to fully break with one side ... that could be significant.

Burlyraven

Would Amadeus count as a lord in exile, with Ranger taking the role of heroic protector in this situation? I'm kinda getting those vibes with their effective seclusion, and the uber-assassins, and the mystical wanderings. If so, it's highly likely to be on purpose, and they're just charging up story power until Amadeus completes the soul searching the story requires, seizes control of his former Legions, and fights a desperate but successful campaign to the tower.

My only doubt on that lie in that fact that it'd be a traditionally heroic story used to seize a villainous crown, even with pragmatic intentions. On the flip side, it'd have the main players gender swapped from our norm, so technically Amadeus would be the princess in this situation, and that mental image is making me giggle.

Ninestrings

I though Amadeus was planning to utilise a "Hijacked by ganon" sort of situation.

The only thing more villainous than hatching an evil plan is stealing another villains plan mid-plan and using it for your own purposes.

Liliet

Amadeus has been in a heroic Role from the inside Praes perspective since he was a wee teenager rising up against abusive authority.

That said, Ranger's protecting him from the threat that comes from her hanging out with him. I'm not sure there's a heroic story about that, unless you count the entire MCU.

Burnsy

Cat: "Imma zoom call Viv, you guys have anything to say to her?"
Indrani: tell her I said 'Cat has a WAP.' She'll know.

Juff

Typo Thread:

cities towns and villages > cities, towns, and villages,
even us the > even used the
frank with about > frank about

Askum > Aksum

sitting the fence > sitting on the fence

I made sense > It made sense

onto to > onto

manner enjoyment > manner of enjoyment

inflicted Sepulchral > inflicted on Sepulchral

and did not > and I did not

edrey

i have this question in my mind before, there is balance between good and evil, Dk and the Bard, the elves and the drow i get that there are less villains since tariq and saint make it so, but how there is balance with the smerald swords and the dwarfs?, keter, praes and the everdark is too little, and they have no Named in the everedark, so i found that evil is lacking, even "saying quality over quantity" isn't enough. especially with the esmerald swords, they dont have villains in the same league. no wonder triumphant grow so much, but now i dont see cat fighting the Forever king.

Darkening

The dwarves were mentioned to employ both heroes and villains, they're not Good but neutral. Giants are probably nominally good, but they're strictly neutral and unwilling to get involved, so they don't matter generally. The elves and Keter probably balance themselves out to a degree, given they had a vicious war at one point. There's the Chain of Hunger I suppose. Really, having the Rats come invade right now would be about the worst possible fate for the Grand Alliance, though I suppose they're behind keter's conquered territory right now. So, Everdark, Chain of Hunger, half the free cities, and Praes,

balanced against Procer, Levant, half the free cities, Ashur and I guess Callow should still count as Good, despite Cat.

dadycool

I'm pretty sure the Drow have been feeding off the Chain of Hunger, which is ironic to think about.

[Liliet](#)

The drow were on the other side of the Kingdom of Dead from the rats.

Keyword being "were", lol.

Earl of Purple

I thought the Empire Ever Dark's borders were with the Golden Bloom, Keter, the Kingdom Under and the Chain of Hunger?

And that the last drow raiding party seen in the human kingdoms was a century or more ago and fought the Lycaonese?

[Liliet](#)

...I need a map.

goes to get a map

...huh, you're right. I remembered it wrong.

mamm0nn

I think the elves and drow were each other's balance, the drow too are massively powerful after all and both were isolationists with problems going on inside their borders. The dwarves meanwhile are neutral, for now.

The balance is indeed too far in Good's favour nowadays, but I think the dwarves will answer that issue when the tipping point comes. They've almost ran out of areas to expand into, only the Dead King's lands being left now. And they always need more magma veins for their bound forge lava elemental thingies, forcing continuous expansion to sustain their economy and lifestyle.

I bet that the moment that Good would tip the balance on the surface too far to their side, or defeat all Evil altogether, the Good surface will suddenly face off against a now Evil underground foe that comes up to conquer for they can no longer fully sustain themselves without the surface. And the dwarves

are a whole new breed of Villains without a great many grooves for the Heroes to use.

Matthew Wells

What about the Dwarven Heroes?

mamm0nn

They seem to be more Neutral from what we've seen, like Ranger, than true Good. They're called heroes by the dwarves themselves, and dwarves liking dwarven Named isn't exactly surprising, and they don't exactly have much exchange with outsiders to counter those claims.

[TeK](#)

Poor Halram is being replaced, eh?

Shveiran

Please. Poor Hakram **fears** he's being replaced.

Not quite the same thing.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I'm guessing Black could use the Emerald Swords against Praes? Maneuver in such a way that they have to cleave through a legion or two to get to Ranger. Dunno if that's feasible but they have to be taken care of at some point, and I doubt Ranger herself would be enough. Maybe if she had a story behind her.

I'm surprised Scribe is going on the campaign with the rest of them but it's probably Cat wanting to keep an eye on her for now.

Miles

Really Ranger just has to stand with the tower between her and the emerald swords. Then whenever they go one way she goes the other and keeps the tower in the middle until the ES gets sick of it and decides to just cut through. Easy peasy.

letouriste

" The orc's face tightened a moment, but it went away almost immediately."

OK, this sentence concern me greatly 🙄
As is the fact Cat misunderstood it...

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus: "Sure, it might SEEM like women always get me in trouble, but consider this: Ranger. Ranger's a valuable ally to have whenever I have her, no downside."

Hye: "So, er, about that heritage thing I have..."

Shveiran

... My god, it really is a pattern by now, isn't it? I never even noticed.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus is like a harem protagonist, only without fetish as the purpose of the writing XD

This poor guy, I just – I just can't get over how MUCH trouble he's been gotten into by his close female acquaintances.

Only Captain kept the madness at bay, but when the world needed her most, she died...

Daniel E

Seems unlikely that Hakram will see real combat again, even after he gets his prosthetics from The Arsenal. My money is on a transition into a front & center version of Scribe. His appearance makes 'blending in' all but impossible, so he goes the other way; openly recognized as the highest level bureaucrat, a genius organizer equivalent to Juniper on the battlefield. I mean, he already is that, but now he gets a Name to further boost those talents.

JRogue

Adjutant is my absolute favorite character and I really -> REALLY<- hope that he somehow makes a return to fighting, if for no other reason than his own mental health. He is feeling like he is being pushed out and his Warlord does not need him anymore. An adjutant is a military officer who helps a commander with administrative management, and with his fighting days over, that is all he has left.

Hakram is the best and I hope he can know and feel his usefulness returned to him.

Frivolous

I feel the same way, JRogue.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Adjutant will wreck some \$#!+ Before he is done. Quote me.
He may regrow his Name, or he may Play it.

Frivolous

I just woke up, and it occurred to me that if this were a different kind of story, Catherine could assemble a band specifically to break into Malicia's vaults and steal all of her gold.

I'd pick the Affable Burglar, of course. Rogue Sorcerer would be good, too. Of the others, I'm not as sure.

I'd call them... Foundling's Five.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Ocean's 5?

Shveiran

And Malicia would play an Irritant and reveal she had a insurance agreement with Mercantis the whole time.

No, with the Dwarves!

heroessucklmao

This is the most description we've had of Scribe's appearance. I wonder if it has to do with Scribe recognizing Cat a little more as a leader?

aran

First time Scribe has let Cat perceive her face... maybe she's lessening the effect now that she's officially working for Cat?

[aran](#)

"Lots of ogres in charge now," Indrani mused, narrowing in on the same detail. "Isn't the last Marshal one too?"

But Grem is an orc, not an ogre. Right? I'm not sure how to read this.

kinghaart

Nim is an ogre and would be the last Marshall if Grem wasn't still alive, that's all. Grem is indeed an orc.

[aran](#)

Very confused at how this seems to contradict what Cat did in Liesse. When she de-souled Ghassan (and threatened to do the same to Hawulti and Fasili), it was implied that this would

effectively be irreversible and fatal. She promised to “destroy [the stone] ... and let [Ghassan] go to the Underworld”, implying that Ghassan’s consciousness would not be in his body, and would never return there – otherwise she would be able to hold his soul hostage, much like Malicia is now doing to Sargon.

But this “soulboxing” seems to leave Sargon still conscious and able to act, or he wouldn’t be able to try to steal his soul back. Is there a magical connection between the soulbox and his body that allows him to remote-control his body even though he’s not in it?

kinghaart

Akua separated her soul too, it seems like it’s a risk to do but doesn’t outright change the connection between it and the body.

I get the sense that the soul isn’t a conscious thing in APGtE, but rather like a pseudo-limb – either you have one or you don’t.

Chapter 52: Sortie

“Swift wars are long in the making.”

– Stygian Proverb

The army set out from Neustal on a warm, sunny morning.

I’d been up since before dawn, when our outriders had set out – the Osenia and Volignac light horse – so I was well into my day when the columns got moving. The Dominion forces of Razin and Aquiline served as our vanguard, an ‘honour’ they’d asked for and few had cared to contest. Given how light on their feet Levant infantry could be, raiders at heart that they were, my main concern had been that they’d get too far ahead of the rest of the army. To ensure otherwise I’d put General Hune and her Second Army behind them, since the lordlings were likely to curb their enthusiasm if they were leaving her in the dust.

Behind the Second I put our Alamans forces, the veteran Volignac army and the fantassin companies Princess Beatrice had picked in my name. With the Firstborn under my Lord of Silent Steps behind them, they made up the ‘centre’ of our army on the march. At night I’d let the drow loose on my enemies, but during day

marches they needed to be protected. While beyond the drowsiness around dawn the Firstborn weren't *harmed* by daylight, it really was a waste to have them fighting by day considering how much more effective they were by night.

Our rearguard would be the Third Army under General Abigail: if there was anyone likely to see an ambush coming a mile away and leave no stone unturned looking for it, it was my sole Callowan general.

The Proceran troops were still filing out of the front gate in a semblance of good order – it looked like Princess Beatrice had spread out her own infantry between fantassin companies, using the rhythmic pace-setting of her drummers in an attempt at setting a marching beat for all Alamans soldiery – under my watchful eye when Hakram came to see me. Not in the stronghold as I'd claimed one of the watchtowers overlooking the trenches, half a mile away from Neustal, as a temporary base while the army got moving. It was a good vantage, and I'd been killing time talking with Pickler when Adjutant arrived.

There was no real way for him to come up, considering the top of the watchtower was accessible only by ladder, so I wove myself a few solid tendrils of Night. I anchored them to the edge of the tower rampart and went over the edge, guiding them to gently lower me in a landing before the orc. The sight was common enough that my escort – knights of the Broken Bells – did not even visibly react. Night was a lot less eldritch a power to their eyes, these days. People could get used to anything if it happened regularly enough.

"Catherine," Hakram greeted me. "Here are the last dispatches before we leave."

He offered me a few parchments with his skeleton hand and I took them. I noticed the Apprentice wasn't around, even though he'd ended up accepting her presence as a helper. He must have left her behind for the trip.

"Thanks," I replied, folding them open one after another.

The first was ordinary diplomacy: well wishes from Hasenbach and the Highest Assembly in our offensive. The second slightly more important, word from the Iron Prince that the dead had begun testing his army with large-scale night raids as it went up the mining roads. So far his pickets had caught them in time, but Prince Klaus believed it likely that his preparedness for a battle was being measured. That was promising, considering we quite wanted the undead army holed up in Juvelun to come out and fight him.

The last might be the most important of the three, though it was by far the least ornate. Just two sentences scribbled in a

familiar handwriting: *It went well, the work has begun. I am on my way.* I allowed myself a thin smile. Good, that was a load off my back. I passed the parchments back to Adjutant.

"We've sent word to Papenheim we're on the move, right?" I suddenly asked.

"I handled it this morning, as soon as the first soldier walked out the gate," he agreed.

Thank the Gods he'd handled that, it'd entirely slipped my mind. Looking at him I began to speak then closed abruptly closed my mouth. My conversation with Vivienne last night had been fruitful, including her finding a candidate for talks with General Sacker – the steward I'd left to rule Marchford in my name, who was both minor nobility and fluent in Mtethwa as well as familiar with goblins from the tribe settled in my holdings – and suggesting the Jacks begin infiltrating the deserters' camp. The part that'd surprised me, though, was that she'd also been in favour of arms sales to the orc clans rebelling in the Steppes.

She'd even urged me to discuss the matter more in depth with Hakram instead of dismissing it as I had, something that'd weighed on my mind since. Vivienne might not have stated it outright, but there'd been more than politics behind that piece of advice. Was now really the time, though, just as our offensive was beginning? *If I don't make the time, I'll never have it*, I chided myself.

"Adjutant," I said. "When we discussed our options in the Wasteland, yesterday-"

"The decision was made," Hakram calmly cut in. "There is no need to revisit it."

"Maybe there is," I said. "Put in an hour for it tonight, in my schedule. Give me an idea what the monetary costs might be of selling or sending armaments."

His eyes narrowed.

"Vivienne is meddling," the orc gravelled.

It wasn't a question.

"She made a suggestion," I shrugged. "I found worth in it."

His face grew very hard to read for a moment.

"Pity is a poor basis for a queen's decisions," Adjutant stiffly said.

"That's not what this is," I sharply said.

"Have your reasons for choosing differently yesterday become any less true?" Adjutant said. "No. Nothing has changed, save that you spoke with Vivienne."

"I'm not saying I'll do it," I bit out, "I'm saying I might have dismissed the possibility too quickly, and I want to know more about what would be involved."

I was trying to stay calm, but it was like he was *trying* to put the worst interpretation possible to anything I tried. I'd had to deal with that from others, but coming from Hakram of all – I made myself breathe out. That was kind of the problem, wasn't it? I wasn't used to this from Hakram because he'd always made it easy for me. Having this conversation with someone else wouldn't have felt nearly as grating. I was not sure I liked what that said about either me or him. He studied me, face once again unreadable.

"I'll see to it," Adjutant said. "I have two subordinates in the adjunct secretariat capable of making the proposal skilfully. They can handle the matter."

The tone had gotten challenging by the end of the last sentence. The unspoken part was easy enough to parse: *if this is a legitimate interest, it won't matter I'm not the one doing the talking*. And if it wasn't a legitimate interest, then he wanted nothing to do with it. I forced myself to remain expressionless and nodded in agreement.

"Is there anything else?" Adjutant asked.

"No," I quietly replied. "You can go."

I shouldn't have listened to Vivienne, I thought. This path was a dead end. I couldn't use the authority of the queen to fix the troubles of the woman. I clenched my fingers as he wheeled away downslope, towards the two phalanges waiting to help him into the litter he used to get around where the chair wouldn't work. It was not a pleasant, realizing that I had no idea how to even begin to mend this. *If it can be mended at all*, a treacherous voice whispered in the back of my mind. No amount of gestures would grow his limbs back or change that he'd lost them in my service.

Forcing a calm expression back on my face – people were watching, people were *always* watching – I pulled on Night and went back up the watchtower. I still had a war to fight, and it cared nothing for my worries.

—

By Noon Bell we were all on the road and the first reports from the outriders were trickling back in.

I'd abandoned the watchtower as soon as the drow were out of Neustal, instead taking Zombie on a ride and joining the Second Army. Morale in the ranks was high, though considering the backbone of the Second had been with me since before the Tenth Crusade I'd expected as much. I traded jokes and wild boasts with soldiers as I rode at their side, a Taghreb sergeant startling a laugh out of me when he confessed he'd promised his wife a mansion in Keter after the war – his fellows jeered it was why he was still here, afraid to come home and face her displeasure at failing to deliver – but eventually moved to ride at General Hune's side.

The ogre was not one for small talk but I hardly minded. She wasn't Juniper or Aisha, I had no good old days to get misty over when it came to Hune Egelsdottir. In a way it was refreshing, the simple clarity of our relationship: queen and subordinate, nothing more or less. It was with her I entertained the first reports from the outriders. The Volignac horsemen had gone east and west, since as natives to these lands they knew the grounds better, while the Osenas had been sent straight ahead up Julianne's Highway. The benefits of the road ensured the latter came back first even if they'd gone further out.

There were few dead ahead, they'd told me. Three different warbands of maybe a hundred skeletons had been glimpsed about two hours of riding ahead, but no larger force. A band of two hundred riders under a cousin of Lady Aquiline had decided to forge further ahead to see how far he could go before encountering resistance, though only after swearing once more to obey my orders against skirmishing: he'd turn back the moment fighting became inevitable. The Beastmaster had kept going with him, so I was likely to get a good look ahead out of the venture. The Volignac scouts returned later and with uneven timing, bearing equally uneven news.

To the west the lowlands seemed empty save for small undead warbands like the Osenas outriders had seen, though there'd been half a dozen instead there instead of a mere three. The Hainaut lowlands were full of small hills and dips, though, and the Dead King a patient foe: it was a favourite trick of his to hide small bands like these and then suddenly assemble them in a larger army to hit a weak point in our defences. This time, though, the threat seemed to be coming from the east. A Volignac captain reported seeing a force of two thousand undead, mostly skeletons and Binds with a few ghouls, wandering to our northeast.

"Most likely a force meant to ambush one of our patrols," General Hune rumbled, and I agreed.

In a way that was a good sign: the detachment wouldn't be out here if Neshamah knew we were coming, as with our numbers and equipment we could easily smash it with paltry casualties. The

Dead King was not so wasteful as to throw away two thousand for no gain, profligate as he was with bodies. I asked the captain if the undead had seen his riders.

"I do not believe so," the mustachioed man replied, "but the Enemy is a cunning foe, Your Majesty. I cannot be certain."

I wanted the Dead King unaware of our march as long as possible, even though it'd been impossible to hide that we were gathering troops in Neustal. Part of the reason the army under the Iron Prince had begun to march a week before us was to draw the enemy's attention, after all. The trouble was that the Hidden Horror could see through the eyes of his undead, and the moment he got a look at the army marching up Julianne's Highway he was going to send his closest army to halt our advance at the natural pass called Lauzon's Hollow.

We wanted that to happen, as if that army wasn't drawn forward our surprise strike at the Cigelin Sisters behind it would likely fail, but we wanted it to happen as late as possible. We didn't know exactly what Neshamah had in reserve, so if he had too long to prepare a response it wasn't impossible for him to fortify both Cigelin and the Hollow. That wouldn't necessarily make it impossible for us to win, but it would make that victory... costly, to say the least.

Fortunately we'd established Neshamah could only 'see' through one corpse at a time, as it required a focus of his attention. But the Arsenal – more specifically the Repentant Magister and Hunted Magician – had also proven there was a working seeded inside Binds and Revenants that allowed them to 'call' for the attention of their master if they believed it warranted. So the tightrope to walk now was how we could wipe out that force of two thousand undead to our northeast *without* prompting them to tattle to their master. If we sent too large a force they were sure to do so, and if our heavy hitters – Akua or myself – went out personally the result would be the same.

We couldn't just ignore it, though, since with Binds in command they were sure to scout in our direction sooner or later. A pack of zombies or bones could be counted to display staggering stupidity, but Binds could actually think. There was a reason it was standard Grand Alliance tactics to target them first if we could find them among the horde.

"If we wait after nightfall the drow can wipe them out cleanly," General Hune suggested.

"That's rolling the dice," I replied. "There's no guarantee they'll wait that long to move towards us, and half the day still lies ahead."

The undead did favour night fighting when they had the choice and Binds around to make it, since unlike humans the necromancy that allowed them to see was not particularly affected by the dark, but it was hardly a rule. So far the Dead King should not have been alerted to our advance, as riders on the distance were hardly anything new. The Grand Alliance fielded regular mounted forays into the territory he held. Yet there was always the change he'd notice that a lot of his warbands had seen quite a cumulatively large amount of outriders today. There was no way to tell if that was the case, though, so no real point in worrying about it.

"A Dominion raid, then?" Hune said.

Could work, I mused. The Osenia elites, the slayers, they were skilled at ambushes. And with one of Razin's kin having died in ambush recently, Keter might even buy this was just a vengeance raid if we added some of his warriors to the force sent out. It thinned our vanguard, though, which I didn't like even if the road ahead was supposedly bare. I had other tools to use, though.

"We've got raiders of our own," I replied. "Send for Special Tribune Robber, would you? And Sapper-General Pickler as well."

Robber's band of marauders was still a mere cohort of two hundred, though the audacity of his raids with them meant few of the goblins in it were the same as when he'd first been given the command. I wouldn't send him alone against two thousand undead, though, especially given that ghouls were just as quick on the feet as goblins and a lot meaner in a fight. It was time we gave Pickler's new copperstone ballistas a proper trial in the field – which Neshamah should buy as a reason for a raid north, if he ended up looking in – but to add a bit of muscle I'd throw in regulars backed by Levantines.

They'd get pissy about honour otherwise, so I might as well borrow a warband of two hundred Osenia slayers as well as an escort for the engines in the form of a cohort of regulars from the Army of Callow. That'd mean around nine hundred soldiers, which I was comfortable sending out considering they were drawn from several parts of my column instead of thinning out one in particular.

I spoke to my goblins first, Robber proving eager for the task and Pickler insisting on going along with her ballistas. I couldn't deny having her there would be useful when it came to assessing their performance, so I allowed it. Hune detached a cohort of regulars and briefed them herself while I went to the Levantines. Aquiline proved flattered that I would call on her elites in particular, which meant she was disinclined to argue when I requested her officers heed the instructions of the senior Army officer on the field – in theory Pickler, though in practice

it'd be Robber. The forces were mustered within an hour, my Special Tribune running off ahead to pick his grounds.

Eventually the rest of the forces mobilized set out east after him and I stayed seated on Zombie, resisting to urge to ride her up in the sky and have a quick look. I had another ride with the ranks just to distract me with the urge. I missed fighting, I could admit it to myself. I'd learned to use other means, as violence had so rarely been enough to get me through the kind of messes I stumbled into, but there'd always been something viscerally satisfying about smashing your enemy personally. Instead I had to wait like a decorative lump as Noon Bell slowly crawled towards Afternoon Bell, receiving continuing outrider reports and waiting for news of the skirmish in the northeast.

Robber came back half an hour before Afternoon Bell, dusty but flushed with preening malice, and I knew it'd gone well before the little shit even opened his mouth.

"They fell for it, Boss, like Alamans told there's a wine cellar at the bottom of the well," my Special Tribune cackled.

It'd gone off without a hitch, he explained. His raiders had harassed the dead by snipping at their flanks with a few ambushes, then fled into their chosen killing grounds as the enemy ghouls pursued. The Osenia slayers hidden along the paths had scythed through the ghouls like wet parchment, then joined the flight with just enough of a delay that the commanding Binds were tempted into committing the entire force to pursuit. That brought them to flat grounds where Pickler's waiting ballistas pounded them to smoldering dust with their copperstone munitions. The regulars came forward to prevent the dead from leaving the flat grounds, hitting from the front while the slayers and goblins turned to hit the flanks.

It'd been a massacre.

Maybe two hundred skeletons led by the last Bind had fled but they were being pursued even now and bones were slower on the feet than even tired goblins. The entire affair had cost us fewer than forty casualties, making it a remarkably one-sided beating. When word spread through the ranks, I thought, it would raise morale significantly. There was nothing like an early win to make soldiers eager for further battles.

"I guess you get to eat with people instead of the horses this week, then," I mused. "Congratulations on the victory, Robber."

"I was going to what now?" the Special Tribune said, sounding alarmed.

"Don't worry about it," I winked. "I'm sure your right to eat anything other than oats is not at all contingent on bringing me more victories."

I winked again, just to piss him off, and ignored his increasingly loud attempts to question me over what he'd done to warrant this treatment. Verbally stepping on him put me in as good of a mood as the victory itself. It really was the little things in life, wasn't it? I didn't bother sending someone to ask Pickler for a report on the performance of the copperstones, as to be frank I'd be getting one whether I wanted to or not. The smile stayed with me until I got a visit from the Silver Huntress.

"There are dead on the horizon, Your Majesty," the Huntress said in that startlingly girlish voice of hers.

I cocked a brow. Like Indrani she had an aspect related to sight over long distances, but I'd kept the two of them close to the van to sniff out ambushes instead of sending them out too far. For the first day, at least, I considered that a better use. So how had she seen something no other Named – or myself – had?

"You saw them?" I asked.

"Word from Beastmaster," Alexis replied, shaking her head. "He sent a falcon."

"Ah," I hummed. "In that case, if you'd elaborate?"

She pointed a finger upwards. To the sky. *Shit.*

"Buzzards or vulture?" I asked.

The former weren't much of an issue, just large undead birds the Dead King liked to use as scouts. A 'vulture' was a necromantic construct, though, and though much smaller than a wyrm we'd seen a lot more of those on the Hainaut front. For their size – none was smaller than a house – they were damned quick, and hard to put down. Usually Keter used them to pick off patrols or strike behind our defensive lines, but on occasion they could serve as a sort of heavily armoured scout.

"One vulture," the Huntress said, "with a flock of buzzards around it. Headed straight towards us down Julianne's Highway, he says."

And there went my good mood. The Dead King *had* noticed something was up, then, and he wanted to confirm the nature of threat with eyes up in the sky. I closed my eyes and thought. Those couldn't be allowed to come too close, but at least the Huntress had warned us with time to spare. If we smashed the flock and vulture we'd still keep Keter from having direct eyes on us. Our overall

campaign plan wasn't threatened, I thought. Even if the Hidden Horror knew my force was going up the highway, it wouldn't take away the strategic threat that was Prince Klaus' host taking Malmedit out east and collapsing the tunnels there.

Now that Neshamah had caught on to my own army's advance, though it was effectively impossible to beat his own force to Lauzon's Hollow. The force Keter had stationed between Cigelin and the Hollow was under a hundred thousand, we believed, but it was a mere three days' march between those two fortresses and the dead could walk through the night. It'd take them a day at most to move to one to the other from their current camp, hence why I'd wanted surprise on our side: even after today's march, our quickest possible pace on Creation would take us another six days getting to Lauzon's Hollow.

That was not truly a setback: that Keter would find my army had been a given, even if this was *much* quicker than I preferred. You couldn't walk seventy thousand people up a road and expect them to go unseen. By swatting the birds out of the sky we could still keep our numbers somewhat obscured, anyway. And strategically speaking my entire army was bait, in a sense, since the first blow in the offensive would actually come from our reserve sallying from the Twilight Ways and taking the Cigelin Sisters while my host drew the defensive army into Lauzon's Hollow.

Nothing had truly been lost, I knew, save that the Hidden Horror had more time to prepare his defences than I'd wanted to give him. So why did I feel so uneasy?

"Go find the Summoner," I finally said, opening my eyes. "And tell him I have need of his services: something that can fly and carry two people."

The Silver Huntress slowly nodded.

"Am I to go with him and destroy the dead?" she asked.

She seemed rather pleased at the thought of combat, if not the company.

"Not alone," I replied. "They'd see you coming from miles away and scatter."

She cocked her head to the side, waiting for me to continue speaking, and I was startled with how closely it resembled the way Archer did it.

"I'll be going as well, to weave an illusion that'll hide us," I said. "Archer will share my mount."

If the Dead King was going to learn something was headed his way no matter what, I grimly thought, I might as well give him something to *really* worry about.

—

All my affairs had been packed off for the road, so I had no tent to use.

I rode up to one of two wagons holding my affairs, though, and asked the phalange handling the reins to slow for a bit. I made my way inside, waking the magelight and going through my clothes. I no longer wore plate, these days, but I'd not forgotten my growing fragility: I dug out a plain steel breastplate and a helmet from a coffer. The helm was a nice bit of smithing, open-faced in the legionary manner but worked to have subtle golden inlays above my head evoking a crown. It'd also been forged to accommodate a ponytail, since I wasn't going to be fighting anyone with loose hair.

The wagon was shaky even at the reduced pace and armour was always tricky to put on alone, so I waited for Indrani join me — I'd sent for her before coming here — and instead grabbed something else from the coffer: a sword belt, with a sheathed blade on it. I slid the goblin steel out an inch, fingers tightening around the longsword's grip. Well-weighted, made especially for me. I'd refused a sword once, in Liesse-Become-Twilight, and I would not walk back that choice. But this was war, and sometimes a staff and a prayer were not enough. I slid it back into the sheath and was tightening the belt around my hips when Indrani entered.

She cocked a brow at the sight.

"So it's a fight, then," Archer grinned.

"Help me put my armour on," I replied after hesitating a beat.

I'd almost not gotten the words out. It was not her, who usually helped me with this. Perhaps sensing she was treading tender grounds, Indrani was efficient about it. The breastplate settled comfortably over my torso, and after I tightened the clasps on my helmet she made sure the ponytail went out through the proper furrow at the back of my neck.

"War boots," Indrani reminded me after.

I'd still been debating that, as it happened. I'd never been a splendid rider and I was more comfortable in the saddle without steel on my boots, but then Zombie was not a difficult mount. Might as well. I sat on a trunk and reached into the pack by the side of it, only to freeze in surprised. There were my old campaign boots there, those I'd been dragging with me since I'd

emerged from the Everdark, but also another pair. New, by the look of the leather, but pressing on them with my hands it was clear they'd been broken in. *Scribe*, I thought. It'd been idle talk when I'd mentioned the detail to her, but details were her trade.

"Cat?" Indrani asked.

They were just boots, I told myself. And still I took the old ones.

"Give me a moment," I replied. "As soon as we've got these on, we'll gather our war party and head out."

—

The Summoner was a backbiting, entitled prick but he did have a lot of combat utility.

Masego had been fascinated by his magic — said the man had, in a sense, failed so badly at both diabolism and fae-binding that he'd ended up making something entirely different from both — but also added it'd be effectively impossible for anyone but a dedicated apprentice to learn, so the man had stayed on the front instead of heading to the Arsenal. His 'summoning' was effectively shaping creatures out of magic that had limited sentience, with those summoned repeatedly gaining greater substance and intelligence as they 'hardened'.

It didn't sound like much, until you realized that given access to enough time and magic the man could make effectively any kind of creature he could think of. We'd later learned he had limits to the quantity of magic he could actually sink into a summoning, which did set a ceiling to the possible size of the summoned creature. His bigger ones tended to be highly unstable, too, so it was often better to aim below the ceiling and end up with something of better quality. Considering the man was whiny and grasping but not particularly violent, I might have ended up halfway fond of the Summoner if he'd not also kept insisting he was Callowan. What he *actually* was, though, was the son of a nobleman gone into exile and a Proceran lady. He'd never even set foot in Callow.

All his hinting that as a Callowan villain he should be my favourite achieved was increasingly strain my patience. Today, though, I had good reason to cut through the stupidity without coming across as overly high-handed. His summon, a wyvern-like creature without scales and imbued of a ghostly glow, was eerily. Not one he'd used often, then. I cast a curious look at it, then at the villain who'd crafted it and the Silver Huntress by his side. I reined in Zombie by their side, Archer in the saddle behind me. She waved at the Silver Huntress, whose face tightened in reply, and I elbowed her sharply.

It didn't do shit through her mail, but the message was received anyway,

"Your Majesty," the Summoner smiled. "I am pleased that you found use in my-"

"There will be time for courtesies later, Summoner," I said. "The enemy is on the move, and we do not have the time to spare. I need you and Lady Alexis on the back of your creation, and close to me: I will weave an illusion with Night that will obscure our approach."

Indrani snickered behind me, not all that subtly, but the look on my face clearly did not brook argument. They climbed the creature, the Summoner nestling close to the neck and the Silver Huntress further back. Zombie eyed the other mount involved with disdain, horrible little snob that she was. I spurred her to get closer and she obeyed even as I began to pull heavily on the Night.

"I have tread black stone and halls grown cold, freed of restraint by the blessing of my patron," I murmured in Crepuscular, weaving the Night around us, "Though feeble, I have devoured might. Though listless, I have stolen the wind. I call on you, Andronike, to veil eyes and ears so that I might triumph in your name."

The Night pulsed with approval, and I felt a breath around the back of my neck as the eldest of the Sisters leant her touch to the blessing. The air in a wide sphere around us, at least forty feet in diameter, grew hazy and smoky. The Summoner let out a little gasp.

"Stay close and don't leave the sphere," I ordered. "It won't last forever, so let's get moving."

Zombie's wings opened with a flourish, the wyvern-thing hastily imitating her, and with a gallop she began our rise upwards into the afternoon sky.

[Javvies](#)

Well, that's unfortunate.

Trouble with the Cat/Hakram relationship. That's a problem. Send there's no good way to heal it.

Born to a Callowan expat and a Proceran noblewoman and raised in Procer does not make you a true Callowan, Summoner.

dadycoool

Depending on the circumstances of the expat's departure, Summoner's pedigree might even work against him.

NerfGlaistigUaine

He's also the son of a nobleman which is a point against him with Cat

Cicero

It's a bit unfair to the Summoner, as he at least appears to personally identify as Callowan, which ought to count for something.

Unfortunately his constant harping on that fact is a habit that is more Proceran than Callowan, and thus aggravates other Callowans, as the habit clearly comes across as foreign.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm wondering if she shouldn't be leaning in the other direction. Get impatient with Hakram. Don't be all gentle and understanding with him, get him the trainers and the legs and insist he needs to get off his ass and be back at her side. Scribe can sign paperwork now, let her bring them messages on the field. Be firm and expectant that he'll get back to it, and perhaps he'll STAND as required.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, if Cat *wanted* him back in the field fighting there wouldn't BE a problem.

But Cat has always been more protective of her retinue than many of them – Hakam in particular – appreciate.

Miles

Not just an expat. Exile is worse. It means he wasn't welcome.

Given the number of times he's been mentioned and the similar metanarrative pattern to Abigail's introduction, it'll probably turn out that the reason for the exile was actually something that Cat would see as a positive thing and he'll eventually get to be in charge of some of the villains who are ok with him being in charge of them. Or he'll be a massive traitorface.

Sir Nil

The summoner was so bad at magic he created an entirely new branch of it that was only suited for him? That's actually impressive in a way. In a stupid, cartoon villain way.

Mental Mouse

That's Name shenanigans for you...

Sir Nil

I'll make my own magic! With blackjack and hookers!
– The Summoner, probably.

Miles

In fact, forget the magic!

Miles

It's kind of too bad nobody is interested in getting him an apprentice. After the techniques have been passed down once or twice this could become a whole new, Callowan, branch of magic.

One that involves just pretending there's an entire lake sitting in the air above your enemies and then everyone looks up and jey look, a lake!

Mental Mouse

No time for that now, but if he lives through the war it might happen.

Big Brother

Oh, that prayer sent shivers down my back.

"I have tread black stone and halls grown cold, freed of restraint by the blessing of my patron," I murmured in Crepuscular, weaving the Night around us, "Though feeble, I have devoured might. Though listless, I have stolen the wind. I call on you, Andronike, to veil eyes and ears so that I might triumph in your name."

I love near-blasphemous individuals able to still use (un)holy magic through prayer.

Shaerick 68

Cat being on the precipice of a new name, her dreams of falling, and her bad feeling of something about to go wrong has me thinking the next few chapters are gonna be big, especially considering the best place to fall is from the sky.

Shaerick 68

This was not meant to be a reply to you, my apologies. This website is kinda jank on mobile.

Miles

The unfallen dark priestess

Miles

I was so sure I'd see this link in there somewhere.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Burlyraven

Hakram's falling into the common problem of the newly handicapped and seeing pity in every helping hand. That's not to say that pity didn't play more of a role than it should have in Cat's decision to speak with him, but at this rate, it's very likely that his Name snaps at the strain that both he and she are putting on it. He needs to understand that he still has purpose if he wants it, and she needs to let him have that purpose.

dadycool

I wonder if his other aspects will fade like Stand did as he becomes more and more convinced of his own uselessness. Without half his body and Scribe doing a really good job as Cat's secretary, he could very well gain a new name. Maybe it'll be mated to Cat's the way Adjutant was, especially if the timing matches up again.

Cold Cyberia

Hakram uses Find to discover his new Role and purpose. It's super effective! 😊

mamm0nn

If he feels useless, it's more likely that he loses his Name like Vivienne did rather than change into a different one. If there's no conviction, the life breath of Named, then he will only lessen until there's no Name left.

dadycool

Oh, I really hope he doesn't just waste away then. It's a vicious cycle, feeling useless, which makes you less capable, which makes you feel more useless,...Something better snap him out of it, fast. Maybe Cat getting tossed off a cliff/rooftop?

Miles

The more I think about this the more convinced I am he's gonna die soon. He's slowly becoming the kind of burden that drains their friends and while none of them would willingly let him go, they'll all feel relief and guilt over that relief when he's gone. Unless he turns this around and starts being his own person again. He's not so far gone that there's no hope yet.

Burlyraven

Since this book is meant to be the climactic end to the overarching story, I place money on him having one last rally in him (even Villains get those). Whether it's a last stand or a full re-assertion of his role is a different question completely.

Alexander Knight

And to everyone who commented on the boots thing, of course we were correct

dadycoool

Heh, of course she got the boots. It does hit hard that, for basically the first time ever, she doesn't have Hakram dressing her. This Army on the March chapter was fun to read.

Djinn O'Cide

Go. Vote. <http://topwebfiction.com/?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Liliet

THIS LINK DOESN'T ACTUALLY VOTE

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Black Spiral Dancer

And so it starts!

Xinci

So he basically made devils but made them of his own concepts, presumably anchored to Creation. Masego already noted that all of the building blocks are the same, so it is interesting to see someone else using them with their own rule set and seeing why certain limits may exist. So fairly similar to Cats winter summons they become more as they get exposed to more stimuli. Looks sorta like another microcosmic test, this time, the microcosm being of the hell's generation system.

Juff

Typo Thread:

second slightly > second was slightly
closed abruptly closed > abruptly closed
Mtethwa > Mthethwa
not a pleasant > not pleasant
instead there instead > there instead
dips, though, (there's another though in the next sentence, so
might want to remove this one)
always the change > always the chance
resisting to urge > resisting the urge
out ambushed > out ambushes
nature of threat > nature of the threat
advance, though > advance, though,
move to one > move one
Indrani join > Indrani to join
in surprised > in surprise
increasingly strain > increasingly straining
was eerily (missing word)
around us, "Though > around us. "Though

Wonder

Why doesn't Cat craft more "a sword that isn't a sword but a
prayer and more of the Night Sink she asked Akua to create in the
previous book?
They turned out to be very valuable.

Scavion

Secret weapons/Trump Cards and stories don't work as well the
second time. Especially in the Guideverse where they are
practically guaranteed to work the first time.

[Estelulu](#)

I forget, but is it pronounced Proker or Procher?

fonne

Most likely soft c, Procer seems to be an analogue of Holy
Roman Empire and their official language is Chantant, aka
fantasy French.

[Estelulu](#)

Oh, I figured the name would be read in Latin, but you make a
good point.

Miles

Hmm so then the R's would be soft rolled in the throat, as the Germanic languages do, and the word ends in "air"? Or I guess "aigr" since that's an r.

MrMaturity

I read it as pro-sir

Konstantin von Karstein

Same for me

Morgenstern

"pro" as in "pro-nounced" and "cer" as in "sau-cer", is what I read it as.

Abrakadabra

I go with proser myself.

ApparentlyAlvin

I think at one point (can't recall the chapter) Ivah pronounces it phonetically as "Prokker".

Alessandro Ussia

I read it Procher, but it does make more sense to read it French-like now that other have mentioned it.

Miles

I always took it as rhyming with "Bra sir."

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Chances that this is a trap? A lot of focus was put on the preparation to take off and there's Cat's premonition too. It's a bit early to get a wrench in the plan but she should've taken a fifth Named, just in case.

thearpox23

A fifth name doesn't make a party of five. You need appropriate bonds as well as roles between people for that.

And if Cat were to make her party here it wouldn't just be a one-off. She'd be giving important information to the dead king about her future capabilities for the price of a vulture and some trash mobs.

I don't know if what Cat done here is a mistake or not, but overloading on names for a minor scouting trip isn't the answer.

Big I

If Summoners “summoning” is actually creating things, why is he wasting his time with creatures? He should be making people. Warriors, servants, advisors, etc. The best minions are always the ones you make yourself.

Darkening

Because the main evolutionary advantage of humans is that they're smart, which his summons aren't. If he wanted human drones he'd be a necromancer or a mind controller. He wants big nasty monsters to tear people apart whenever he has a temper tantrum.

Big I

They get smarter the more they're summoned though (“hardened”).

[vernal.ancient](#)

True, but they start getting unstable once they come close to their hardest level, so humans or human-like creatures probably aren't worth the effort; he'd have to dismiss them right when they start getting useful. Creatures that are naturally dumber but have a lot more muscle are more useful for his circumstances

Lady Serpentine

That's not what it said. Think of it like this:

Summoner has a balloon. Creating something is like adding water to that balloon: Once you pass a certain point, the balloon gets more and more likely to burst.

Hardening is like if every time you filled the balloon to make something you've made before, you use a little bit of wine instead of some of the water. It doesn't put more stress on the balloon, it's just qualitatively distinct from pure water. Since you replace a bit more water every time, you eventually end up with nothing but wine in your balloon. Although if the upper limit for how hard something can get is sufficiently high, you might end up continuing this process for several more steps; say, going from wine to aragh and then ending up with orcish liquor in your balloon.

Matthew Wells

No, they get unstable when they use too much magic in one summoning, they harden through repeated summons.

I think it's more likely just that their maximum intelligence still isn't sapient.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Just checked back, and yep, you're right about the instability

nick012000

Counterpoint: He could totally make himself a Stand if he wanted to.

Letouriste

So his summons are not really summons but creations of his own mind? it's interesting.

i'm confident Hakram will manage to overcome this in a way

flashburn283

This seems like it is going to end up being 30 Corps advance from Market Garden

[vernal.ancient](#)

Only tangentially related, but the plan as a whole feels like a sort of reverse Market Garden. IRL, a highly mobile force was used to prepare the way for a less mobile main force; here, the less mobile main force is being used to create an opening for the more mobile force to strike. IDK, it's a bit of a stretch now I write it out

mamm0nn

Our rearguard would be the Third Army under General Abigail: if there was anyone likely to see an ambush coming a mile away and leave no stone unturned looking for it, it was my sole Callowan general.

Okay, that got a genuine laugh out of me. Especially after imagining the Dead King strategising and choosing not to attack the rear because the mysterious and unpredictable Abigail watches over it.

Daniel E

lol yes. Despite the relative downer that was the bit with Hakram, the mention of Abigail always makes me grin. That poor girl has a never-ending streak of 'wrong place, right time'.

[Liliet](#)

Oh no, Cat, Hakram)=

To Cat, this is about herself – Hakram getting crippled in her service is HER failing. The fault of her service, the fault in the system of him serving her.

To Hakram, it's the other way around: him getting crippled is HIS failing, and that it happened in Catherine's service is the only silver lining.

And they're both too far up their own asses about it – I say that lovingly, this is a pretty valid thing to be in Strong Distress over – to notice the other's position.

Shaerick 68

Cat being on the precipice of a new name, her dreams of falling, and her bad feeling of something about to go wrong has me thinking the next few chapters are gonna be big, especially considering the best place to fall is from the sky.

jckattck

Is nobody else worried that Cat's TRUSTED LIEUTENANT is becoming embittered and is having even his non-combat role appropriated by the Scribe? I believe there are a couple of Heroic Axioms that are just itching to be applied here.

Chapter 53: Joust

"War, that most glorious of horrors."

-Bastien de Hauteville, Proceran general

Keeping pace turned out to be pretty tricky.

Zombie's wings weren't actually what allowed her to fly, since they were nowhere strong enough to actually lift a horse her size – much less with two riders on her back – but Masego had never actually been able to give me a clear answer about what exactly *did* allow her to fly. There'd been a lot of talk about natural domains and the inherent structural differences of the fae, but the bottom line was that he couldn't really explain it. There was at least *some* grounding in Creational laws, though, since Zombie did use the wings to steer around and adjust her flight. It made her flight pleasing to the eye, an extraordinary thing but not unnatural to behold.

The Summoner's creature was his own work, on the other hand, and not a being stolen from Arcadia. It was his own craftsmanship on display and it hardly equal to even a lesser god's, to say nothing of Above and Below. His wyvern-thing's wings moved, but the advance of the creature itself was jerky and only tangentially related to the way they batted. If anything the sight brought to mind the way I'd used to shape footholds out of ice in fights, if said footholds had then been forcefully dragged forward by magic. The flight was largely stable, though, and the Silver Huntress had a lot more room to stand at the back than Archer did on my own mount.

I suspected frequent use of this construct would make it more 'natural', as if the repeating conflict between magic made flesh and Creation was grinding the shape down into a compromise appeasing both.

For now, though, my main concern was ensuing that when the wyvern-thing pulled forward it did not take the other two Named out of my Night-working. If they left the illusion, our enemy was likely to scatter into every direction: it'd be impossible to stop them from flying over the column then, we just didn't have the flyers for it. The sun was eating away at the illusion, slowly but surely, but I'd woven it with the personal blessing and attention of the eldest of the Sisters: it'd hold until I no longer needed it. Which promised to be soon, as the enemy's shapes grew from blots on the horizon to discernable silhouettes.

Leaning forward against Zombie's mane as Indrani's arm around my belly loosened to let me, I began to count to the smaller undead birds. The buzzards had been raised from the remains of birds, it was visibly true with each, but they'd not all been of the same size and so Keteran necromancers had expanded the frames of those who'd been too small. Made of bare bone and 'feathers' of dead wood framed with dulled copper, they were quicker and tougher than the actual dead birds the Dead King occasionally threw at us in flocks. I found thirteen, taking my time to find them all. None strayed far from the fat construct between them, the *vulture*.

At least a dozen feet tall, all bristling bones and thick folds of dead animal skin, the abomination watched the world with too-large wet red eyes: old blood long gone sour, made into something farsighted by ugly rituals. Its large and leathery wings beat the air, not quite hiding the rows of insect-like segmented legs under it. Each ended in a long spike of steel, which the construct could strike forcefully enough with to punch through plate – I'd seen it run straight through a knight, once, and toss her away like a ragdoll as the horse panicked. It was the 'bald' patch atop the head, where plaques of iron had been nailed into the skull to protect it from easy shattering, that'd earned the creature the sobriquet of 'vulture'. It was no wyrm, capable of

tearing through an entire battalion in moments when catching it unawares, but vultures were no laughing matter.

"Thirteen buzzards," I called out. "Think you can handle that much?"

"Please," Indrani snorted into my ear. "It could be twice as many and it'd make no difference. Should I put an unraveller in the vulture just to make a point?"

"We're keeping them a surprise still," I declined.

A sharp whistle – it would not leave the sphere of my Night-working and give us away, the miracle was a very cleverly made one – drew my attention. The Silver Huntress wanted to speak, it seemed, and so I pulled at the reins to bring Zombie closer to the Summoner's creature. The wind would make it hard to understand the heroine, otherwise.

"There's something hidden on the vulture's back," the Huntress called out. "A refraction trick, I've seen it used by the dead before."

I did not ask her how she'd picked the detail out at such a distance, since it was exceedingly rude to ask another Named about their aspects.

"Does it work up close?" I called back.

"Yes," she shouted. "Needs disruption. Light works."

I frowned. There weren't a lot of things the Dead Kings would bother to hide on the back of something as visible as a vulture. Either he'd sent out mage Binds, which he was always careful about protecting, or there was a Revenant riding that thing. The first we could handle easily, the second might get... complicated. Some Revenants were no more dangerous than a necromantic construct, simple champions to use against Named, but there were some who'd kept the better part of their fangs even in death.

"Archer will handle the buzzards," I yelled. "Disperse the trick on my word, we'll attack together."

Zombie knew Indrani well and even liked her – she kept offering her oats that the godsdamned dead fae horse *did not need* – so there shouldn't be an issue leaving her on my mount's back. The Silver Huntress gestured to make it clear she'd heard, then retreated further on the wyvern-thing's back. Like Archer she'd come with her bow already strung and a quiver of arrows that were more or less the size of javelins. Unlike Indrani, though, she preferred a short spear to a pair of longknives. It was just as silver at the bow, and no doubt just as heavily enchanted.

I waited until we'd gotten within a hundred feet of the enemy. By then I could almost make out the trick the Huntress had mentioned: there was a... glimmer on the back of the vulture, whenever it shifted one side or the other. I leaned back towards Indrani.

"You ready?" I asked.

"Give me a moment," she said, pressing a kiss into the side of my neck for good luck.

She put a hand on my shoulder to help herself upright, standing on the saddle with a gleeful grin and nocking an arrow. Gods, I hoped she wasn't about to die a very stupid death just so she could have a better field of vision when shooting. She tapped my shoulder to tell me she was finished, and I turned to find the watchful eyes of the Silver Huntress.

"Now," I shouted.

She nocked an arrow of her own and smoothly drew, silvery Light gathering at the point like a blinding star, then casually released. My working shivered under the cold burn of her power, hollowing from the inside even as the sun attacked it from the outside, and shattered entirely even as the arrow left the confines of my illusion. In the heartbeat that followed, things happened so quickly I almost couldn't parse them – the buzzards began to scatter, Indrani loosed an arrow, the vulture tried to evade to the side and the silver arrow struck true. Two silhouettes were revealed, and neither looked like a Bind. *Fuck.*

I cursed in every tongue I knew. Time for a brawl, then.

I breathed out to steady myself, then threw myself to the side. Swallowing the scream that was trying to fight its way out, I forced my eyes to stay open and gauged the distances even as I drew on Night. *One, two, three, four and... there.* The gate into Twilight opened below me even as a second silvery arrow swatted a leaping Revenant back onto the vulture and a fourth buzzard dropped. I dropped through the warmer sky of the Twilight Ways for a heartbeat before pulling at the Night and wrenching open another gate, resuming my fall about two feet above and three feet in front of the vulture.

That repositioning trick had been a *bitch* to learn even with Komena helping me.

I dropped down, eyes wide open and cloak trailing behind me, and before I'd even landed atop the construct my enemies gave answer. A blackened longsword's point came at me in a thrust, exquisitely timed to go straight through my unprotected throat even as my feet touched the ground: I slammed my dead wood staff against the ground first, and the clap of Night that rippled out messed with

the timing. Before the armoured Revenant – in impeccable knight's armour, I glimpsed, down to the faded heraldic swans of House Caen on the shield – could properly turn the thrust into a cut I landed in a crouch at its feet, fingers sliding down the length of my staff.

"Afternoon, Neshamah," I drawled, and rolled forward before the Revenant could bash in my head with its shield.

Right behind the first enemy the second had been waiting for me. Tattered robes and a breastplate of dull green light were all I caught before the points of the trident coming for my chest got a lot more pressing a consideration. Laughing I leaned back, earning myself half a moment – just long enough to unsheathe my own sword and slam the side of it into the blow. The dead Named pushed the lock one way and me the other, only my grunt breaking the silence. The Revenant was stronger than me, pale dead eyes staring down through a ratty hood, but Night pulsed through me and with a savage grin I slapped aside the blow – just in time to see the Dead Knight about to run me through the back most unchivalrously.

Silver light rammed into the side of its head, blowing off half the steel helm and revealing blond locks on a beautiful face.

Dead Knightess, I mentally amended, and deftly twirled my staff to smash it into the exposed flesh. Too slow, I cursed, her shield coming up and even the Night I'd slid down the staff splashing out harmlessly against it. I narrowly parried a thrust from the trident and withdrew to the side prudently – that light breastplate wasn't that of a warrior-Named by my reckoning – but not *quite* swiftly enough. When lightning streaked down the trident's length and lashed out at me, it caught the edge of my cloak. The Mantle frizzled the magic, but did not shatter the spell: it twisted around, answering the Revenant's will, and struck my sword-hand.

I bit down on my scream, limbs convulsing, and dropped my sword against my will.

A blow from the back hammered into my shoulder, cutting deep as the Knightess put the full weight of her strength into it. Blood spurted and I was driven to my knees, but I let out a bark of laughter through the sting: painful as that had been, it'd broken the lightning spell's hold on me. The hand freed by dropping my sword went up as I drank deep of the Night, then closed my fist. As if a dragon had breathed in the air was sucked in by the funnel I'd crafted, drawing both Revenants in, and with a hard grin I spun my staff: blackflame roared out in a wheel. Both retreated, Robes doing better than Knightess whose exposed face was caught, but their relief was short-lived.

With a furious cry, the Silver Huntress entered the fray by smashing a shining spear into the Knightess' side. Pulling at my breastplate so it'd stop digging into my wound, I rose and offered Robes a wink.

"Hey," I said, "do you want to see a magic trick?"

The Revenant stiffened for a moment. Wait, was this one of the perfectly conscious ones? They were exceedingly rare.

"No," the Dead King replied through another mouth.

In the same moment, uncaring that there were also Revenants atop it, the vulture flipped upside down. Gods, Neshamah really was such an ass even when you discounted all the horror and mass murder. The Huntress still blew part the Knightess' shield in a streak of silver, scoring deep burns into the plate behind it, but I had to trade taking a shot at Robes for crafting a tendril of Night and catching the heroine by the waist, throwing her upwards. That cost me, as Neshamah-in-Robes got off a spell before I finished crafting a veil of Night for my own defence: there was a boom of thunder that struck me like a physical blow, rattling my bones, and then my vision went white as a column of lightning erupted.

Would have caught me for sure, if a creature looking like a large ghostly pufferfish hadn't suddenly formed right in the path of the spell.

Shit, I thought, changing the veil from a defensive one form one that'd obscure my presence before I was done changing it. *I might actually have to be polite to the Summoner for that.* From the corner of my eye I caught one, two, three silver streaks – the Huntress had somehow taken her bow even while being thrown upwards and her arrows hammered into the Knightess mercilessly. Neshamah-in-Robes did not bat an eyes, beginning to weave a large web of lightning streaks around the lot of us – like a large, loose net. Clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth disapprovingly, I opened a small gate into Twilight near the edge of the net and allowed it to close.

The Dead King, visibly irritated through his puppet's face, gathered the lightning streaks into a spear of spinning threads and tossed it at the Silver Huntress. I let myself keep falling, Mantle of Woe flapping around me, and pulled on the Night. I grinned as a silver arrow tore through the point of the lightning spear, hollowing out the centre, though it was an unpleasant surprise to find that the outer layers had kept shooting forward. I saw movement from the corner of my eye again, though, and kept working on my miracle with a pleased smile. Zombie glided down past the Huntress gracefully, Indrani catching her old comrade by the scruff of a neck.

They went into a dive before the spell could catch them, though the Dead King was already preparing another spell – lightning was pulsing around him, erupting from the frame of the Revenant in spikes. And still I waited, carefully shaping the Night.

The vulture swung around, one of those deadly legs catching the Knightess and slamming her onto its back before moving so that the Dead King's puppet could lightly land on the back. Just before the feet of Neshamah-in-Robes could touch the vulture they threw their spell – a ball of lightning that began to expand massively the moment it left his hands – I struck at last. Thin tendrils of Night shot out of me by the hundreds, ripping through my veil and revealing my position, but even as the Dead King turned towards me the first tendrils sunk into the flesh of the Revenant he was using. He began to cut at them with the trident, but there were too many and he was too slow.

"Here it is anyway," I smiled, and snapped my fingers.

Robes' silhouette shivered for a moment, then grew sunken as I hollowed it out from the inside with acid. Without bones and runes to anchor the necromancy, the Revenant collapsed within moments and there was simply nothing the Dead King could do about it. Which was good but I was still, unfortunately, rapidly hurting towards my death. That, uh, hadn't stopped while I was scheming. Fortunately others had noticed, and within moments the Summoner had brought around his wyvern-thing and even guided it to sweep me so I wouldn't break my legs landing on it. I gave him a thankful nod, then breathed out and opened a gate into Twilight in front of me.

A heartbeat later I stepped out of another gate onto the back of the vulture even as the Knightess turned to face me, longsword raised. She was a better swordswoman than me, I figured, and at the moment I didn't even have a sword. The Revenant reached behind her back, beneath a faded cloak, and to my surprise unsheathed another longsword. But instead of approaching me with both blades, she threw the fresh blade at my feet.

"A knight even in death, is it?" I mused out loud.

I was offered a salute, flat of the blade against her forehead, and nodded in return. I bent down to pick up the blade, shoulder wound stinging and already pulling on Night, but the expected betrayal never came. I was tempted, for a moment, to just blast her anyway. She might have been Callowan, once upon a time, but now whatever she might believe she was only a tool of the Dead King. And yet, as blood seeped down onto my breastplate and I watched this fair-haired killer standing across from me, I realized with a start that I wanted to beat her with a blade in hand. Wanted to give her that bit of dignity before oblivion took her, if I could. I spun the longsword, once and slowly, and though the weight was a little off it was no great hindrance.

"Catherine Foundling," I introduced myself. "Queen of Callow."

The pale dead face twisted into a smile.

"Aubrey Caen," she rasped. "Knight Errant, once."

I left my staff of yew standing, knowing it would not fall, and took a limping step forward. The air was crisp, this far up, and the afternoon's fading light cast us in relief as the wind howled around us. She took a step of her own, grip two-handed and pommel held above her head as she approached. I kept my guard low, knowing I'd not be faster than her to the strike – my kill lay in avoiding her blow and striking while she was extended. And beyond the cold bite of the wind, beyond the howl, I felt a warm breath against the back of my neck. A large thing looming behind me, fangs bared and eyes patient.

I smiled. *Approve, do you?*

The woman who'd once been the Knight Errant darted forward and struck with blinding quickness. I pivoted to the side, the same way another Knight had once taught me, and let the blow pass me – but one of her hands left the sword and she elbowed me with a steel-clad elbow. Or would have, if I'd not pressed the flat of my blade against the blow and pushed her back. She almost stumbled but turned it into a lateral swing. It found a parry waiting as I turned her blade and ripped it off her grasp. She was Named, even if dead, so she snatched it out of the air: but not before I slashed at her exposed face, drawing a deep bloodless cut across it.

I watched her, eyes unblinking, and felt something well up in me. Not Night, not power that was borrowed. It was all me, something born of Catherine Foundling and nothing else. My limbs felt limber, my hands steady, and when the Revenant struck again I knew she'd move before she did. The overhead cut was slapped aside, falling harmlessly beyond my shoulder, even as I struck her chin with the pommel and then, as she rocked back from the strength of the hit, measured my killing stroke through the neck. Or would have, had she not gone eerily still.

"I am not so helpful," Neshamah said, "as to provide you a whetstone for your Name."

The woman who had once been the Knight Errant sagged as he released her, falling to her knees, and her dead flesh began turning to flakes within her armour. She looked up, eyes almost pleading, and I breathed out.

Teeth gritted, I decapitated the Revenant.

Her head rolled and the Beast laid its head on my shoulder, its warmth approving. It was not a knight I was becoming, I thought.

My old friend had not come out for the fight, but for what it stood for: me, standing in judgement over others. Delivering it sword in hand. And it had earned weight, that the Knight Errant had once been Named. I sighed, letting the wind ruffle my hair. To my left, I found Indrani seated on Zombie's back and gesturing to catch my attention. She'd transferred the Huntress back onto the wyvern-thing, it looked like. I curtly signalled for her to ride towards the back of the vulture, then limped in that direction and snatched up my waiting staff. The construct began to spin, in attempt to throw me off, but it was too late.

Absent-mindedly I pulled at Night, weaving a gate into Twilight right in front of the construct as it sped forward, and leapt off its back.

Zombie caught me, Archer shuffling backwards to make room, and after some difficulty I sat the saddle. The longsword the dead woman had given me was not an exact fit for my scabbard, but it fit. It would have to suffice. A heartbeat later the vulture's momentum forced it to try to pass through the gate, where it suffered instead the Grey Pilgrim's burning hatred for the Dead King and all his works. Quite literally, as furious white flames devoured the necromantic construct until nothing was left but a handful of ashes scattering in the wind. I flicked my wrist, closing the gate shut, and finally allowed myself to feel pain and exhaustion.

"And now?" Archer asked.

"Now we head back," I replied. "And tell the army it's time to pick up the pace."

The Enemy knew we were coming, so the race against time had begun.

—

I clenched my jaw so I would not hiss as Senior Mage Jendayi healed the wound on my shoulder. I could have asked one of our priests to handle it instead and it would have been painless, but being healed with Light tended to screw with my ability to handle Night afterwards. Not majorly, but enough that precision work became difficult. Better to let one of my mages handle it, even if it stung as the flesh knit itself back together. Still, if nothing else the pain kept my mind focused on the here and now.

"Thank you, Senior Mage," I said, nodding my gratitude. "It was smoothly done."

Not compared to what Masego would have done, of course, but I'd been made clear to me over the years that this was a completely absurd standard to hold people to. The dark-skinned woman smiled and left the tent after requesting a check-up later tonight,

leaving me to combat report turned war council unfolding around me.

"- the Black Queen personally slew the last in an honour duel, blade against blade," the Silver Huntress said.

She shot me an admiring look at that, and to my amusement so did Tazin and Aquiline. I became a little less amused when I considered how that little detail might have done months of work in trying to wean them of that practice.

"A whetstone for my Name," I dismissed. "Which slowly becomes clearer in shape."

And Gods Below, how large would the scope of it be for it to take so long to coalesce?

"Regardless," I continued, "the Dead King rode both Revenants at different times. There can be no denying that he is now aware of the existence of our column."

Even our most conservative estimates had been that we'd get two days before he caught on, so that wasn't a pleasant surprise. All those forward patrols we'd sent to sweep the lowlands in the last few months had failed to pay off, mostly out of what I'd consider bad luck. That force of two thousand that Robber and the rest had wiped out had clearly not been sent as scouts, after all. They'd not been the right make up of dead for that at all.

"Your presence will have told him this is a serious thrust," General Hune said. "Though we've kept our numbers unclear through your actions, so he won't be sure where our troops have been sent."

By which she meant he wouldn't be sure if our force, the visible one, was a distraction while another one stalked the Twilight Ways. Which was the case, but our numbers – seventy thousand men – were meant in part to dissuade him of that. Our reserve was less than half of my column, after all, and about that for the Iron Prince's army. When he got a good look at both our armies, which I intended to make him bleed to get, his conclusion should be that the numbers in the offensive meant we'd bet it all on two quick thrusts backed by Named.

"Agreed," Princess Beatrice said. "Though I'd recommend we make haste towards Lauzon's Hollow regardless. It is crucial we dictate the tempo if our surprise attack on *les Soeurs Cigelin* is to bear fruit."

I frowned. I was wary of hurrying forward heedlessly, as it happened. If the siege of the capital of Hainaut, our ultimate objective for this part of the campaign, was to be a success then we needed our supply lines clear up Julianne's Highway. Getting

sloppy about clearing the lowlands as we advanced towards the Hollow was a good way to get sprung a nasty surprise when warbands of undead lying low united, though.

"With all due respect, ma'am, the reason we're not using the Ways to attack in the first place is that we need the highway clear for our supply lines," General Abigail quietly said. "There's no point getting to the capital if we starve while sieging it because the bread gets burned on the way."

I hid a smile. She was growing into the rank better, I decided, without my looking over her shoulder. Akua had been right about that.

"Then we split our forces," Lady Aquiline suggested. "Send out large warbands to clear the countryside of the enemy while the main column continues its advance."

"Split our forces while already outnumbered?" General Hune said. "A recipe of the enemy to roll us over piece by piece."

"We are outnumbered in principle, not in..." Ivah began then stopped, biting its lips. "These are not the correct words."

It turned to me, speaking a few sentences in Crepuscular. I nodded.

"The Lord of Silent Steps means we are outnumbered in a strategic sense, not a tactical one," I clarified. "I tend to agree. With the Twilight Ways we're quicker on the move than the dead, so we'd be able to afford sending out detachments to clear the countryside and still be assured we can concentrate the column before giving battle with the central enemy force."

At this point there was no denying that the enemy would move into the Hollow long before we were in a position to contest it. I'd be surprised if those one hundred thousand dead weren't already on the march as we spoke.

"If the Enemy fights as we want him to, and sends his soldiers to the man the Hollow," Captain Reinald pointed out. "This assessment depends on the Hidden Horror holding up in his defences instead of taking the field."

The two fantassin captains had been quiet in this council, aware that out on march their influence was not the same as in camp. Not even the snippiest of mercenaries would seriously threaten to walk in the middle of an offensive into the territory held by the Dead King. It'd be a death warrant for them, if nothing else.

"He's right," the Silver Huntress said. "We haven't gotten eyes on the enemy yet, Your Majesty. I'd like your permission to take a band out for a deep reconnaissance."

I mulled over that a moment. By a band she meant a band of five, so that was more or less a third of the Named with this army that'd be risked on this jaunt. Mind you, having actual hard information about where the enemy army was would be damned useful and sending heroes into an adventure of this sort a lot less dangerous in practice than it sounded. I eventually nodded.

"You'll take the Headhunter with you," I said. "Any preferences for the rest?"

"The Vagrant Spear," she immediately said, "and the Silent Guardian."

She paused for a moment, deep in thought.

"And the Rogue Sorcerer, if you have no other use for him?" she tentatively asked.

"Take him," I agreed. "In and out, Huntress. Don't let yourself be drawn into a scrap."

"As you say, Black Queen," she smiled, offering a quick bow.

She offered another one to the room at large, and departed with haste. My gaze returned to the rest of the war council.

"You've convinced me with the war parties, Lady Aquiline," I said. "I'll detach ten thousand drow under Lord Ivah to sweep the lowlands, as well as a fighting escort that can handle the daytime."

It couldn't be the Levantines, I decided. They were good at light warfare, I wouldn't pretend otherwise, but they were also a lot more likely to let themselves be drawn into unnecessary battles than a more discipline force. I wanted them close so I could keep an eye on them.

"I would volunteer for such a task if you'll allow it, Your Majesty," Captain-General Catalina spoke up. "My company can discharge these duties skillfully."

I glanced at Princess Beatrice, who subtly nodded. Good, she agreed this seemed like a decent idea then.

"Take your pick of the companies, no more than eight thousand total," I said. "You will be sharing command with Lord Ivah, I'll leave the details of the sweep to you."

"By your command, Your Majesty," the fantassin replied.

"Chno Sve Noc," Ivah simply said, inclining its head.

I rolled my shoulder, finding it stretched taut from the healing but no longer painful. Good work by Jendayi, that.

"As for the rest of us, we'll continue our advance at the quickest sustainable pace," I said. "Let's get to it, people – the Enemy won't dawdle, so neither should we."

Skraeling

Damn. The more that Catherine comes into her name the more excited I get. Also

My old friend had not come out for the fight, but for what it stood for: me, standing in judgement over web serials. Delivering it Vote in hand.

Liliet

...I cannot lie. this one is good

ohJohn

It helps to include a link!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

shimizubad

It's just me or her shoulder healed too quickly narrative wise? Nice chapter by the way, I was getting thirsty for some action even if I like the political and strategic side of the story.

Big Brother

Remember, even Name-incurrents get the superior effects on their bodies, though not to the level that full Named do.

lordcirth

The injury itself isn't narratively lasting; it is merely there to show that the fight was not a stomp. Once that has been achieved, it can vanish by the next scene.

Tenthyr

A name that wants her to stand judgement, and a new name of such vast scope that it's taking forever to crystallize even now, with Catherine directly aware of the presence of her Name again. Not much to go on for us, but exciting all the same.

Salt

The Judgement part has a potential narrative danger that she needs to watch out for, though. The latest conversation with the Pilgrim had him make an almost prophetic old wise-man prediction that she might eventually come into conflict with Hanno, we know Hanno believes no mortal deserves to stand in judgement over anyone.

An avoidable arrow for sure, but she needs to be wary of it so it can't be used as a wedge between allies at a bad moment. Any time you get overlapping themes in Names, you usually end up with very positive or very negative reactions (easy example are the mage Named)

caoimhinh

Well, she is not exactly the judge of Named, but pretty close.

She is already guiding the whole continent into a new era and setting the rules of engagement between the chosen of Above and Below on Calernia. She is *regulating* the conflicts.

Though it would be kind of cool if she had an Aspect called **Judge** just so she could be witty to Hanno and his whole "I do not judge" motto. Hahaha.

Although, thinking about it, **Sentence** seems more fitting for Catherine.

Do0d

Guiding Calernia ... What if her new name is Practical Guide, although that might be too on the nose.

caoimhinh

I'm fine with it just being the Guide.

Do0d

I've been toying with the idea for a few weeks. Mostly because in Cat's first Name-dream, she basically told below: you're doing it wrong, watch me this is how it's done.

[Casey Glick](#)

The Practical Guide

Dathrax

Warden of the East. Her nascent name surged when Catherine was alone as the counterpart of the First Prince, who is known to have refused the Name of Warden of the West. Additionally, the Doddering Sage said her name was paired with one who had refused the call,

reinforcing that she is the counterpart of the Warden of the West, the Warden of the East.

RoflCat

So, just a random idea: What if her Name is about giving 'ending' to another Name? Especially ones whose Story has been disrupted.

For the Errant Knight, it was the final honorable duel that would've left her accepting of her death such that the Story weight would've made her soul broke free of Dead King's control and pass on.

Considering Wandering Bard, such a Name would be extremely relevant in permanently ending her.

eleutheriahaswon

...oh shit. That... that would actually fit Cat SO WELL. "The Ender of Stories," someone who understands stories, intuitively, magnificently – but does not love them. Someone who seeks to break them, to recraft them, to end them. The one who stands in judgement over Fate and stories and the people caught up in them and winnows the tangled web, thins the field to allow new things to grow.

I'm putting my money down on something like this.

Miles

So basically an Anti-Bard name

Crash

Bards going to be delighted, she's still relevant as opposition to Cat's name AND she gets to finally die.

(Honestly at his point I'm with her on this, just let her die folks. She wants it so bad she almost killed Hakram for it.)

Curtopolis

What was it Kairos said? That every time the angels let her get away with defying them it cements her position as someone able to get away with that shit? Which fits with the judgement over fate thing. But I'm thinking more of a breaker of dates kind of thing. Kind of an opposite side of the bards coin. Someone who sees fate forming around her and shatters the chains rather than weaving them

Derek Anderson

Denouement would be a good word, if we're not picky about languages.

[rue](#)

If Catherine gets a name which reeks of Judgement, I wonder if one aspect might be Forgive, and whether that aspect might heal physical wounds, in particular, those of Hakram.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm not sure the Name itself is going to be *fundamentally* about Judgement... But at this point, she's touched and been touched by three Choirs, each of which left their mark on her. And one of those is Judgement.

DoOd

The three Choirs she interacted with directly are, in order, Contrition, Endurance and Mercy. She was never touched by Judgement unless you count her friendship with Hanno.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She tangled with Judgement at the trial, no? When did she face Endurance?

DoOd

At the trial, she stopped Mercy from smiting everyone around along with Kairos. Judgement's attention was solely on Hierarch. Endurance is the Choir she called bottom feeders before the 10th crusade was called.

Clint

And those three choirs really are what she's all about.

Doing evil for the greater good – that's Mercy in a nutshell. What she's trying to do to Akua is Contrition. And she's always been about putting herself in harm's way to protect Callow and her people from harm – that's Endurance.

There's no way the First Under the Night could get a Hero name, is there? (As an added bonus, it would completely screw up the pre-Accords T&T, because she couldn't be the head villain representative anymore, and there's really no one she could trust to take that over.)

[Javvies](#)

Eh, unless she gets a blatantly Heroic Name and/or stays throwing Light around, she'll be assumed to have a

Villain Name by just about everyone, except possibly Tariq (because of Behold/his direct line to the Ophanim), Augur (because precog/seer), and Masego (because he's the fucking Heirophant and he knows Cat).

At least, until she starts showing signs of aging. Then questions would be asked ... but it's pretty certain that she's not going to be aging at anything near mortal human standard rates for at least as long as she's First Under the Night, so there's no telling how long that might take. Plus, let's not forget that she wasn't noticeably affected by the pocket of fast aging that she killed Saint of Swords with, and eleven years would be noticeable with normal human aging.

Crash

Wouldn't it be fun if each of her aspects was choir related? I like this idea very much.

Ignae

I actually have a nagging suspicion that her name might actually be "Justice". Sorry in advance for the lightly edited, decently long ramble.

1.Many of the other people she interacts with in the plot follow Major Arcana symbolism or literally take their names; Hierophant, Empress, The Tower, Death (either as Neshamah, or literally as he's depicted as a Black Knight on a pale horse), the Hermit (the grey pilgrim), The fool (the wandering bard), the Devil (The Diabolist) the High Priestesses, etc. I could see her maybe being Judgement, as Judgement's imagery could also indicate a somehow-heaven-ordained support for Necromancy, which would be a fascinating foil to Neshamah, but Judgement is already a choir.

2. In the Major Arcana, Justice is a woman crowned, with a sword in one hand and scales in the other. Catherine's literal standard is a crown and a sword on a set of scales, with the motto "Justice only matters to the Just".

3. Her current character arc is trying to create and then enforce "equalizing" terms between Named, keeping Unnamed people as safe as possible from their shenanigans and, in effect, creating the first(?) real system for redress of grievances between people whose lives are either so dramatic or tragic that they sweep up everyone near them with them. A logical conclusion of her plans could be far fewer names as a result; a character who seeks to prevent or control even future "injustices" would be a good candidate for Justice.

4. She, at every possible move, calculates her moves and decisions along an incredibly rigorous set of criteria; she tries to do what is best, for the most people she considers to be innocent/deserving, is as merciful as she believes she can get away with without undermining her long term plans to do what is best for the most people, and also does her absolute best to honor contracts and agreements that she makes, to the point of refusing to break them even when a Hero would justify it being for the "greater good" or a Villain would simply do as they wish. She has an inner sense of righteousness that comes from layering multiple, increasingly restrictive standards of ethics over each other, not picking and choosing from many, choosing only one, or abandoning them.

5. Craving what you believe is owed to you, is at the heart of many Named narratives. What Catherine has always craved is less Named dickery in average people's lives, and overall less Named. Her Name seeks to resolve and end other name's plots; her Name dances her out of following tropes, her Name keeps her on the sidelines of a hundred other Name stories but you see her hand guiding them. I would argue this pushes her towards an absolutely massive Name; similar to "Narrator", like the Wandering Bard.

Javvies

I'm thinking Cat's Name is going to be something the lines of Arbitrator.

The Dead King knows they're coming in force and are serious about it.

That's not going to be good.

At this point if the Dead King fights the way they want him to, it would almost have to be a trap of some kind.

Elaikases

Yep. Not Black Knight.

Though "Intercessor" is a real possibility.

Klatn Yelox

I have been thinking Arbiter myself for a while.

Eleron Pfoutz

Black Arbiter.

NerfContessa

Dark Arbiter of Stories, Judge 9f endings, the Guide of calernia future. A mouthful... DAoSJoEtGoCF.

Djinn O'Cide

Go. Vote. Here: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Daniel

I predict she'll be Justice Of The Peace, and the void left by the Choir of Justice left somehow makes that name more powerful.

Good chapter! I especially like the contributions of Abigail and Ivah.

I have a feeling this will be the longest of the books by far.

Cicero

Taking some risks there Cat.

You're not a hero, so you can't be as sure of Heaven's aid as the Silver Huntress is.

Zggt

She can be sure Above will not interfere with her as long as she's fighting against the Dead King. Cat has told off choirs three times and had them obey, expects them to fall in line against the greater foes, and works around their limits regularly. At the point you are referencing, her name may very well have gained a part of it which **can** be as sure of aid as much as any Hero... which is exactly why the Dead King nope'd away (that "whetsone" comment).

Those risks are the ones that Cat has always taken, when it comes to both Above and Below. And it's becoming a part of her Name.

impolitic

Catherine Foundling, Preacher to the Choirs.

Daniel E

Take my vote and get out of my sight.

Salt

Pretty measured risks this time though, all in all. Going in first so providence could work through the huntress to bail out an ally in the nick of time is narratively a pretty safe move. Cat can't wield providence, but the Huntress sure can.

The duel with the Knight was also measured, and actually imo a mistake on the Dead King's part. Measured since presumably her recognition of the revenant's heraldry, it being a Knightess at all, and the Revenant's rather positive reaction to finding out she was a Queen of Callow likely means this one used to be a Callowan Named. Being ended by the current generation of Named wartime Callowan ruler is about as fitting-end as it gets. Especially since Cat started out as the Squire to one of the most skilled Named Knights on the continent, one that specifically leverages subtlety and skill to make up for lack of power.

Mistake, since this is the second time in recent memory that Cat has won a formalized duel (not just a random lvl), against an entity who is way above her weight class for brawling, purely due to a fitting story; the first one being the Fae lord during the arsenal attack.

Once is a fluke, twice is suspicious, thrice is a pattern. The Dead King doesn't actually know that this is the second time since he had no eyes in the Arsenal, and pulling back the Knight Errant after she clearly already lost the duel was far too late. I don't think he actually knows that he's only one more formal duel away from accidentally giving away a solid tool to Cat, for her narrative arsenal of stories.

caoimhinh

I don't know. This didn't seem like Catherine was rationalizing and taking measured risks (when that has happened before, the text shows us her thoughts about it). This was more Catherine jumping in headfirst to a fight against two Revenants because of a gut feeling or instinct. Sure, she knew it had to be a fight and she could dive into the fight trusting that there were people having her back, but this wasn't really a cool-headed decision. Catherine was *eager* for that fight. The whole time she was grinning and laughing.

ohJohn

The Knightess has both the heraldry of and surname Caen. From Chapter 51 (Twilight) of the last book:

"Before long I was hobbling down into Liesse, through the broken palace of the proud and ancient House of Caen – gone from Callow, like the city they'd once ruled."

(also Cat mentions the Knightess used to be Callowan in this chapter :P)

TalanelatElin

The White Knight was originally supposed to be Above's answer to Catherine. Maybe it's being continued here: Hanno does not judge. She is more than happy to.

softle

God damn cat is badass

It was a bit confusing tracking where the fight was happening: the back of the vulture being called "the ground" twice made it difficult, but on reread knowing that was the case it felt cleae

caoimhinh

Yeah. It also felt like the Dead King was just kind of passive during the whole fight, just letting it all happen or making decisions too slowly, not to mention without even trying to take advantage of the fact that they were who knows how many feet above the ground.

I mean, there thirteen other constructs there, but they just fled away once the battle started and the vulture didn't do anything except spinning once and then turn around *after* Catherine's duel with the Knight Errant was over.

ohJohN

Idk, I think Neshamah did fine with the resources available, Cat's party just outclassed his.

The buzzards immediately scattering was good tactics by DK: they're simple constructs that aren't gonna do shit against 4 Named, that's what the Revenants are for. His immediate goal was finding out the opposing force's numbers, so if even one escaped, it could continue scouting. (Also I'm pretty sure Indrani took them all out almost immediately – 4 were down before Cat even finished gating onto the vulture – so there wasn't much opportunity for them to do anything else.)

The vulture was more useful in that fight as mobility for the Revenants, and the first roll was smart, interrupting Cat's "magic trick" and letting Robes throw some lightning. But after Robes bit the dust, the (presumably short-range) Knightess would be useless without a platform, while Cat had two flying mounts available – the vulture couldn't do much without effectively sacrificing the second Revenant.

Miles

Probably dealing with some lag there. A seemingly op ability must come with some downsides to avoid too many fingers on the scale and ping woes seem appropriate for what the ability is.

Hardcore Heathen

I liked the bit about her Name wanting her to stand in judgment over people, but the way we got there frustrates me: the duel. Cat's first encounter with a Named opponent as the Squire was when the Shining Prince challenged her to a duel. The switch away from mundane pragmatism to narrative showmanship seems to clash with a lot of her history.

lordcirth

Perhaps the point is that in order to effectively lead and unite, she must sometimes put on a show? Being openly and utterly utilitarian/pragmatic tends to be bad for morale and thus not actually pragmatic.

[sengachi](#)

The thing is that her early pragmatism was **also** narrative showmanship, just of a different stripe. Plucky upstart doesn't give a damn about your conventions and just gets the job done was a narrative horse to ride, albeit backed by the genuine benefits of pragmatism.

Now though, Catherine is genuinely powerful enough to fight a simple Revenant solo and be sure of her victory, so she pragmatically does so for the extra benefits it provides. She puts on a show of being narratively flashy, as a pragmatic move.

Miles

Do you realize how close she is to Ranger's level now?

Cat beat 2 revenants with the help of a living distraction vs Ranger's 4 revenants solo, with similar levels of wounds at the led of the fight. She's caught up enough that we can make a coherent comparison. Holy jalapenos.

Matthew Wells

When did Ranger solo 4 revenants? I only remember 2.

Salt

I read it as a narrative win, with the details of the duel not actually mattering. Pragmatism by narrative showmanship, exactly like her rather dramatically pulling a sword from a stone against William and Akua

The revenant was alone on the end of a losing fight as a once-honorable Knight turned undead abomination against her will. Cat recognized its heraldry, it was a Knight (which Callow is known for), and it was visibly happy to find out that Cat was

an anointed Queen of Callow. Meaning all in all that it was likely an old Callowan Hero, or at least close enough to fit the story.

A Named warrior queen of Callow ending the miserable unlife of an old Callowan Knight is about as fitting an end you could get, especially since Cat started out a Squire to the most prominent Knight of a generation. That fight was won the moment she announced her royal title and the Revenant reacted well. The actual swinging of metal sticks that followed was more or less just a formality.

Albert Wen

Well it was a very one-sided duel, her judgment uncontested and crushing. I think it still carries the same tone as her execution of the Shining Prince, which itself was a very dramatic moment.

I've just made this name up

Perhaps her name will be something g along the lines of The Long Price.

[sengachi](#)

Oh. OH. You just made me realize something.

Catherine's nascent name got all rumbly over her standing in judgement.

I'm betting she's going to get her name when whatever is coming to a head with Akua finally comes due, and the long price, Catherine's sentence for her crime, comes due.

hakureireimu

I think it's because Villains are all about Might makes right, so she has to triumph over the Revenant first.

shadw21

Well the Knight Errant did have her helmet on, so she got a pass on getting an arrow to the throat.

Flameburst

A new name of vast scope based on judgement. With a relatively recent vacancy left by the choir of judgement. Someone is going to fill a large narrative role.

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, so I think Cat's Name is meant to be a break-glass-to-restore-Callow Name, because her story keeps finding weight in finding, putting down, and receiving recognition from, exalted dead Callowans. This is putting aside the whole standing in judgement thing, and any other specific aspects the Name drifts towards, and speaking entirely of the role it's seeking to fill. If/when Cat follows through on her abdication, it's very likely to establish the rule that the Name is powerful, but only ever to be worn by those clearing the ledger of the long prices, purifying corruption, reestablishing glory, etc.

What that means for later years in Cat's life, or whether the Name would be neutral or Villainous is another matter completely.

KageLupus

I disagree with Cat's name being related to Callow, actually. In my mind, those narrative beats are the trap. Those moments where something deeply Callowan and meaningful happen are an enticement, something to keep Cat playing the same game that Above and Below have been running forever. The fact that she left the old king's sword in the Twilight Ways and that she didn't actually get a Name from fighting the undead Knight errant is evidence that Cat isn't falling for it, I think.

Cat has been setup as the successor of both Black and the Grey Pilgrim, and I think that her eventual Name and role is going to be something very similar to that. She will be the wandering boogeyman that travels Calernia, hunting down Named of any alignment who go against the Accords. Originally I thought that she would stay and teach at her new Named academy, but the more I think about the more I think she will leave that role to others. Cat constantly talks about how the responsibilities of ruling chafe at her, and how she only does it because no one else can be trusted to do it right. I think that if she had the choice she would rather be a travelling enforcer than a principal.

Burlyraven

Her whole repeatedly stated life plan is to become a principal/ruler/however you wish to phrase it and spend a sizable portion of her life governing Cardinal once it is founded, acting as an arbiter. In this very chapter she talks about not being a Knight, and hints at taking on a Name at a more judicial level than an enforcer. Her beginning was as she who would restore Callow by any means necessary, and her ending will be the same (at least as far as *this* story is concerned).

Burlyraven

Also just realized that this is the second(?) time someone has looked gratefully at her as she freed them from suffering by death.

Clint

Merciful Executioner?

hakureireimu

Except Callow is already restored; a Name is not needed for that. Besides her ambition is much bigger than just Callow.

mamm0nn

So I think we can all agree that this whole confident "We can still salvage this." attitude of the Dead King not yet knowing all of their moves and expectations and seeking to smash their whole force underfoot is just wishful thinking on Cat's part, right?

A scout, sure, but a scout with two Named to answer their approach and knowing this two days before even their most conservative estimates means that he knows / anticipates a lot more than she gives him credit for.

Oshi

Contingencies.

The_Piman

I think it might be to ensure providence is on their side, actually. If the first step succeeds, they are in a really good position strategically. If it fails, they know they aren't following a villainous story, and so providence will probably help them out later. Especially since General Abigail is involved.

Matthew Wells

Come to think of it, I could absolutely see the Reluctant General clawing her way out of an ambush.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Zombie's wings (extra space in front)
it hardly equal > it was hardly equal
scatter into every > scatter in every
count to the > count the
Dead Kings > Dead King
as silver at > as silver as

me me > me
touched the ground (this is on the back of the construct)
against the ground first (^)
Laughing I > Laughing, I
blond locks (should be blonde if she's female)
doing being > doing better
from a defensive one form (something's wrong here)
I'd been made > it'd been made
to combat report > to the combat report
recipe of the > recipe for the
were are > we are
the man the > man the
"He's right," (extra space in front)
sort a lot > sort was a lot
discipline force > disciplined force

kmucha31

From what we've seen so far my guess for Cat's upcoming name is the Arbiter or something like it. I doubt it's a name about rule as she plans to abdicate the throne and once she does so it doesn't really end her story. Not with how she's going to move to Cardinal.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm still rooting for her to become the Practical Guide. The ultimate title drop.

KageLupus

Cat's last line reminds me of my favorite bit of Magic the Gathering flavor text:
"Death never stops to rest. Neither can we."

That goes from being really defiant when said by a Battlefield Medic, to really ominous when Cat is talking about the Dead King and his hordes of monsters.

Dillon

Weirdly enough, Arbiter is what I immediately thought as well.

Per our late Tyrant, Cat wants peace more than anything. She wants order, and her Callowan blood calls her to make others answer for their slights.

Tie that in with Cardinal and it seems like her Name will have to do with being a judge and enforcer of other Names.

Some Smartass

Wait, why is she still riding Zombie, the most obvious sleeper agent in this entire crusade?

shadw21

Nah, that goes to Stealth Goat, lurking stealthily in the background since the end of book 1.

[Liliet](#)

Zombie is more of a summoned spirit than an undead.

Do0d

I'd say that Zombie is a fae playing the role of an undead horse

[Liliet](#)

An undead horse fae, I would say. It's not like there's anything more to the fae than the role they play.

Theodor Belaire

Honestly I was 100% expecting the sword to explode as soon as Cat picked it up.

Dsylexic Wofl

Harbinger. Quite literally a Named with that name would be the End pf Something or someone. For the bard and Neshamah it would be fitting

[Black Spiral Dancer](#)

"All this took time to describe but was actually done in minutes" is what a Wuxia would say.

Donut

At first I thought Occam's Razor will apply, and Catherine's Name will simply be Black Queen. However, she's showing quite the combat proficiency with these duels, which is not what one expects from a royal Name, considering Malicia's apparent Aspects.

My next thought is that she'll be the new Black Knight; after all, she made the comment about having to settle the East "the hard way", causing her Beast to stir.

Continuing down this road, she will remain a priestess of Sve Noc, AND have combat prowess, so perhaps she will become Black Paladin, thereby blending her fighting skills with her divine blessings.

Daniel E

With the Choir of Judgement still on holiday, I'm throwing in my hat with the 'Intercessor' crowd. Cat's name would be a much more literal interpretation than the pseudo-insult attributed to The Wandering Bard. The textbook definition is "a person who intervenes on behalf of another, especially by prayer."

dadycoool

Gotta say, Neshama was very rude this chapter. First he refuses to watch Cat's magic trick, then he interferes in the duel between Queen and Knight.

Praetorian

Cathrine foundling- Black subjugator
The name can have a more or less profound context depending on how hard she pushes the narrative.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "I am not so helpful," Neshamah said, "as to provide you a whetstone for your Name."

Too late.

Andrey Kravchuk

Maybe it's a common knowledge already, but if you can gate a vulture so easily, why not make it BEFORE all these honor duels?

Chapter 54: King's Fianchetto

"That there is little reason to war should be no surprise, for war is never the choice of reasonable men."

– Basileus Stavros Trakas of Nicae

It wouldn't be cheap.

The pair from the adjunct secretariat had been dismissed, leaving me with a pile of papers where the words 'maybe' and 'should' came up uncomfortably often. While the phalanges who'd spoken to me – an orc and a Callowan, nice touch that – had been well-versed in the details, looking at the plans I recognized the careful method that lay behind them. This was Hakram's proposal, and not one he'd begun working on recently. Too much groundwork

had been laid, and some of those numbers would have taken months to get. I was honestly astonished he'd managed to get his hands on estimated fighting strength for the greatest of the Clans, as the Jacks were completely blind in the Steppes.

As far as proposals meant it was well-crafted, and made it clear that not only was propping up an orc state in the Steppes achievable but it would benefit Callow in several practical ways. Establishing treaties with orc leadership and trading ties with western clans would ensure that raiding of my kingdom did not resume down the line, while a mutual defence pact would mean that if the Dread Empire turned on us both Wolof and Okoro would be knocked out of the war before the first sword was drawn. The Clans weren't rich in much besides amber and fur, but trading those goods south in Mercantis would mean steep profits for Callowan traders given the demand for both.

There'd be no need for actual Callowan military involvement either, as simply arming the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves up to Army of Callow standards would allow them to sweep through Malicia's allies in the Clans and become a thorn in the Tower's side in northern Praes. From there different manners of support could be offered, grain and cattle and craft goods, while the Clans stabilized as an independent polity and pressured the Wasteland with their raiders.

But there were... issues. For one, orcs didn't have a great record when it came to keeping to treaties – especially treaties binding multiple clans, considering the independent bent of their chiefs. The trade outlined would become profitable in the long term, yes, but in the short one it was a drain on the already strained treasury of Callow. It'd also represent an escalation of our current manner of war with the Tower, struggles abroad through intermediaries, to something significantly more aggressive. There was a difference between backing rival parts of the League and arming rebels in Malicia's backyard. This *would* prompt retaliation, one that Callow was currently ill-equipped to handle.

And the truth was that, in the end, I couldn't be sure the orcs even would stay an independent nation for long. If Black claimed the Tower then given his popularity up north he shouldn't find it overly difficult to bring the Clans back into the fold. Meaning I would have pissed away gold, political capital – it was going to be a difficult sell in Laure to arm greenskins largely at our expense, to say the least – and risked retaliation all to strengthen soon-to-be Tower loyalists. Sure they'd be a pain in Malicia's neck for a while, but was that small a gain really worth such a significant investment? Much as I would have preferred for the answer to be a different one, deep down I knew it was not. I sighed and leaned back into my seat, the lights of

the camp around me dimly visible through the entrance flaps of my tent.

I poured myself a finger of brandy, and tried to think of a reason for me to back this that wasn't just making Hakram happy. He'd been good, for a very long time, about never putting me in a position like this – having to choose between him and duty. So damned good I'd allowed myself to forget he wanted things at all. That was a dangerous thing to ignore in my right hand, the keeper of so many of my secrets. But I couldn't just empty my kingdom's coffers just to please him, could I? Gods I rather wanted to, if only so things between us could go back to normal, but it wouldn't be that simple would it?

No, I suspected that if anything accepting when I had so many qualms would only make things worse.

I cast a baleful look at a sheet of parchment detailing the costs and benefits of arming orcs in Callowan steel instead of sending them shipments of dwarven armaments bought in Mercantis, passing a hand through my hair. I'd refrained from calling on Akua when considering this, wanting no contrary opinion tainting my thoughts, and forced myself not to send for Scribe – even though she'd likely have better force estimates for the Clans than anything my people had been able to dig up, on top of the lay of the more recent politics.

"I can't accept this," I admitted to myself quietly.

It was a stark enough admission that I punctuated it by guzzling down the brandy, the burn in my throat and belly distracting from the unpleasantness. I wiped my lips afterwards, reaching for a quill and inkwell, and pawed around until I found a sheath of parchment I could use. I couldn't accept this, I thought but I could at least make it clear why I couldn't accept it. It was better than just refusing, and letting silence have the day. The words came easy, when I got into it, and I found further reasons to hesitate even as I wrote.

For one, the Clans were currently dependent on Praes for many goods and the northernmost Soninke holdings much closer than Callow – how could I be assured the Steppes wouldn't just be pulled back into an eastern alliance down the line by simple dint of needing what the Wasteland could provide quicker than my people could provide it? Callowans were not known as great merchants, and there was no port up the Wasiliti for our river barges to land that wasn't in Praesi hands. I needed answer to more than a dozen questions just as crucial, and so I asked them all. *I cannot in good conscience commit to this proposal at is stands*, I added at the end. *I would, however, be willing to entertain a revised one addressing my concerns.*

I bit my lip, a few drops of ink dripping down as my hand hesitated. *I look forward to seeing your work*, I began, then crossed it out. *I expect I will soon see...* No, I thought, and crossed it out again. *I hope that*, crossed. *I believe that there is merit to this*, I finally allowed, *and look forward to the improvements*.

The queen would not allow the woman to say sorry, so this was as close as I'd ever get to saying the word to Hakram.

—

I slept uneasily and woke up already tired.

Though we both knew he'd read my answer, Adjutant did not speak a word of it as we ate breakfast and I did not press the matter. While I'd slept the campaign had continued, the ten thousand Firstborn still with my army hunting down nearby wandering bands of undead in the lowlands and wiping them out under moonlight. They'd retreated back to camp before dawn and were now sleeping through it as the remainder of our column prepared to resume the march. I'd be leaving the Third under General Abigail to protect them while our march picked up again, the Levantines once more serving as vanguard.

I'd pulled at the leash yesterday and gone out to fight, but I'd not get such an opportunity again anytime soon. There was no Juniper for me to hand command to as I went hunting for trouble, much to my displeasure – it was my command, for better or worse. The detachments of fantassins and drow we'd sent out yesterday had dug in through dawn but would begin sweeping the region clear of undead soon enough: I got regular reports from both Ivah and Captain-General Catalina about their progress. It looked to be slim pickings, with the enemy force holed up in Luciennerie having sent no raiders down the blue road that we could find.

That worried me.

Why was the Dead King not reacting to our advance? There were three forces that were in position to prove a threat for the offensive. First was the hundred thousand army ahead of my column, no doubt well on its way to Lauzon's Hollow by now. Another of at least one hundred thousand was holding Juvelun to the east, but we were trying to bait it out with Prince Klaus' army. A force at least as large as the others was in Luciennerie, though, and while Princess Rozala was supposed to send raiders out to worry it the absence of reaction from there was raising my hackles.

Luciennerie was a fortress, it wouldn't be easy for raiders to take even if a few dozen thousand dead were sent down to march on our defensive lines north of Arbusans. It was what I would have done, in the Dead King's place: mounted a large enough assault on

that defence that my column was forced to strip away detachments to reinforce. It'd weaken us before the clash at the Hollow, and in the worst possible case the Dead King would break through the fort and force our arriving reinforcements from Callow and Procer to face him in a costly field battle before his marauders were driven back.

So why was there only silence from the northwest?

My Lord of Silent Steps had correctly estimated that east of Julianne's Highway was the region I wanted cleared most thoroughly, and it had acted consequently: the Firstborn had gone out there in force overnight and savaged the enemy warbands in the area thoroughly. They'd also paid particular attention to keeping the connection between the mining roads of the east and the Highway clear, which I send a commendation for. So long as that road remained open, the Iron Prince could keep sending us messengers even when he got into territories where scrying broke down. My column's advance went uncontested through the rest of the day, the field ours in every direction according to the reports of my scout. Some of my commanders came to believe we'd caught the Hidden Horror by surprise with our advance, that our timing had been apt.

He might have been focusing his attentions on the offensive against Cleves, they said, the one headed towards Trifelin. Our two-pronged offensive might have caught him with his forces deployed in the wrong places. Some of General Hune's staff argued for us to increase the speed of our offensive because of this theory, and the notion was popular with Princess Beatrice and her army. They were eager to reclaim their capital from Keter, it was a point of pride for them. I stamped down on their ardour, as unless their guesswork was confirmed I saw no reason to change our campaign plan. Just because we could not see the Dead King's preparations did not mean they weren't waiting for us.

On the third day of the march, early in the morning, I got word from Prince Klaus. When he'd sent his messenger his army had just passed Juvelun, where to his dismay the enemy army had refused to engage even when he'd skirmished provocatively. Our early hopes that the raids on his army were the prelude to a greater attack seemed in vain. With the hope of baiting the enemy into a field battle easily gone, he'd followed our contingency plan and begun a forced march towards Malmedit. That would force the enemy army to either follow or risk losing the tunnels there, but noted it would not be difficult for him to keep in contact with my army from now on.

He wished me luck, and in silence I wished him the same. It was not without risks, marching on Malmedit: it left his supply lines open for the enemy to raid, or to block entirely if they decided to leave Juvelun and advance against his back.

It was only half a bell before sundown that I finally got an explanation as to why Luciennerie had gone silent. Princess Rozala sent word by scrying that not only had Keter begun the expected offensive against Trifelin, where she'd fought a field battle and was now suffering a siege, but that there seemed to be another attack afoot. The raiding detachments she'd sent to harass the army in Luciennerie had been ambushed and driven back, but not before catching sight of a Keteran host marching towards the fortress they'd come from. The same one anchoring her eastern flank, Coudrent. My fingers clenched until the knuckles went white when I heard the news.

If the fortress fell, Cleves was in trouble. The dead would have access to the soft underbelly of the principality, and not only would they be able to cut the supply lines of the far-flung capital of Cleves but they'd also be able to strike at the besieged army in Trifelin from behind. It'd be a *crippling* blow. One that could potentially turn our currently steadiest front into a howling disaster over the span of a bare few months. There were Named in Coudrent, though, and a significant defensive force. The fortress would not fall easily. Still, it now looked like the Dead King had decided to gamble on breaking Cleves before we could retake Hainaut.

He must have realized that we'd weakened the defences there to strengthen our offensive here, in troops and Named. It was a bold strategy from an opponent usually more inclined towards patience, but then he could afford the losses better than we could: every battle refilled his ranks while ours dwindled. It would have been a mistake to hide this from my highest officers, so on the same evening I called another war council. It was taken with equanimity on the surface, but it was only skin deep.

"It might be best to end the offensive for now," Razin Tanja reluctantly said, "and instead reinforce Coudrent through the Twilight Ways."

I cocked an eyebrow, almost impressed. It'd be a strategic blunder to do that, in my opinion, but it showed forethought on his part that'd been entirely absent back when we'd tangled at Sarcella. He could recognize, at least, that losing Cleves would be a greater loss than winning Hainaut would be a gain.

"The Hidden Horror could be baiting us," Aquiline reminded him. "We do not know much of what happened out west for certain."

"If anything this reinforces the need to advance swiftly," Grandmaster Talbot argued. "If we smash our way up the Highway, the enemy might be forced to withdraw the forces they sent out or face losing Hainaut largely uncontested."

"Beg your pardon, lord, but it's only uncontested if the army in Juvelun does what we want and chases the Iron Prince," General

Abigail said. "Might be we could take that for granted before, but I'm not so sure we can now."

"Agreed," Princess Beatrice said, startling my general. "Though I would suggest that is even more of a reason to push forward quickly. Unless we become a serious threat on the Enemy's hold of Hainaut, he has no reason to reconsider his offensives. The army in the Hollow needs to be shattered, and soon."

I stayed silence, wanting all here to air their thoughts, but I tended to side with Beatrice Volignac in this. There were still four days of marching between us and the Hollow, if we stayed on Creation, which was starting to look like too long. The Dead King wouldn't have made a move against Coudrent if he didn't believe he could take the fortress, Named or not, and to be honest I was starting to suspect the attack on Trifelin was not to take the place – Rozala Malanza had made it into a butcher's yard for anyone trying to take it – but instead to pin down the Princess of Aquitan's army so it couldn't relieve Coudrent.

"We can't fight a battle with our column spread out as it currently is," General Hune pointed out. "We'll need to recall the drow and the mercenaries first and that'll take at least a day."

A generous estimate. The distances involved were not small, there were no real roads to speak of out there and the forces in question were significantly spread out. Even if we sent the order in an hour, I doubted we'd gather everyone here by tomorrow. I'd bet the morning after, the dawn of our campaign's fifth day, if we were lucky and the fantassins ran themselves ragged.

"It will slow us down to wait for them," Aquiline pointed out.

"Attacking an entrenched force with superior numbers without our full strength would be foolish," Hune bluntly replied.

"We don't need to launch an assault outright," I noted. "We can set up camp facing the Hollow and prepare for battle, and order the detachments to catch up to us there."

It'd have the benefit of having those detachments sweep through the upper lowlands on both sides as they joined us, flushing out undead warbands still in hiding.

"And if the enemy comes out to fight?" Princess Beatrice asked.

"Gods, if only," I wolfishly smiled.

General Abigail let out a small trilling laugh, which sounded either keen or terrified. Her fear aside, I strongly believed that in a field battle we'd smash right through the force the Dead King had sent to hold the Hollow. It was one thing to

assault a strong position, another to face bones and Binds on the plains – where our cavalry could come into play and we could force them to come to us as our engines pounded at them.

“Send out the recall orders, we’re to gather directly before Lauzon’s Hollow,” I ordered Hune, then turned my gaze to the rest. “As for our column, prepare your forces for a march through the Twilight Ways. Morning Bell tomorrow is the timeline for beginning to open the portals.”

Which meant we’d probably start moving around Noon Bell, realistically. Even the simplest of things became incredibly complicated to achieve, when out campaigning, and time was always the first casualty. My tone was firm and there was no argument, the war council dispersing to see to their orders. We could all feel it, I thought, how much more had come to rest on our shoulders with the latest news. If we failed and Cleves fell, then the Principate would follow. Maybe not the same year, but it would all be downhill from there.

“So we don’t fail,” I murmured.

The words were cold comfort as I went to sleep.

—

Noon Bell turned out to have been wildly optimistic. For once it wasn’t even the fantassins that ended up being a pain in my ass, it was the drow. With Ivah gone their discipline had thinned and they dragged their legs when it came to getting their supply carts in order. Which in turn slowed down the Third Army, which was meant to march into the Twilight Wats after them, and when it became clear that halfway to Noon Bell we were still far from marching the armies that’d gathered had to be released – we couldn’t just make the soldiers stand in the sun for hours like scarecrows, hundreds would get heatstroke and discipline would break down.

The upside was that when the Silver Huntress and her party returned from their jaunt into enemy territory, just a little after Noon Bell, I was still there to take their report. Haranguing sigil-holders had stopped being a productive use of my time about two hours ago, so I’d sat down for lunch and had covers set for the Named so they could join me as they gave their account. Unsurprisingly, the tore at even such plain fare with great enthusiasm. I waited until they’d filled their stomachs some before nudging the Silver Huntress into starting to talk.

“We got close to the Hollow,” Alexis the Argent said. “It was swarming with soldiers, so even sneaking near the road wasn’t an option, but we went up into the hills to the east so we could have a look from there.”

She paused, swallowing a piece of jerky and washing it down with a mug of ale.

"The Headhunter was the one who found the goat path that allow us to," the Huntress conceded. "She did good work."

The villain in question only grinned at me, showing crooked but white teeth.

"The rise we found overlooked the army, Your Majesty," the Vagrant Spear said. "The dead are raising fortifications, making ready for us."

Bad news, but not unexpected ones. The dead tended to do as much when they had the time and expected to fight a defensive battles. Unlike the Army of Callow, though, Neshamah's undead hordes did not usually have dedicated engineers or artisans that could serve the same purpose. Sometimes Binds with know-how managed something a little more elaborate than raising palisades and digging ditches, but it was rare.

"Anything to worry about?" I asked.

"Ditches and walls, the usual," Roland told me. "They are concentrating on where Julianne's High passes, but there were several layers being dug when we had our look."

All the more reason to move on them soon, I thought. Even without giving actual battle, when we got close I'd be able to send raiders to disrupt their preparations. I glanced at the Silent Guardian, but though she was clearly paying attention she had nothing to add by gesture. There'd be no talk out of her, of course. Her Name was not an exaggeration – she'd been born mute, way I heard it.

"The Grey Legion was there," the Headhunter said.

She grinned at me again, as surprise appeared on the face of her companions. Evidently, she'd not informed them.

"You saw them?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I have a Mark on two different soldiers of it," the Headhunter said. "Both were in range."

I nodded. She'd always been vague about what her range actually was with the aspect, or how many of those marks she could have simultaneously, but I'd gathered it was at least several miles.

"You never said a word," the Vagrant Spear indignantly said.

"I'm not your mother, Bloodlet," the Headhunter sneered. "I won't hold you by the hand when you fail."

I whistled sharply, which interrupted before *that* lovely little spat could escalate.

"You can wait until I have my report to tussle," I bluntly said. "Do you have numbers for me?"

"Around ninety thousand infantry," the Silver Huntress said. "Mostly skeletons, though there was a large contingent of ghouls and we won't have seen them all."

"Constructs?" I asked.

"Two wyrms," she grimaced. "And the usual for a frontline force: beorns and tusks, a few vultures and irregular horrors. At least a hundred total, and more they'll have kept hidden in reserve."

Not as bad as I'd expected, although the wyrms would be a problem and the Grey Legion was going to complicate everything just by being there. Either Akua or myself would have to be kept in reserve and fresh for when they came out, else that was going to be a damned costly battle. There just wasn't anything our infantry could do against those things, not even my legionaries.

"Anything else come to mind?" I pressed.

"There were Revenants there," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "At least ten. And there was a shape in the distance, behind the Hollow, that I believe might have been a Crab."

That got my attention, since we'd ever only had unverifiable reports about those existing.

"How sure are you?"

The Headhunter snorted contemptuously.

"Not sure enough to want to risk venturing too far," the villain said.

"Our orders were to avoid combat," the Silver Huntress sharply said. "And we obeyed them. As to the Crab, Your Majesty, it was impossible to tell if it truly was one from so far. There was magical interference as well, we believe."

A 'Crab' was what we'd called the method the Dead King used to keep his armies halfway functional out in the field, when he had no cities to support them. It was a massive skittering necromantic construct, but not one meant to fight: the inside of its armoured shells was supposedly filled with forges, workshops and warehouses. A small moving city meant to allow repair, the creation of fresh constructs and safely carrying necessary goods.

Masego believed they were also one of the methods the Dead King used to scramble scrying, as a sort of moving ritual site. We'd never gotten a close look at a Crab, though, as they tended to be kept relatively far behind enemy lines and jealously guarded.

It'd be a significant blow to the Dead King's ability to wage war in Hainaut if we destroyed one, though. There wouldn't be a swift replacement either: Given how expensive and difficult making a construct the size of a small city would be, we were pretty sure there were no more than ten of them in existence. My eyes moved to Roland.

"You didn't answer the question," I noted.

He hesitated.

"I strongly believe it was one," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "The spell I used is essentially a Baalite eye made through sorcery, and though it doesn't show much at great distances what it *does* show is reliable."

I nodded in acknowledgement, drumming my fingers against the table. I tended to put trust in Roland's judgement, cagey and tricky bastard that he was. While bagging the Crab wouldn't be a greater priority than, well, actually beating the enemy army ahead of us I'd keep its existence in mind. It'd be quite the prize to destroy one of those.

"Noted," I said, then changed the subject. "Our approach to the Hollow has changed, we'll be moving out through the Ways as soon as possible and leaving our detachments to catch up to us near the enemy. That makes planning our answer to the Revenants and the enemy's trump cards – the Grey Legion and the wyrms – all the more important."

"There could be more Revenants," the Silver Huntress reminded me. "We cannot be sure."

"That's war," I shrugged. "You can never be sure. But we can plan for what we do know. I'll want a more detailed report on the Revenants you saw once you're done eating, and I'll be calling an assembly of all Named with the column tonight."

That got their attention, considering they were all included in that.

"We'll be discussing match ups for the Revenants," I told them, "and how we might best deal with the constructs you've identified."

Much as I'd prefer not to, we might have to reveal the unravellers to deal with the wyrms if we couldn't get a clean kill otherwise. I'd not get soldiers killed to keep the element

of surprise – in other situations I might be willing to make that trade, but not when preserving our strength was so important. The battle ahead of us wasn't the last we'd fight this campaign, and likely not even the hardest. I'd intended on hearing our suggestions from them ahead of the assembly, but it was not to be: before I could prod of them into giving an opinion, Adjutant wheeled his way into the tent.

I caught his eyes, and he indicated for us to move outside.

"You all did good work," I told the seated Named, rising to my feet. "And brought back knowledge that might be the key to victory in the coming battle. The Grand Alliance thanks you all, and you will be commended at the assembly tonight."

It was easy enough to take my leave, since even the most polite among them were hungry and in front of a meal, so I left them to it and joined Hakram as he wheeled his way out.

"Word from Neustal," he said. "Fresh from a runner. The Gigantes wardsmiths have arrived."

Finally, I thought. The Titanomachy had been slow in coughing those out, at least when it came to the Hainaut front. Those who'd gone to Cleves had arrived almost a month ago.

"Good new," I said.

"Their leader sent word to ask whether they should follow behind the column or stay in Neustal until sent for," Hakram told me.

I mulled on that a moment. Was it worth the risk? Honestly, yes. I'd probably be able to squeeze a few things out of them if they were there when we attacked the capital, and until then they'd be useful in repairing and fine-tuning the artefacts they'd already sent us.

"How many of them are there?" I finally asked.

"Twenty-two," Adjutant replied.

I let out a low whistle. That was more than I'd expected, at least the Titanomachy wasn't being stingy with manpower – which, if what Hanno had told them about them was true, was the single they prized the most. There honestly was no way that our troops had missed anything numerous or powerful enough to threaten *twenty-two Gigantes* when sweeping through the lowlands here, so there went my last qualms.

"Send them up," I said. "Though with warnings that this is still a war zone, if one we believe secure. If they want to wait until the next supply convoy so they can share the escort, they should feel free to."

They'd still get to the city of Hainaut around the same time we did, by my reckoning.

"I'll see to it," Adjutant replied.

I opened my mouth, to ask about my answer to the proposal, then closed it. I'd already made things worse by pressing too hard once, I thought, it might best let him set the terms of engagement going from here.

"I'll see you later then," I simply replied.

It ended up being near godsdamned Afternoon Bell that the last of our soldiers entered the Twilight Ways, which was the final nail in the coffin of my optimism for this campaign.

caoimhinh

Ohh, we are back to the Chess-themed chapter titles, nice. Last time it didn't end that well for Amadeus, let's hope that this time it turns out well for Catherine.

For those wondering what Fianchetto is: In chess, a fianchetto is the development of a bishop by moving it one square to a long diagonal; specifically, a set of opening moves where a bishop is developed to the second rank of the adjacent knight file. It's an opening that serves to gain control of the major diagonals and serves as preparation for future moves. It serves to delay a direct occupation of the center with the plan of undermining and destroying the opponent's central outpost, but it carries risks: for example, if the fianchettoed bishop is taken (or exchanged), the diagonal that the bishop was formerly protecting will become weak those squares will become holes in the defense, and can form the basis of an attack by the opponent.

So basically, the chapter title is saying "This is a cool, modern move that is the basis of a large strategy, but if this goes wrong, shit will go down."

Konstantin von Karstein

Thanks for the explanation:) I hoped that I would be the first to comment, but you were faster 😊

Miles

"So we don't fail," I murmured.

The words were cold comfort as I went to sleep.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

Darn it that was supposed to be not a reply

[onedollargum](#)

Everyone liked that.

Miles

So we don't fail," I murmured.

The words were cold comfort as I went to sleep.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

caoimhinh

I thought it would be "The words were cold comfort as I went to vote"

[Liliet](#)

Definitely better as is than your version. Please no.

Miles

The best ones are when you don't have to change a thing.

hue hue

Shit is going to hit the fan, and it's going hard. Bet that in the next 10 chaps a Allied Named will die

[Javvies](#)

Interesting.

This is going to be complicated.

On the one hand, things are no longer going smoothly. On the other, I wouldn't stop worrying about the other shoe dropping yet, because it doesn't feel like things have gone significantly far off plan or badly enough for The Inevitable Unexpected Setback to count as having happened, which means it's still waiting to be triggered.

Oh, please don't let the Gigantes get jumped on their way up. That would be all kinds of bad.

M0och123

That's why I am feeling rather uneasy about the current situation!

The other shoe has yet to drop, DK is probably trying to slowly mount pressure onto the Alliance until when the Shoe does come down, it completely dooms Procer.

Not that it won't be stopped by timely Named intervention.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, 22 undead Gigantes would be bad enough, but if the DK can make bonds of them he could have access to their warding schemes. And use them. Imagine trying to invade a Keter that's surrounded by a thing like the Red Snake Wall.

Crash

Imagine having the Titanomachy mad at half of calernia for getting twenty two of their people immediately killed.

Juff

Typo Thread:

even would stay > would even stay
too choose > to choose
needed answer > needed answers
hundred thousand army (sounds odd)
area thoroughly (might want to reword, as thoroughly appears twice in this sentence)
I send a > I sent a
reports of my scout. > reports of my scouts.
army form now on > army from now on
the tore at > they tore at
unexpected ones > unexpected
I'd be a significant > It'd be a significant
will commended > will be commended
"Good new," > "Good news,"
told them about them > told us about them
the single they > the single thing they
might best let > might be best to let

[Burlyraven](#)

In before one of the Revenants is revealed to have the Name of Giantslayer.

Also, that Crab feels like bait. It could possibly be the reveal of Cat's Name, taking it down, but that feels like a costly path, with a *lot* of death and sacrifice.

beleester

It's the size of a small city. It's too expensive to be bait.

I bet it has some sort of nasty secret weapon inside it. You don't need something the size of a city to keep a zombie army supplied. They don't need food or water, and it's not like armor and weapons wear out that quickly. And they said it was also a mobile ritual site. It's gotta be some sort of magic weapon system.

RoflCat

It might be expensive, but the point is Dead King CAN create more of them, seeing as they expect he has multiple of these already.

Multiple Gigantes Revenants on the other hand...

[sengachi](#)

Armies absolutely do go through armor, weapons, and munitions that quickly. And if they're also constructing new constructs that's no small logistical undertaking.

Though also a small city by Calernia's standards is probably only a few thousand people, something that to us would barely be a town. It might not be **that** big.

Salt

They have no choice but to kill it, it's a giant enemy crab

It's mandatory to attack a giant enemy crab's weak point for massive damage.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

This guy/gal/nonbinary pal gets it.

[Liliet](#)

Well, Catherine has established a channel of communication with Hakram! Here's hope that goes well.

And the stakes have officially been raised. The structure I'm seeing is that the tension will keep mounting and it'll be a Evil Only Has To Win Once situation – minor skirmishes can and will be lost, but no big setback can be *allowed* lest everything be lost, and it's the threat of those setbacks that will be The Inevitable Bad Thing.

mamm0nn

It's a bit sad that I don't really find ten Revenants as threatening as they should be. They've been little but Named fodder till now, at least on the field, despite them supposedly being in limited supply. But they never really won anything or truly challenged anyone that we saw. Those Cat fought at the beginning were capable, terrifying and top tier, but we would've heard if someone of that calibre would show up again.

Which begs to wonder what happened to our Horned Lord oracle, a guy like that should've and could've wrecked whole cities after finding regions where Named are temporarily absent when they attack. Or perhaps the Dead King is now using him to predict Cat's side of the battlefield and be one step ahead?

Earl of Purple

He has a limited supply in that each is unique and can't be replaced. But he's spent thousands of years collecting them from every war he's fought, including five or so Crusades. They might only have two of their three Aspects, but they are the two most useful for the Dead King. Also, they were Named, and can slice through normal infantry as easily as a living Named, and often have tricks they developed when alive or unusual magical equipment or abilities.

shikkarasu

Also lets not forget that a pair of Revenants once made *Ranger* go all out. I think that, like Named, Revenants come in varying degrees of useful and DK keeps his best as his Personal Guards. We are seeing him throw everything below his top 10% at the enemy with the expectation that either 1: he will just make replacements out of the Named under the Truce and Terms once the War is won or 2: He will just weather a few more crusades after this to build up his numbers again.

mamm0nn

People already knew of the existence of Revenants before he began his invasion, meaning DK ought've used them during his 'regular' city-kidnapping skirmishes too. We're not seeing millennia of accumulated horrors, because he could (and to feasibly take down Heroes and Villains on those skirmishes probably also should) send those on the regular outings as well.

Meaning that we're seeing the same at most equal exchange of Revenants for new Named which right now feels more like he's bleeding two for each he kills, or DK killed weak Heroes to add to his collection very, very sparsely in those millennia he had till now.

Yes, Ranger fought two without curbstomping them, but I'd hardly say that she went all-out when only using aspects that are always active anyway. Cat fought a few capable ones in the prime of their elements, and those I had been hoping for. But right now they feel more like notable generals and henchmen that are slightly more difficult than the average but feel no more dangerous or significant than the Beorns, wyrms and Grey Legion. Only DK is dangerous, and he's a looming threat on the horizon.

I mean, if DK had been farming Horned Lords and other Villains that are powerful but not protected by Story to prevail over Named-collecting undead constructs more often than not, then sure. He could've gathered a bunch. But with the way Heroes are pesky to stay alive and win after wiping their bloody lip, as we've seen throughout this entire story, I just don't see them being the most common kind Named in his arsenal when his average Revenants have yet to show great ability take down even the B-list Named.

Jarl Zarl

Didn't the Skein die (again) at Third Llesse or am I misremembering that?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, and explicitly turned to dust.

M0och123

As is commonly the case with plot devices like Revenants, when we first encounter them they seem much scarier. Then, when the protagonist has started to deal with them (relatively) easily and regularly they become extra padding onto forces meant to represent a threat.

Also, pretty sure they destroyed the horned lord during the scramble to reach Masego. I distinctly remember the Tyrant's insanity being the perfect counter for The Horned Lord's seeing ability.

mamm0nn

Very true about the diminishing value of elements we've already seen given time. It's just that the Dead King already has constructs very capable of serving that purpose, so I was hoping for Revenants to be more rare and sparsely seen but the Oh shit factor that the Dead King himself can't be out on the field. Yet.

This undead horror of endless numbers just doesn't feel that threatening, despite the good worldbuilding of economic and

military number collapse, when he doesn't have a true cudgel in his toolbox to prevail when he really wants to. But now his odds to win against Heroes feels more like 1/10 at best. He won against Named once, and not thanks to Revenants, while the Heroes are regularly winning battles against him. Meanwhile the Named value of bolstering morale and seeing to battles won doesn't apply either to the morale-less undead armies DK employs.

Salt

I wouldn't be worried at all about the Dead King being not scary enough tbh. The thing about Necromancer-type BBEGs is that there's usually a really obvious-in-hindsight twist involved, even after the undead are all down:

Cornering a BBEG like the dead king is asking for a pithy line about the nature of power or how the Protagonists aren't the only ones smart enough to have contingencies, before he instagibs half the party with whatever hidden horror the BBEG used to kill Spellblade or Skein level Named in the first place, when they were alive and in their prime.

You thought still waters was bad? The Calamities figured that out over their few short decades of life. Neshamah is the literal greatest sorcerer in the history of the continent, and had millennia longer to prepare contingencies that would make second llesse look like a minor mugging in comparison.

Personally my theory is that one contingency is baked into High Arcana to begin with, since he's the original Archmage Trismegistus who invented Trismegistan sorcery and was / generous/ enough to share it with the rest of the continent.

The other is that all those third (and usually the most powerful) aspects he ripped out of his revenants were never thrown away or destroyed. Just kept in his back pocket, as a last resort if a particularly bad rainy day ever showed up on his doorstep.

Ever wonder what kind of insanely dangerous aspects could beat the Skein's Spool and the Spellblade's Ban for the coveted title of third and final aspect? We'll find out, when the Dead King kills Hanno and half the Woe with them.

caoimhinh

You know when the real ultimate mess will be?
When they reach the Serenity and find thousands of innocent and good people who genuinely love and worship Neshamah as a god and benevolent ruler.
That's when the Heroes will be unable to advance and the

Villains will have to dirty their hands, that's when the limits of this alliance will be tested.

Even the Augur found it worse when trying to peer at the Dead King around the faith of his people.

Extract from Interlude And Yet We Stand:

*"she was already touching the limits of what she could do: trying to peer around the edges of the darkness that shrouded the Dead King was a thing of horror, the endless chorus of screams and crazed laughter. **Or even worse, deeper in, the chilling serenity of the voices worshipping him as a god.**"*

Who knows how much power he has in that realm, considering that his first reaction when walking into Creation was *"enjoying the pressure of a word he could not simply shape as he wished"*.

Abrakadabra

Actually, I fully expect the Dead King will use living troops to Access the twilight ways.

caoimhinh

The Skein was destroyed by the Dead King to send back the information about the Wandering Bard, it turned into ashes.

Apparently, the more terrifying of the battles happened during the 2-years timeskip.

We are supposedly in a lull of the conflict (for whatever reason), where Catherine felt confident enough to stroll the countryside along with Razin and Aquiline (and their respective thousands of soldiers), leaving the frontlines and going to visit the Arsenal; the lull in the conflict is apparently big enough that a huge number of combatant Named simply left their positions in what was supposed to be a war without breaks to go to the Arsenal, which is what enabled the previous arc's conflict.

Catherine mentioned in one of the early info dumps of this book (which were an unfortunate necessity to catch us up on the developments during the 2 years of constant warfare and active plot) that the Grand Alliance is actually losing, and barely holding the lines now. There were battles where thousands of their soldiers got massacred. Grey Legion and Revenants that easily pushed back the Named and the armies, even one time where the Witch of the Woods had to destroy the fortress where they were fighting just so that the main force could escape from the hordes of the dead. They are in a state where losing one battle would mean the loss of the war.

Then, of course, all those horrifying battles happened out of screen during the 2-years timeskip and aren't happening anymore (except for the Drow side) because... reasons. Thanks to this lull in the dead offensive, the Grand Alliance can begin their counterattack, which we are seeing now.

That's why you are feeling that the Revenants aren't as threatening as they should be, because we haven't actually seen them doing the damage that they have done, it all happened during the timeskip, and the few that have appeared now have been dealt with relatively easily. Hanno one-hit-KOed a Revenant in the Winter extra chapters, the Drow General destroyed a Revenant (Stitcher, I think) that had fought many times against the Grand Alliance and was apparently very hard to kill, and now Catherine beat two Revenants (one even directly possessed by the Dead King) with relative ease and little support from the others.

Then again, the hard battles are supposed to happen again once this offensive sets off. Keep in mind that so far these were just battles in the occupied lands of Procer, not yet a proper assault on Keter nor the Serenity.

I don't think it would be good for the story if all of a sudden the GA started to be massacred again just to show us that the Dead King is fucking dangerous, because we already know that. What's necessary now is for the GA to win, but showing us that they are winning because they have the preparation for it, not simply a clash of forces where the dead are overrun by the living. We need to see those dangerous and OP Revenants being defeated, but displaying how powerful they are, how much of a threat they represent, without actually letting them do their potential damage.

It's a delicate balance, but I believe EE can do it.

The timeskip is supposed to be the justification for all the new artifacts, weapons, tactics, powers, techniques, and such that the Grand Alliance and Named are going to show now in the coming battles. That's the key to this.

mamm0nn

Ah, I remembered the Skein getting away from the battle with Cat, Saint and Tyrant so I thought he lived. I forgot about what happened afterwards.

With the two years, I agree and understand. I love that this story actually goes into the more 'mundane' things like politics and economics that don't just go away during a war, where so many others muddle in the whatever is convenient and important only. And I know that the last two years have been rough.

It's just, it hasn't been narratively rough, in that we feel the severe pressure against them. Those two years were off-screen and we know little to nothing about when and how DK killed a bunch of Named including the Fortunate Fool. Just that it happened. The only times we've seen Revenants out on the field in the Extra Chapters and lately they've been more push-overs losing against the Heroes because of course they do because Story, than precious rooks and bishops played by a being that knows Name lore and how to circumvent or avoid it.

Granted, the importance of the living Named has waned as well now that there are so many, it's a given because there's a finite amount of attention to go around, but right now it feels like the Grand Alliance is bleeding men and coin but not Named. That those don't have to be placed as cautiously and in groups because the DK would kill them if used recklessly. That there's an ever-looming blade above the neck of the Named that they can fall and be turned against their former alliance if the strategists make the wrong move or strategically sacrifice a Named for a victory or other Named to survive. Named right now feel like they're with plot armour of not falling or being truly threatened along with everyone else, until they meet the real opposition in the form of DK himself.

Liliet

I mean, that's kind of... how being Named works. Plot armor is the first perk of the position.

Plot armor that Revenants straight up don't have, and that's why Named tend to curbstomp them if there isn't an absurd disparity of power like with Spellblade and Skein.

The Revenants are minions, story-wise, in the way they weren't before the big war. Inverse Ninja Law is a bitch for the side with the numbers – it was for the Grand Alliance against Catherine, and now it is for the Dead King against the Grand Alliance.

Like, that's a known and acknowledged thing in-universe.

It's also worth noting that Catherine isn't functioning as a field commander of Named right now. Presumably there's a lot of careful planning and desperate struggles for people in charge of the specific squads of Named. Catherine herself is too powerful to be worried about that when she is around, the problem is what happens where she isn't – and, well, it's her POV we're following.

Loin

I think part of it is that DK has to be much more careful about playing his best cards on the Procer front than he does in Keter or elsewhere, in order to avoid getting caught up in an unfavorable story. I'd imagine that the really nasty Revenants, like all the other super nasty stuff, is currently going towards keeping the Drow occupied.

Ninestrings

Dead King: Hey man remember when we talked about making giant mobile crab bases, you were high as shit but I thought it had some merit

Aide: I ... think that was my grandfather Lord.

Dead King: Shit was it? Oh probably anyway there's a giant necromantic Crab out there the size of a city I need you to outfit with war stuff.

Aide:

Dead King: I'm not getting rid of it.

laguz24

So they are going to be fighting a giant enemy crab that is not a crab, sounds ominous.

Matthew Wells

Something that big and mobile must have severe structural compromises in it's armor.

STRIKE ITS WEAK POINT FOR MASSIVE DAMAGE!

Clint

If an Unraveller can destroy one (1) undead construct (some stabbing required)... does a city-sized crab count as one?

I think we really need a party-of-five interlude with heroes jockeying to get the most kills so that Silver Huntress can shoot the city-sized crab thing with an Unraveller and have the Troubador or the Barrow Sword call out, "That still only counts as one!"

M0och123

Excellent chapter name!

A slightly unexpected move on DKs side. Though a mid game chess strategy would probably be more appropriate instead of an opening.

For some reason I am feeling a slight feeling of unease about Cat's army. Can't quite put my finger on it but I feel much more uneasy than the foreshadowing so far should be giving me.

Regardless, great chapter!

M0och123

Another thing to bring up is the possibility of Malicia betraying DK at some crucial juncture to try to get into the Alliances good graces.

It would be very unlikely to work but if the right opportunity comes, who knows?

Miles

Holy it it makes sense.

Ranger can't join, as her ally Black can't join either.

If Bard plants a seed to convince Malicia to try and join that could cause some severe headaches for Cat.

Clint

I'm not sure Malicia **can** join. She signed a soul-bound contract with the DK. And even to sign on to the T&T or Liesse Accords, wouldn't she have to abdicate her throne – and risk losing the name? (I say risk because of Dread Emperor Irritant's several abdications... If she were a more out-of-the-box genre-savvy thinker, she might actually try something like that.)

Nordvegr

Watch, we'll be seeing the KIA. As of today, considered suboptimal by most masters.

Cayle

Nuke or pressure the elves and the orc and Callow alliance works. Otherwise Black just needs to pull his head out and deal with it.

Daniel E

Good thing Cat already has a counter from her College days; Operation Feinting Goat is a go.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I give this pun an A for Adjutant. It is a prince among jokes.

[sengachi](#)

I kind of love how even though the threat of the Revenants feels like it has dimmed somewhat (though oh, I am expecting to get that flipped on me), the tension of logistics and operationally competent enemies has **not**. Getting your supply line messed with or your enemy having free excess to your vulnerable countryside is still exactly as much of an existential threat as it was back in the beginning. Moreso, if anything, now that the story has built up Cat and our's understanding of how critical logistics is.

This chapter also gives me a better appreciation for how Amadeus took Callow. He just did **this**, exactly what the Dead King is doing. He constructed a war engine with so much power and logistical flexibility that he could force terms of engagement and then capitalize on his opponent's decisions with moves which targeted failure points which can't be countered with heroism. It just doesn't matter how much Named oomph you've got if the capital lynchpinning your local defenses can't be fed in the face of enemy action.

Which, uh, concerns me. I am not happy about seeing Amadeus parallels in the Dead King's strategy. That is ominous.

Liliet

Amadeus and the Dead King always had narrative parallels. Neshamah was always the unsaid counterargument to Amadeus's "I just want Evil to win once". Neshamah was always the person who actually did what Amadeus professed to do – use people and story tropes to his advantage coldly, without actually caring a whit. Neshamah was always the ur-Practical Evil.

That he and Amadeus do the same clever thing in the same circumstances is not IMHO a narrative sign of bad times to come, any more than we already knew they were coming. It's just an inevitable conclusion from their other similarities.

Miles

Amadeus probably got many of his ideas from Neshamah's playbook. After all, there's the villain who came closest to winning against Good in all of recorded history. Heck, Amadeus might have joined Neshamah if not for the whole needing to die first thing, or the inevitable conflict of interest thing.

Liliet

I, uh, really don't think Amadeus would have joined Neshamah. They do not have interests in common.

Abrakadabra

So the Dead King has mobile factories? Damn.

Chapter 55: Queen's Pawn

"Let there be no talk of mercy after the ram has touched the gate."

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

Of all the gifts the Sisters had given me, the peculiar sense I had for the coming of dawn and dusk remained one of the most useful. It would be a little under a bell before sundown, in Creation. Not so here, of course, for the Twilight Ways knew no such change. The timing of this undertaking had been chosen very precisely, as it was no longer a few warbands hitting our dug-in positions that we'd be facing: we were about to come out swinging in front of a field army of the Kingdom of the Dead, the Hidden Horror's host forewarned and prepared for our coming. It was going to be an ugly fight, before we got our defences up.

Spread out on the green and sloping hills of the Twilight Ways, the warriors mustered to take the van in the coming battle were tightening their ranks as the gate-mages finished the last few syllables of their spells. Masego's formula was the one being used, universally so even if it wasn't necessarily the best formula possible for each mage. It was however, the one formula that more than seven in ten of the sufficiently powerful mages of the Grand Alliance were able to use. Numbers had a strength of their own, especially when it came to war. *The pharos devices wouldn't work anywhere as well with disparate formulas, anyway*, I idly thought. Not that we'd be using our only one tonight, if I had my way.

The evening air grew thick with sorcery and silence spread as the mages each finished their incantation and shaped their sorcery before withholding the last syllable – a guttural sound in the mage tongue that echoed of something like *krakh*. It would only be spoken when I gave my command, painted the night sky with my signal to begin the crossing. Mounted on Zombie and perched atop a hill I held good vantage, and so allowed myself to sweep the assembled forces with my gaze one last time. It was an unfamiliar sight. Our strength had been mustered not in the shape of an army ready for battle, but according to the new rules that warfare through the Ways demanded.

Standing in bands among the hills, near the gates-to-be, the painted warriors of Malaga and Tartessos were waiting to serve as the tip of the spear. Led by Blood and backed by four Named – Vagrant Spear, Headhunter, Sage and Silent Guardian – they would seize the grounds we needed as our first wave. If they got through in the time they'd been given, anyway. Behind them the Second Army stood in good order, ranks of red painted shield and polished helms glinting in the twilight. General Hune's hulking silhouette towered above the ranks, a siege tower made woman.

I'd lead the first rank personally, when we sallied out.

The holding action would be ours.

To the left and right of the Second Army our horse was milling about, one wing led by Grandmaster Talbot and the other by Princess Beatrice. A few mages with them ensured we'd have some measure of flexibility in the coming engagement, though only within limits. Our fantassin companies, under the consolidated command of Captain Reinald, were waiting behind the Second and intermixed with Volignac infantry. It was the Third that'd serve as our reserve: I was counting on Abigail of Summerholm's knack for calculated risks. She'd commit if and when it was needed, but not a moment before. At the back of everyone else stood the drow, a sea of sigils that was not so much a reserve as another force entirely. Their time would come, but they would not share this battle with us. It would have been too much of a waste.

"Into the breach, dearest?" Akua Sahelian idly asked.

I glanced at her. No dress tonight, no silks or velour. The shade had taken the appearance of a daughter of Wolof gone to war, beautiful lamellar plate in red and gold beneath a curved helmet and an aventail of mail that could be fastened with a piece shaped like a black swan. I was in no mood for banter, tonight, and did not pretend otherwise.

"Find your mages and waste no time," I said. "Your hands will decide how much the butcher's due tonight."

"Then luck in battle, my heart," Akua smiled.

"Luck's for the other side," I replied. "We make due with plans."

And as she melted into the shadows, I raised my staff and pulled at the Night as I unleashed a great spurt of power. The bright light that bloomed in the sky exploded in silent streaks of colour, and with that unmissable sight the battle began. Mages finished their incantations, magic held back at last unleashed: the Twilight Ways shivered and seventy-two different gates into Creation opened. Most weren't even large enough for two people, with a mere twenty of proper size to let carts and engines through, but that was why we were sending the Levantines out

first. They were quick on their feet and used to fighting without formations.

Clamour in Levantine tongues went up, war cries filling the air as the warriors boldly went forth through the gates. *Honour to the Blood*, they clamoured. *Honour to Levant, honour in strife*. I'd found a thick shield and a knack for ducking more useful than honour, as a rule, but I would not deny their ways when they lit a fire in their bellies. I kept my eyes on the bands filing through, counting down as the warriors passed. The Enemy was slow, tonight, or we got lucky: it was thirty one heartbeats before Keter gave its answer. More than half the gates – but not the large ones, thank the Gods – flickered, shredding whatever flesh and metal had been going through in a red spray.

So that was to be the first beat of our dance tonight, huh. *Thirty one heartbeats*. The Dead King's mages were getting sloppy, if it'd taken them this long to disturb our gates with their counter-rituals. Banners were raised by the gates and drums brought to the fore, so that through their beating the rhythm could be kept. For thirty beats Levantines continued to cross, then halted. The gates rippled again, taking the leg of some screaming young warrior who'd been foolhardy enough to try the odds. It wouldn't be the last time today it happened. The bleeding man was dragged through and the crossings resumed.

For now I was not needed. The first hour belonged to the Dominion of Levant, tasked to clear the grounds in front of us so that when the Second Army began its crossing we had room enough to set down wards and protections undisturbed. Depending on what the enemy had waiting on the other side, that hour would either be a pleasant moonlit walk or a bloody horror of screams. The lagging counter-rituals gave me hope for the former, but hope would not serve me well in a battle with Keter. I'd learned that the hard way. Time dragged forward as the warriors passed through the gates in a trickle – hundreds, then thousands – but I watched in silence. My escort dared not disturb me. It was only when I sensed the time nearing that I headed out, spurring Zombie forward. An escort of twenty knights from the Order of the Broken Bells behind me, I headed towards the Second Army at a brisk trot.

Soldiers under half a hundred different banners cheered sparsely as I went by, for even though few of them were mine I was known as a good woman to have on your side when the steel came out. Though later I would fight on the front, for now I went to Hune. Looking down at me, the ogre gave a brisk salute.

"First reports?" I asked.

"The enemy was already mobilized," General Hune said. "We'll be doing it the hard way: ghouls were already afoot so it was contested from the start. Keter has pulled in every patrol in a

radius of miles to slow us down. We're looking at thousands, not hundreds."

My lips thinned. I'd known that Keter would be expecting us to pop out soon, but not anticipated large enemy forces this far out: our beachhead was at least ten miles away from Lauzon's Hollow!

"If it were an easy war, we would already have won it," I said. "Watch your back, general."

"Good hunting, Your Majesty," Hune replied.

Dismounting Zombie and handing her reins over to my knightly escort, I went to stand with the front rank of the Second. The company was under the command of a Captain Bolah, a dark-skinned veteran who'd once served in the Legions, but it was her young Callowan lieutenant – Alfred of Ankou, he eagerly introduced himself as – who stood closest to me. Before long the two Named that were to serve as my retinue for the fight made their appearance, having been lingering nearby but away from my troops.

"I don't believe we've ever shared a battle before," Roland noted, coming to stand at my left.

He'd prudently added a helmet to the mail and longcoat he refused to set aside.

"Not on the same side, at least," I acknowledged.

The Beastmaster, on my right was not inclined to idle talk. His eyes stayed on the banners near the gates.

"Time will run out soon," Lysander grunted.

I nodded in agreement. It was unfortunate, but it didn't look like the Dominion would be able to get all their warriors across in the time we'd allotted for it. Before long trumpets sounded, signifying the warriors of Levant were to move to the sides and clear the gates, which got... contentious. None of that proud lot wanted to be denied the opportunity to battle because they'd been a little too slow, and some gates had to be forcefully cleared of Levantines trying to force their way in. Behind us the Second Army raised its banners, horns were sounded and the advance began.

Unlike the Dominion forces, my Army of Callow had standard company sizes and officers ensuring order so instead of a mess of warbands it was neatly filed lines matched to gate sizes that approached specific gates. My own company, Captain Bolah's, was bound for one of the larger gates – part of the reason I'd picked it – and before long we were standing in front of the transparent veil, the mage maintaining it standing to the side with closed

eyes and two assistants. On the other flank the drummer kept pace, while a Proceran held the banner telling us the number of the gate and a young woman by his side shouted at us hurry.

A heartbeat later we were through and the cool evening air of the Hainaut lowlands washed over my face. *Shit*, I immediately thought, even as Beastmaster contorted and a veritable flock of birds erupted from his furs to fly above. I could now see why the Dominion had found it hard to get people through, and it wasn't just inferior discipline. The gates has all been opened along the same axis, though the line itself was wavy from imprecisions, and near the left side of that axis bands of Dominion were being hard-pressed by a surprisingly large number ghouls. There just hadn't been much room for more people to pour through, even when there'd been time.

Streaks of Light told me the Lanterns were in the thick of it, as was their wont, but their tricks weren't the ones I'd been looking for.

"Beastmaster," I said, limping forward as the legionaries advanced behind me. "Where's the Vagrant Spear?"

She should be handling that flank along with the Headhunter, but I saw no sign of her. The other villain's steps slowed a heartbeat as he saw through the eyes of one the birds in flight, then he pointed to the left.

"There," he said. "Pulling one of your lordlings out of trouble, looks like. Osen. Wounded. I see blood."

I swallowed a curse. Already? No, that was unfair. Likely the dead had gone specifically after her, knowing her death would brutalize Dominion morale. The issue was that there would only be Lanterns near and that lot couldn't heal. The Forsworn Healer was on his way, but he was with the third wave of Named near the *back* of the Second Army.

"Roland," I tightly said. "Go patch her up."

"On it," the Rogue Sorcerer nodded.

He was gone in a moment, stride near a run as his long coat swirled behind him. Gods, if only I could have a dozen more of him.

"With me, Beastmaster," I said. "And I want a warning when the first tide gets close."

"I see it approaching already," the man murmured. "Hurry, Black Queen."

A quick look behind me told me all of Captain Bolah's company had crossed and it was now in good order, waiting for my instructions even as another company began to emerge behind it.

"With me," I yelled. "We'll set the boundary."

I got a roar back. Good, they'd need the spirit before this was over. Much as I would have liked to head to the left flank and stabilize our lines there, I had other duties. Besides, we had a contingency that should take care of it before long. A messenger should have gone through the dedicated gate by now. A hundred legionaries in tight formation behind me, I limped to the front. The Dominion had formed up into three large clumps of warriors after crossing— shield walls that'd suffered under ghoul assaults, most likely — with the two more or less to the right having held well and only the one to the left having gotten mauled by the dead.

Out of the seventeen thousand Dominion warriors maybe ten thousand had gotten through in the half hour they'd had, a testament to their light-footedness given the situation. There couldn't have been more than three thousand ghouls and maybe half that in skeletons out here right now, all spread out, but up close ghouls were bloody and hard to kill even. We'd be winning this fight, for sure, but it would cost us precious time and keep us from seizing the territory we wanted before the first tide hit. I grit my teeth, in a black mood, and led my company three hundred feet out before calling a halt.

"Here," I shouted. "Form up."

Maybe twenty feet ahead of us the Tanja forces were cleaning up the last of their undead. Among the ranks I glimpsed the Sage and the Silent Guardian, whose assigned flank this was. On the other left side four large gates opened and our first surprise of the night came out at a gallop: Grandmaster Talbot led out the Order and some Dominion light horse in wedges, smoothly coming around to hit the ghouls that'd been chewing up the Osenia in the back. Long lances skewered the creatures and Levantines butchered them after they were pinned, leaving the Order free to peel off the engagement quickly and with few casualties.

They retreated the Twilight Ways without wasting time, as the last thing we wanted was to risk them out here for too long. Cavalry was not easily replaced, and the Dead King was always hungry to steal it for his own armies. With the pressure taken off of them, the Levantines on the left flank pushed forward at last. I worried my lip, eyes on the moving soldiers. Using my location as the yardstick the Second Army had begun taking position in a broad hollow square, but the left third of that square was noticeably lagging behind the rest. It wouldn't be ready in time, would it?

"Beastmaster?" I asked.

"You'll start seeing them in a moment," he replied. "And hearing them not long after."

"Fuck," I snarled. "They'll hit us long before the cabals are in position."

Much less the wards, whose raising would be further delayed. Akua was good, and I'd glimpsed her crossing through with mages and wardstones, but she couldn't conjure up a stable array out of thin air. She needed room that she just wouldn't have.

Beastmaster's warning proved true moments later: in the distance I saw what I might have taken as a swarm of insects, were it not too far out for their size to be reasonable. Birds, they were birds. Not buzzards, which were specially-crafted dead, but just any bird the Dead King had been able to get his hands on. His forces slaughtered and poisoned all wildlife wherever they went so that they could use this very tactic: throwing massive flocks and herds of them at us as skirmishers.

Like a tidal wave filling the sky, they came.

"I'll handle it myself," I finally said.

There went one of the two large workings I'd be able to throw around in daylight.

Striding forward with more anger to my stride than I'd care to admit, I left behind my legionaries after a curt gesture signifying they shouldn't follow. Beastmaster kept pace with me, looking oddly at ease in the middle of mayhem. The warriors from Malaga had been thorough about putting down the dead, but sloppy with clean up: with my staff I shoved aside a painted warrior before the back of her knee could be stabbed by a crawling half-broken skeleton, my boot going through its skull with a wet crunch. I ignored whatever she said to me in Ceseo and kept limping ahead. The Levantines split for me, almost respectfully.

By the time I got to the front, stepping away from my armies with no one but Beastmaster at my side, the tide of undead birds was closer. Close enough no one could miss them, close enough that the beat of their wings and their ceaseless *screeching* hit our ears like a drumbeat. One coming ever closer as dead things filled the horizon. The birds would only be the first tide, I knew. They were just the quickest to make their way to our lines. Behind us I felt the Dominion warriors shrink. I'd seen some of those same people leap into a siege tower on fire without batting an eye, face Revenants with gleeful whoops, but this breed of horror always hit them hard: what honour could there be in being shredded by dead birds?

Neshamah had made of study of us, of what got into our heads and put lead in our legs.

"You have means to deal with them?" the Beastmaster asked.

"Sure," I replied with a hard smile, "it's called *force*."

To my surprise, that startled a laugh out of the usually humorless man.

"Don't let me get into your way then, Black Queen," Lysander said.

A snort was my only answer. As if. I took another few limping steps forward, loosening my shoulders under the cuirass and taking a good look at the advancing tide. Hadn't rained in a while, had it? I knelt down, leaning my staff, and traced the ground with a few fingers. Dry. I hoisted myself back up with a grunt.

"You never taught me a prayer for this," I said in Crepuscular. "An invocation. I imagine there isn't one."

I smiled at doom coming on darkened wings.

"Shall we make one together?"

On my shoulders I felt sharp talons dig into the skin, almost enough to draw blood. I had their attention and, closing my eyes, I breathed out and sunk into the Night. I pulled it deep into me until it was writhing in my veins like serpents of smoke.

"I have come a long way, through winding paths," I murmured, and cocked my head to the side to better hear them.

It was neither a murmur nor the beat of wings, and somehow both.

"Yet behold," I said, Andronike's cool disregard given voice, "this barren realm, this crown of ruin!"

And her sister was not far behind, leaning close to hisper into my ear – every syllable a caw, a greedy call of carrion.

"Let me match horror with horror, might with might," I said, Komena's poisonous pride made verdict. "And know no master in this."

The Night roiled, the sea boiling out of me in dusky vapour, and I almost smiled. They had left me the honour of the last touch.

"So let the sun weep and the Crows have their due," I spoke in a rasping laugh. "For in the end, all will be Night."

I felt the Sisters smile against the sides of my neck. This one, they whispered, would be known as mine. *Catherine's Tears*. Above the tide of carrion birds the sky howled with gales as the Night left me, leaving me buckling down to my knees and hollowed out. My vision swam, but not so much I did not see my work: the power forming into a great sun of black flames, pulsing and screeching almost as loud as the undead. And the tide moved to split around it, but it wouldn't be enough. I pushed myself up with my staff, and raised a trembling hand.

I snapped a finger and all the Hells went loose.

The black sun blew up in a wave of heat, long streaks of dark flame lashing out and carving streaks of ash through the undead. Like black comets seething strokes shot out, burning as they went and smashing into the plains below with enough might to have the ground shivering even where I stood. Droplets of black fire fell like rain, igniting the carrion dead, and I watched with a cold smile as entire swaths of the enemy burned. Soon the smell of burning bone and flesh would come to us with the wind, but for now I turned around and began my limp back to my lines. The Beastmaster's followed, face gone blank.

A sky-shaking roar came as the Dominion and the Second Army gave their approval to my work, but no smile touched my face. I'd dug deeper than I'd planned to – my legs still shook and my arms felt numb – so I could not guarantee I'd be able to pull something on the same scale again. Not anytime soon, anyway.

It'd not been enough to blot out the birds, but it'd slow them down. The undead things had scattered every which way, so they'd take time to regroup, and I could generously be said to have at most destroyed half of the lot. It'd be long enough for the Dominion left to have put itself in position, hopefully, because otherwise there was going to be an awful lot of blood on the floor and soon. My face grew grimmer as I got closer to our formations and saw we were still behind. The Second Army wasn't entirely on the field yet, and that meant we'd be understrength when it came to priests – the kind that could make shields, anyways.

While I could have gone to the command node of the Second, all I'd do there was get in Hune's way. She already knew the damned plan, she'd helped make it. Getting too close to Akua's work would be a risk as well, since I was pretty much a moving mass of Night even when not actively using it, so the frontline was the best place for me. The Second Army had moved into cohorts, with furrows behind them, and as I got back to Captain Bolah's company the first trumpets sounded. The Dominion moved down the furrows to stand behind the Army of Callow formations, with some relief I fancied.

The winged undead were already beginning to gather in great swarms. As soon as the Dominion was behind them, the Second Army's standards were raised and horns sounded: the lines closed and shields went up, a solid wall of steel becoming the frontline as mage cabals got into position. Ahead of us, the tide had entirely formed anew. It was closer now, and the cacophony of screeches was once more deafening. *Four hundred feet*, I thought, watching. *Three hundred feet*. Around me legionaries shifted uneasily.

"Steady," I called out. "Trust in your officers. We're ready for them."

That got a few shouts back, and swords were hammered against shields. *Two hundred feet*. The shrill screeches washed over us like a physical wave. Screams erupted behind us, not of fear or dismay but battle cries as the House Insurgent slashed out with Light. *Callow*, some simply shouted. Cries of *For the Kingdom* or *Gods Unforgiving* with them, and even a few *Only to the Just*. Like a volley of arrows javelins of Light went flying, prayers to Above brightening the air. *One hundred feet*. One, two, three volley followed and then at fifty feet, when the noise was like a rolling thunder in our faces, transparent panes of sorcery bloomed in front of us. Like a sorcerous tortoise formation, the rectangular angled shields came down as armour and muted the cacophony.

It was not airtight. Some birds went through, and with a tired hand I drew my sword to hack at a rotting blue jay as its talons clawed pointlessly at my cuirass, but those few were a pittance compared to the angry tide hammering at the magical defence. In some places the shields flickered or outright broke under the pressure, but we had mage reserves and the House Insurgent had been tasked with purging breaches.

Captain Bolah's company was untroubled, so I clapped her young lieutenant's shoulder and called for Beastmaster to follow me. We would be most useful plugging breaches for now. The Second Army finished ferrying across its numbers early, but still too late: by then the second tide had struck. Insects, come on smaller wings. Flies and hornets, until larger things like beetles and stingers and butterflies came up. Unlike the birds, they were capable of digging under the rim of the shields and going up. Twice I torched a stretch when swarms became large enough they devoured soldiers alive, Roland coming back to my side for the grim business after having healed Aquiline Osená.

Sappers came forward and burned the insects out with torches and pitch, but it wasn't enough. We had to pull mages from shielding to defend against the insects, and it shrank our defences. More panes began failing when our intricate patterns began losing strength, dozens of soldiers dying to every breach before the

House Insurgents and the Lanterns, come to reinforce them, could purge the invaders. The third tide hit just as the first Procerans began crossing through, and to my relief Juniper – Hune, I caught myself, it was not the Hellhound in the deeps with me this time – had called for priests to cross first.

When vermin and wild animals began to hammer at the shields and wriggle under them, less numerous than birds or insects but much stronger, we finally got to dismiss entire sections of the defence and remake them anew in pale yellow Light. It burned the dead when they touched them, though not as much as more concentrated amounts would have. We focused our defenses anew, breaches becoming rarer as the work became more distributed, and in some places our people even began to lower panels to bait the dead into deadly Light volleys.

“It’s turning in our favour,” Roland told me, panting and sweat-soaked.

“For now,” I grunted back. “Still an hour and half before sundown”

“They’ll pull away before that,” the Rogue Sorcerer said. “They have to.”

He might be right, I thought. The Dead King had to know we had Firstborn with us, and on weak undead like this roving packs of Mighty would be pure butchery. But the assault from the hordes wasn’t slacking and that boded ill. He had at least one last nasty trick left for us, and I could hazard a good guess at what it might be.

“Send for our sword,” I told Roland. “I expect we’re about to have an unpleasant turn.”

It didn’t make me a prophet to predict hard times when fighting Keter, but I felt a sliver of dark satisfaction anyway when the hammer blow did come. With so much magic and Light out in the air, it’d been damned impossible for even Named to smell it when a force had approached us under the Dead King’s favourite hiding enchantments: we didn’t realize a thing until a wave of skeletons broke through a weaker section of the shields and hit the Army of Callow’s shield wall. The swarms poured in with them, a potential catastrophe, but Hune responded as swiftly and ruthlessly as she’d been taught in the War College.

The entire beachhead was purged in a wave of fire and Light, including at least half a company of our own soldiers. We would have lost a lot more, I told myself, if the gap had spread.

I’d not intervened yet because I didn’t believe that was the last blow, and once more I was proved right: an entire section of our defences shattered a heartbeat later as half a dozen vultures

with Revenants on their backs broke through the 'ceiling'. I wasn't close to enough to help much, to my irritation: I only got off a few shots of flame from a distance, and by the time Zombie came to my side the Revenants were already on the ground. I'd had a band of five waiting for this, our sword. Archer and the Silver Huntress were among them, but while they went through the vultures like butter the Revenants were another story.

They didn't stay and fight the Named, they just *killed*.

The dead Named butchered their way through the Levantines and my soldiers, each heading out towards a different part of the shielding even as masses of birds poured through the gaping hole they'd made in the ceiling. The sorcery and Light that shot up in answer wasn't enough, like someone trying to stop a river with a spear stroke. I almost reached for Night again, I was recovered enough to do *something*, but breathed out in relief when massive spinning blades of Light erupted just above our troops and began shooting upwards.

The Blessed Artificer had come through the gate, arriving with the third wave of Named.

Enough dead had flown through already that dozens more soldiers died before the carrion could be destroyed, and we did not catch a single fucking Revenant as they fought their way out – and, even worse, opened breaches as they did. Fuck, and we'd barely learned anything about what they could do too. I secured two breaches with my escorts as the shielded ceiling was painstakingly restored, and a moment later Creation shivered. I grinned tiredly: Akua had finally anchored the wards, thank the Gods. Unlike the first few times the Dead King wouldn't do us the favour of grinding his expendables to dust on our defences, so to the ragged cheering of the army the swarms went still and then began to retreat.

Half an hour left until sundown.

Still on Zombie's back, my face was grim as I looked around us. Though the battle had gone well, better than we'd expected even – there'd been no need to commit the Procerans or even the Third to very risky flanking actions – we'd still lost more than a thousand, at a glance. At least half over that in wounded too, though the priests would see to that some. As night began to fall and the hard work of building the camp into a defensive position was undertaken under torchlight and magelights, I found myself approached by a silent ring of thin silhouettes with painted faces. The sigil-holders of the Firstborn bowed when I turned to them, and I offered a hard smile.

"Prepare your sigils," I said. "We raid, Mighty."

The answering smiles were fearsomethings, for these were a fearsome lot.

It was our turn, now.

[ErraticErrata](#)

First update of the month, that means an extra chapter in the tab of the same name. This one is titled "Malanza", from the POV of Rozala Malanza at various points in the series.

Insanenoodlyguy

"You have means to deal with them?" the Beastmaster asked.

"Sure," I replied with a hard smile, "it's called votes."

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Djinn O'Cide

Go. Vote. Here. <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Javvies](#)

Ouch.

Sending squads of Revenants out to kill their individual ways through regular troops while avoiding the Named concentrated to deal with them? That's going to be brutally effective when the Alliance can't prevent it.

Zggt

I think that the Dead King has contingencies for when only Named will be of import in the confrontation. Catherine's legacy, in as much as she wants to build it, is that humanity can create a change where Named can't, and that it is stronger. Whittling down the army while letting the Named survive removes that life-long narrative from Catherine, which as a villain would be her downfall (her unbelievable hubris, and so on).

RoflCat

And yet out of those 1000+ dead she confirmed (and more wounded), how many were done by the Revenants compare to the rest of his forces?

It's also saying something that both DK and Catherine focus more on damaging the non-Named forces than the Named (Catherine dropping her big Night bomb on the bird swarm, DK have his Revenants deal as much damage to the line as it can then get out)

Frivolous

It impresses and horrifies me that Catherine and the Levantines knew that many would die when the gates were countered, and yet the Levantines went through anyway.

Catherine's Tears. Nice name for a destructive evocation spell.

I really hope that in the next episode, we'll get a look at Mighty harvesting Night from Keter undead. We've had no actual depiction of such yet, which is unfortunate.

Liliet

Not the first nor the last time. Fights against fae were much uglier, as the vanguard was practically guaranteed to all die to the fire and shit. And people went anyway.

Someperson

For all intents and purposes it seems she just invented the meteor swarm spell.

Burlyraven

Heh, once more Catherine's lasting legacy will be a thing of fire.

I wonder how used to the harsh calls everyone in the alliance is at this point? Obviously all the soldiers on the frontlines know they're likely going to die in any combat, but I wonder if the mages and priests hesitate any when the call for a purge comes, or if even the bloodiest of hearts therein has calcified. It's kill a dozen to save a thousand, but that's still quite the burden on the average will.

RoflCat

The first time you hesitate over a guy and get to see dozens more died, you'd probably learn that lesson fast.

Or just hear stories from those who were there.

dadycool

Catherine's Tears, a rain of black fire. Beautiful.

caoimhin

A hard start, but it's a win with relatively low losses of lives.

It would be so, so awesome to read the Drow's Night Raid from the Drow's POV. But Catherine tends to get poetic when describing them, so I guess that's fine too.

Cheers for a cool chapter!

Darkening

Seeing Jindrich's pov of Cat was spectacular. I'd love more of that lol.

letouriste

delightful as always:)

Juff

Typo Thread:

twenty knights form > twenty knights from
the ogre have > the ogre did
aknowledged > acknowledged
at us hurry > at us to hurry
gates has all > gates had all
number ghouls > number of ghouls
retreated the > retreated into the
to hisper > to whisper
dedly > deadly
fearsomethings > fearsome things

[TeK](#)

Well finally someone uses necromancy right. It always annoyed me how, despite it's catastrophic destructive potential, nobody tried to get creative with it. You can do just so much, undead insects, chemical warfare, psychological pressure, it always disappointed me, how most writers never explore these delicious opportunities. So my hat's off for EE, yet again.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, I liked Cat musing about the fact that some of the most important wards defending the camp were those against vermin. Probably because it would poison food and water supplies.

[Liliet](#)

Also because you cannot sleep because short of solid stone nothing can actually prevent them from coming after you when you are.

Well, I guess sleeping in shifts would be possible, depending on the amount of vermin.

[Adrian V](#)

In the defense of the many authors out there sometimes the very rules of magic of their setting prevent those uses, at least in a big manner, even here DK can do it because he has experience and raw power behind him and liek we justs aw it can be countered. Also in other setting they have the means to oppose such tactics, here their danger was the number but they were individually pretty fragile, i can see another world were such attack are rendered useless by a simple (but big) cloud of acid or even just gas ignited by a spark.

Hellrage

Wasn't it mentioned explicitly that it carries the risk of the DK having some connection to it still? So they were very wary of harvesting from the undead.

Big I

So is the Sage no longer Doddering? Or is this someone else?

Frivolous

Someone else. There appear to be numerous Names of Sage. We've seen Doddering Sage, Sage of the West (only a Revenant, and then destroyed by Ranger), and now Sage, period.

ninegardens

>It was the Third that'd serve as our reserve: I was counting on Abigail of Summerholm's knack for calculated risks. She'd commit if and when it was needed, but not a moment before.

Hehehehe... Gotta love that casual assumption of Abigail's hypercompetance... that the poor girl herself does not believe in.

Finn ...

Um, wrong chapter?

[Liliet](#)

Right chapter, it's the quote from above.

[Liliet](#)

I really, really want to see Abigail's POV again. Catherine's seeing what's really there and we could already see it in Abigail's book 4-5 fights, but does Abigail herself? XD

Abrakadabra

Ab, ab, ab-Abigail hero of the imperium!

Black Spiral Dancer

Love Abigail getting her recognition of perfect dutiful coward

[Tohron](#)

Way back in the Battle of Three Hills, the size of Catherine's entire force was less than double the death toll of this single engagement. Quite the perspective shift.

Crash

First chapter after having caught up with the series! I seem to always catch up when battle is about to begin haha

I appreciate the little mentions to Abigail and how her tiny appearances can make a lot of waves just because we've been in her PoV before. I know this isn't exactly a big deal currently but I appreciate these minor story beats paying off.

nightup

"If your Grand Alliance makes accord with me, Princess of Aquitan," I softly said, "oh, what howling ruin I will visit upon the King of Death. I have dooms in my arsenal that the world will shake of them."

mamm0nn

Hm, I wonder why, even after 5 years, they are still using Rozalia's Light and sorcerous panes from the Battle of the Camps instead of permeable but softly burning ones. Rozalia used them well at the time because she was fighting humans (and orcs and goblins) with ranged and artillery, and her solid panes were particularly potent for the battle.

But against the Dead King's waves of Carrion I'd assume panes of continuous damage, even if it would take minutes for it to bite through skeletons enough to 'kill' them, would be preferable and long since developed. Something that in game-terms would be an area of 1 fire damage / second to all that enter it.

Those insects are the most troublesome with the birds a close second, the larger the creatures the less troublesome they are for they are more numerous and spear-vulnerable they are. So let the dogs and deer run through those panes barely singed, the bugs all burn and the birds are rendered flightless by scorched wings.

mamm0nn

*the larger the creatures less troublesome for they are LESS numerous and more spear-vulnerable.

Liliet

Because the main point is to stop these from killing their army? Being bitten by a poisonous insect that is also on fire is not preferable to just being bitten by a poisonous insect.

the insects are DK's disposables. Catherine's soldiers are very much not. So defense >>>> offense here.

Black Spiral Dancer

There's no option of a Wall of Fire that is also a Wall of Force.

Chapter 56: Repertoires

"There is no such thing as an unusable army, only armies that are not properly used."

– Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general

We did not come as an army, not the kind I'd raised and led and fought against. The Firstborn followed in my wake like a trail of colourful armed gangs, advancing without formation and answering to no single general. Ten thousand of the Firstborn had come raiding with me, the eerie grace of their stride belying the disorder of their advance. Few of their sigils resembled each other, be it in looks or composition. My old servant Lord Soln now led hardened elites in steel and obsidian, its circular sigil of grey and red painted over faces and mail, while the numerous sigil of Mighty Kuresnik eschewed armour entirely in favour of long barbed spears and dyed green hair like their sigil-holder.

Through the winding hills of the Twilight Ways they followed me in silence, my dead mount's gallop keeping me ahead of even the quickest among them. Of the sigils that had answered my call, the greatest Mighty were Soln – once a lord in my short-lived Peerage, and still instinctively deferential to me even when it preferred otherwise – and Sudone, who back during the Iserran campaign had once challenged me and since been taught better. Three days stripped of all Night had humbled it, but though fear had given way to insolence it loved me not. No matter. When it

came to commanding loyalty among the drow, fear was more than enough. They would both serve as my captains when the time came.

And it would come soon, for our departure had been swift. It had left all the work that inevitably followed the end of a battle in the hands of General Hune and the Blood, but that'd not been a choice born of shirking but of a pragmatic consideration: so long as we took the Twilight Ways, we'd reach the enemy's camp before the Revenants could return. Stripped of their vulture mounts by Archer and Huntress doing, they'd have to make their way back on foot and stuck on Creation. Less than an hour had since been spent treading the paths of Twilight, but already I could feel we were reaching the end of our journey. Just a few more hills and we'd be there, which meant it was time to appoint my captains.

I stroked Zombie's mane, silently instructing her to slow her gait, and shortly closed my eyes. In a twist of will I pulled at Lord Soln and Mighty Sudone through the Night, as if tugging a bridle, and before long tendrils of shadow trailed Zombie's hooves along the ground. The Mighty smoothly leapt of the darkness, each landing at a full run and never breaking stride. But a heartbeat later we were atop a hill overlooking a small vale where I could sense our crossing awaited, so bade Zombie to halt and the drow smoothly mirrored her. With them no longer moving, I got a better look at the pair I'd summoned.

Soln's sigil, a ring of swords with an open mouth at the centre, had been enameled into the side of a helmet of clear Proceran make. It hid its eyes from sight, if not the long pale hair that went down its back. Beneath that affectation it wore ornate ringmail under its obsidian cuirass, going down into knee-length mail skirt ending in obsidian greaves covering leather boots. Soln had a martial look to it and bore both sword and spear, two of the three traditional arms of the Firstborn. Like most of those who had once been in my Peerage, my once Lord of Shallow Graves had thrived in the war against Keter: taking Night and loot from the dead had allowed it to slowly turn its sigil into a hardened and finely equipped warband. Its sigil-oath, I'd been told, related to the sharing and obtaining of such equipment: even dzulu were promised mail and steel weapons. It was not a grand oath like Rumena had made, but it had made the Soln an attractive sigil for many in this time of war.

Sudone's appearance was rather more lavish. Its sigil was woven into many tresses as small coloured stones that made the wavelike blue and green patterns look like they were following some eldritch tide, almost hypnotic to look at. Its 'armour' was a decorative breastplate of dyed leather so heavily encrusted with lapis lazuli as to be useless even if it *didn't* inexplicably have a neckline. Beneath it were only long gauzy robes in shades of blue and green, though there were enough layers its body could

not really be made up beneath – but the different colours made it look as if it were rippling, likely the intent.

It was impressive and unique, as had often been the way with sigil-holders in the Everdark.

Sudone's only weapon was a long obsidian-tipped glaive and like many traditionalists it disdained the 'new ways' learned in the Burning Lands, mocking armour and 'dressing up dzulu' as being some kind of perverted fixation for Mighty grown feeble in the head. The Sudone and other traditionalist sigils often took harder losses in battle, but the old-fashioned way they distributed Night also tended to mean they had more powerful Mighty. Those two were, in a way, emblematic of the currents that were beginning to pull Firstborn society two very different ways.

Mind you, the traditionalist here did not have the better reputation of the two. Sudone was taller than Soln in body, and perhaps stronger in the Night, but it was also what the drow called *radhular*. It translated roughly to 'glad-joiner', and was an insult some Firstborn used for Mighty who preferred to act through cabals and alliances instead of picking an honest fight. The connotation was that drow like Sudone only fought when the odds were on their side, something most Firstborn would be quite offended to be told. The essence of the Tenets of Night, after all, was to rise in power by taking it from others.

I'd been silent for too long, I realized, lost in my thoughts as I'd been. Both were looking at me without hiding their wariness.

"Watch closely," I said, "as neither of you were with the host when we took Lauzon's Hollow last summer."

Lightly tapping the dewy grass of the hill, I let Night ripple out and shaped it as the broad strokes of what the location we'd be raiding would look like. Julianne's Highway, going from south to north, would furrow between steep-sloped and tightly nestled hills.

"The Silver Huntress and her cabal tell us that the entrance has been fortified by the enemy," I said.

My staff traced ditches and walls not only in the furrow between the hills, but also in a broad half-circle in front of them. Keter had not spared work in preparing for us, though these defences were not yet finished.

"Deeper in, we approach the Hollow proper," I continued.

Night continued to slowly ripple forward, depicting the way the furrow would continue into the hills until it reached a bowl-like valley, its surrounding slopes so eroded by rain as to be nearly vertical walls.

"There was once a village there, Lauzon, for which the hollow was named," I said. "Some structures should still stand, and the enemy is likely to be using them as warehouses. There will be many undead here, and perhaps even Revenants."

In fact the village was named for a folk heroine named Lauzon who'd supposedly beaten back a great army of bandits here and then founded a village when the prince gave her the land as a reward, but I saw no need to needlessly confuse the matter. Night continued to crawl, shaping the latter end of the pass: a wavy, hilly road with several large alcoves that eventually led back to open grounds.

"There will be enemies on the road," I continued, "but the larger part of the enemy's camp is out in the open beyond the pass."

There just wasn't enough room to cram a hundred thousand people in the pass itself, even if Keteran armies didn't have to deal with the usual disease outbreaks that came from cramming soldiers tightly together for long times. The two Mighty were watching closely, and not only because I'd ordered. There were no sigil-holders alive who were not practiced raiders, aware of the importance of knowing the lay of the land.

"We will split our force in three," I said. "So that we might make the most of this night."

"Wise," Mighty Sudone muttered. "We will not find a soft belly twice."

I nodded, then turned my gaze to the other sigi-holder.

"Lord Soln," I said, and watched the title ripple through its frame. "You will take to a third of our force and strike at the enemy's fortifications."

The bottom of my staff tapped the entrance of the pass, in particular the walls and ditches nestled between the hills. Pickler's engines would be able to reduce fortifications out in the open, but further in it'd get tricky. Best take care of that potential bottleneck now, as no one did attrition warfare like Keter.

"Leave no wall standing and sweep all in your way," I ordered.

"It will be as you say, Losara Queen," the drow that had once been my Lord of Shallow Graves replied, pressing hand over heart. "The dead will die once more."

My gaze moved to Sudone, whose silver-blue eyes watched me unblinkingly.

"You will lead one third of our force as well, Mighty Sudone," I said, and tapped the northern edge of the pass.

Near the open grounds where the camp lay, but not too far out.

"Your duty is hunt down the Enemy's ritual-makers and destroy them," I bluntly said. "Sow ruin where you may, but it is those skulls above all others I require of you."

It was a fantasy for the raid to be able to rid us of Neshamah's mages, but we could at least hamper his ability to hammer away at us with rituals. It was always Binds who were capable of magic, never the lesser undead we called Bones, so great concentrations of their kind were usually knots of sorcerers – when they served as officers for his armies, the Dead King used them rather more sparingly. Made sense, considering he had a limited stock of Binds and massive hordes of Bones. Just because Keter's logistics were different than ours didn't mean his armies were entirely without them.

"Your word is that of Sve Noc, First Under the Night," Sudone replied, mirroring Soln's own salute. "Their will be done."

It would do. Sudone was a better match for the mage-hunt, given that Soln was a great deal more prone to... blunt approaches. It was no Jindrich, mind you, but Sudone was a lot less likely to end up overreaching when it hit the edge of the enemy camp.

"I will lead the last third myself," I said. "You may pick whatever sigils you like to assemble your war party, but I claim three for myself: Brezlej, Randebog and Kuresnik."

A pair of eyes, a shield and a swift spear. Those three, as much the Mighty as the sigils they had shaped, were at the heart of my plan for my part of the raid. Neither of the three were considered among the greatest Mighty of the host, either, so it wasn't even like I'd be stepping on the toes of my two captains by claiming them.

"And should we both seek the same sigil?" Sudone asked.

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"I would expect the matter to be settled in concord between you two," I said. "I have no patience for foolishness tonight."

"As you say, First Under the Night," Mighty Sudone murmured in reply.

Not convinced, that one. It would have preferred a fight. Sudone's sigil had grown smaller in the years since the giving of sigil-oaths had become a law of the Firstborn, for its rule was particularly brutal to dzulu. Yet those that remained, and those

that had since joined, were hard-nosed traditionalists. That lesser Mighty and even dzulu would be willing to become Sudone knowing they'd be treated like expendable things had startled me, but then the Everdark's traditions were not something easily set aside even when those traditions were at your expense.

"Might this one ask what deeds you will seek tonight?" Lord Soln delicately asked.

Flattery and not genuine deference this time, I gauged. Not that it made any difference.

"Havoc," I replied, baring my teeth as my staff came to rest on the valley that had given the pass its name. "Havoc is my business tonight, Lord of Shallow Graves."

While they went about their sabotage, I was going to return to my roots: I'd make enough of a bloody ruckus that Keter would not dare to look elsewhere.

"Is it not always, Losara Queen?" Mighty Sudone laughed.

It bowed to me, allowing the gesture to end its presence as it dissolved into shadow.

"Our deeds will be worthy," Lord Soln promised me, "of an empire ever dark."

It followed suit, though not quite as smoothly. As for me, I closed my eyes and let Zombie guide me towards the last of the distance to the needle-hole that would take us out of the Twilight Ways and into the heart of the enemy camp. Letting the Night flow through my veins, I listened through the sea of thoughts and emotions as my two captains picked their sigils. They went swiftly, the unspoken competition having hurried them as I had wished, and when the last of the sigil-holders, a Mighty Finarok, went over to Sudone I leaned forward with a smile. The darkness came eagerly when called.

"You ride with me," I murmured.

It carried through the Night, like a whisper into the ears of my raiders. Fear and excitement bloomed, along with an undercurrent of *hunger*. Oh yes, I mused, these would do nicely. The sigil-holders among them I pulled to me as my mount slowed and then stopped before the very stretch of grass where we would cross. First those I had wanted most: wary Brezlej, grizzled Randebog and bold Kuresnik. But the others as well, the whole throng of them, with only the most eye-catching standing distinguished from the rest. One-armed Vudaga bedecked in jewels, Darissim with the bone-white tattoos and its ebony spear, even bloody Ogoviz –

smaller than me, almost childlike, and having never worn paint not made of Mighty's blood.

Even the least of them had been around for a century, and there some here who had been blooding their spears for longer than anyone save elves could live.

"Sudone has been made a hunter of hunters," I told them. "And Soln will destroy the works of the Enemy. Ours is to be the hour of the sword, Mighty. Bare and bloody."

I swept the sigil-holders with my gaze, holding them there long enough for them to look away.

"We will war in the manner I have arranged," I said. "Listen close now, for you will bring those words to your sigils."

Nothing too sophisticated would work with Firstborn. They weren't trained soldiers, and though by now they were veterans one and all it would be decades before a proper dwarf war doctrine could be made – just adapting the Legion one to Firstborn peculiarities was bound to fail, and spectacularly. So it was tactics in broad strokes I presented them with. Skirmishers out front, the sigils heavy on them taking the vanguard when we crossed. After the first few exchanges armoured sigils would strike in the thick of the enemy, and those few small sigils that were heavy on Mighty were to hunt constructs and Revenants at the exclusion of all else.

The tactics were not new to them, and I trusted they would be carried out skillfully. The dismissal was swift, save for three I held back. Brezlej, Randebog, Kuresnik. I met their eyes, sensing their unease in the Night.

"I have a particular use for you," I smiled.

They listened, and when I was certain they'd understood I dismissed them as well. Not a moment too early, either. Our way out was just before us, and the forces of Soln and Sudone were nearing their own ways out. Orders trickling down from sigil-holders to sigil, my third of the forces gracefully repositioned into the rough order of battle I'd outlined and resumed its advance. We would be the first into the fire, to draw the most attention.

Within moments crossed, and the hour of the sword began.

—

Two hundred of us, Mighty and dzulu, slipped into Creation.

By the time feet had touched solid ground, the first volley had already been thrown. Keter did not field many bowmen – bows

required too much upkeep – but that hardly meant the armies of the Dead King were without ranged weapons: iron-tipped javelins came down as a rain. Two dzulu were unlucky enough to take a sharp tip through the chest before they could liquefy into shadows, but they were the only casualties from the first round. Drow skirmishers were damnably hard to kill. I batted aside the sole javelin chunked at me – it would have punched through my shoulder, by the angle – with my staff and took an assessing look around.

I almost let out an impressed whistle as a second wave of drow came into Creation, for Keter had been *busy*. All around us the dead turned to match the threat. Already a second volley of javelins was in flight even as drow began to emerge from the shadow tendrils closer to the enemy, but the sigil-holder for the Serbanad howled as it unleashed Night and the javelins froze in mid-air, momentum stolen from them. They clattered to the ground a moment later, even as I pulled Night to my eyes and tried to figure out the lay of the enemy's fresh works. The abandoned village of Lauzon had been rebuilt into fortified stone warehouses, but that wasn't unexpected.

The surprise was the scaffolding going up the eastern and western sides of the hollow, intricate sets of stairs and even pulley-lifts. In the darkness I glimpsed hulking shapes atop the hills where the scaffolding led, not constructs but instead engines of war. My brow rose, as those were rare – Neshamah usually preferred his horrors, as they could be used in more ways than simple engines. Which meant, I grimly thought, that these were unlikely to be simple engines at all.

We had maybe half an hour to spare before this got too dangerous to continue, so there was no time to waste. My skirmishers were already on their fourth wave through and they'd closed the distance with the dead, going up close with the skeletons in mismatched armour the Dead King had crammed here. More threatening were the warbands of heavy infantry near the entrance to the hollow: tall skeletons in heavy armour, wielding long spears and greatshields. If my vanguard got in close with those it'd be slaughter, so I breathed out and let Night flood through my veins. A few javelins were thrown at me, but two ispe in Volvich paint had stayed as guard dogs and they shredded the projectiles with howling bursts of air.

I struck the ground with my staff, letting Night crawl out in thin tendrils like spiderwebs along the ground. With every heartbeat more of the hollow was covered, until the crisscrossing covered the full grounds. Firstborn stepped on the darkness without consequences, which had been the tricky part, but where the undead made contact they found the working stuck to them like glue. Much less exhausting than a destructive miracle, and almost as effective: given the size of the heavy infantry and their lack

of finesse, most of them were caught within moments. Those that weren't found their fellows served as the wall they were meant to be, only this time to Keter's detriment.

"Slayers, begin," I called out in Crepuscular.

Acknowledged bloomed in the Night as the last of my skirmishers hurried through and armoured drow began sidling into Creation. All around me the hollow had become a nightmare made melee, deft drow dancing around clumsy corpses – many stuck to my miracle – and reaping death as they moved with fluid grace, slipping into shadows and striking with unnatural strength. I waited until two sigil-holders I'd decided on earlier came through, then finally set out.

"Krakovich, Prosij, with me," I ordered.

I limped towards the old village of Lauzon, the two of them trailing behind me without a thought to disobedience.

"Mighty Krakovich, I am told you know the Secret of Great Gales?"

"It is so, mighty one," the sigil-holder acknowledged.

"And you, Prosij, are reputed to hold the full suite of the Secrets of Ruin," I noted.

"A feat long in the making, Losara Queen," it proudly replied

Good. The Ruin Secrets were on the subtle side, compared to most Secrets, but I'd found them very useful – the trick that'd killed the Saint of Swords was derived from the Secret of Marching Ruin – against most conventional defences. There just wasn't a lot of sorcery using similar means, so most wards and enchantments didn't account for them.

"Good," I smiled. "Mighty Prosij, I want you to use the Secret of Ruinous Downfall on those stone houses."

I pointed at the warehouses Keter had raised from the old village, sidestepping a skeleton swinging a sword as I did and leaving Krakovich to absent-mindedly slap its head off. Its fingers trailed down the bare spine after, and there was a soft touch of power as Night was stolen from the corpse and added to its own. Prosij looked pained, as if it wanted to contradict me but did not dare.

"There are too many, Losara Queen, and the sum is too large," Prosij finally hazarded. "It will not be a success."

"It's not meant to," I grunted. "Krakovich, be ready to call on the Gales soon."

Mighty Prosij, either reassured or wary of arguing further, heeded my command. Biting deep into its own thumb it drew intricate patterns on its bare arm, the Night shivering in them, and only then did it begin to call on the Secret – a stabilizer, the patterns, as the Ruinous Downfall was particularly difficult to maintain. It was based on the principle of entropy, like most Secrets of Ruin, but this particular one had a vicious bent: it went for the weakest part of what it meant to unmake and poured the curse there. In people, that usually meant bursting eyes or the brain, but anyone with Night could fight the curse off so it was usually used on artefacts or structures instead.

When it got unleashed on a dozen stone warehouses instead, it proved thin. Weakened. Which didn't matter because I'd never meant for the Secret to actually break the stone: what it did, what I'd wanted it to do, was find the weak parts of the buildings and then attack them. Sorcery immediately flared as the defensive wards laid into the stonework by Keteran mages protected the structure, neatly informing me of both the strength of the enemy's defences and where the weak points were. Masego much admired the Dead King's wardwork, as it was reactive instead of uniform – it concentrated power where the strike was made instead of leaving it spread out.

This once, though, for someone who could smell out the sorcery it was like shining a light on the weaknesses.

"Keep it going," I ordered, and let loose the Night.

Veins writhing with power, I grit my teeth and went about it methodically. Shaping a great spike of Night, angrily roiling power, I rammed the strike straight into the weakness of the ward. The warehouse blew as if struck by the hand of an angry god, clouds of a disgusting green miasma erupting as a plume.

"Krakovich," I snarled, already shaping a second spike.

The Secret of Great Gales were meant to shred entire warbands approaching through tunnels, but it wasn't the force I'd been after when I'd chosen someone who could use it – it was the size. Correctly divining my intent, Mighty Krakovich drew the cloud of poison that would have spread across the hollow and guided it up into the sky where it could not massacre my entire raiding force. The Dead King did like his poisons, and he would have made sure to keep those both close to the front and under a roof, where the containers would not be damaged by the elements. We went about it in good order, smashing one warehouse after another.

By the last one Krakovich was panting heavily and Prosij looked about to pass out, but we'd left only rubble and poisoned sky where Keter's poisonous munitions had been held. That alone would make the raid worth it.

"Well done," I said. "Retreat to your sigils. This is about to get a great deal more unpleasant."

How many dead had there been in the hollow when we'd first come? A thousand, I figured, maybe two. Not as much as could have been placed here, even though it was a significant amount. By now most the last waves of my raiders were almost done coming through and we'd effectively taken the hollow, though of course trying to keep it would have been madness. We were a cork on a river, not a dam, and Firstborn were not good defensive fighters. The last few holdouts of the dead were heavies, pockets of a few dozens being taken apart by lesser Mighty and drained of Night, but I knew better than to think this a victory. There had been no constructs here, no Revenants. We'd not been contested, and though the poison had been a loss for Keter it wasn't a major one – if they truly had a Crab close, then not only would they have replacements but they could likely *make* more. It'd been bait.

Lauzon's Hollow was defending itself too poorly. Mighty Soln would be hitting the positions ahead of us by now and Mighty Sudone be sowing chaos near the enemy camp, but that wasn't enough to excuse the poor performance of Keter tonight. It'd all make sense if we had taken them by surprise, but they had to have known a retaliatory strike by the Firstborn after dusk was a possibility. Were this the first year of the war, I might have been on the enemy miscalculating and believing that Ivah's ten thousand out in the lowlands were all the drow there were on our side. I knew better by now, though.

When Neshamah made mistakes – and he did, like everybody else, for brilliance was not omniscience – it didn't look like this. This was a trap. One I'd caught in advance and entered willingly, with an eye to the escape, but it would have been a dangerous delusion to believe we actually had the upper hand right now. Making my way back towards the heart of the hollow, where Julianne's Highway passed, I idly flicked a hand over my shoulder. The western scaffolding went up in black flames, and with a sharp twist of will I subjected the eastern to the same. Petty vandalism, but sometimes it was the little things that made life sufferable.

"Spread out," I called out. "Prepare for assaults from the front and back."

Skirmishers took the front on both sides, heavier sigils setting up behind them, but I did not supervise – with Firstborn, doing so was often more harmful than helpful. I pulled at Mighty Ogoviz and Darissim through the Night, called them to me. I did not waste time with courtesies when they rose from shadow.

"There are engines of war up on the hills to the east and the west," I said. "Go there, and learn of them. Destroy the Enemy's work if you can."

I dismissed them curtly, and in silence they melded back into the shadows. I doubted the Dead King would leave those as unprotected as they looked, but it was worth a try. And if it went bad, as I suspected it might, those two sigils were known as being rather quick on their feet. Unlike with humans, the drow conception of honour in no way precluded running away when the opposition was stronger than expected. Safely at the heart of the milling sigils, I wove myself a few protective workings in Night – an illusion, a sharpening of my senses and a trip ward – and straightened my back. It wouldn't be long now, I figured.

Above, on the hills, the two sigils I'd sent ran into what sounded like entrenched defences. There was fire and light, sorcery as well as clash of arms. And still I waited, almost with baited breath. Ogoviz retreated from the western heights, going down the heights as shadow strands with most of the force it had taken up there, when finally Keter closed its trap. With a bone-shaking hum, wards went up over all of us. Idly, already knowing the outcome, I tried to open a gate into the Twilight Ways and found a lock had been placed over the area.

"The first part," I mildly said. "Now for the second, King of Death."

As if called forth by my words, two hulking shapes rose from where they had been lying among the hills. With horrid roars, the great undead dragon creatures we called wyrms spread their wings as their eyes glowed with eerie power. There was a great clamour as the drow who had gone up to the other heights fled in disarray, a tall silhouette in armour standing over the edge and bringing up a bloody head. Mighty Darissim, I recognized. *Revenant*. I cracked my neck to the side and grinned. Good, Keter had finally played its hand.

Now the fun could begin.

devildragon777

Cat is in her element, tonight. Also fun to see more of the various Drow sigils.

Voting: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Top Web Fiction reset their vote counts recently, so Kat only has 70 votes for the week and five votes for the last 24 hours!

[matrixm](#)

Mighty Darissim noooooooooo!

Frivolous

Yeeesss!!! Finally, a solid example and depiction of drow draining Night from Keter undead.

– The last few holdouts of the dead were heavies, pockets of a few dozens being taken apart by lesser Mighty and drained of Night, but I knew better than to think this a victory.

Scary that Cat and Neshie have learned to anticipate each other. I wonder if they find their mutual emulation of each other's thought processes to be alarming.

[Liliet](#)

Neshamah probably greatly enjoys it. Stimulating, entertaining etc

Frivolous

I can't help but wonder if there is some kind of side effect from learning to think like an or another immortal.

Reading the Kabbalis Book of the Dead is supposed to allow Neshie to possess you. Learning to anticipate Cat's strategic thinking might have a similar effect on Neshie, and vice versa.

Crash

In Masego's words "the godhead is a trick of perspective".

But that's a difference in thinking in a massive scale. It's not like villains and heroes haven't fought from the other's perspective before, they're not so much ascending in thought as slightly shifting their morals and wants for 10 minutes of tactical planning.

The Kabbalis is another beast entirely, it was written to be an artifact of possession. It's entirely possible the Dead King left a bit of his soul there specifically for this purpose. These things aren't quite equivalent.

That said... it's interesting, Cat's POV in this chapter. I can't quite put my finger on it but it's different. I would enjoy seeing more.

[TeK](#)

You can't leave a bit of your soul inside a piece of information, unlike a material thing. After all, Kabbalis something-something in Praes is not necessarily an original book, especially considering that Mdego never touched the original or copied book – he picked the secrets out of Neshamah's head.

Miles

Nah there's probably just an attunement ritual hidden in the cadence of the words or something, which makes the caster/reader susceptible to someone who knows the right formula.

Frivolous

On the contrary, I think the Kabbalis Book of the Dead was more like a contagious meme or an information virus. It teaches you how to think so much like Neshie that Contagion and Sympathy occur and he occupies your head.

Being able to predict Neshie's actions or Catherine's actions therefore might have a similar effect on the anticipator. Neshie is a god and Catherine may be approaching that level, though I believe the latter is a low probability.

Masego's axiom of Godhead is a trick of perspective may have a corollary: Thinking too much like a god lets the god into you.

[Liliet](#)

I think the process is more... natural. Like what Kairos commented on for Cordelia learning from Malicia.

When you're learning against another opponent, they become your context. If something is "better than what they do" then that's your reference point, even if it might still be worse than you would have ever entertained otherwise. Or something that seems "barely living up to their standards" would be absolutely unthinkable for everyone else. You anticipate their reactions rather than reactions everyone else would have, etc. Just context and being used to things.

We don't know about the Kabbalis Book of Darkness thing, but I'd guess it's not just learning what Neshamah knew that has the effect talked about. Note how Neshamah's memories might have taken Masego over as an independent entity, but didn't change him as a person (beyond the mundane effects of trauma / learning new things).

And learning to anticipate Cat's strategic thinking might well have had an effect on Akua (again, context and what you have to pay attention to: can't ignore what happens to civilians if your opponent's actions are decided by that), but Neshamah... no.

devildragon777

...So you're saying that it tickles his funny bone?

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

Nilsen

Woop woop

[TeK](#)

Still waiting for a Mighty named Kowalski.

dadycoool

He'll be the strategist when they finally start getting the hang of real strategy.

Halinn

Knowing the Secret of Analysis, perhaps?

[TeK](#)

Yeah. Now that I think about it, any mind-enhancing Secrets would be both the most overpowered and the most obscure. Unlike some flashy Night bombs and such, you wouldn't really know that the Mighty knew that Secret and you would be even less willing to announce it's existence.

Which makes it pretty likely that they actually exist.

zebano

I may be misremembering, but isn't this part of why Ranger is so powerful?

grzecho2222

I wonder how many people here know that name from somewhere aside of Madagascar

Salt

Is that an undead dragon knight? Has to be, right? You can't just make a dramatic solo entrance flanked by a pair of dragons and

not be a dragon knight. Especially since it's tall and visibly armored

Javvies

Heh. That's a nifty combo to trash the toxin stockpiles without letting them out to contaminate everything.

And, yeah, trap. I wonder what Cat's plan for countering the trap is, though presumably it involves the Mighty and Sigils that she explicitly laid claim to before the raid started.

darkening

She probably has a couple unravelers here to kill the wyrm and the drow are gonna ambush it.

caoimhinh

"I idly flicked a hand over my shoulder. The western scaffolding went up in black flames, and with a sharp twist of will, I subjected the eastern to the same. Petty vandalism, but sometimes it was the little things that made life sufferable."

She just *couldn't* resist setting stuff on fire, could she?
Hahahaha

Crash

Pyromaniac is her true Name, the fact it's taking so long to form isn't evidence of it's scope but that she is actively fighting it into being something else!

But we know. We all know in our hearts, the Pyromaniac Vandal bane of all that is flammable or inflammable alike!

dadycool

I love reading about the Drow raiding. I also adore how she's able to just pluck Mighty from wherever they are and use their specific talents like grabbing tools from a belt. I also love how her favorite command is essentially "Cry HAVOC! And unleash the... well...ME!"

Also caoimhinh is right. She really couldn't resist setting something on fire, even though she had just rained it down that afternoon.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

New Name: Dog (or Cat?) of War.

Not a robot

Why not just John while we're at it

Burlyraven

So the drow are coming from a despot based tribal anarchy with a unifying religion, and are rapidly becoming a theological empire divided into tribes as a part of that religion, complete with factional divides on interpretations of scripture. Neat.

Crash

It's also super neat that due to how the Firstborn think this is actually likely to work just fine where in a human society they'd have walked out of Keter to wage holy war on themselves.

Would absolutely read 5 books about the minutiae of Drow society re-forming itself.

10/10 world building

beleester

It's not really a theological dispute, more of a tactical one, seeing as the theology in question is basically "you keep whatever you can take." They disagree on the best way to gain power – whether it's by beefing up your Mighty so you have an unbeatable trump, or to beef up your dzulu so that you have a more useful army.

In the Underdark, the former was the clear winner – the Mighty are ridiculously powerful and an army of cannon fodder doesn't do much besides slow them down. But in the war against Keter, an army that can deal with hordes is a powerful asset, and it'll also bring in lots of Night that can raise them up even more.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Archer and Huntress doing > Archer and Huntress's doing
foot and stuck on > foot, and stuck on
leapt of > leapt off
halt and > halt, and
made up beneath > made out beneath
society two > society in two
take to a third > take a third
hamper is ability > hamper his ability
"You word > "Your word
there some here > there were some here
there look enough > there long enough
down form > down from
Within moments crossed > Within moments we crossed

sidling (should this be sliding)
sorcery it was > sorcery, it was
most the last > most of the last
Sudone be sowing > Sudone sowing
baited breath > bated breath

Mental Mouse

> though fear had given way to insolence >
From context, should be the other way around.

James, Mostly Harmless

I suspect that insolence gave way to fear, which gave way to
insolence again ...

Sinead

A more subtle note that someone made on Reddit, but Soln's oath
has changed from the original oath.

"...Mighty Soln's pledge to found a cabal with any other sigil
willing to help raise another Tvarigu in the heart of the
Burning Lands ..."

TeK

Yeah, but frankly, by this point I don't remember it either.

Sinead

True, but from a continuity perspective of publishing this
series it is a detail that would be a) really confusing b)
hard to catch in general editing process (considering some
other books I have read, editors are not always good at
catching such details).

This has to be a way for the author to help revise the full
series, otherwise it is brutally nitpicky to have this after
every chapter.

miles

Were this the first year of the war, I might have been on the
enemy miscalculating and believing that Ivah's ten thousand out
in the lowlands were all the drow there were on our side.

Bet?

Rohkan

Soln had a different oath in book 5 chp 63. Tbh I sort of liked
the old one better.

"Mighty Soln's pledge to found a cabal with any other sigil

willing to help raise another Tvarigu in the heart of the Burning Lands had the crowd rippling in approval and a few feet stomping down,”

KageLupus

I think my favorite part of this chapter is how it shows the subtle shift in mood Cat seems to get when interacting with her Drow. The whole chapter Cat was much more poetic and formal, even just in her internal dialogue. She gets a little more in line with her normal tone once the fighting kicks up, but the whole first half of the chapter feels like Cat putting on her First Under the Night hat and really leaning into that role.

Cayle

So someone has to ask the real questions.

What happens when you drain the Night from an undead dragon?

darkening

Y’know, it’s a real shame general disaster went back to praes. A dragon would be a fun asset in the war against Keter.

[sengachi](#)

See, that kind of thinking is how Keter gets undead dragons.

Darkening

I fail to see the issue. Awesomeness ensues either way.

Juneau

Wait.. what?

Where is the next button?

Dont tell me I have finally caught up? Been reading on and off for the last year, a book here, a book there.

Urghhh. Now I have to wait. What’s the release schedule like I’ve honestly not been paying attention.

Matthew Wells

Tuesday and Friday. Bonus chapters at the start of the month.

Juneau

Awesome. Thank you. One tomorrow.

Side note if the author ever sees this. Abigail is totally the best side character ever, I hope she gets more time.

Chapter 57: Battery

"Fear not defeat, for defeat is the mother of learning. Many a time will you be asked this question: are you worthy? Many a time will you have to deny it, until at last you do not."

– Extract from the Tenets Under the Night, Book of Losara

Mighty Brezlej, I spoke into the Night, begin.

Brezlej Hundred-Eyes was an oddity by Firstborn standards. Most sigil-holders prioritized obtaining fighting Secrets, but Brezlej had instead begun picking up sight-related suites as far back as when it'd been ispe. It had since survived not by being slaying all its rivals but by dint of the unnaturally good timing those Secrets leant it. Its sigil had been shaped in the same image, sharp but fragile and relying heavily on its keen perception. What I wanted from Brezlej was not one its more famous tricks, like the Farsight or the Nine Pridnis Foretelling, but instead one that'd been considered near useless back in the Everdark. The Source-Finder, it was called, and up in the Burning Lands it had found a use at last.

Mighty Brezlej signaled agreement and submission, and I dismissed the matter from my mind. It would reach out to me when it had results and the other two sigil holders I'd hand-picked would hang back until the preliminaries were done. Now, stuck under ward with our backs to the wall, was the time to make asplash.

"SA VREDE?" I asked in a roar.

Are you worthy? The gospel I had first passed on to the Firstborn under twilight glow, long grown into something greater than the sum of my words. It might have been my lips that spoke it then, spoke it now, but the words did not belong to me. They belonged to the grey-skinned silhouettes standing in the dark of Lauzon's Hollow, those fresh faces bedecked with ancient glories come to wage a war against Death tonight. And they answered, for I'd given them the first half of the prayer but the second was of their making.

"CERA AINE!"

The nuances bloomed in the Night: shame, fond amusement, hard-toothed pride and grim determination.

Are you worthy? I had asked them.

Ask tomorrow, they replied.

An oath, a threat, a boast. They were not yet worthy, but the night was young. I did not often like them, these strange and vicious souls that cruel goddesses had placed in my hands, but there were times where I could not help but love them. How could I not, when I had spent my life taking in lost souls and broken things as my own? Perhaps it was that the Crows had seen in me when they stole me back from the brink, that I would not be able to use them without coming to care for them. Even the worst of Firstborn was beautiful in its own way, and when time came for another to stand as first under the Night I would not part with the mantle embittered from my years under it.

The drow had screamed their defiance into the starlit sky but it could not answer. The Hidden Horror *did*, with fury and crawling madness.

With a deafening crack the sides of the hills broke open in showers of stone, horrors crawling out with ear-splitting shrieks. Above us the stars were blotted out by great wings as the wyrms roared, spewing out clouds of poison onto my raiders as the great war engines atop the hills began to ponderously turn towards us. Over the edges tides of undead were unleashed, leaping down into the hollow – ghouls and skeletons and mages lit in ghostly green, spells already aflight. Among them a handful of silhouettes stood tall, Revenants clad in faded things and awaiting to unleash old horrors. The head of Mighty Darissim was thrown into the throng, leering in death, even as the first strike of the drum was heard.

Deep, slow and unrelenting it shivered through the air. Sorcery flared. *Doom*, the faraway drum promised. *Doom*. And through the sound fear and fatigue slipped into the ears of all who heard, sorcery just as poisonous as what boiled within the belly of the wyrms. Sve Noc stirred in the distance, ever jealous of the souls of their flock.

"You'll have to do better than that, King of Death," I laughed, Night gathering to me like rivers to the sea. "Let me remind you which of us it was, old bones, who once reigned over the night."

I had no use for subtlety, not when I was *making a point*, so it was an arrow of screaming Night that shot up towards that insolently-close wyrm above me – it spun as it shot up, siphoning ever more Night from my veins as Komana's harsh glee howled against my ear, and the abomination screamed when it pierced its belly. The Night did not fade after, staying a solid length

rising straight from the tip of my staff to dozens of feet above the dead thing. Poison oozed down the length of the spike as I shifted my footing, grunting with effort even as a second hand came on my staff and Night surged through my limbs.

With a savage whoop, I slammed the dead dragon into one of the western engine turning towards us.

The belly burst open, unleashing a tide of steaming poison, and though the thing was not destroyed I had shredded its wings and body with the fall. I let go of the Night, gasping, and watched as pillars of wind turned back the cloud of death that'd come for my raiders. Eagerly, a whirling storm of obsidian and steel met the walking dead. I glimpsed only parts of the maddened melee, the nightmare suddenly turned real. Rylleh and sigil-holders split apart Tusks even as they trampled dzulu with impunity, ispe flickered from shadow to shadow as they danced the blades with sharp-fanged ghouls, javelins ripped through ornate breastplates as sorcery and Night traded deadly volleys.

Night had fallen, but there was light enough one would have been forgiven for believing otherwise.

There would be no gate into Twilight to take me up to the heights above, but then I had other ways. I whistled, with a flick of the wrist unleashing a rolling ball of blackflame that tore a hole through a tightly-packed shieldwall of armoured dead giving trouble to the Vuraga dzulu, and lightened the pain on my leg so that I might leap when Zombie passed by my side at a gallop and took flight again. Settling into the saddle I unsheathed my sword and savoured the ring of well-crafted goblin steel. With my knees alone I led her to take me to the eastern heights, where the Revenant that'd slain Mighty Darissim still stood, and my mount's long wings flapped as she hoisted us upwards in a spiral. Striking at the wyrm had dispersed my protective illusion, but it was not with surprise that I greeted the enemy's first volley. I'd been well aware it was coming.

Ghostly green flames flew at me in winding streaks, following even as Zombie dipped and twirled, while javelins and arrows came in swarms. Were I tired, were I spent, these could have been a threat. I was neither, for the night was yet young, and so I crushed them head on. Their dead flame I drowned out with my own, and no arrow was so well-crafted that it would not turn to ash when swallowed by blackflame. We came down on the enemy in a storm of fire, my mount whinnying with glee at the sight of the mayhem, and as her hooves touched the rock a circle of dead-become-ash burned around us.

"Come out, Revenant," I idly called out. "That won't have been enough to destroy you."

The noise was soft, under the roar of flames, but not so soft I did not catch it – eyes flicking to the side, I saw the spinning throwing axe about to bury itself in my chest. Swallowing a curse I leaned back and swatted at it with my staff, narrowly landing the blow. But I was looking the wrong way, as a flicker at the edge of my field of vision told me: the Revenant was coming from the other side. Zombie kicked at the enemy but I saw an axe come down and go straight through her leg. *Shit*, I thought, throwing myself down so she could flee. The Revenant was quicker than her. I glimpsed a blur of pale plate and then a large two-handed axe as it went down her back, splitting her in two.

“No,” I screamed, Night already at my fingertips.

I lashed out with darts of shadow but the Revenant met my eyes for a heartbeat – a pale brown, somehow sympathetic – and stomped down into the ash. The erupting cloud covered his retreat, leaving me with the horrible sight of Zombie cleaved in half. The pieces fell, after a moment, with sickening lurch. Destroyed beyond repair, whatever light there’d been in her eyes gone from a single stroke. Swallowing the grief I’d not expected to come, I laid a hand on her flesh and dragged the remains into the Night. I could dispose of the flesh properly, at least. There was no time for more, as another muted woosh tipped me off the enemy was after me again.

This time I ducked below the throwing axe, sharpening my senses further so I might hear from where the Revenant would come. *Left*, I thought, and lashed out with Night. A ghoul went up in black flames, then I caught sound from the right and burned up another. I was being toyed with. It was only luck that let me catch a glimpse of moonlight on steel and realize that, utterly silent, the Revenant had somehow gotten behind my back and was leaping towards me. A working would be too slow, I thought. Night burned in my arm as I twisted around and met that great axe with my sword and staff, being forced back as pain burned white-hot in my bad leg.

The Revenant withdrew his axe and I struck, sword flicking out, but even with Night along the edge the steel found no purchase in the plate. It’d been bait, and when I blocked the following blow with my staff – spell-forged steel or not, the Revenant’s blade bit not a whisper into the dead yew I’d been gifted in the depths of Liesse – I gave under his strength, stuck on the defensive long enough for him to take off a hand and sock me in the stomach. I spat out blood as a rib broke with a sharp snap, giving ground as I fled backward and flicked off the Night on the edge of my sword at the Revenant in the form of black flame. That white plate, though, was not so much as darkened by the heat of it. Dangerously well-crafted.

“Who were you?” I gasped out.

"Adehard Barthen," the Revenant replied in stilted Chantant, his voice deep and pleasant. "Once the White Knight, now a hound to the Enemy. Run while you still can, Callowan."

A White Knight using an axe? Hells, an *Alamans* using an axe? He must have been quite the odd duck.

"Not in the cards," I rasped.

The hand taken off the great axe reach behind his back. Another throwing axe, I decided, and threw up a quick gale of wind. But there was a flare of sorcery and it was another great axe that was revealed, one in each hand as he sped towards me. I shaped a tendril of Night and sunk it into the ground right before him, then detonated. He leapt up, just in time for my staff to smash his armoured stomach and forced him back to the ground. I swallowed a scream, my broken rib digging deeper into my flesh.

I struck out with my sword, looking for a weak point closer to the knee – if I found flesh, I could burn him inside out while avoiding the enchanted plate...

An axe came down to force aside my blade, goblin steel stubbornly matching Keteran spellcraft, and he swiftly pivoted on himself with his axe spinning with him and aimed for my throat. Gods but he was quick for a man his size. I formed a tendril of Night, curling around my own abdomen and had it drag me out of the axe's swing faster than I could move, then hammered his helmeted head with the tip of my staff: Night blew up in a heated detonation, but while the helm shook from the impact Sve Noc's power did not bite into the steel as it should have. Fuck me, but this one was a hard nut to crack. I stole the pain out of my rib, as it was getting too much to bear.

Completion sounded a clarion call into the Night: Mighty Brezlej was done. And it had answers for me.

Though I itched to continue the fight with this strange White Knight who'd already cost me too much, I'd not come here for revenge or a pissing match. My staff struck the ground in front of me, smoke billowing out, and even as a great axe went spinning through where I'd been a heartbeat earlier I weaved an illusion around myself. Lesser undead came flooding the edge of the broken hill, as if answering the Revenant's call, but I was just one limping step ahead. I skipped off the edge, calling Night to myself. Tendrils of darkness rose from the ground, forming into a flat bar I landed on and then stairs I strolled down as the workings of Mighty covered my back from the shots of the undead.

Mighty Brezlej knelt as I approached, so unusually short and stout for one of the Firstborn – I'd not seen many who could be called fat, though Brezlej fell well short of that – and its gaudy golden trinkets dangled on their strings.

"We have found three sources, Losara Queen," Brezlej said. "I offer these sights to you."

It offered up its palm, a small sphere of Night atop it. With a nod of thanks I took the sphere in hand and crushed it. My vision wavered as the memories I'd been given settled into my mind. It took me a few heartbeats to place the three ward anchors Mighty Brezlej and its sigil had found. One in the enemy's camp proper, beyond the pass – I sunk that memory into the Night and passed it to Mighty Sudone, along with the curt order of *destroy* – and another closer to the front, close to where Lord Soln was fighting. Its raiders were actually in the memory, getting the worse end of a tumble with ghouls and beorns. I passed along an order to break that anchor as well, Soln replying with a sense of acknowledgement.

"You believe the third anchor is the key one," I noted.

"It is the source of sources," Mighty Brezlej agreed.

And it was the one closest to me: not far beyond the hollow, into the winding pass and tucked away behind secondary wards obscuring what defended the anchor. It had trap written all over it, but it needed to be sprung anyway. Fortunately, I'd already handpicked –

"No you fucking don't," I snarled.

The wyrm I'd downed had been patched together by necromancers just enough to start moving around again, and now instead of massacring anything daring to climb its hilltop it was getting back on its feet and preparing to bound down into the hollow. There its weight alone would kill hundreds if not thousands of my warriors before it was itself ripped apart by the Mighty. Above us the other wyrm made a pass, spewing clouds of poison and tying up Mighty with defending against them. Too many for comfort, every one of those wasn't handling more mundane javelin volleys killing the dzulu.

The poison will win, in the long term, the cold voice in the back of my head assessed as Night raced through my veins. The gales were not dispersing the clouds, just pushing them higher. Already a dome of death was beginning to form above the hollow. The thoughts had flickered as my will shaped Night, weaving it into a cable stronger than steel. Without asking I snatched a javelin from Brezlej's back and bound the working to it before sheathing my sword and leaving my staff to stand unnaturally still. The downed wyrm was not a difficult target, so strength without skill was enough to have the barbed javelin sink into its side.

The cable went from before me to the wyrm, protruding from a rippling sphere of Night, but I wasn't intending for a repeat of the last time. I ripped out the other end of the cable from the sphere, spinning it out and adding a hook to the end. The downed

wyrm leapt, after having batted ineffectually at the cable and found it would bend but not break, but I was swifter still: the other wyrm was making it pass and the hook clipped its belly. Both wyrms roared with dismay as the cable pulled taut, forcing the flying dragon into a fall and snatching the leaping one before it could land atop my warriors.

They both fell on hillsides out of sight, writhing angrily, and without batting an eye I wove a fresh cable and tied it halfway through their shared binding. The other side of that fresh cable I tied to a javelin – offered up solemnly by Brezlej – and with a snap threw it at the hulking shape of Keter's untouched siege engine on the eastern heights. A hard smile stretched my lips as I felt the steel bite into something solid and the Night sink roots, just in time for the wyrms to try to peel away: one went back up in the air, the other circled west to return to the hollow. Both pulled at the second circle with massive strength. With a thunderous crack the engine was pulled up, and it was with pleased chuckle I saw that the base of the platform had been fused into the rock. The wyrms cracked the hill open like an egg, undead falling below as part of a rain of rock.

That ought to slow the enemy down some.

A tide of dust washed over us and I pulled my hood down, calling Mighty Randebog and Mighty Kuresnik to my side. In the distance I felt an anchor break. Mighty Sudone's work, and not its only doing by the rising columns of smoke in the distance. The ward cutting us off from the Ways thinned, especially around where the anchor had been, but it did not break. Most likely it wouldn't until the main anchor lay shattered.

"Brezlej," I mildly said. "You have tactical command until I return. Aim the Mighty to keep back the poison-cloud and make the wyrms trash everything you can."

"Chno Sve Noc," Mighty Brezlej fervently swore.

Randebog was a stately one, wearing a black cloth mask going down to its lips. The yellow cape on its back somehow accentuated the tall silhouette bedecked in boiled leather painted black, and it bore a long curved sword at its hip. Kuresnik was the opposite, if anything: though just as tall, save for its dyed green hair it wore not a thing above the waist. It'd similarly eschewed boots and wore only a skirt of long metal-tipped leather strips as clothing. It had a wild look to it and its vivid green sigil was tattooed on its face, mixing with intricate tattoos of the same hue covering most of its grey-skinned body.

"Open your minds," I ordered.

With restraint but not gently, I pushed into them the sight Brezlej had shared with me: the main anchor, nestled in the pass

and awaiting our destruction. Both drow shivered as the sensation, as the Night that I wielded came straight from Sve Noc and apparently felt... purer than most. Raw.

"Kuresnik?" I asked.

It clenched its jaw, as if straining.

"I can take us close, Losara Queen," Mighty Kuresnik eventually agreed. "But not there directly. There is a boundary."

Around us their sigils had been gathering, still fresh and eager from having been kept in reserve all this time. Maybe seven hundred in total, most of them Kuresnik – their sigil was one of the most numerous in my army – though their lot was admittedly thinner on Mighty. The Randebog had never been many and their chosen specialty had not learnt itself well to thriving in the war, but their core of twenty one Mighty were what I'd been after all along.

"Do it," I bluntly ordered.

Mighty Kuresnik slammed the butt of its long barbed spear into the ground, Night rippling out, and a heartbeat later its sigil followed suit. Kuresnik, that bold soul, had taken to the new ways with great relish: it was the first of my sigil-holders to have ever taken a Secret it owned and taught it to its own, spreading it around until its entire sigil could use the Secret of Long Strides. Not all Kuresnik were able to use it properly, but enough minds had pondered the matter that while trying to make the Secret easier to use they'd ended up making another entirely. The Secret of the Shadow Road, as they called it, was more or less a communal version of the Long Strides – one that could, with sufficient numbers, be extended to cover people who did not know either Secret.

To my eye it looked like a mirror made of darkness was opened in front of me, and after a wary glance I limped through. A tunnel, I thought, one in which I stood alone. The dark silently roiled around me, swallowing up all sound, but I could glimpse a patch of night at the end of the tunnel that was lighter in shade. It felt like I'd walked for an hour when I strode through the waiting dark mirror at the end, but my sixth sense told me that dawn was barely any closer – mere moments had passed. And still I now stood among a throng of drow, mostly Kuresnik, while ghostly fire rained down from above and sorcery crackled angrily in the air.

"Forward," I bellowed in Crepuscular.

"Cera aine," they shouted back.

The Dead King had known we were coming, and so made this place into a killing ground. The bend in the pass had been turned into a bastion, eight sets of increasingly tall and thick ramparts with the last reaching the height of the surrounding hills. Ghouls screeched as they leapt into the charging Kuresnik, claws and barbed spears tangling savagely, and knots of Bind mages scorched the air with their eerie flames from behind the safety of skeletons so heavily armoured they boasted more steel than bone. Lizards, rare among constructs, lay on their bellies atop the ramparts and spat goutts of flame and poisonous smoke. It was a tide of death, but it was met with vicious valour.

Shaping Night into a great spike, I hammered at the ramparts even as the Randebog began to emerge from the Shadow Road. The walls shook, but they had been warded up to the gills: I turned undead to ash but did not shatter stone. We'd have to do this the hard way. This was an ambush in more ways than one, of course. My Firstborn had emerged just outside the bend, scything through the few dead on the road and immediately turned against the heavily fortified bastion, but Julianne's Highway continued towards the enemy camp. Reinforcements poured in so swiftly they couldn't even be called that.

A wedge of Tusks, those great boar-like abominations with bellies full of stone, took the vanguard but behind them a flood of Binds and Bones was coming at a run. On the heights above, to the east, I caught sight of a silhouette in pale plate. Mounted atop a horse entirely of bone, now, but there was no mistaking that great axe. The Revenant who had once been the White Knight bellowed no war cry as he led his mount to skip off the edge of the hills, lesser undead trailing it his wake.

"You again," I coldly said.

This might have been trouble, were I a fool. Mighty Randebog answered my summons, having been close and waiting.

"Randebog," I hissed, "*now.*"

It nodded, its Mighty gathering around it to lend power.

"I am the curate of forgery," Mighty Randebog prayed, voice clear and beautiful. "I bear empty sacraments and offer neither rise nor fall, only the bitter deception of the road winding ever round. Hallow me, Sve Noc, and so permit me to share your gloom with all the world."

The dead knight raised his axe, sensing the power, but it was too late. Before the hooves could touch the ground, darkness billowed out from Mighty Randebog in a great ring. It swallowed whole the Revenant and the tip of the coming reinforcements, before coming at a sudden halt. Within the ring, only my force and the enemy bastion could be seen. No one else would intervene so long as the

Secret of the Lesser Gloom held sway over these grounds: round and round our enemies would go, finding nothing but where they had come from. *Now, I thought, all that's left is smashing that fucking bastion to pieces.*

I felt triumph in the Night and the wards shivered: Lord Soln had destroyed its own anchor. All on us, then.

Some mageling tossed a fireball at me, curving it past my warriors, and I casually swatted it aside as I took in the sight of the assault unfolding. Normally I'd consider sending light foot into a dug-in position to be throwing away lives stupidly, but the Kuresnik were a different story – nimble as wasps, they flitted from place to place in no way impeded by the heights and the walls. Already they'd swarmed through the first two walls, but looking at the meat grinder that ensued I wondered if that might not be by design: the third rampart was further back than the others, giving a clear line of sight, and the dead took full advantage of that.

With heavies out in the front and some sort of ward stunning the drow when they went up as shadows, the third rampart was proving the cliff to the sea of the Kuresnik. They won footholds, but did not keep them long. How many had died already? A third of the force at least. Lucky for them I'd come along.

"Randebog dzulu, with me," I shouted.

Even as I limped to the front of the offensive, drow parting smoothly for me, the enemy began to focus their fire on me. Ghostflame and curses, javelins and arrows and stones. I raised my staff, pointing it forward, and wove Night as a vortex of wind sucking in the deadly rain. Within moments the winds were howling with fire and steel, burning bright, and with a grunt of exertion I shaped the wind into a sphere and smashed it down on the third rampart. Sorcery and hot steel erupted, carving a hole in the enemy's defences, while I dragged myself up to the first rampart with Night tendrils and the dzulu followed with nimble leaps.

The dark filled with nightmarish visions that came almost too quick for me to react. A ghoul fell on me from above and I unsheathed my sword just in time to carve through it, staff coming forward to send a streak of blackflame into some Bind's leering skull before it could tighten a curse of decay around my throat. The Kuresnik surged forward in the hole I'd blown from them, one even smashing the wardstone that'd been giving them trouble, just in time for the enemy to toss down great pillars of rock. I would have laughed at the absurd mundanity of that tactic, but Neshamah didn't *do* mundane.

To the utter surprise of the Firstborn, Night wavered around the pillars – now shining with runes – and those that tried to escape

into shadow instead of dodging were crushed. The third rampart, not even fully taken, became yet another killing floor.

Tentatively I chucked a spear of blackflame at the fifth rampart and found it became unstable just before hitting the enemy javelinmen perched there, though it still torched a few. There were more, then, and direct workings were doomed. I'd have to pull something heavy and risk the vulnerability. I called Mighty Kuresnik itself to me, signifying I was in need of a bodyguard, and let the Night roar inside the back of my head. I'd drawn heavily on my well, tonight, and though it was not empty – could not empty, not when the Sisters smiled on me as they did tonight – I was beginning to near the limit of what my body could tolerate using. It was time to wrap up this raid.

As if sensing my intent, Keter pulled out all the stops. Stones shifted and a terrible screech filled the air, swarms of insects emerging from the sixth rampart like a tide and descending. Distantly, I heard Kuresnik fending off arrows and worse. Swallowing a curse I adjusted the working I'd begun to weave on the fly, forced to adapt as the first ranks of dzulu were devoured alive and the Mighty began to torch swarms and drow alike with black flames of their own. A dark shape, vaguely rectangular, began to shimmer into being above the enemy. Sweat beaded my brow. A headache was already pounding at my temples: Merciless Gods but I *hated* shoving imperative properties into things.

I only had the barest understanding of them through my patronesses, so pulling on one of them always had that horrid bleed. Back when I'd been smoke and mirrors I was able to shrug that off, but these days I was at a risk of my brain beginning to boil if I trifled too much with things beyond my understanding.

It worked, though. I'd pretty shamelessly stolen a favourite trick of Radhoste the Dreamer, the Sixth General, but with my own twist on it. Rhadoste like to make large miracles with magnetic properties, since it could foresee the enemy's approach and arm its own forces appropriately, but simple imitation wouldn't help me with the swarms. So instead of a simple magnet, I'd leaned on the Sisters to allow to 'understand' a nameless property. It was, essentially, 'bodies with Night and bodies without Night'. As my miracle flared, the dead – ghouls, swarms, skeletons – were slammed against their own ramparts as a great force repelling all bodies without Night exerted its strength against them.

"Quick," I gasped. "Clear the ramparts, I won't last long."

It was all butcher's work after that, killing enemies that mostly couldn't fight back. The pillars that troubled Night were tossed aside with simple strength and the ways cleared as Mighty took the time to get inventive now that they were no longer being shot at. Acid and fire and curses that turned bone to dust lashed out,

clearing one rampart after another as the dzulu advanced. I released my working as soon as we began storming the last bastion, spent and covered in sweat, and though there were a few last nasty surprises one of the Kuresnik eventually shattered the last anchor with a well-placed blow. The invisible weight went off our shoulders and I breathed out in relief. We'd lingered long enough, the swarms and Revenants couldn't be far by now. *Retreat*, I spoke into the Night, putting an end to our raid.

Bodies were picked up where we could, and within thirty breaths of my order there was not a living soul left in Lauzon's Hollow.

Puckstop101

Zombie 🙄

Gibborim

Keter must pay for this transgression.

NerfContessa

Indeed.

Does she still have the goat Kairos kept?
It's the only remotely worthy replacement.

Though fugldge, zombie the... 3rd?

caoimhinh

F

[Cold Cyberia](#)

And so, the title of best unholy abomination is passed to Robber.

shikkarasu

From Footrest to Steed, or How I Stabbed My Way to Being the Boss's Best and Baddest
By Robber of The Rock Breaker tribe The Fifteenth Legion of Terror Juniper's S*** List Callow

mamm0nn

You just know that Robber will publish that first draft with the crossed out parts included, only for scholars a hundred

years from now seeing many deeper literary meanings leading to tons of academic debate in his laziness and provocative publishing of a haphazardly unfinished work.

Sir Nil

Will I vote?

Cera aine.

[TeK](#)

Will I clean my room?

Cera aine.

Will I finish the project?

Cera aine.

When we will get our payment?

Cera aine.

I mean, it's badass and stuff, but, uh, easily exploitable.

caoimhinh

The Tenet of Procrastination.

caoimhinh

I found it weird and funny that when Catherine shouted "Forward!" they actually replied "Cera Aine".

I was like: Did they just... respond "ask tomorrow" to the order? LMAO.

[Adrian V](#)

That is kind of the joke, that she managed to introduce her sass into the culture xD

Cap'n Smurfy

Given that one of the most popular Drow pastimes is insulting rap battles and the existence of Mighty Rumena, I believe the Drow were already sassier than Cat. She merely adopted the Sass. They were born in it, molded by it.

[deciusbrutus](#)

Given that she was a barmaid and a pit fighter before she was Squire, I would say that the Sass adopted her.

Crash

Rumena, the magnificent old bat has been in this world for thousands of sassy, sassy years.
May it last a thousand more.

Half-deb

Super Impressive work as always.

[shimizubad](#)

Aww. Poor Zombie. What's gonna be Cat's next mount? It has to be something more epic than an undead carnivore flying fae horse.

blrbly

Undead flying suicide bomber demon goat

shadw21

Stealth Goat's time to shine.

That Other Guy

That poops goblin fire

[boballab](#)

She already has the replacement (Zombie V) even though it is still alive atm. She got it when she confiscated the horses of the Helikean Cataphract and rode her when Zombie III was punished for destroying Zombie IV back in Book 6 Chapter 21. The question is will she use the still living horse or make a Zombie VI.

caoimhinh

An undead carnivore flying fae horse resurrected by the dark miracles of Night.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Neshamah himself.

Burnsy

Hakram's new Role revealed?

Clint

Obviously, she's going to have to steal control of a Wyrms from the Dead King, because who doesn't want to ride into battle on a dragon-shaped abomination constructed from the bones of a hundred brainwashed willing sacrifices?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I odn't. I want an ethereal one made of their souls.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Not sure how I managed to misspell "don't," but okay. It'd be nice to be able to edit these.

Matthew

I love a good action chapter, I was hoping for a shiver of Name to come through though.

Ed

Names require a story and a struggle, this the whole way through was not a struggle and the story was one of the Drow not Cat's story.

[sengachi](#)

It definitely tells us about the character of her name though. A simple minor skirmish was enough to rouse it when standing judgement over a Named was involved. But a full blown raid from hell with her throwing around the full of her power didn't stir a whisper.

Frivolous

Hmm. I wonder what the strategic and ulterior objectives were in this raid. I thought the real objective might have been to kill Revenants, but apparently not.

Could someone please explain what it was they were trying to do?

nick012000

Well, now they know the identity of one of the Revenants they're fighting and have some idea of its tricks – and if they're able to scry the White Knight, he might be able to give them intel on him by using Recall.

Also, they destroyed some of the strategic resources of the Dead King's armies in this area, like the poison, the siege engines, and the Wyrms.

dadycool

Also the ward anchors that acted as a barricade, as well as the other fortified positions there.

Matthew

I think they wanted to wreck the defenses there before the main army arrived. The other ulterior motive was to get the Dead King to close a trap with insufficient preparation

Frivolous

Thanks, Matthew.

KingJulius

The goal of the raid was to weaken the defenses of the Hallow for the main army to follow up and take it. Hitting with the Drow here allowed them to attack the defenses with a few days less prep time and without their full defensive force because some of it was still retreating from the attack on the main army during the day. The Drow were able to take out 2 Wyrms without revealing the Unravellers, destroy the siege engines, get rid of the poison storage, and destroy many of the outer barricades and defenses for the Hallow.

Frivolous

Thanks, KingJulius.

[onedollargum](#)

That's some pretty good crowd control for an improvised miracle.

[Liliet](#)

Absence of evidence is probably evidence of absence here: raids are not, in fact, what Cat's new Name is going to care about.

No wonder, that – her combat role has been deeply secondary for her entire career. Even as a Squire the POINT was her being a leader of armies and nations, eventually.

shikkarasu

I would go a step further and say that her role has been to be the Biggest and Baddest.

Cat has always been infuriated at her own weakness (Watching Captain and Black spar, being **Spoken** to) and she consistently uses her abilities/reputation to bully people (forced draw against Juniper). She hates dealing from a position of weakness and isn't good at *actual* compromise(RIP CatXKillian).

As for her abilities, she had a superior foil by way of Willie for a while, but eventually killed him. Then she met Archer, who was even better, but proceeded to become Duchess of Moonless Nights almost in response to Archer joining the proto-Woe. From then on she barrelled through her challenges,

even later being recognised by Neshie as a third peer - something he does not even call *Ranger*.

Compare to Black who was quite at home being 2nd best (willingly served Malicia for decades, physically weaker than Captain, less skilled than Ranger, less destructive than Warlock, and overall less impressive than the previous Black Knight).

Cat has either been peerless or been sprinting toward peerlessness her entire journey. She may be the Leader of her Band of Five, but she takes great delight in being the Big Strong Guy of her personal Story. The death of the Dead Kind and Wandering Bard will be the final nail(s) as she loses the last of those who could truly challenge her.

[*Liliet*](#)

Ouch, NOT what I was trying to reply to.

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh no, Zombie)=

CERA AINE is *excellen and the best*

[*Burlyraven*](#)

And now Cat has had a victory and a draw against the Dead King's armies on this campaign. Considering she has yet to fully come into her Name, I'd say my prediction that she gains her Name amidst the corpses of her army has a bit more backing than before.

agumentic

I am getting really tired of people ascribing literally everything to the patterns of three.

[*Burlyraven*](#)

It's a rule of the universe for big Names and major stories of even the mundane. Saying you're tired of rules of three is like saying you're tired of major plot points.

agumentic

That must be why most of the so-called patterns of three drawn out in the comments came to nothing. Things can happen outside of them, you know.

panic

That is silly. Rule of Three has ever only been applicable in story about Three or so times. The constant nagging that literally Everything is a rule of three is really annoying when it starts to get to the Point that every new chapter is a different rule of three.

beleester

Rule of Three as an in-universe force is specifically about rivals. Cat vs Lone Swordsman – two conflicting visions for the future of Callow. Or Grey Pilgrim vs Cat – two staff-wielding miracle workers with opposing visions of “the greater good.” Or Black vs Hanno – the White and Black Knight (although Hanno’s “fated victory” there only killed a puppet).

Other things do come in threes – Liesse, for instance, or Cat’s three resurrections – but those don’t have an exploitable pattern, they’re just “something significant happens three times.”

Lordy

Nope the war has been going on for 2 years in the time skip.

[Burlyraven](#)

And? There have been multiple campaigns in this war. This one has produced a victory and a draw with obvious story weight.

[Liliet](#)

“Being shown onscreen” is not the criterion for story weight in universe.

You know what’s had story weight? Cat taking Masego away from the DK. And yet it’s been two years and no story has shown up in the meantime.

Black could tell he and Hanno weren’t going to be rivals after a pattern of three failed to form after their FIRST encounter. That’s how it works: it either forms immediately after the first person gets a victory, or IT DOES NOT, PERIOD, FULL STOP.

IF the Role of one of the people involved changes significantly, like with Cat the Priestess of Night, then the countdown can reset, yes. But Cat and DK are fighting the same war they have been fighting the entire time. There’s nothing now that would let Cat claim the role of his rival any more than she could two years ago.

It’s. Not. Happening.

Vlatko

I'm not convinced. They've been warring for years, and this doesn't seem like a skirmish any different from what could have happened previously. Besides, as far as I remember, don't patterns of three happen between two rival Named? The Dead King is too smart to let himself fall into a role like this, which is why he's so detached from the war itself. In addition, there's zero chance we'll notice some kind of pattern that Cat won't.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Yeah, no, this isn't a draw. Cat accomplished her goal of destroying/damaging the enemy fortifications before her main army arrived, then got her Drow back to safety before Nessie was able to wipe them out. That's a victory for her by any reasonable standard. You could argue last fight was a draw, since Nessie found out the army was coming at the expense of two revenants and all the constructs he sent, but A: Rule of three doesn't go 'draw, victory, loss" and B: considering that Cat's entire schtick is being ridiculously good at spotting and manipulating narratives, if she hasn't seen and called out something as basic and predictable as the Rule of Three then it's a safe bet that the rule isn't taking effect

Darkening

Hard to call this a draw honestly, sure she has some casualties, but she trashed Keter's reserves of poison, his siege engines, and his wards, and the other drow contingents probably achieved at least part of their goals. They even stole some bodies at the end so they can drain night to make up for the losses they took. We'll have to see just how bad the casualties got before we can really declare anything, but Cat did achieve a number of her objectives.

Miles

No she hasn't.

She's had a conversation and a raid.
She won both inasmuch either thing can be won.

[TeK](#)

Ooh, I love getting all metaphysical and shaping the fabric of reality.

Juff

Typo Thread:

being slaying > slaying
one its more > one of its more
asplash > a splash
would not able > would not be able
worst of Firstborn > worst of the Firstborn
western engine > western engines
sickening lurch > a sickening lurch
reach behind > reached behind
then detonated > then detonated it
pleased chuckle > a pleased chuckle
as the sensation > at the sensation
purer than most > purer than most
butt its > butt of its
they third > the third
Rhadoste like > Rhadoste liked
to allow to > to allow me to

dadycool

No! Not Zombie! I hope that Alamans Zero runs in circles for eternity.

Ingenuity in a race like the Drow is dangerous, especially since they basically made a Night Way simply by considering how to work together.

Raved Thrad

Alas poor Zombie. You will be missed.

[Javvies](#)

But Zombie!

That's going to hurt. Both emotionally, and in more practical terms. Not only has Cat had Zombie for years, Zombie was awesome. Maybe Masego can do something to restore Zombie, but I don't have much hope for that.

And Keter has viable mage-based countering/suppression wards targeted against Night based abilities. That's not going to be good. Especially on the actual Drow battlefield.

Sinead

I wonder if The Summoner will play a role in the return of Zombie in some form.

To me at least, there is something comparable to what Cat described Zombie as and the Summoner's own work. It would work well as part of Cat's "I now need to be nice to the Summoner?!" comment.

[Liliet](#)

We've seen the anti-Night wards in the glimpse Sve Noc had shown, actually.

kinghaart

Would also be interesting to see if Cat can imbue sentence onto Summoner's creatures.

I am still waiting for her to try and wrest the dead from the DK... Though that could be a bad pattern to follow too if the wrong story gets attached.

Either way, with her affinity for Necromancy being shown with the Red Axe, Dead Queen could be a contender...

[Liliet](#)

Cat cannot imbue sentience into anything since she fed Winter to the crows. It was a fae ability, she's back to regular necromancy now.

mamm0nn

Yeah! Now this Revenant was awesome, he actually had some weight and danger to him unlike the previous batch. This is what Revenants should be: Named-shadows that can check Named and wear them out while the undead armies win the regular battles against no longer morale-up'd soldiers, if not defeating Named entirely when they're not the freaking Black Queen.

[Liliet](#)

Keep in mind Cat can thrash most Named on her side with both hands tied behind her back. The other Revenants she's fought could probably very much check someone like the Barrow Sword or Silver Huntress.

kinghaart

Revenants lack a third aspect. Seems that's part of story-fu in a way, as used well they can force out a living names third aspect on themselves instead of on a construct or other asset of the DKs. Like a decoy card.

But yeah, makes sense that a stronger Named like the White Knight would become a stronger Revenant too.

Cap'n Smurfy

Hey, remember when Cat had to half kill herself to beat a baby Named with sword?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Half? She was *dead*! The Once And Future Squire!

Cap'n Smurfy

No no, you're thinking of the Third fight. I was talking about their first fight where Cat was only nearly dead after winning.

LM

Kuresnik? You definitely took inspiration from the joker for him yeah? Pretty cool

Xinci

Well not too surprising after that last revanant that Cat got beaten a bit by a older deadlier Revanant. That staff still has pretty interesting properties I must admit, still curious if it being similar to miracles is akin to having its own domain with its own rules.

I feel zombie could have been repaired if Cat acted quick enough, since we already know the Night can hold souls, and possibly as a result, may recreate a body from what becomes a part of it. So theoretically it could hold a facsimile of Zombies soul/essence and put it into a body similar to the one she had before. Cat was busy and still isnt that good at magic though, so it is what it is.

When it comes to swarm like tactics(that is to say disorderly looking orderly dynamic improvisation on a tactical and strategic scale), I feel the Night gives the Drow a huge advantage in its ability to transmit thought and emotion through itself. Just the information speed alone is a very big deal if you wanted to give them a proper doctrine.

Also great to see more of the laws/properties of reality that the Night may subsume. I wonder when they will make a catalogue to aid them in dealing with Light or foreign "viruses" from greedy sorcerers.

miles

Zombie doesn't have a soul and can't die. It's a fae horse.

Miles

This is not who I was replyingto you bloody liar of a website.

Miles

No actually it was. Gaah

Daniel E

The death of Zombie the Third was so incredibly arbitrary that I can't even work myself up to be mad about it. This felt like a Game of Thrones or Walking Dead bit; just 'oh hey, this beloved character is dead now, with absolutely no rhyme or reason, sucks to be you'. Hopefully her spirit will return to Arcadia, maybe then she & Cat can be reunited.

Mental Mouse

Shush you, better Zombie III than some actual character. Especially since Z3 was a construct anyway, Cat can probably remake him....

Daniel E

Z3 is (was 😞) absolutely a real character. And technically speaking, not a construct. She was a Fae horse, but still flesh & blood (or whatever their equivalent is). She could no more be dismissed via sorcery than any of the other Fae.

Mental Mouse

> or whatever their equivalent is
Well, that's the point. Z3 was a former Fae creature layered with necromantic power. It's entirely possible it could be re-made, perhaps with an extra layer of Night, if Cat can get some time to experiment.

Matthew Wells

Plus we just got introduced to a new character that specializes in this sort of thing.

Liliet

Her.

Tom

Cera Aine could be an Irish person.

Clint

>"Adehard Barthen," the Revenant replied in stilted Chantant, his voice deep and pleasant. "Once the White Knight, now a hound to the Enemy. Run while you still can, Callowan."

Finally we've got a Named Revenant surviving to fight another day.

He doesn't seem like a proper mirror for Cat, so I wouldn't expect a Pattern of Three or anything like that, but he did just kill Best Zombie Evah (aka Winged Zombie) so there's a need for payback – that most Callowan of all vices.

Sounds like Name bait to me.

Miles

Definitely expecting her to cast judgement on that former white knight at some point.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Noooooooooooo.

Not Zombie, everyone's favourite undead horsebomination!

beleester

Chess lingo note: A "battery" is two rooks on the same file (or other pieces that can attack on the same line, like queen+bishop on a diagonal). Like a gun battery, it aims all your "firepower" at the same spot, typically the enemy king. Setting up a battery can let you set up favorable trades and smash open the enemy lines.

Chapter 58: Prophylaxis

"One can no more win a battle than one can 'win' a hurricane or a house fire. It can, at best, be a disaster withstood better than some others also suffering it."

– Dread Empress Sanguinara, the Shrewd

The blades had gone back to the sheaths, so as always the generals were left to the grim business of counting the corpses.

With the protective wards set down the rest of our army had crossed into Creation and a camp begun being built, but even so General Hune had prepared casualty reports by the time I returned. A little over nine hundred dead for the fight taking the beachhead, more from the Dominion than the Army of Callow. Significantly more wounded, but we weren't low on priests so that ought to be a temporary measure in most cases. Given that there was sure to be fighting tomorrow, our standard orders that mages would not currently offer advanced healing stood. Not too unexpectedly, the raid I'd led into Lauzon's Hollow had turned out more costly than the first battle of the day.

Almost twelve hundred drow had died on those grounds, Lord Soln's battle claiming the largest share of dead – it'd run into heavily entrenched positions and waiting Revenants. A costly affair, losing more than a tenth of our current force of Firstborn on the first stroke, but the payoff had been worth it. We couldn't be sure of the enemy's casualty numbers but around six thousand at the hands of my raiders was a conservative estimate, and that was without taking into consideration the targeted objectives we'd gone after.

On wyrm was destroyed entirely, stormed by a hunting pack of Mighty while I'd been gone, and one of the siege engines made essentially unusable. Soln had devastated the enemy's fortifications in the front and one of its sigil-holders slain a Revenant, while Sudone had done more damage than the two of us put together. Three ritual sites had gone up in flame along with the mages manning them before it found a fourth too well-fortified to assault and turned instead to setting fire to every structure in sight. It'd even collapsed the mouth of the pass leading out of the Hollow on its way out, which if nothing else ought to slow down the enemy's repairs overnight.

I sat down with Senior Mage Dastardly from the Third to get my rib seen to as I heard Hune's assessment of the situation in camp. We were building quickly but too fragile for her tastes, not that there was much of a choice. While Dominion folk and Procerans – the Volignac soldiers and the fantassins drew lots – could be put to work digging ditches, most couldn't be trusted to raise palisades or assemble watchtowers. It just wasn't the way either of their peoples waged war, they had no training in it. I called a war council after thanking Dastardly for his work, first to reiterate the watch arrangements – goblins and drow would take the first few shifts, but as soon as we had enough torches and magelights up the forces that'd not fought today would begin sending watchmen – but secondly to share what I'd learned during the raid.

"The surrounding hills have been hollowed out," I told them. "To what extent I can't be sure, but at the very least the valley where the village once lay is significantly larger now."

Meaning the enemy would be able to cram a lot more soldiers into it when we tried to break through.

"More worrying is this," I continued, pulling at Night.

I drew out the silhouette of the two siege engines I'd never quite gotten a look at.

"Larger than even goblin works, much less those of the dwarves," Princess Beatrice observed.

Spoken like someone who'd never seen an actual dwarven army on the march, I thought. The stuff they peddled up here was the dregs of their arsenals.

"What does it do?" Lady Aquiline more bluntly asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Neither fired, and they were slow in turning towards us. I'd wager they were being pointed at the grounds in front ahead of the Hollow and that the machines are slow to turn."

"Not surprising, given the size," General Abigail muttered. "Old Bones doesn't usually use this stuff either, Your Majesty, it's all monsters and spells. I don't like the looks of it at all."

Several people leaned forward as the Callowan general, famed for her sharp military instincts, expressing such wariness. They'd not been taking it all that seriously until now.

"Do we have a way to silence it before the assault?" Lord Razin asked.

"We can't take horses up those hills," Grandmaster Talbot said. "Gods know we tried, last year. We never found any proper paths for soldiers to go up, either."

"I intend to send Special Tribune Robber into the hills to see if there are paths to use," I said. "But I'll not pin great hopes on the attempt. The area will be swarming with undead, regardless: even Mighty in the fullness of night were unable to seize those positions."

I hadn't been able either, and lost Zombie in the process, but I wouldn't admit to that in front of these people. The myth of my unconquered strength was much too useful to begin chipping at now.

"It might be worth trying a second raid with the full strength of the Firstborn when the detachments return," Captain Reinald suggested.

"Playing the same trick on Keter twice always ends the same way," Razin Tanja firmly said.

Good boy, I thought. He was learning, our Lord of Malaga.

"The detachments will begin arriving tomorrow afternoon at the earliest," General Hune said. "And it would be ill-advised to attack before the following morning. We still have time to consider other methods."

"The Dead King won't wait until then to begin attacking," I said. "Don't rely entirely on the common watch, you should all keep your own as well. Tomorrow we'll begin bombardment of the

entrance to prevent fortifications from being raised again, but in essence our position remains defensive. We are preparing for a decisive thrust, not spending our strength."

The trouble would be figuring out how to make our thrust decisive, I'd already gleaned. The Dead King had struck with all his might against Cleves in the west, betting that he could break through there before we could reclaim Hainaut, so he wouldn't be looking to outright win the battle here: just delaying us for too long would be victory enough. It was hard to dislodge a skilled enemy waiting you out in a fortified position like the Hollow even when they *weren't* outnumbering you, and attempting to force the pass would be bloody business. There would be a need for some cleverness here.

The only good news so far was that there was no hint our enemy had caught on to our reserve using the Twilight Ways to strike directly at the Cigelin Sisters, behind our current tussle. I was actually tempted to just trade artillery shots with the undead here until the Sisters were seized, actually, since their fall might force the enemy to move from the Hollow. That was just me getting squeamish about casualties, though, I suspected. At the moment time was more precious to us than soldiers, ugly as the truth was. I called the war council to an end shortly after, exhausted but not yet done with my duties.

I held back Princess Beatrice, since I had a question for her.

"Ever heard of a Chosen named Adehard Barthen?" I asked. "He would have been a White Knight."

"I have not, Your Majesty," Beatrice Volignac admitted. "Though history was never my strong suit. The name sounds northwestern but that might not mean much: the Principate is not a small realm."

"It was worth a try," I sighed. "Kindly ask around if you know anyone of such scholarly incline."

Might be worth sending word back to Neustal to see if Salia or the Arsenal could dig up anything for me. It'd been a while since I'd lost a fight that badly, and this White Revenant wasn't even supposed to be the main threat here: that would be the Prince of Bones and his Grey Legion, neither of which had yet made an appearance. Which was worrying me. The Headhunter had not been able to confirm their marks were still there, as I'd not risked Named too close to the enemy defences yet. The last fucking thing I needed was a fresh Revenant with knowledge of my war plans.

Hakram was in not long after, the Apprentice trailing his shadow as agreed. The Ashuran was young, and her face of a cast too hard for people to call it pretty. I sympathized, having been there myself at her age – only without magical powers to make up for

it, unless you counted compulsive mouthing off as one. Adjutant came with a mug of hot tea – sweetened with honey – and reports I'd been wanting. I drank of the first, enjoying the warmth seeping into my bruised lips, while gesturing for him to summarize the second.

"Start with the Rapacious Troubadour," I said.

"As ordered, the Vagrant Spear preserved a Bind and delivered it into our custody," Hakram gravelled. "The Troubadour then interrogated it in his particular manner."

"He means the Troubadour ate the soul and went sifting through its memories," I idly told the Apprentice.

"That is revolting," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I hummed in agreement.

"Damned useful, though," I said. "So, what did her get?"

"Confirmation that the Grey Legion and the Prince of Bones are here," Adjutant. "Eyes on at least twelve Revenants. He also believes, from the movement of troops glimpsed, that the Dead King has been waiting for our offensive."

I grimaced. Much as I hated to hear that, it fit what we'd seen: the strikes to the west into Cleves had come too quickly after the beginning of our offensive for it to be a coincidence. He'd waited until our armies were committed elsewhere to attack.

"Speaking of Revenants," I said, "I want you to look into a name: Adehard Barthen. White Knight, possibly from the northeast."

"I'll see what I can dig up," Hakram gravelled. "Difficult foe?"

"Couldn't crack him before I withdrew," I admitted. "And Zombie's gone."

He let out a soft noise of sadness.

"I'd begun to think that malevolent old thing was unkillable," Hakram said.

"So had I," I murmured.

I shook it off, sipping at my tea. This was no time to get sorry over a dead horse dying again, there was a war on.

"Firing platforms?" I asked.

"Pickler says they'll be ready by morning," Adjutant replied. "Our artillery will be in place by Early Bell at the latest,

though come daylight she maintains her request for Named spotters."

"I'll think about it," I grunted.

I hated to use any Named like that, as it felt like using a magic wand as an arrow, but some of our less combat-ready contingent might be gainfully used that way. I wasn't going to be sending the Page out into the fray anytime soon, for example, so an argument could be made there.

"The trouble, sir," Apprentice reminded him.

"I had not forgotten," Adjutant replied, sounding somewhat amused.

He was in a much better mood than when I'd last seen him, I noticed, and I didn't even know why.

"The Blessed Artificer went to have a look at our wards," Hakram said. "Or tried to. Akua sent her packing, in her own polite way."

"The Artificer has threatened to lodge a complaint under the Terms," the Apprentice said. "It's been the talk of the Named in camp."

"Akua Sahelian is not Named, which makes that threat utterly meaningless," I replied, rolling my eyes. "And if the Artificer wanted a look at our wards, she should have sought permission from the appropriate officers first. This isn't the Arsenal."

"Don't I know it," Apprentice muttered under her breath.

I smothered my amusement. Evidently, while pragmatic about trading the assignment as Hakram's bodyguard and assistant for my backing in being reassigned to the Arsenal afterwards she wasn't quite as sanguine about the trade as she'd been pretending. I hardly minded, if anything it'd keep her motivated to ensure Adjutant made it through this in one piece. After downing the rest of my tea and dismissing the two of them, I crawled into my cot and tumbled straight into a mercifully dreamless sleep.

I woke up much too soon, one of the Night-workings I habitually lay around my tent having been tripped. When an attendant came into my tent moments later and I slipped back my knife under the pillow, it took his announcing of Scribe as the courtesy it was: the villainess would have been perfectly capable of coming in without tripping a damned thing, or being seen by my guards. The nights were cool enough I'd gone to bed in a shirt, which cut down on dressing time, but I'd not washed before sleeping so I was unlikely to be smelling of roses. Eh, she'd deal.

"I" generously assume you woke me for good reason," I bluntly said, sliding into a seat.

"News from the west," Scribe replied. "From Princess Rozala."

I grimaced. Yeah, that was well shaving an hour off my bedrest for.

"Hit me," I sighed.

"You might recall that the diversionary force Princess Rozala sent out of Coudrent to pin the enemy army at Luciennerie was routed," Scribe said.

"Not before seeing the Dead King was on the march, though," I said. "I take it the siege of Coudrent has begun?"

"It has not," Scribe calmly corrected. "In fact, the last reports from outriders insist there is no trace at all of an offensive against Coudrent."

I blinked in surprise. Wait, what? It wasn't that a feint was impossible there – I could think of half a dozen ways it could be done without even using magic – but rather that if that one hundred and fifty thousand strong army wasn't headed west, where the Hells *was it*?

"Is it coming down the blue road instead?" I asked.

Vivienne was in for a ride, if that was the case. We had a stronghold straddling the blue road, north of Arbusans, but even with reinforcements holding it against such numbers was going to be rough. I frowned before Scribe even replied, already suspecting what the answer would be.

"There have been warbands, but no sign of an army," Eudokia said.

Less than three bells ago, I'd been convinced that the Dead King's plan had been to strike hard into Cleves while delaying us in Hainaut so that whatever gains we might make were made worthless by an entire front collapsing to our west. *But that only makes sense if he attacks along both lines*, I thought. Even if Trifelin fell right now – and it was by far a harder fortress to force than Coudrent at the moment, to boot – Cleves would be able to rally and mount a defence.

Which meant I had been gravely, utterly wrong about what Neshamah's campaign plan was.

"*Fuck*," I cursed. "We were had. I don't know *how* yet, but we were had."

Dragged into full wakefulness by dread, I turned a hard eye to Scribe.

"Wake up Adjutant," I said. "I want my full war council up and here within the hour."

The Scribe nodded, but did not immediately depart. My brow cocked with impatience, as I probably needed to get some pants on if I was going to be entertaining royalty. I had fond memories of doing otherwise, admittedly, but it was best left as a one-off.

"I hear you have been asking about an Adehard Barthen," Scribe said.

I gestured curtly for her to go on, since it was a rhetorical question we both knew the answer to.

"Though I cannot speak to this Adehard in particular, the House of Barthen is ancient Proceran royalty," Eudokia said.

"Unless I missed a name when I made myself memorize the Highest Assembly – and I did not – you mean ancient in a very literal sense," I noted.

"Relatively so," Scribe hedged. "It preceded the House of Goethal on the throne of Brus, but collapsed after the death of nearly all adults of the line in the Sixth Crusade. In the short-lived civil war that ensued, the Goethals seized power while having essentially no real claim to the throne save force."

Well, I thought, that was something.

"Anything related to them and a greataxe?" I asked.

It was an unusual enough weapon for an Alamans noble it was worth asking. She stilled a moment, as if deep in thought.

"The heraldry of House Barthen was a white axeman on green, wearing armour," Scribe finally said. "And their words translated roughly to 'None May Mar'."

My eyes narrowed. I'd not scored so much a single wound on the dead White Knight, had I? And my inability to damage his plate – mar it, so might say – might have a deeper source than simple sorcery.

"Talk with Hakram," I said. "Look into it together. Artefacts like a set of pale plate and a greataxe would be details of interest to me."

If I was going to be fighting this one again, I wanted all the knowledge I could on my side. Scribe took my words like the dismissal they were, leaving me to limp around looking for a clean pair of trousers and quickly wash myself of the worst of the dried sweat from the night's fighting. My hair went into a loose ponytail and I went looking through my desk's drawers for nuts and dried raisins, which while far from a meal would have to

suffice until something more filling could be arranged. I unrolled my maps of Hainaut on the carved table, setting down painted iron blocks for the forces once more.

I wasn't seeing the solution, and it was like an itch I couldn't scratch. I honestly couldn't make sense out of the Dead King's campaign plan here. The army here in Lauzon's Hollow to stop us made sense, no arguing with that, but the rest wasn't adding up. There were too many little details going against the grain. Like Prince Klaus' best efforts to bait out the army holed up in Juvelun failing even though at first his advance had been harassed quite aggressively, for one. The way that attack on Trifelin, which Princess Rozala had turned into a bloody fortress, had been obvious enough in coming we'd *known* it would for weeks if not months.

And not the supposed march on Coudrent turning out to have been a feint, which made some sort of sense, but less so that there'd apparently been *no follow-through*. Where had the army in Luciennerie gone? It should be hurrying down the blue road at breakneck pace right now, in an attempt to move quickly enough even through the Twilight Ways we'd be too late to reinforced. Instead an army of hundred and fifty thousand had disappeared. In principle, going into the countryside and off the roads it was possible to cut through the hills and reach Cigelin or the capital from Luciennerie.

In practice, that same lack of roads meant that the journey would be so slow that if my army broke through Lauzon's Hollow in the next three days we'd still get to the capital ahead of the Luciennerie reinforcements, and with time to spare. My host was capable of beating such a force on the field, especially from a fortified position like the walls of Hainaut. Would the army in Juvelun move to the Cigelin Sisters and try to slow us down there instead? *But that'd be throwing away another army*, I thought. Neshamah had bones to spare, but he wasn't exactly in a position to be pissing away armies like this either.

Honestly, even just taking Hainaut back up to the Cigelin Sisters while sealing the Malmedit tunnels out east and investing Luciennerie to the west would be a major victory for us. It wouldn't deal with the bridge up north, which would still need to be destroyed, but that could be attempted from our new fortified lines – which would include, for the first time since the beginning of the war, a shared frontline between Hainaut and Cleves through Luciennerie. That'd be bad fucking news for the Dead King, and this entire gamble did not seem like his kind of stratagem at all. Which meant I was still missing something.

It had to be about that force of two hundred thousand, the one still missing. It'd last been seen north of the capital, and obviously it wouldn't be able to move quickly when it was so

large a force, but maybe it'd gone west? It might hit Trifelin, still being besieged, as a second wave. Hells, it might even try to attack the shore elsewhere entirely by going through the bottom of the lake. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. No, I decided. That wasn't it. There'd be sense in that strategy – the Luciennerie army would then finally attack our defence lines after having delayed, forcing us to commit there and not reinforce Malanza – but that was, as the Intercessor had reproached me, still thinking like a general. Neshamah wasn't trying to win a war, not like we would.

He was trying to exterminate vermin.

Battles and strategic victories meant little to him, it was only the destruction of our forces that mattered. And he wasn't going to get that out west in Cleves, not when so many of the prominent Named and our finest armies were here in Hainaut and taking risks. The killing blow would come here, on this front. I could feel it in my bones, even if I still could not discern the shape of the doom to come. My war council filed in just as warm meals and steaming mugs of tea were brought in for everyone – Hakram's eye for detail had not failed me – and I filled them in as everyone dug in. Not everyone understood the trouble we were in, unfortunately.

"I'll not complain at fighting fewer enemies," Captain Reinald said. "Let the Princess of Aequitan turn them back from her nice, cozy fortresses."

"The dead will not grow wings, Black Queen," Lord Razin said. "We'll find this missing army sooner or later."

I eyed him with displeasure.

"Or they'll find *us*, Tanja," Lady Aquiline flatly said. "This is grim news."

Good girl, I fondly thought. She was learning, our Lady of Tartessos.

"In the worst case scenario," General Hune said, "the force that routed the raiders from Coudrent could have been a simple large detachment – fifteen or twenty thousand, enough for a full-scale assault to be inferred by scouts – while the rest was already marching east. They could already be closing in on the capital, or even the Cigelin Sisters."

I hadn't even considered that, in truth. I nodded appreciatively at the ogre, even though she'd made it plain we might be in more trouble than I'd thought.

"Word should be sent to the Iron Prince," Princess Beatrice suggested.

"It will be," I said, "but there's no guarantee the messengers will make it there, much less back to us with an answer. He'll be north of Juvelun and approaching Malmedit by now."

Meaning his back would be very much exposed, and the roads about as safe as having a drink in the Tower.

"No point in talking much about it, is there?" General Abigail shrugged. "Only one thing left to do."

I suppressed a grin at the sight of every eye in the room turning towards her. See, the thing about that little jewel of a find was that while she was deeply paranoid – a healthy survival trait, in the Army of Callow – and just a little on the side of cowardly, she was also a significantly better commander than she believed she was. Her trouble was, in essence that her points of comparison were the finest generals of our time. She had the stuff, though, the spark that meant you had the potential to be one of those. The War College couldn't teach you that, and while today Hune might be the better commander in every regard a decade from now I'd bet on Abigail of Summerholm nine times out of ten. Something like anguish struck the other woman's face when she realized that her conclusion had not, in fact, been obvious to everyone else in the room.

"Proceed, General Abigail," I drily said.

"If we can't figure out what the Dead King's up to, then we have to punch through as quick as possible," she hesitantly said. "Doesn't matter what his plan is, if we throw a sharper in the middle of it."

She'd put her finger to the pulse of it. Tempting as it might be not to act until we'd figured out what Neshamah was up to, it was too late for that. The armies were already marching, the bets had been put down. Now the only way out was through.

"My thoughts exactly," I agreed. "It has now become imperative to break through even before the reserve strikes at the Cigelin Sisters."

It'd allow us to secure the lands between the Hollow and the Sisters swiftly, and make sure the army holding Lauzon's Hollow was annihilated instead of dispersed. I had no intention of allowing chunks of it to break off after we won the field and cut our supply lines after we moved on. We'd bottle them up in the lands between the two armies and eradicate them before moving on the capital together.

"Prepare for battle," I ordered my war council. "As soon as the artillery is ready to begin firing, we will begin probing for a weakness to assault."

There was no arguing with that, so as soon as the meals were finished they returned to prepare their men. I'd been blunt with my commanders mostly for the sake of clarity, as hurried or not I did not intend to throw soldiers into the meat grinder of a straightforward assault of the Hollow. It had become undeniable, however, that we no longer had the time to be too sly about forcing out the enemy. I was left to rely on the possibility that my first leanings might have paid off, so when a bone-tired Robber returned to camp an hour after dawn I had him brought to me directly. Dusty and bloodied, he still came in with a swagger. It did not hold for long when I asked for a report, though.

"I've got something," Special Tribune Robber admitted. "But I'm not sure you'll like it, Boss."

"It beats the nothing I currently have on the table," I frankly replied. "Talk."

"There's no goat paths left," the goblin told me. "Keter got clever about it, broke up anything that might serve as a road soldiers could use coming from the outside. Went over the hills by climbing, but the place is full of ghouls and mages. I lost most of a line to some pretty well-hidden wards."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Blew up the dead," he said. "Keter'll get no word out of my lot, even in death. It was the sharpers that let us find out what we did, actually. You mentioned the hills were hollowed out some, Boss, but it's a lot more than that. They made the sides of the pass into a massive cavern camp, I reckon."

I grimaced. I'd not thought that the Dead King would have invested so long in building up the Hollow, or that we would have missed it. Hells, with work of the scale he was mentioning the dead must have been at work even before we seized the pass last year. They'd hidden their tracks well, if even heroes had missed them.

"You can get in there?" I asked.

"Sure," Robber of the Rock Breaker Tribe grinned. "We know a thing or two about digging, goblins."

He elaborated further under my questioning. Having assessed that trying the hilltops any further would just get more of his people killed to no gain, he'd instead spent most of the night getting a sense of the lay of the structures under the hills. The malevolent imp had three points of ingress for me and a sketch of what he believed the lay of the artificial caverns might look like – a copy of which was already in Pickler's hands. Good, that'd spare me sending him to do that afterwards.

"Taking those would get real messy, Boss," Robber told me.
"Legions don't do well on grounds like those, not against things like Tusks and Beorns. We need an open field for our mages to handle their like."

"I'm aware," I mused. "But if you're right, the enemy will have hidden a significant part of its army under the hills."

Waiting to surprise us after we'd taken the hollow, I decided. First they'd bleed us taking the entrance, and after we pushed the dead back beyond the old village they would have sprung the trap. The raid of last night paired with my favourite marauders had sniffed out the jaws, though, so we might be able to turn this on them. I drummed my fingers against the table, closing my eyes and forcing myself to think. The Dead King's army had a superior position, superior numbers and it'd been preparing for this fight for long enough it'd still have a few nasty surprises up its sleeves. What did my army have that could overturn all those advantages?

"Maybe they'll turn around and walk home, if we're lucky," Robber mused. "Stranger things have happened."

My eyes opened. That was an answer, yes. *Luck and goblins.*

Didn't sound like much, but you could do a lot of damage if you used those right.

SpeckofStardust

Collapse the caverns.
First literal thought.

dadycool

That's exactly what I thought, too.

Ninestrings

Everything in there is very physically resilient and doesn't need to breathe.

Probably would barely slow them down.

Sulo

Sure, if the literal tons of stone crushing them was spread thin enough. *shrugs*

hakureireimu

Flood it; my second thought.

Ninestrings

That would accomplish literally nothing except make the undead harder to attack and maybe ruin some munitions.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, but as the only general to ever defeat Theodosius once said: "The best move in the war is the one your enemy does not expect, therefore the good plan should always surprise the general himself.

Eduardo Diaz Torres

so, himself?

Lox

So dump goblinfire pouches in the caverns along with the flooding water. Add self detonating timers to the pouches, and leave enough air in the pouches to let them float.

[sengachi](#)

Ah, but we've seen Named bless entire lakes before. And these are no fey undead.

mamm0nn

Not if we flood it with holy water. Can priests baptise a river, Castlevania style?

Abnaxis

I think you're all missing the *real* issue: if they flood or collapse the caverns, how will Cat set then on fire? She's running out of goblinfire...

[Dresden 67](#)

Goblinfire burns stone and water fine, just slower.

Frivolous

Flood it with holy water.

WuseMajor

Holy Lakeomancy.

I like this plan.

[origamiflame](#)

With goblin fire

[irritantseraphim](#)

With Goblinfire

[boballab](#)

Use the last of her goblin fire inside the Caverns was my first thought since this is Cat thinking about goblins and it has been too long since she really let her inner pyromaniac loose.

dadycool

Hmm, I wonder if Freddy will get the chance to take out his predecessor, which sounds like he started the line, Levantine style, if their coat of arms is essentially him.

It's nice to see Hakram more cheerful.

Lol, Abigail is comparing the tower she's building to the moon while everyone else is using it as a space elevator.

ninegardens

Soo... undead bomber goats in a cave?

[boballab](#)

I was thinking along those lines myself since we had a sequence in an earlier chapter where Cat refrained from using her Goblin munitions incase something important came up.

[TeK](#)

No. Using undead against the Dead King is a folly. Instead, through careful surgery, alive suicide bomber goats should be used.

Ninestrings

blinkingman.gif

nick012000

So, the enemy has built a network of underground tunnels? Sounds like an ideal fighting arena for the drow, while the rest of Cat's forces draw off the above-ground undead. They'd spent thousands of years living and fighting underground, after all.

[TeK](#)

Blowing up caverns seems like a bit of a too obvious choice. Especially given Catherine. Seems like a bait. Neshamah might've as well built a town and left a crate of goblin fire near it with a sign "Please don't burn".

[Mental Mouse](#)

And about that chapter stinger... how could Cat get them to "turn around and walk home"? Maybe change the objectives on him? She probably can't send the Named away elsewhere, but how else could she convince him to turn his attentions elsewhere?

[TeK](#)

Honestly this cliffhanger seems like that part from House M.D. when someone says that they'd like to be dominated by a BBC and he figures out that the patient is sick with cryptococcus.

therealgridlock

It was the mouse bites keeping him alive! Now he needs to drink this bleach!

[Liliet](#)

Hell yeah Cat's thoughts on Abigail ♥

And I love Robber's way of talking and the way it meshes with Cat's random association thought process ♥ ♥ ♥

Fucking RIP campaign plan, but hey, surviving first contact with the enemy etc

Dead King's plan ain't surviving this either

caoimhinh

I love how the chapter is called "Prophylaxis", which most people will associate with preventive medicine, but that word has another meaning:

In *Chess*, "prophylaxis" is a move or strategy that frustrates an opponent's plan or tactic. It's a move that stops the opponent from taking action in a certain area for fear of some type of reprisal. Not only does it improve one's position, but it must also prevent the opponent from improving theirs.

The title was telling us "Hey, you know those cool campaign plans? Well, RIP."

[Liliet](#)

R I P

Crash

Absolutely living for General Abigail continuing to gain ground. She best survive this bullshit, all that paranoia has to hae some use!

panic

Ahem. I suggest the following. Portal. Portal in the Cave. Portal in the Cave with the other end leading to a lake. Portal in the Cave with the other end leading to a lake of lava.FIN

shikkarasu

♪Ho, ro the rattlin' cave♪
♪The cave in down in Lauzon's Hollow♪
♪Damn cave, the rattlin' cave♪
♪The cave down in Lauzon's Hollow♪

♪Well in the cave there were undead♪
♪The damn dead and Rattlin bones♪
♪Dead in the cave♪
♪The cave down in Lauzon's Hollow♪

– Some verses later –

♪The Payer in the Ward♪
♪And the Ward in the lava♪
♪And the lava in the lake♪
♪And the lake in the Ways♪
♪And the Ways in the Gate♪
♪And the Gate in the cave♪
♪And the cave down in Lauzon's Hollow♪

♪Damn cave, the rattlin' cave♪
♪The cave down in Lauzon's Holloooooow♪

Bonus points if the Mages who make this possible are Duni-descendant.

Belenos42

That...was fucking inspired.

Lox

That was awesome 👍👉 I need context for why Duni?

shikkarasu

The Duni in PGtE are very clearly Irish-inspired. "Duni" is even an old Irish word for "People," if I remember correctly. The Irish Descendants did one of the more famous versions of Rattlin' Bog.

Finn .-. .

Wasn't that the Duchy of Daione, not the Duni?

Cheetah724

No, Daione are Native American racially, Scottish/Celtic culturally.

Juff

Typo Thread:

a camp begun being built > begun building a camp
temporary measure (measure doesn't really fit. setback?)

On wurm > One wurm

sigil-holders slain > sigil-holders had slain

fragile > fragilely

war, they > war; they

expressing such wariness > expressed such wariness

her get? > he get?

believes, form the > believes, from the

it took his announcing > I took his announcing

"I" > "I

well shaving > well worth shaving

much a single > much as a single

so might say > some might say

enough even through > enough that even through

to reinforced > to reinforce

out of then > out of ten

what we did > what they did

they'd bleed > they'd have bled

Miles

This was no time to get sorry over a dead horse dying again,
there was a war on.

"Gonna vote?" I asked.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

The Coudrent force is digging a tunnel under the fortifications,
isn't it? Pretty much the same plan Cat had, just lower tech. Who
needs interdimensional tunnels when a good old fashioned tunnel
in dirt will accomplish the same thing?

[Javvies](#)

Well ... those are some unpleasant surprises.

This is going to get messy.

Hah, Abigail is forced to recommend aggressive action because she knows that letting Keter's plans unfold unhindered is even worse for her personal survival.

On the other hand, the Dead King is going to have contingencies set up, and let's be honest – attacking quickly to try to disrupt his plans is a fairly obvious possibility.

mamm0nn

Alright, who here didn't know that the 150000 undead that suddenly disappeared are headed to Hammer and Anvil Cat's army when she commits to an aggressive assault and that her planning around DK's plans merely saw her know that he knew she knows but her not knowing that she knew that he knew that she knew?

This is going to be a bloodbath, because in the end it doesn't matter to DK whether he wins. Just like she said it wouldn't. All that matters is that he takes out her army, Named and commanders just so that the Alliance no longer has those. If even one army goes away, the defensive lines grow so thin that the dead can flood into the heartlands and increase their numbers like crazy, starting the death spiral that will see the war become a slaughter.

beleester

Goblins are obvious, but how can Catherine rely on luck? She must be talking about heroes, who quite literally have luck on their side. Do we have a band of five that would be suited for tunnel fighting?

Eleron Pfoutz

Goblin Named.

[styn](#)

LOL I would lose my shit if Robber pulled a hero name somehow this late in the tale.

Halinn

Maybe he stole one earlier, been keeping it for a rainy day. Or maybe Robber is the Name.

[Luxuria Tenebris](#)

So taking a look at the map. If the missing army didn't go west, it didn't go south and north is the sea so it can only be going east towards Cats army. I can see the caverns being large tunnels that will allow the missing army to show up behind Cat, with means that army can target the Giants then swing around to hit Cat with their new giant servants.

Bellaco

I really really hope that luck is an euphemism for “exploding goats”.

[Entrerist](#)

Can't the dead king also use Acadia? He just opens up a gate into Acadia and hits Callows capital.

D

Assuming you flood it with water. What front is the Concocter on these days?

Daniel E

Here's a thought; what if DK's missing elite army managed to sneak Southeast and use the Whitecaps passage to threaten Callow? Unrelated, but I'm also curious what the heck the Dwarves have been up to all this time.

dadycoool

Presumably exactly what they were intending to do waaaaaaay back when Cat met them: surround Keter from below and attack the city's base.

hoser2

The situation with Scribe seems awkward. Whether Cat likes or trusts Scribe or not, treating her with respect and giving her information seem like the basics for a working relationship. Black was polite with Scribe, IIRC.

Storm

Bruh I thought there was the missing undead under the hill last chapter. Smh I thought you were better at seeing story shapes, Cat.

Interlude: Old Dogs

“I fear our tyrant in the east, but dread I reserve alone for what staying on our knees would make of us.”

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty

General Abigail looked into the Baalite eye again, wishing generals didn't have to be on horses.

It made her stand out, and people who stood out did have that unfortunate tendency to get shot. She couldn't even use the damned thing to run away, because it made her stand out so people would bloody well notice. It was the sixth time since the Third Army had begun to mobilize that she was having a look at the enemy positions, but repetition wasn't improving her prospects any. The drow had done good work, smashing up the enemy's walls and collapsing their ditches, but the corpses had worked tirelessly overnight. The walls had been rebuilt into little more than stacked stones, more like a cattle-fence than a fortification, but the nice thing about cattle was that it wasn't usually trying to stab you.

Somehow she doubted the undead would be so congenial.

"At least they're low on bowmen," General Abigail muttered. "Javelins aren't as bad when it gets down to it."

They did a number even on plate and they could scrap a shield, sure, but the range was lesser and you couldn't carry anywhere as many of them.

"I don't understand why Keter fields so few," Staff Tribune Krolem gravelled at her side. "With their numbers, mass volleys would be near impossible to deal with."

Except with them mage shields, of course, but those would be needed for the more exotic stuff the enemy had up its sleeves.

"Their dead are too dumb," Abigail absent-mindedly told him. "The Binds, the one with souls still nailed to the corpse, they're as clever as people. But the Bones? They can't maintain gear for shit, certainly not something as finicky as a good bow. Javelins are simpler, and easier to make too."

She glanced at her right hand, the tall orc looking like he was spoiling for a fight. It wasn't his fault, Abigail reminded herself. Orcs were just born that way, with more teeth to compensate for the absence of the part where good sense went. Besides she'd probably like fighting more if she got to eat the losers afterwards, she figured. Tavern rates these days were basically robbery, so greenskins were definitely coming out ahead there.

"We'll wait until the Sapper-General finishes her bombardment to advance," she told Krolem. "And send our bloodhounds out, would you? I want this field cleaned up before our shield wall starts advancing."

"On it," the Staff Tribune saluted.

Good man. Some would have called Abigail paranoid for the precaution, but they couldn't. Largely on account of them all being fucking dead while she was not. A nice empty field all the way to Lauzon's Hollow, after Keter was allowed time to work its wickedness? Yeah, she wasn't falling for that one. Her 'bloodhounds' were a suggestion she'd made to the Black Queen last year that got approved, to her surprise: mixed crews of regulars, priests and lesser magical talents that could sniff out the kind of hidden devilries the Dead King liked to leave lying around *before* her people walked into them. Leaving them to do their work properly would slow the advance, but Abigail didn't exactly mind. She looked into the Baalite eye again, silently bemoaning her fate.

While it'd been a relief to learn that the Black Queen's battle plan wouldn't require the Third to charge at the mouth of Lauzon's Hollow under enemy fire, she'd still ended up stuck leading the vanguard. Her inexplicably enthusiastic soldiers might think it was an honour to serve as the foremost meat shields – *Dauntless*, they'd all cheered, like the word meant they were no longer the people standing closest to swords trying to kill them – but General Abigail was not fooled. When you tangled with Keter, the front was the last damned place you wanted to be. Nowhere near was her own preferred locale, but she'd not had a great deal of success getting there.

Gloomily, the general leaned back on horse as the wings of the assault assembled to the east and west. The Second Army under General Hune would stay behind her and serve as both the reserve and the escort for the siege engines, while to the left the Procerans had assembled under Princess Beatrice and to the right the two leading members of the Blood had been granted a shared command. It made the west the weak flank, not as steady or numerous, but the Black Queen had sent most of the alliance's horse there to prop them up. It would be some time yet before they had to advance, General Abigail knew, and when they did she'd at least have Named with her.

It was still with despair that she realized they'd somehow got her again.

She'd had a plan, a solid one. It was too late to back out of this whole general business now, as a pragmatic soul she'd been forced to recognize as much. Besides, Abigail of Summerholm hadn't stuck out this bloody nightmare of a war to *not* retire with a full general's pension: when she got home, she fully intended to never lift a finger again for the rest of her days and maybe drink herself into an early grave. It was her *godsdamned godsgiven right to do so*. So the plan had been adjusted. Abigail was going to make herself just enough of an embarrassment that they'd reassign her back home where she

couldn't make the Black Queen look bad in front of all the fancy nobles by being a lout.

It would be a delicate line to walk, being embarrassing enough to be sent away but not enough to be demoted, yet as the daughter of a long and storied line of loutish drunks Abigail had trusted in her blood to get her through this. It, uh, hadn't panned out quite how she'd expected. People kept laughing when she said terrible things like 'sure the Dead King horrid, but in his defence he's been stuck living next to Procer for centuries' and 'makes sense the lake by the Dominion is from a hole in the ground, that's pretty much the rest of the country too' and instead of being made of pariah the amount of invitation to parties had tripled.

She'd dug deeper into loutishness, trying things like saying 'you people' and repeating the filthiest stories you could hear living in Summerholm as a brewer's daughter, but it turned out these fancy Procer folk were shocking hard to, well, shock.

The only upside had been that these days Abigail might have to worry about nooses and the Black Queen eating her soul, but at least she didn't often have to worry about being stabbed! Best thing about being a general was that when you got to a nice safe spot away from the frontlines, you got to call it *strategizing*. Very fond of strategizing, Abigail was. She did as much of it as was humanly possible. But now, as the Third Army spread out on the plains before Lauzon's Hollow, the dark-haired woman finally understood the final treachery of her rank: even if she stood at the back of her army, that army could still be made to stand at the front of the coalition. She'd been had again.

The general looked into the Baalite eye again and sighed. It really was a shame about the horse, she thought. They might not have noticed her slipping away otherwise.

—

Though Robber had been told that his assignment was to serve as Pickler's bodyguard, he suspected that what he'd actually been sent here to do was make sure that the Sapper-General of Callow did not end up murdering her assigned spotter: the honourable young lord Gaetan Rocroy of Cantal, also known as the Page. Robber admired the young man in a deep and sincere manner, which he'd not hid in the slightest. It'd taken him *years* of work to be able to get under the skin of everyone he met, while the boy was pushing through on natural talent alone. It was a wonder to behold, really.

"Praesi measurements are quite inadequate," the Page blithely said. "Outdated, even. It is the Salian *paume* that should be used, not the—"

Sergeant Snorer, who had been a sapper for more than decade, twitched so violently he snapped the thin copper wire he'd been adjusting. Crows, but the boy was an artist. The talent could not be suppressed, Robber would not allow it. It had to be encouraged, nay, *cultivated*! It would be a loss for Creation otherwise.

"Fire," Pickler coldly ordered.

The Page had not quite got out of the way, so when the trebuchet's counterweight came down he had to hurriedly hop to the side.

"Eyes on the stone, lordling," Robber called out.

The hero glared at him for the presumption before doing what he was supposed to and serving as a good little spotter for the sappers of the Army of Callow. The boy's eyes narrowed after the stone hit the side of a steep-sloped hill to the left of the hollow's entrance.

"It shook," the Page said. "Stone shattered on the surface. No large crack, though, you'll need to get closer."

There was a shared sigh by everyone here who'd studied ballistics. Eight hundred feet was well into the range of an imperial trebuchet, which was the model the Army of Callow used. If the stones weren't enough to crack open the hills at this range, then ballistas – which shot further, but with significantly smaller projectiles – would do next to nothing if deployed. The choice left was either to keep hammering away with the trebuchets for hours or start pulling out more interesting ammunition. The Boss had made it clear that she wanted those hills torn open for her plan, and she hadn't looked like she was in mood for an argument as to the practicalities involved.

"Iron framework inside, do you think?" Robber asked Pickler.

She licked her chops thoughtfully, chewing on the thought.

"If your assessment of how hollow the hills are is even remotely correct," Pickler said, "then it is the most sensible theory. It could be wards, I suppose."

"Boss mentioned when one of the siege engines they've got was ripped away, the top of the hill came clean off with it," Robber noted. "She thought the platform was sculpted from the stone, but maybe..."

"It was simply anchored in metal beams that crisscross the summit of those caverns," Pickler approvingly said. "It would be metal strengthened with spellcraft, to have had this particular effect, so more likely steel than iron."

Long, spindly fingers – she had sapper's hands, Pickler, delicate and deadly – drummed the side of the closest trebuchet thoughtfully.

"We'll keep hammering away at the eastern hills," the Sapper-General decided. "Nothing we have will crack the western ones right now. I dislike relying on sabotage, but it seems necessary this once."

Without even a need to be ordered, the sappers around them heeded her words: the nine trebuchets were prepared for concentrated fire, pivoted on their platforms. Like a swarm of ants, the goblins to work. The Page looked quite discomfited, staring at them uneasily, so Robber decided to lend his help. Sidling up to the boy, he offered a wide and fanged grin.

"Do tell me about these *paumes*, good sir," Robber asked. "Unlike my ignorant and hidebound colleagues, I am always open to heeding superior Proceran learning."

The boy's face lit up with enthusiasm, and from the corner of his eye Special Tribune Robber caught sight of a lieutenant kicking a trebuchet stone in fury.

Would Catherine be open to permanently assigning the boy to him, he wondered?

—

Roland de Beaumarais suspected that many would have envied the surface of his current situation – namely, walking forward slowly as four beautiful women were pressed up against him. The whole part about it also involving a tricky illusion spell and being surrounded by undead desiring to kill them all might have been considered something of a drag, mind you, and sadly he wouldn't even be able to remember the experience fondly. Not when Sidonia kept elbowing him, as the Levantine heroine just had the most horridly bony elbows, or when the Silent Guardian was not stepping on his feet for the eight time.

Gods that plate armour was heavy, aside from the fact that the Guardian herself was in no way a small woman.

"My foot," the Rogue Sorcerer croaked out in a whisper. "*Please* be careful."

To the Silent Guardian's credit, she looked somewhat apologetic and tapped his shoulder in apology. That already put her ahead of Sidonia, who'd just snickered when told she kept elbowing him.

"Stop whining," the Blessed Artificer said. "You'll give us away."

That Adanna of Smyrna spoke the reproach without so much as a hint of irony to her voice was, in its own way, impressive. Roland made himself count to five so he would not indulge in a retort and then they resumed their slow advance. The paths that Catherine's worrying goblin lieutenant had found proved true eventually, the third attempt allowing them to slip into a crevice that led into the great caverns below the hills. There'd been difficulties on the way, of course, but between Roland's knack for ward-breaking and the Silver Huntress' keen senses they'd managed to avoid giving themselves away.

It was inside they'd been forced to stay under illusion, as the place was crawling with undead. Even in the rare hallways Binds were always patrolling, and Roland pressed close to the wall as the other Chosen did the same to once more avoid the edge of his illusion being touched by a patrol of thirty undead soldiers in pristine armour. The caverns were shaking from the pounding of the Army of Callow's engines was giving the surface, but while sometimes stones were loosened the place seemed in no danger of collapse. He could understand why Catherine had taken the risk to send them here, now.

Only a band of Chosen would be able to see this through halfway quietly, or without everyone involved dying in the process.

"We're close," the Silver Huntress murmured. "Only one level left. Adanna, you're sure you can't do it from here?"

The device the Blessed Artificer had prepared ought to be able to collapse the cavern's ceiling, but she'd insisted it ought to be triggered as close to it as possible. There were hallway rings going up the sides, fortunately, and four nerve-racking levels up the five of them now stood close to the highest they'd be able to stand. There was a fifth level, but it seemed narrowed than the others.

"I could have done it from the bottom," the Artificer peevishly replied, "but that would be rolling dice. I can only *guarantee* results from the level above us."

"Then we go," the Huntress sighed. "Steady and careful, all."

The illusion Roland was currently using covered sound, so long as it was of sufficiently low pitch. It was why he'd picked something otherwise so unstable and finicky among his repertoire. Which was why when a great axe sunk into the wall just above his head, a tall Revenant in pale plate smiling mirthlessly as the spell shattered, he was rather surprised.

Halfway quietly was out, the Rogue Sorcerer mused. Time to see if 'without everyone involved dying' could still be salvaged,

There was a moment of silence as a massive lance of Light tore through the hilltops on the left side of Lauzon's Hollow, spinning up in the sky like some behemoth's spit until it thinned and vanished into a shower of motes. Trails of smoke followed behind, the heat from the priestly power having set small fires and scorched rock.

"You know," Robber said, looking at the rising smoke, "when the Boss told me there would be sabotage, I figured it would be something a little more..."

"Subtle?" Pickler suggested.

"Yeah," he faintly replied. "That works."

Was that from the woman that looked like Wasteland get? Gobbler knew it couldn't be the Vagrant Spear or the Silver Huntress – the former would have had Archer bragging up a storm, while the latter would instead probably have tried to kill Archer by now. The Rogue Sorcerer was a skillful meddler but no user of Light, and the Silent Guardian was by reputation a solid warrior but not particularly powerful. That left only the woman with the Ashuran accent and those golden highborn eyes that had Robber feeling wary every time he saw them. People with them were usually quite dangerous, when they got to live up to the Blessed Artificer's age.

"It will do the trick, regardless," Pickler shrugged. "Shame they didn't get the enemy engine, but I supposed it will have to do."

In front of them, the trebuchets snapped into motion. One after another they pounded at the hillside, until finally the thunderous crack the sappers had been working at for an entire bell finally resounded. The Page excitedly informed them there was a large fissure now. Another seven stones and finally the side of the hill collapsed. The iron bones that'd held it up were could still be glimpsed in the rubble, twisted and bent but rarely broken. The sight matched that on the eastern slopes, which had been smashed a more than half a bell ago.

"Hold fire," the Sapper-General ordered. "The trebuchets are done. Begin advancing the copperstone ballistas as soon as the Third advances."

Ignoring the Page who was asking whether he could finally leave, Robber picked out one of the trebuchets and began to climb his way up the beams. Unlike his fellows, he had an inkling of what was coming and he wanted as fine a seat to witness it as he could. Deftly raising himself atop one of the legs supporting the pivot, he watched as a great wyvern took to the sky from near the frontlines. Not a real beast that one, it didn't move quite right, but his sharp eyes caught sight of two silhouettes on its

back. The Summoner would be one, he knew, but he wasn't sure for the second.

Archer ought to be with the Third, since it'd serve as vanguard, but you never knew with the Boss. Not like she was low on Named these days, anyway. The speculation served to entertain him as the wyvern flew forward, swarms and a wyrm rising to meet it in the distance. A death warrant for the two Named gone out, if it'd been meant to be anything except a distraction. It wasn't, though, and with a pleasurable shiver Robber felt the air begin to thicken. He gulped down his breaths as if struggling against an unwilling Creation, the sheer powerbeing gathered always surprising him. It was good for this army to be reminded exactly what the Black Queen was now and then, the Special Tribune felt.

Cat played nicer, these days, so sometimes the westerners forgot who it was exactly that'd won the Tenth Crusade.

A large circular gate winked open in the sky above Lauzon's Hollow, and to Robber's delighted surprise a heartbeat later a *second* one did. Sahelian was finally earning her keep, then. The hollowed out hills on both sides of the pass had been torn open at the top and smashed in the front, so now all that was left was using that broadened field of engagement and giving a pitched battle – or so conventional wisdom would have suggested. That wasn't the Boss' way, though, not at all. She rarely settled for a single knife in the kidney, it was one of the more charming things about her.

So it was with utter glee that Robber began cackling when he realized that the gates in the sky weren't connected to the Twilight Ways at all. The way water began pouring out of them was something of a hint.

—

Roland pulled deep on one his strongest offensive magics, forming fire and turning it dense and liquid before tossing a hundred droplets of it at the mass of skeletons coming after them. The Vagrant Spear, pulling the unconscious Adanna closer to her, turned just long enough to send a blast of Light at the armoured Revenant still pursuing them, cursing angrily in Ceseo when the dead hero shrugged it off like he had everything else they'd thrown at him. Nothing made a dent: not steel, not sorcery, not even Light. The Silent Guardian had managed to throw him off the ledge earlier, the most success they'd had, but he'd been back before long.

With more Revenants, of course, for the Gods despise Roland deeply and wanted him to die screaming.

Alexis put a seventh arrow in the shield-bearing titan of a woman coming after them with a halberd, that Revenant's unsettling

laugh echoing across the cavern even through the cacophony of an entire army mobilizing to kill them. Arrows clattered against the wall as they passed by a pillar, just a second too slow to catch any of them, but already they were being charged at by armored skeletons ahead and javelins were in flight from somewhere he'd not even looked at yet! Swallowing bile, already feeling the raw sting of his aspects being leaned on too harshly, Roland conjured a shield to take care of the javelins.

The Silent Guardian plowed into the skeletons a heartbeat later, smashing everything aside like a bull in a house of glass, but deep down the Rogue Sorcerer knew it wouldn't enough. It was still two levels down before they'd get to the crevice they'd squeezed in through and there was simply no way they were going to last that long : opposition was hardening the further down they got. The Guardian screamed when a great barbed arrow punched through her mail, shot by some distant Revenant with a black iron bow, and though the Silver Huntress managed to turn aside a blow of the Revenant in pale plate and throw him off the ledge again, it was a temporary relief at best. Already the one with the halberd was coming at her, and now that the Silent Guardian was wounded and was going to start struggling with their front it would all be-

A wall of water came down from the sky, smashing through the holed that'd been melted through the ceiling of the cavern. The halberd Revenant was caught by a stream and smashed into the wall as the Huntress danced away just in time.

"That also works," Roland admitted.

Mind you, if they didn't figure a way out of this soon they were just going to drown instead. Still, this was already a distinct improvement. *Thank you Catherine*, he mused. *Very timely of you*. Screaming at each other so they could hear over the roar of the falling waters, the Rogue Sorcerer and the Silver Huntress agreed on a plan. If you could call an agreement to get the Hells out of here as quick as possible that. Water was beginning to gush down with them, and to their horror it was already filling the crevice they'd used to come in. They'd need another way out. Thankfully, even as they were wondered what in the Merciful Heavens that would be, scaffolding on the level above them collapsed.

A large flat piece of wood, one that must have served as a work platform, bounced down and rolled slightly downhill until the wounded and white-faced Guardian caught it with a hand. It was large enough for all of them, Roland noted, and quite likely to float. He met Alexis' eyes, then shrugged.

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked.

She didn't.

—

General Abigail shivered.

It was not the first time she'd seen this horror unleashed. Even if her memory had allowed her to forget the first day of the Battle of the Camps, her nightmares would not have. The gates did not look the same, now sleek rinks of darkness rather than the thin slices into Creation the Black Queen had once wielded, but then as now the sky had opened and wept. Abigail remembered the hate that'd simmered under the fear, back in those days where it'd been the Principate they'd fought. The way she'd known that their queen was a monster but she was not a monster who had sought this war, that it had been forced on all of them by a handful of rapacious princes in their palaces across the Whitecaps.

But not even then had she believed the invaders deserved that cold, brutal and senseless end.

Not the sky wept again, two gates torn into the fabric of the world high above, and like jugs being filled the hills that'd been ripped open by siege engines received the deluge. Even stone shattered, when the water came from so high, and before long the hordes the Dead King had hidden within his caverns began pouring out on the tide half-smashed. The water rushed out of the broken hills, taking with it rocks and corpses and steel, and began to spread into the plains below. In the sky above Named skirmished with horrors and Revenants, Light streaking bright as the flood gates were protected from disruption. It wouldn't last forever, Abigail thought, but it wouldn't have to. That'd never been the plan.

Water stormed out of the pass itself now, having overrun the hills themselves and swept into the hollow between them, the tide bowling over the undead and smashing the fortifications at the mouth of Lauzon's Hollow. The mud would make for unpleasant fighting grounds, Abigail thought, but it would hinder the undead as well. And it was the cost for something almost priceless: right now, as the waters kept hurling down from the gates, the Dead King's waiting army had been essentially dispersed. All preparations, positions and traps and been unmade by the brute force of thousands of tons of water coming down from the sky. It would not win them the battle by itself, but as far as first strokes went it was a masterful one.

Let it not be said the Black Queen had come by her reputation dishonestly.

It was not even half an hour before the first enemy got through and took a swing at a gate, making it stutter, and within moments both gates had winked out of existence. Water kept pouring from a

blue a cloudless sky, jarring to behold, but General Abigail knew what was required of her now.

"Krolem," she said. "Have the advance sounded."

"Ma'am," the orc saluted.

Water still flowed but the plains were large and it had not rained in days: the earth would drink the tide in full, and it would not take so long as one might think. Abigail would not waste the advantage she had been given.

"Good, you're not dragging your feet."

The dark-haired woman almost fell down her horse, utterly startled, and froze in a different kind of fear when she saw exactly who it was that'd addressed her. The absurdly large bow would have been answer enough, even if the dark linen scarf and long coat had not been just as telling a sign. The Archer was not an uncommon sight around the camps of the Army of Callow, though Abigail preferred to avoid Named like the plague when she could.

"Pardon?" General Abigail got out.

"You're attacking," the ochre-skinned villainess said, smiling pleasantly. "Like Catherine wanted you to. Don't be afraid to press your luck in the assault, general, we're not done with surprises for the day."

"I, uh, of course," Abigail stammered. "You are to be the Named that comes with the Third, then?"

"Something like that," Archer grinned. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

Abigail noted that her horse was looking at the villainess with fear-tinged distrust as well. A wise animal than she'd believed, she conceded.

"I'll see you around, general," the Archer winked. "Don't go disappointing me, now."

"I wouldn't dare," Abigail replied, a lot more honestly than she'd meant to.

Luck was on her side, and so the Named drifted away as she laughed. The general took the time to gather herself, straightening her back and breathing out. She had a battle to get through. In the distance in front of her, horns sounded as the Third Army's ranks tightened into a shield wall and it began to advance. Noting its unease, General Abigail patted her horse's neck and mercifully ignored the attempt to bite her fingers she received in return.

"If you get through this, Boots, I might take you with me when I retire," Abigail of Summerholm muttered. "If you're unhappy about being in this mess, that already makes you the second smartest animal in this bloody army."

Onwards they went anyway, to swift death and graves shallow.

ruduen

Aaaah, she still has the same horse.

Also, vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Someguy

I am surprised the horse survived so long. Abigail must have really kept away from battles a lot.

[Liliet](#)

The Legions doctrine says generals stay back, IIRC Istrid used to get into fights with Grem One-Eye about it. Abigail would never go against the doctrine!

shikkarasu

"I wouldn't dare," Abigail replied, a lot more honestly than she'd meant to.

[Liliet](#)

Precisely!

[vernal.ancient](#)

Ahem.

It is called strategizing.

She does as much of it as she can. 😊

danh3107

>Boots

I see you Erratic, I see you

Sir Nil

I just had a thought, what if that disappeared undead army was trying to get the giants? 22 giants would be a hard nut to crack but if even 1 undead giant showed up from behind...

[Liliet](#)

That Would Be Bad

[Javvies](#)

Yeah, that would be a pretty bad scenario. And you're not the first to be concerned about the possibility.

On the other hand, while 22 of the Gigantes plus whatever escort they have would be a tough nut to crack ... I don't think they're anywhere near 200k undead tough. Which means the Dead King could have split his missing army group to go after the Gigantes and another target simultaneously.

Vortex

I was under the impression that the whole reason gigantes magic was scary was because they burned their enormous life force to enact wonders. Would undead giants have any life to spend? Wouldn't they just burn themselves out before dying?

Sir Nil

DK might not be able to use it outright, but he is one of the greater mages in existence. Just from the fact he's developed countermeasures against Night so quickly, and the fact that he can't use Night, but he can quickly detonate it and waste it if the holder dies, makes me suspect that he probably has ways to use the Giants magic.

Cpt. Obvious

Regarding DK not being able to use Night, is that because it's a power granted by Sve Noc? I know Catherine has a pool of night to draw on, but for the big stuff she serves as a conduit for the night the goddess's provide. Given that they currently isn't on speaking terms with DK I can see how they would frown on DK and his minion trying to use the power of Night.

[sengachi](#)

That's a good point, but on the other hand the Dead King literally wrote the book on sorcery as usurpation. If he can't do *something* horrible with the undead corpses of giants once filled with unfathomably dense magical life force I would be shocked.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That giant frame could also allow DK to pack more unlife-power in there. The Skein didn't seem to have any problems.

[boballab](#)

Abigail really needs more POV time.

Zggt

Lakeomancy to the rescue!

erebus42

Hey it's hard to argue against it's effectiveness.

RoflCat

Lakeomancy:

When you want the literal pouring of cold water on your enemies instead of figuratively.

Someperson

The old Foundling gambit never fails.

erebus42

Abigail is hilarious and relatable as always. Honestly her POVs always give me a Terry Pratchett vibe.

[Burlyraven](#)

Oh... no... Robber, don't corrupt the young Proceran hero... anything but that...

[doominator10](#)

Robber is Page's sith lord.

[doominator10](#)

People kept laughing when she said terrible things like 'sure the Dead King horrid, but in his defence he's been stuck living next to Procer for centuries'

And she wonders why people keep inviting her to parties...

LarsBlitzer

"Yesssss, feel the sarcasm flow through you. GIVE YOURSELF TO THE SNARK SIDE!"

MrRigger

This was everything I wanted. Abigail being Abigail and continuing to fail her way into success with her plan to be sent away. Robber being Robber and the hilarious image of him using the Page to torment everyone around him. Roland being Roland and showing the kind of Providence a Band of Five can get against the Dead King with the convenient platform literally falling into their hands.

And of course the other old dog, the return of lakeomancy. Screw your fortifications, we're just not going to bother with them. And now you've got to fight in the mud. Your feet bones are gonna get suctioned off!

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, while the sheer convenience of it was definitely Providence, there would have been a lot of wood floating around – they'd have been able to salvage something for themselves even on regular probability rules.

Story just greased the gears a little, there.

Dome Zasrekh

And That Is Funny.

aeoncor

Doctrine of the black queen:

Step 1: create chaos

Step 2: no I mean really, put your back into it, not just chaos, but !!!CHAOS!!!

Step 3:..

Step 4: lose less than the other guy

Big I

Now I really hope Robber gets to keep his Proceran side kick.

FableWright

Robber has an apprentice now.

Let that sink in.

sniff this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Hellspirit

A future Lesser Lesser Footrest maybe? If he can live up to his masters renown.

[doominator10](#)

Dauntless— The army most likely to be the first one in and last one out. Proud, near insane fighting maniacs.

Their general: Abigail. The one guaranteed to do everything in her power to get that pension check... but she has to be alive to do that, might as well keep her troops alive too.

Actually a perfect match.

Big Brother

Abigail, “cowardly” Commander of the Dauntless.

caoimhinh

Perfectly balanced, as all things should be.

dadycoool

Oh, I love this chapter. Poor Abigail, forever destined to be a good commander, no matter how much she tries to avoid it. Robber’s pride should shame Page, if he weren’t as bad/worse than Masego ever was at reading the room. Lol, the water.

[Liliet](#)

Robber + Page BroTP

I’m so sorry about your sense of propriety Abigail ;u; no wonder Cat finds her as entertaining as she does l m a o

The heroes deliver, as always ♥ Adanna continues to be a stone in the boot of everyone she ever meets which is glorious and best

luv Abigail's reaction (and memory of previous reaction) to the lakeomancy

LUV THE RETURN OF LAKEOMANCY

NerfGlaistigUaine

I’ve had some seriously shitty days recently so this chapter is a nice reprieve. Always great to have Abigail’s POV. It’s nice that even in the middle of the apocalypse, Abigail is still Abigail.

Also nice to see that the new Page is a buffoon. That’s two for two with that Name.

[Liliet](#)

Tavros and Jake:)=

NerfGlaistigUaine

Google tells me that's a Homestuck reference but I don't know how it's applicable here, so care to clarify?

[Liliet](#)

Homestuck has a 'class' system for characters; Tavros and Jake are both Pages.

They're also both, uh, easily bullied, at one point by the same character. Now Guide is bullying them too)=

Darkening

I recall Jake was the Page of Hope or something like that, so those characters probably had a similar dynamic to robber/page, but it's been so long since I looked at homestuck I couldn't possibly tell you for sure.

[Liliet](#)

The Robber was if anyone Vriska, who's more like Akua Sahelian, which is not a coincidence because Robber mentions her one time this chapter *and because nothing is ever a coincidence.*

NerfGlaistigUaine

I understood that reference! 😊

God that was a wild ride, one awesome day of reading and even though I saw the twist coming from a mile away, it still hit me right in the feels.

[Liliet](#)

I know, right?!

(I did not see the twist coming... TOO UPSETTING
)=)=)=)

NerfGlaistigUaine

I suspected since the prophecy, was convinced once Simeon's theory came out, and was absolutely certain by the failure at Yakutsk. On another note, I just reread the story b/c of this comment and loved it all over again. Really bad time to do so considering how ridiculously busy and stressed I am, but still loved it.

Unsong also has the #1 most badass boast/threat/statement I've ever read, "I will recarve God without that facet"

LarsBlitzer

The first Page wasn't so much a buffoon as she had a severe case of "Notice me Sempai! <3" dressed up in Duty and Honor and Other Stupid Ideas That Will Get You Killed. She, along with White Knight-sempai at least served as an excellent example of what not to do. The new Page is just a twit.

As for Abigail, she's quickly becoming one of my favourites. But then, I'm a fan of Blackadder, Caiaphas Cain, and Flashman.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Well the definition of buffoon is "a ridiculous but amusing person." I don't know about you, but a person with "a severe case of "Notice me Sempai! <3" dressed up in Duty and Honor and Other Stupid Ideas That Will Get You Killed" definitely fits in my book.

LarsBlitzer

I stand corrected. I only remember him for being the twit to deliver an impassioned speech to Cat's army only to eat a crossbow bolt, which is why it's always a good idea to wear a helmet, and to not get caught monologueing.

Earl of Purple

The Exiled Prince, Kairos' nephew, ate a crossbow bolt after his Armour of Arrow Deflection deflected it from a non-lethal area. Page was the androgynous girl in love with him, who fought with a rapier and whom Cat defeated in the melee after she'd had (I think) Nauk shoot the Exiled Prince.

Darkening

She worked for the exiled prince, not the white knight. But yeah, the point stands. And I agree, Abigail is a great character in the Caiaphas Cain archetype.

shikkarasu

Abigail has strong "Rincewind with a military Rank" energy.

Juff

leaned back on horse > leaned back on her horse
Dead King horrid > Dead King's horrid
made of pariah > made a pariah
invitation > invitations
shocking hard > shockingly hard
theback > the back
pivoted > pivoting

goblins to work > goblins got to work
semmed narrowed > seemed narrower
no used > no user
I supposed > I suppose
were could > could
a more than > more than
witness is > witness it
powerbeing > power being
one his > one of his
Gods despise > Gods despised
wouldn't enough > wouldn't be enough
long : > long;
holed that'd > hole that'd
Not the sky > Now the sky
traps and been > traps had been
a blue a > a blue
A wise animal > A wiser animal

Juff

Typo Thread ^

[Javvies](#)

Ah, Abigail, you're doomed to not be getting out of your job. Cat has plans for you, after all.
Plus, as Cat once noted, hating on Procerans unifies just about everybody in Calernia – even a lot of Procerans (because they headcanon your insults about all Procerans to be about the other Proceran groups).

Heh, Roland is not having the best time.
And, damn, that White Knight Revenant is going to be a problem, even the Heroes couldn't scratch his armor, albeit in unfavourable circumstances.

Wait, just Lakeomancy? I mean, it's good, but the best part about using Lakeomancy against the undead is that you can turn the water onto Holy Water.

[Liliet](#)

The best part about all this is that Abigail genuinely thought racist jokes would be disagreeable in polite company.

She's just too precious.

Frivolous

I don't think the White Knight Revenant is actually that much of a problem. They just have to attack the parts of him that aren't covered by his indestructible armor.

Mental Mouse

More likely, this is Mirror Knight's eventual target.

pagesbe

Except it's not easy. He's probably wearing fullplate that basically covers everything, and moreover he's highly skilled so he's unlikely to just let someone slip a knife in a joint or something. If he was as easy to beat as you say, at least one of the 5 heroes pounding on him would have done something.

sengachi

Unfortunately a proper expensive set of plate mail can have very little in the way of gaps, on top of which this is a trained professional *Named* who spent a lifetime fighting enemies who knew their only hopes were those few gaps.

He's also undead now, so little pokes through gaps in the mail are unlikely to do the trick anyway. Against a high class revenant specializing in tanking, I'd be shocked if anything short of total dismemberment or the like is enough, and for that his armor needs to be cracked.

hoser2

I think that White Knight Revenant will indeed be trouble. I see uses for that armor, though. Put it on Fredric of Brus and give him Severance? Seems better than dealing with the Mirror Knight.

Javvies

Assuming the Revenant can be taken down without trashing the armor, that the armor would fit Frederic(no auto resizing/adjusting), that the armor isn't trapped or something, and that the armor would be as effective for Frederic ... and that the failure points.

That said ... Frederic would definitely be preferable to Mirror Knight, IMO, along he could safely wield the sword. Or Hanno. Or pretty much anyone other than Mirror Knight.

AceOfSpade

Abigail rising in the world through a mix of fearful self-preservation, pettiness, and plain luck will never stop being entertaining.

"Some people would call me paranoid but most of those are DEAD and I'm NOT." is pretty legit a bragging rights go.

Someguy

And then one day the Dead King acknowledges her personally through a Revanent after she won the field.

Frivolous

I guess blessing the water and making it holy was not a thing that could be done instantaneously. Maybe take a minute or two? Because otherwise Cat would have ordered the priests to do it, or had one of the heroes in Roland's group do it, destroying all undead the water touched.

Or maybe Adanna the Blessed Artificer was the only one in the group with the command or capacity of Light needed for the deed.

And yeah, enjoyed the viewpoints of Abigail and Robber. Always funny.

I think Abigail is going about it all wrong, by the way. To really get demoted, she should be doing something more venal, like a little mild embezzling, or offering incompetent people promotions in exchange for favors, or causing dissension in the ranks by sleeping with multiple violently jealous people at the same time. Not enough of a sin to get her hanged, but too much to trust her with command.

I guess it says much about Abi's virtue and personality that it doesn't occur to her to use her position to enrich herself that way.

I also find it interesting that Cat assigned a weak Named like the Page to the artillery unit simply to use his Named senses as a spotter. Very Boring But Practical.

Frivolous

Not demoted, my mistake. Reassigned is what I should have written.

Maybe openly masturbating during staff meetings might work. Or eating lots of beans and passing wind a lot during meetings. What do you think?

Darkening

I mean, last time we saw a reference to blessing large bodies of water was at the battle of camps, and they were basically right on the shore, might be they can't do it from a couple miles away like they are right now.

[Liliet](#)

Abigail also thought that MILDLY RACIST COMMENTS were utterly unacceptable in polite company and would make her enough of an embarrassment that the Black Queen would have her reassigned.

She's a ridiculously pure cinnamon bun and must be protected.

Liliet

(that said, embezzling and promoting incompetents is how (Abigail assumes) people get hanged in the Army of Callow, not reassigned)

Niteman

Back in Summerholm we saw the Bumbling Conjuror with an absurd amount of luck, I wonder if Abigail is on the road to becoming the Bumbling General...

Frivolous

Abi isn't Bumbling, exactly. Simeon the Bumbling Conjuror succeeded by accident, but Abi doesn't make that many mistakes. Her choices are reasoned and reasonable.

If she did acquire a Name, I believe it would be more like Timid Conqueror or Hapless Victor.

I suggest Hapless deliberately. Hapless means unfortunate, and Abi certainly considers herself accursed.

Emily

It's got to be the Reluctant General. (Not advocating her getting a name but if she does that's it)

Valkyria

Since Cat's going back to using the classics, and Archer said they got more surprises... Undead goats would be a bad idea against DK... but ... it wouldn't be that far fetched to expect some... arson next, right? A nice little spot of Goblinfire... Come on Cat, we all know you want it too!

boballab

I'm waiting for the crossbow shot kill of the monologue idiot as well as something being set on fire.

KageLupus

From the end of the last chapter;

"My eyes opened. That was an answer, yes. Luck and goblins.

Didn't sound like much, but you could do a lot of damage if you used those right."

Cat used Goblin siegework to crack open one hill, and the Providence from a band of five to crack the second.

Clint

Oh, an Abigail interlude!

And Robber!!

And Roland!!!

And Axe-White-Knight-Revenant and the return of lakeomancy.

So many favorite things. And it's not even my birthday, yet.

Thank you, EE!

Frivolous

Ongoing trend with Catherine:

She is infamous for both arson and lakeomancy – fire and water.

She is a warlord whose Wish is for peace.

She is the Queen of Lost and Found.

Therefore I believe her Name will be about Concordant Opposition. And maybe the reason why Cat's Name is taking so godsdamned long to surface is because it is so difficult to mix fire with water, unite war and peace.

[Liliet](#)

Note: Lost and Found is just a drow translation of her last name.

She's just Queen Foundling, which is a much funnier point in the first place.

nimelennar

Silly Abigail.

She's going to retire with a Legate's pension, not a General's.

[Liliet](#)

You mean Marshal's?

Valkyria

If Abigail wrote a book it probably would be:

A practical guide to an early General's pension – How to fail with success

SaveOurSquirrels

She hasn't been very lucky with it so far

Razorfloss razor

I imagine it will by her standards be a tell all bitching about her life as a general but ironically have great insights on what it takes to be a good commander making it mandatory reading for all up and coming commanders.

SaveOurSquirrels

10/10 would read

ereshkigala

Only 800 ft range for that artillery? The goblins must be slacking. Longest catapult shot IRL is over 3600 feet.

Kinda surprised Nussy isn't using his numerous airforce as artillery too. Remember how eagles kill turtles by dropping them from a mile high IRL? Those undead vultures and buzzards could drop rocks bigger than turtles and a house-sized boulder dropped by a Wurm could kill everything within 100 feet as it shattered or break a castle.

No need for them to engage the ground forces in melee at all; they could stay beyond non-Named spell range and pummel them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Our heroes and villains both have amply demonstrated the ability to take down DK's flyers. The downside of getting above it all is people shooting at you.

ereshkigala

And? Nussy will have reduced the fight to just a few Named vs all his air-force. The big anti-air blast ate half of Cat's reserves a few chapters back, so if Nussy divides his air-force into 100 dispersed groups and staggers their attack runs every half a minute, the Named casters will be exhausted after negligible damage. That will leave ranged attacks and flying/teleporting Named, which will take forever to chew through sky-blotting numbers of flyers.

In the meantime, the terminal velocity of a dropped 20-lb rock is over 300 m/s, multiple times greater than the velocity of the same rock launched from trebuchets. Each of them will hit like an early cannonball, even its impact fragments slicing through infantry armor and producing casualties. An army formation hit by a few hundred such projectiles is gonna break. A medieval fortress is gonna fare about as well as those hollowed hills.

And the kicker? Just replace half the rocks with casks of that airborne poison. Suddenly the coalition needs to beat every single attack without them dropping their bombs, because even Cat's powers with Night can't do more than hold the poison back for a short time. Definitely not long enough to evacuate the whole army via gate.

PS:

With a flight speed of 40 mph (pretty average for large birds), Nessy could send them on bombing runs on every city and town in half of Procer in a day. Just one cask of that airborne poison is gonna seriously mess up any crowded area, or poison a field. And a bucket of magical plague is gonna be way worse.

Noldo

Presumably only Binds would be capable to perform such raids and those are not to be wasted so the mass attacks are just remnants of dead birds in their natural form. Quick and easy to make, but lack precision.

dadycool

My answer to this argument is: WB said he's not actually trying yet and included a logical argument. Thus far, he's been fighting an attrition war, which is a category he has a monopoly on. If he were to do a Hard-And-Fast blitzkrieg, there would be Consequences. If he dominates even a single battle without giving the other side a fighting chance, even a long shot, there would be similar, lesser Consequences. He's not new to the game. Don't cite the deep magic to him, he was there when it was written.

Ben

Do we know if Hanno can use his aspect to call up the memories/skills of Revenants made of heroes—at least from prior to their death? Because that could be a pretty handy tool in this war...

Darkening

I believe he can, but scrying doesn't work in the territory the Dead King controls, presumably something to do with the Crab construct workshops or something. So Cat can't call him up to ask about this White Knight.

flashburn283

Poor Abigail, she is turning into Caiphas Cain at this rate, every time she tries to avoid her reputation, it just grows stronger.

Juneau

Exactly this and it's why I love her so much.

I've used this comparison before.

Best character

Abrakadabra

She is also adorable and definitely hates being useful.

Also Ab, Ab, Ab-Abigail, hero of the imperium!

Daniel E

Oh man, a PoV from Abigail, Robber, and Roland together? This chapter is now a close contender for my favorite Interlude.

Noldo

Are we going to get another Interlude titled "New tricks" describing how Cat unleashes the cards she has not yet shown?

ninegardens

Nope- We're gonna finally get the interlude "Flow", to commemorate Cat's latest Lakeomancy.

"New Tricks" will be delayed for 20 chapters time.

Detton

I want abigail to get a Name soooo badly hah

Graeme Dochylo

I'd sort of like to see this water having come from Lake Hengest. Y'know, the one mentioned to be so affected by the angel corpse in it that the water was nearly holy water?

Sounds like the exact sort of water to use against the undead.

Darkening

Considering that lake is (sorta) in Creation, she'd have to open a gate from creation to arcadia/TW, then drop the water from that portal into *another* portal to get it to her destination. Also, that lake isn't a mile deep like the arcadian one, so you'd lose out on a lot of the physical impact. Though yeah, holy water would make up for that a fair amount. Still, dunno how many uses you'd get out of the lake before you basically emptied it even if you could get past the logistical issues of dropping it through multiple portals.

DocSumac

I do love me some Abigail. Touches of Flashheart, Blackadder, Caiphas Cain. Nothing like the pragmatic cynic to add some salt to the meal.

Juneau

Absolutely love Abigails character. I would read her books any day!

Aotrs Commander

We once again cut to the future, where Supreme God-Empress Abigail, ruler of the Everything, sits on her grand Combined Throne of Calernia, Above And Below.

Countless thousands below await her proclaiptions of wisdom, for it and her wit are beyond legend.

"No, but seriously; why the actual FUCK does this keep happening to me?!" She wails...

Interlude: New Tricks

"Surprise is not a fixed quality. Yesterday's coup is tomorrow's blunder."

– Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

Princess Beatrice Volignac of Hainaut believed in being honest with herself even when it was painful to do so.

Particularly when it was painful. Even when back when she'd only been the sister of the ruler of Hainaut, she had known that there would be great dangers in refusing to look the realities of Creation in the eye. It was why she did not bother to pretend that she was anything but fat, even when her high birth meant that flatterers offered up sweet lies insisting otherwise by the basketful. She was fat and she would not slim up. It was the way of things, something she did not like but would have to live with. Allowing herself to indulge in a fantasy world at the expense of reality was just being childish, and childishness in a woman of her rank was the road to an early grave.

And now she was not a mere princess' sister anymore, she was *the* Volignac. Julianne had gone off and chased a death worthy of song, leaving Beatrice with two grieving nephews as well as a crown she'd never expected she would have to wear. This was

Procer and here blood mattered – especially when it was as old as that of the House of Volignac – so Beatrice was still being treated as royalty, but she had no illusions about what she truly was: the leader of a large armed gang, dependent on the charity of the high throne and foreign powers for her survival. She was royalty only so long as no one cared to challenge it, and should the army she'd salvaged from ruin perish it would be the end of Hainaut as a realm. There could be no return when one's rule extended only to ashes and refugees.

And so Beatrice had thought herself cleverer than those Langevin whoresons in Cleves, at least, whose smidgeon of safety had deluded into thinking that they could afford to *plot* when the very end times were at their doorstep. The staggering stupidity of Gaspard Langevin's manoeuvring still surprised her – had the man truly forgot that more than half the forces defending his lands were foreign, that some of the very same Firstborn he wanted to slight had bled for Cleven grounds? It'd been a comfort, cradling that knowledge. And yet now, as Beatrice Volignac's fingers tightened around her lance, she was forced to acknowledge that in some ways she had been a fool as well.

Queen Catherine Foundling of Callow was an easy-going woman. That temper was legend, true, but it was not easily provoked and when in a good mood the young queen was both amiable and impulsively generous. She was free with honours others in her position would have clutched tight. The Queen of Callow's obvious lack of schooling in the mores of one of high birth was an occasional figure of fun in Proceran circles, for she was cunning in the way that a peasant or a tradesman was cunning – without polish, without elegance. Beatrice was not fool enough to consider the Black Queen of Callow a mere savage, but between the cordiality and the lowbrow habit she'd come to forget who it was that she was dealing with.

Then hills were cracked open, the sky opened and an army was smashed by celestial deluge all in the span of an hour.

Beatrice remembered the stories, then, of the Battle of the Camps. Of the Doom of Liesse, of what Callowan veterans fondly called the 'Arcadian Campaign' – as if it were not utter howling madness, to have *invaded the realm of the fae* – and at last of the Princes' Graveyard, where sport had been made of her kind as none had dared since Theodosius the Unconquered. The Black Queen did not bother with the proper courtesies, Princess Beatrice remembered, because after the Graveyard there was not a living ruler left who could demand them of her. The Princess of Hainaut let that sink truth sink into her bones, breathed deep of it. It would not be forgot again, she swore.

Princess Beatrice let the fear settle down, reminding herself that this once the horror was on her side, and turned her gaze to

the enemy. Already the Third Army under its canny fox of a general was advancing at a brisk pace, red-painted shields locked tight in a shield wall. The waters had not yet finished flowing, but they'd slowed and would soon die out. Behind them would be left muddy grounds and a roiling mass of undead, an unprotected and hindered formation that the Army of Callow was already punishing with sustained artillery fire. The rumoured 'copperstones' fired by the Sapper-General's ballistae burned with bright Light where they hit, incinerating bone and unmaking necromancy.

The battle plan, as it currently stood, dictated that the flanks of the coalition army would wait a span before advancing as well. Beatrice understood the purpose, for she had made some study of war: it was hoped that the enemy reinforcements already pouring out from deeper in the pass could be drawn back into the water-emptied caverns by the Third Army's hasty advance, in an attempt by Keter to pincer that force as it pulled ahead of the rest of the coalition army. This was a risk, on the surface, but in truth it was the Black Queen's attempt to limit casualties on their side as much as possible. She wanted, in Beatrice's opinion, to draw the dead into fighting her at the mouth of the pass.

There, where Keter's number could not be brought to bear as they would in a broader field, the Queen of Callow wanted to eat up an army of one hundred thousand one bite at a time. The battle lines would stabilize once the flanks caught up to the Third Army, and when they were the artillery could be brought to bear on the massed undead facing the coalition. In a very real sense, the Grand Alliance soldiers would not be the executioner's axe but the chopping block: their purpose would be drawing out the enemy and keeping them in the artillery's killing field, not necessarily to do a great deal of damage themselves. The young queen's art of war was not famed without reason, though the Princess of Hainaut did not believe it would be quite so simple.

It never was, with Keter.

Yet blind worries were no reason to stand paralyzed, so when Princess Beatrice Volignac received the word from their supreme commander she passed down the order to her captains. Trumpets sounded, a bright clarion call, and the drumrolls began as the last army of Hainaut began its advance intermixed with companies of fantassins. To the east the Levantines mirrored her advance, and just as the Third Army reached the edge of where the waters had touched – where the dead had been swept up – the march of the flanks finally began. The Queen of Callow's plans were proceeding nicely so far, Beatrice saw. A stream of reinforcements had hurried out of the deeper pass to prevent the Third from just sweeping through, and when finally it made contact with the shield wall of the Third Army both forces slowed in the morass of mud and steel that the water had made. The undead did not have

sharp enough teeth to smash a Callowan shield wall, though, so the stream split.

The caverns, torn open for al to peer into them, were beginning to fill with undead attempting to go around the enemy's shield wall. Instead of just fighting in front, the dead were trying to bring their numbers to bear by attacking on the flanks as well – for now only splashing harmless at the sides of that stout eastern square formation, but the undead were gathering numbers to mount more serious assaults. The enemy was moving too quickly, Beatrice thought as she watched with narrowed eyes. Light skeletons, without armour and barely armed, had been sent out first and *en masse* as they were not so prone to getting stuck in the mire.

The Princess of Hainaut sent for one of her captains and ordered that the roll of the drums be quickened, setting a quicker march. If she waited too long, she feared that the Third Army might be entirely surrounded before reinforcements arrived. That would be a disaster, especially should the well-armed Callowan soldiers rise in the service of Keter. No wonder Callow was bereft of all beauty, she sometimes thought when looking at the pristine armaments of the Army of Callow. All the wealth there had gone into war. Would that Julianne and their father before her had practiced that same folly, which in these dark times was no folly at all. The House of Volignac had more use for plate than palaces these days.

The Princess' eyes drifted to the hills in the distance, beyond the fighting, where she had been told that a great siege engine still awaited. It had yet to fire a single shot, but as far as she knew the Chosen had not destroyed it. What was Keter waiting for, then?

—

"We're through with the easy part now, ducklings," Sergeant Hadda growled. "Shields steady and mind your right. Don't get smart, it doesn't pay off against the skellies."

Edgar breathed out, feeling the usual tremor of fear going down his spine. He'd be all right when the shield wall made contact with the enemy, but until then he knew from experiences the nerves would stay with him. Orders had come from above for the fourth cohort – of which Captain Pickering's company was the second company – to move to from the back to the left flank, to prevent the enemy outflanking the army. Felt odd to be turning his back to the dead in front of them, coming out of the Hollow, but then Edgar was just turning to look other undead in the face wasn't he?

"Liked it better when we were just smashing the downed bones," Edith muttered at his side. "Like a dangerous chore, but still better than the fucking shield wall."

Edgar snorted. A dangerous chore had been a good word for it. The Black Queen had called forth the tides to smash the enemy's hidden army, and when it'd washed up in a sea of mud and roiling undeath the front ranks of the Third Army had sent forth the priests of the House Insurgent. Streaks of blinding Light had hit the struggling skeletons and ghouls, carving smoking furrows into the mud, but it'd been the task of the legionaries following behind them to shatter any bones they saw sprouting out. Not harmless work, this, for sometimes skeletons played deader than they were and nasty surprises of mud and steel came at you from below. But like Edith – surprisingly sensible, for a Liessen girl – had said, still a damned sight better than the shield wall.

There, sometimes luck just meant you didn't get back up in the Enemy's service when you died.

The company moved into place as smoothly as was possible on muddy ground, a line of twenty moving to the front. Edgar's own line made up the second rank, which meant they'd see fighting before long. Over the shoulder of a shorter soldier, he saw pale bare skeletons with only spears in hand deftly going through the mud. Companies filled in to the side of Edgar's own, broadening the shield wall before the enemy could sweep around it, and he breathed out quietly. If he'd been in the first rank, he wouldn't have dared to take his eyes off the enemy even when he caught movement above. In the second, though, he risked a glance.

It wasn't the Summoner and another Named engaging vultures up in the sky, as now that the flood gates had closed they'd fled. Too low, anyway, and too quick. It was with quicksilver surprise that Edgar realized he was looking at artillery fire. Some sort of enormous spear had been fired, or perhaps a pillar? Whatever the truth of it, a great length of dark stone fell into the back ranks of the Third Army, killing a dozen with the impact. Edgars' fingers tightened with fear at the tight, for the black stone was glowing with runes. A heartbeat later, there was a crackling sound and a burst of sorcery followed by screams, half a company dying in a heartbeat in a mess of lightning.

Another pulse, and the dead rose.

The companies in the back of the Third turned to face the fresh threat – and while another pillar was shot at them, it burst in midair as if artillery fire of their own had somehow caught it – but the pulses kept coming. Always the same two, lightning and necromancy, but it was a potent combination and the streaks of Light and sorcery thrown at the pillar did nothing. Edgar of Laure breathed out and looked away. Fear ran in his veins as the distant sound of great drums began to thrum, but he could no

longer afford to look anywhere but forward. The first wave of skeletons charged forward in utter silence.

"Dauntless," Sergeant Hadda screamed.

"Dauntless," they howled back, and for a moment the boast chased away the gloom.

—

Gods, Indrani grimly thought. *That's a new one.*

What the Hells was that pillar? She recognized the stone from their trip into the Crown of the Dead a few years back – she'd never seen that exact tone of black anywhere but in the deepest reaches of the Dead King's fortress – but it was the first time she'd ever seen this particular breed of nastiness. It was a pretty simple setup, but the alternating pulses had already chewed through two companies and all attempts to handle the situation ended up turning into oil tossed at the flame. Not that she could afford to spare much time looking. The enemy's siege engine was still firing the damn pillars, and there were only so many heavy arrows in her quiver – three, actually, and she was already on her last. That would mean three pillars swatted out of their trajectory, at least, but somehow she doubted Keter would be running out of ammunition the same time she did.

Nocking the last heavy arrow, Archer suppressed a grimace as she saw another blackstone pillar let loose. She breathed out, steadied her aim, then drew and released. Indrani didn't even bother to watch if she'd hit, already knowing she would. Normally she'd have a few more heavy arrows, but today Cat had sent her out to handle constructs so it was unravellers she'd loaded up with. Useful things, those, but unlikely to dent a pillar. Pickler's copperstone ballistas were still chewing up the undead coming out of the pass so the Third wasn't in danger of collapsing anytime soon, but casualties were already mounting and that slippery eel General Abigail had left Archer behind at some point.

Glancing ahead, Indrani found that beorns were massing in the pass. House-sized abominations resembling bears, damned hard to put down and surprisingly agile for their size. They also carried bellyfuls of undead soldiers, which made them a bloody plague for regulars: it was like a living battering ram spewing out soldiers. Archer bit her lip. She couldn't do anything more about the pillars, it'd have to be one of Catherine's contingencies that handled it. She could begin hammering away at the constructs, though, so even as another pillar was shot in the distance Indrani reached for an unraveller and nocked it.

In that, at least, she could tip the scales.

—

You have no assignment, the Black Queen had told him. Follow providence where it leads you.

Balzer, who men now knew as the Sage, had done so without qualms. Even the Peregrine had been burned by that villainess' wiles and he would not gainsay them when they stood on the same side. So the Sage had retreated into himself, closing all shutters so that nothing might obscure the sensation of the slight nudges of Fate. And Fate had led him not to stand with the Dominion's warriors, with whom he shared blood, or the Procerans he had sworn to protect from the Enemy's attentions. It was with this strange Third Army that his steps had taken him. Not even to fight on the front, though Balzer knew many secrets of destruction beyond those of his fists, but to stand at the back.

He understood why only when black stone fell from the sky as a pillar and death bloomed around it.

Balzer had learned many secrets, for which some called him wise and others had decreed him a sage – even Sage, in time. But enlightenment was not a shared road, it was the struggle within: lonely, endless, forever reaching for unattainable perfection. So he was not surprised when the priests of the House Insurgent molded their faith bright and threw it against the black stone to no avail. No candle could light up the ink-black sea. And what could sorcery do, be it flame or thunder? Only a fool sought to beat a devil at devils' tricks. In this, though, he could lend aid. The Sage waded through the fresh undead, smashing skulls through helmets as he glided through their ranks, and before long beheld the pillar from up close.

"What a malevolent thing you are," the Sage murmured, eyes narrowing.

Kill, the black stone sang. Take. Kill. Take. Its insistence washed over him like morning mist, even the touch of lightning – the Light within him was greater than what the Enemy's work could bring to bear. Balzer pressed his palm against the stone, disliking its feverish warmth but not lingering on such ephemeral things. Like the river, he must flow and never cease. It was the opposite with this thing of stone and dread, for it was a shell hosting pulsing hate and greed and nothing more. Shells always had weaknesses, and the Sage found this one's before long. Undead grasped at his back, but he was swift and his oneness with Light blinded their eyes.

"Begone," Balzer ordered, and struck.

In his right hand he held the power to **Destroy**, learned from years of studying the lingering wisps divine wrath had left behind on this world, and it was this he unleashed against the

work of Trismegitus. The black stone shattered under his fist, revealing a howling sorcerous heart, and this he snatched and snuffed out. For a moment, when it died, he thought he had heard a word. Not enough to **Divine** anything from it, but perhaps with meditation... The sky above spewed out another pillar of black stone, falling among soldiers to deliver thundering death. Ah, opportunity. The Sage smiled.

Today was a good day, he decided, and sought the next pillar of black stone.

—

Lord Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood threw down his shield, for the javelin might not have punched through but it'd made it good as useless anyway. That was the third shield he'd gone through since the battle began, and he'd already had two horses killed under him: Keter was in fine form today. His sworn swords, which had served as the vanguard, were holding steady ahead of him. Malaga was upholding its honour today, though it was Aquiline who was adding deeds to the Rolls for her Blood — she'd taken a few slayers and Lanterns to kill a Tusk that'd passed by the Archer's punitive barrage, giving the killing blow herself.

It ought to put her in a better mood, wiping away the disgrace that'd been getting wounded on the first real day of fighting of the campaign.

The dead were holding firm under the assault of the Dominion, the Lord of Malaga found when he scrutinized the battle lines. The warriors of Levant weren't making enough of a dent to push back the enemy, though they were themselves in no danger of losing ground. Much as Razin would have preferred a more glorious bent to the battle, he could not deny that the Black Queen's plan was working: the copperstone ballistas of the Army of Callow were tearing through entire companies of the enemy as they poured out of the pass to reinforce, focusing on the centre in front of the Third Army.

It was not a great honour for his warriors and Aquiline's to be used as mere hooks keeping the metaphorical fish from wriggling out of the ballistas' reach, Razin Tanja thought, but if it led to victory he would make his peace with it. The Procerans had been tasked with the same on their wing, anyhow, so there was hardly a surfeit of honour to go around — only Abigail the Fox, that ruthless and cunning general who'd bled his binders so starkly at the Graveyard, had claimed any by being given the pivotal role of the day. Still, there was no reason for the Dominion not to try to seize a better position. Razin sent for his captains and ordered a push at the very edge of the right flank, led by Lanterns and axemen. One of his sworn swords brought him his fourth shield of the day, and the Lord of Malaga

pondered whether he should rejoin the ranks. The men fought better when he fought with them.

The decision was stolen from him when Keter acted first. From the broken ceiling of the caverns a great cacophony came as a devilry kept back was suddenly unleashed: the surviving swarms from the first day, birds and bats and insects, flowed out like a tide with ear-breaking shrieks. The Lord of Malaga swallowed a curse. Of all the armies of men, the Dominion struggled with these horrors the most.

"BINDERS," Razin Tanja screamed. "BINDERS, ON THE SWARMS."

—

The Summoner snorted derisively when he saw those Dominion savages fumble around with their so-called sorcery. Half-baked diabolism was what it was, this use of souls as anchors for bodies made of their surroundings – in this case, largely mud and stone. Not all the binders could forge flying creatures, either, further proof of their fundamental incompetence. Cedric reminded himself that not all could equal his own mastery, but it was a half-hearted thought and almost more a boast than a commiseration.

"You are certain your creature is capable?" the Concocter asked.

Beneath them, his summoned wyvern batter of her wings as she sped towards the undead swarms. The Summoner cast his colleague a scornful look.

"A little late for asking, yes?" Cedric sneered.

She rolled her eyes, the insolent wretch. Gods, but the Black Queen simply did not recognize his worth – always she used him as a horse-handler for some inferior Named, when he could have done it all on his own.

"My concoctions will work as promised," the Concocter flatly said. "The only possible point of failure here is your work."

The Summoner scoffed.

"My works is always beyond reproach," he said. "It is why I have been judged too valuable to send to the Arsenal, unlike some others."

She probably would have argue with this self-evident truth, so Cedric ordered his summon to bank hard upwards and leaned closer to its neck. The containers the Concocter had loaded its belly with made the construct less manoeuvrable, but he'd learned to compensate. It would not matter, anyway, he thought. Unlike what his colleague believed, the containers would not simply be spat

out. Cedric manipulated his summon to constrict its 'stomach' when they neared the edge of the swarms, breaking a container even as it opened its mouth. Like the old dragons of legend, his summon breathed out a gout of something – though it was a gas instead of fire, rather lessening the effect.

The gas did its work, the Summoner was forced to admit even as he began leading the wyvern into making a long pass through the mass of undead creatures, spewing out clouds all the while. The brew attacked the necromantic constructs almost as holy water would have, eating at them and disrupting the spell holding them together – it was particularly lethal on insects, but even the birds collapsed after a heartbeat of exposure.

Yet another victory to be laid at his feet, the Summoner thought with smug satisfaction.

—

General Abigail figured this must be a little like how a chicken would feel, if it were still alive when you put it on a spit to roast.

Just enough movement to give you the illusion that you might make it out, when in fact you were just spinning around so that you could be roasted more evenly. Sadly still on her horse, the general hid another wince as she watched another pack of ghouls leap over the shield wall at the front and land atop the shield panels of the mage cabals, then wiggle through a weakness in them. The Third Army was being made to stand and take the bloody hits to the Sapper-General of Callow could pound the enemy into dust with her ballistas, a strategy that Abigail would admit to herself she would have been very fond of if it didn't involve her standing so close to the killing field.

Boots, that bloody horse, seemed to have grasped that they were in it together at least until the end of the battle – it was cooperating, and had not tried to bite her in at least an hour. From that unfortunately dangerous vantage point, General Abigail watched the field. It'd been hours since the battle began, long enough that some of the mud was beginning to dry, but for all the efforts on both sides it remained a stalemate. Revenants had tried to smash the front lines a few times, but Named had met them head on and gotten the better of them. Most the time, anyway. Some devil in pale plate had killed a villain and only retreated when the band under the Silver Huntress reappeared to force him back.

It'd be a while still until sundown, Abigail figured, but there would be no clear winner today. The trouble was that even with rotations he people were getting damned tired, and the Procerans likely had it worse on their flank: half of them were mercenaries, and unlike the Dominion on the right they didn't

have the numbers to be able to keep back a reserve. It might all turn nasty, if they weren't careful, and even with the Second Army still being held in reserve a lot of damage might happen very quickly if the left flank went sour. The trouble was that, when it came to what she could actually do to help prop up the left flank, General Abigail saw only the one option and she wasn't exactly eager to take it.

"Might not be as bad as what happens if we wait, though," she muttered at her horse.

She considered the risks. Gods, much as she hated to admit it doing nothing might be the more dangerous of the two. The Volignac soldiers were a hardy lot, but the mercenaries didn't have the same stomach for the right. If some started running... Abigail still held back on doing anything until she saw the first fantassin company break, cursing and giving orders to her general staff even if the mercenary company managed to rally and return into position. It was only going to get worse the longer she waited, and with Abigail's luck everyone up here was going to pull a runner except her own damned army.

After dismounting she gathered as many companies of heavies as she dared to pull to her and arranged for a wedge. She sent for the Third Army's standard, picked some poor bastard to carry it into battle and waited for the orders she'd given to trickle down to the House Insurgent and the mage cabals. The change was noticeable, when it happened: from defensive to offensive. The priests struck out with mass volleys as shields winked out and were replaced by great spears of flame either.

"Gods," Abigail faintly muttered. "How bad could it really have been, being a tanner?"

Too late to back out now, she knew. After pulling all those heavy companies to her, if she gave the command to someone else they'd turn on her for cowardice. *Ah*, she realized with a start, but there was a way to avoid fighting. She found the poor bastard she'd given the army standard too and sent him back to the ranks with a smile, taking it up herself. See, with that thing in hand she wouldn't be able to use a sword so no one could expect her to – *shit*, Abigail, realized, she could no longer use a sword. And Keter might go after the standard to hurt morale. She'd made herself a target again.

"Are you ready, general?" Krolem asked.

They were all looking at her, Abigail saw, waiting for her order. She swallowed a whimper, which came out sound a little like a giggle. Some of her officers looked impressed.

"Forward," General Abigail ordered. "Into the breach, Dauntless."

For once, she was lucky: the answering roar of approval drowned out how shrilly terrified her voice had really been.

Big I

Hahaha, Abigail the Fox. Sounds like she's got a song in her future.

Just remember Abigail, you'd have had to marry one your cousins if you were a tanner, and they all look like ferrets.

[Liliet](#)

Abigail the really, really fucking scared fox.

Scared animals are the dangerous ones :3

shikkarasu

Didn't Cat narrowly avoid a Fox related Name that WB was trying to force on her? Wonder if that Name will settle somewhere nearby.... Y'know, with someone who has a similar reputation to Cat and with whom Cat occasionally commiserates/teaches.

[Liliet](#)

Not how Names work!

stevenneiman

Cornered Fox, maybe?

[Liliet](#)

y e s

Halinn

"Gods," she muttered, "ferrets can't be too bad, can they?"

Juneau

I'm going to say this everytime she has a bit in the book.

She needs her own books.

Best character ever. And yes, I love the Ciaphus Cain books

Anomandris

Abigail is a treasure....Ciaphas Cain would be proud....

Dome Zasrekh

Why did it take me so long to find a comment like this?!
Also yes, mood kindred indeed!
We need more of her!

Wen Yang

Mood kindred! Indeed, Ciaphas would be proud.

[*boballab*](#)

There really needs to be more Adventures of Abigail of Summerholm! I'm also going to predict she will accidentally kill that one pesky revenant using the standard.

Gibborim

No, that Revenant is the final whetstone for Cat's Name.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

And after she stands in judgement over it and readies herself for the killing blow, Abigail the Fox, seeing an opportunity to finally flee, will in her panic go in the wrong direction, and she'll trip on a corpse and bash the Revenant's head in with her standard.

flashburn283

And she will have truly become Caiphas Cain

Tenthyr

Its impossible not to adore Abigail and Cats malicious delight in using her.

[*Burlyraven*](#)

I honestly believe there's at least one god for both Above and Below just waiting for that one little bit of something extra to give Abigail a Name. I'm also pretty sure if that did finally happen, Abigail would cry (out of despair, but everyone would interpret it as happiness or pride), and eventually accidentally become the most potent Named to ever live.

mamm0nn

Doubt it. Though she may be lucky and even fate-guided, Named are inevitably about willpower which she lacks. Combine that with her being a little Catherine when the big one is still alive and others like Robber also not getting a Name despite

all the shit he manages to pull, and a Name becomes unlikely. EE doesn't hand those out like candy, especially not to characters already known.

[Burlyraven](#)

I acknowledged that. She's lacking that extra something (which is different for Above and Below), but with all of the wild success she has, some higher power is having fun.

[Liliet](#)

Named aren't inevitably about willpower. Sabah was born to hers, not a lot of willpower in a newborn baby. Willpower is a common component to stories, but not a necessary one.

That said, yeah I don't think Abigail's getting one.

mamm0nn

Please, we all know Sabah came out fo the womb with JoJo face, scaring her parent with her menacing aura. Plus, as both naturally born with some extra and a culture that would nigh certainly see her pray to Below, she actually had patrons where Abigail wouldn't make a champion for either side.

thearpox23

Sabah was Cursed, a Name driven to cause misery and destruction by a long-dead sorcerer. And pretty much every circumstance I can think of where the bestowal of a name isn't dependent on willpower of the receiver is some sort of a curse, (*ahem* Sleeping Princess,) or at most a 'blessing' of being the chosen one because of blood ties or something.

To me at least, mamm0nn's argument seems entirely valid.

[Liliet](#)

I mean no-one's saying Abigai's Name isn't going to be a curse equivalent?

thearpox23

Ah yes, The Reticent General, with aspects such as "Be misunderstood unless I am talking to Catherine," and a slight luck/providence bonus to not get sniped off a horse. I am sure that in a different story, perhaps with a more comedic bent and some fourth-wall breaking shenanigans that could be a thing. Unfortunately, we are reading this story, and a curse that can be broken by a resignation letter and a quiet discharge the moment there is a break in a campaign isn't a thing. (Because

let's be honest, Catherine isn't going to execute Abigail if Abigail snaps. She'd want to keep everything hush hush to prevent riots and present this as an illness or a secret mission.)

I ask the same question again: What would a name change for Abigail. What would it help her accomplish?

Because she isn't gonna get a name that would make her a melee powerhouse, or one to make her sword shoot lasers into the sky. And she doesn't need a Name to command her troops, no more than other general. The only things left are her absurd luck and charisma, but she's been benefiting from them now for years because she fills a role and so is favored by providence, things which we have learned are often confused with but not dependent on being Named.

Crash

(:

Sir Nil

It's obvious she's going to be the new Fortunate Fool.

Sir Nil

Oh nvm someone already made that joke.

Eleron Pfoutz

Her First Aspect is DEFLECT, a passive aspect that makes her immune to being sniped if she's wearing a complete set of armor.

[Liliet](#)

A Name DOESN'T categorically change things about a person, actually. It amplifies what's already there, and for heroes, provides convenient tools for them to not fail at the story that should be theirs for embarrassing reasons (Hanno's lack of mount as a Knight, Tariq's complete inability to read people etc).

That said, I do agree Abigail isn't going to be Named. It's fun to speculate about specific factors that go into it though.

thearpox23

>I ask the same question again: What would a name change for Abigail.

>A Name DOESN'T categorically change things about a person

I wasn't referring to it changing her as a person, but what tools what it provide for her. Thief desperately needed a way to Stash her loot, both Tariq and Kairos to see the truth of people, and even Poisoner wanted excel in her craft.

By comparison, every advantage I can think of that Abigail would be handed from a name is something she's already got and have had for years. It'd be like Kairos receiving his name AFTER uniting the Free Cities and leading his army through the Whispering Woods.

[Liliet](#)

Do you mean why it would happen in-universe or why it would Erratic do it?

Because neither of those depend on "what advantage would it give the character" necessarily.

It's only about whether it will make a more interesting story. And, well, I think it's "no" to either, but it's still not about what Abigail gets out of it.

thearpox23

In-universe rules.

>Because neither of those depend on "what advantage would it give the character" necessarily.

I struggle to grasp what reasoning led you to believe this. Names exist to give people advantages. Aspects exist to give people advantages. When people don't need the advantages of a name, they don't get it. When they have a different source of power (hi WinterCat) they can also skimp on it.

Hell, it's pretty much explicitly stated that heroic Named generally have that shore up their weaknesses while villainous Named have ones that let them fulfill their ambitions.

Oh, and

>It's only about whether it will make a more interesting story.

Even if you weren't confusing the intent behind the creation of the system with the system itself, a power-up actually being relevant is something of a necessity for a power-up scene to make it into a good story.

[Liliet](#)

> Names exist to give people advantages. Aspects exist to give people advantages. When people don't need the advantages of a name, they don't get it.

...Especially Cursed?

Names don't exist for a purpose, except maybe entertaining Gods. They're a "why", not a "what for".

And yes, they GENERALLY help. That's a consequence, not a prerequisite.

You are absolutely correct about relevance being required, but "relevant" and "helpful" are not necessarily synonymous 😊
(why yes, I'm evil. All writers are, didn't you know?)

thearpox23

generally have ASPECTS that

maybe next decade wordpress will allow me to edit my posts.

[Liliet](#)

we all dream

thearpox23

>> Names exist to give people advantages. Aspects exist to give people advantages. When people don't need the advantages of a name, they don't get it.
>...Especially Cursed?

Are you being pedantic on purpose? Because if I didn't know you any better I'd think you were trolling me.

Yes, exceptions exist. There are curses, ancient prophecies, gods, et cetera. In cases of a curse the advantage is given not to the receiver of the Name but to the giver of the curse, even if that 'advantage' is petty cruelty.

>Names don't exist for a purpose, except maybe entertaining Gods. They're a "why", not a "what for".

No, stories exist to entertain gods. Names exist to give mortals/some immortals a leg up, so that they don't get crushed, and can generate stories. They prop up when a community encounters something they can't handle by mundane means. Notice how Mercantis doesn't get (many?) villainous Named because mundane business cut-throaty is enough to get the job done. How Procer was noted to get by without Named for the most part even when grappling with Praes or Callow. How the drow don't have conventional Named because they are already so inundated with the Night that any advantages from a Name would just get overshadowed.

Ergo, if you can get by fine without a power boost, you're probably not gonna get it.

>And yes, they GENERALLY help. That's a consequence, not a prerequisite.

No, it is a prerequisite. The only question is WHOM they help.

>You are absolutely correct about relevance being required, but "relevant" and "helpful" are not necessarily synonymous

I know, and I made the word choice deliberately, something which would have had more of an effect if I want in the habit of skipping words and then being unable to edit.

Helpful is something that improves the chances of the designee. (+3 longsword to upgrade from my +2! Yay!) Relevant is something that doesn't get overshadowed by other advantages. (Catherine not immediately getting a name because anything common would get overshadowed by her position as the First Under The Night.)

>(why yes, I'm evil. All writers are, didn't you know?)

No, you are randomly pedantic, and are skilled at misinterpretation. The only writer I recognize as evil is Herman Melville. He promised me a book of sea adventures, and instead I got a wikia on early 19th century whaling. The famous confrontation between Captain Ahab and the Whale was just

Melville getting bored because he ran out of things to catalog, and not wanting to spend any more effort on the narrative.

Liliet

> No, stories exist to entertain gods.
I'd say what entertains the Gods Above and Gods Below is opposite enough they would not set up for each other's fun. No, stories exist for a purpose they actually share – which is to say, settling the wager. They amplify the effects of mortals' actions and choices, making it easier to track whether Evil or Good is doing better at... whatever metric they use to measure all of this.

You can't just say the Name of Cursed is a grand exception. Hierarch wanted the exact opposite of his Name, too, and Dread Emp has been described as curse-like on many occasions, notably by the claimant theme song.

> In cases of a curse the advantage is given not to the receiver of the Name but to the giver of the curse, even if that 'advantage' is petty cruelty.

I'd say this is tortured logic. In that case, Abigail getting a Name that won't help her with anything is an advantage to Catherine who is always looking for more Named to join her cause and wanted to badass Abigail up in the first place. Dilemma resolved!

> Helpful is something that improves the chances of the designee.

Chances at what? Villains are notorious for not outliving average human lifespan despite being technically immortal in the ageless sense. All Below's Names function a little like curses, increasing the bearer's propensity for violence through a chain of Pavlovian incentives.

By "writers are evil" I was referencing the basic premise of "no good story without conflict", and the frequently-following conclusion that it means needing to throw your protagonist into ever more danger. And that IS how Names function – most heroes don't live to be elderly, and I've already talked about villains. Names are a monkey's paw, a double edged sword, and those who seek them out accept the tradeoff, but that doesn't mean their

PURPOSE is helpfulness. I'd argued against the premise you offered at the very start because it rings wrong to me, but to the degree that it's true (which is certainly some) – yeah, Named are basically scapegoats/sacrifices.

(Writers are evil because they drink the tears of the audience, as is well known. Among writers, at least)

Insanenoodlyguy

Robber was Named when we met him. His Name is Robber.

[Liliet](#)

We have WoG that is not the case.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

On a serious level I respect that, but I still like my absurd theory (which I may or may not have shared in the past) that all goblins are Named and the reason they age is that they're secretly all heroes rather than villains. Also I think Robber should be the next Dread Emperor, which of course was never a thing that could happen.

[Liliet](#)

Ooooooh. I like that one too, with the "all heroes" addition it crosses the line into VERY HIGH-QUALITY actually.

Crash

Honestly the only name that makes sense for her is Fortunate Fool or whatever that weird dude in the Vales campaign name was.

But no, our girl is 100% normal human and absolutely unwilling, the magnificent character that she is.

Honestly she's a lot like the non-bender characters in Avatar, and that's great.

[Liliet](#)

Sokka was a Named non-bender :thinkyface:

Crash

I don't think he'd be, to be honest. Someone like Ty Lee sure, but Sokka is about a 1:1 on Abigail on buffoonery made heroic/competent.

He did have dreams of grandeur though

Abrakadabra

The fearful charger, or The reluctant achiever or something that can convey that she somehow fails to fail. Unintentional Victor.

[Liliet](#)

I mean... he's one of the main characters? Sokka 100% had a Role in the events, come on.

Crash

I don't know, man. I just like the idea of people having Roles but not Names.

Call me a contrarian, but I like it when ordinary folk are competent as fuck and completely mundane in a world where a random extremely powerful thing exists (Names, bending, etc).

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's what the Badass Normal trope is about.

Unfortunately, since Guide's Name system is meta, it gives out power proportional to narrative importance + badassery. All tropes are Roles, and Badass Normal is no exception.

I feel you, I really feel you. Sokka just isn't it. You want unnamed engineers who made cool shit in the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom, maybe?

(Having a significant Role and no Name is a situation that comes from there being no folk hero cultural archetype corresponding to what you're doing. Sokka is in no way NOT a folk hero)

[Liliet](#)

The Bumbling role type, and the fact that there are roles for the non-Gifted, come together to show that Sokka is very much an example of a Named. He's Badass Normal – and sure, his setting is geared further towards that being an exception than Guideverse, but he's absolutely a typical Named. He's part of a Band of Five for fuck's sake – it might not have been exactly five people, but the number being that precise is a guideverse gimmick anyway, the Gaang is exactly that trope at its core.

Crash

Yeh, I see your point haha.

I was kinda trying to shoehorn him into a Vivienne type situation, where she is a part of the band but also mundane. (Though she was Named in the past.)

I'm using Sokka as a substitute for Abigail in this and I really, really don't want her to be Named so I went with Sokka being un-Named as well, even though he is actually very much a great fit for it.

[Liliet](#)

Guide's meta-ness really messes with readers' instincts on this, doesn't it? In another setting Amadeus would have been a Sokka-type Badass Normal...

[Liliet](#)

(Abigail is different because she is a SIDE CHARACTER)

WuseMajor

She needs to meet the Grizzled Veteran and go out for drinks together.

Miles

What she lacks is a desire for power. Regardless of which side, they both always pick someone who wants the power. Abigail always just wants to leave and let someone else handle it.

[Liliet](#)

> Regardless of which side, they both always pick someone who wants the power.

Newborn baby Sabah.

Frivolous

Poor Abigail. Slippery eel, Archer thinks of her, which is astonishing given how Indrani is Named and not one to compliment much. Abigail the Fox, Razin Tanja calls her, which is also astonishing given he's a Lord of the Dominion and she's a Callowan commoner. I'm amazed he's giving her a complimentary epithet like that.

She's famous no matter what, and that's a really bad thing if you want a quiet life. The possibility of her gaining a Name increases, I think.

Also, Cedric remains a complete jerk. His only virtue seems to be that his jerkiness is merely social, not physical much, and that will end once he gets even a smidgeon of authority.

Liliet

I'm pretty sure "slippery eel" is high key NOT meant as a compliment, and Indrani is actually one of the people who sees exactly how much of a coward she is (and unlike Cat, doesn't have absolute certainty that she'll stay loyal and do her job regardless).

Frivolous

I don't think Indrani could have possibly lost the Third Army, of which Abigail is the very visible General, since she's the one on the horse.

I think Abi somehow just managed to sidle away from Indrani when Indrani was distracted. Yes, while Abi was on a horse and Indrani being Archer, with the enhanced senses Named have. Which is a bit scary, really.

Abi wasn't a slippery eel because she slipped away from the battle. She just didn't want to be near Archer, because Archer scares her.

Liliet

I mean Indrani evaluates Abigail's entire personality as "slippery eel" regardless of context. That's the feeling I got.

ruduen

Well, Abigail's overall plan seems to be working. I know my morale's been improved.

Frivolous

I wonder which villain had been killed by the White Knight Revenant. It doesn't have to be one of the attendees at the hill meeting, right? That was a while ago and far away.

I do hope the deceased is not one of the more interesting and engaging villains. I'm okay with Headhunter or Red Knight or Summoner dying. I'd prefer that Beastmaster and Barrow Sword and Harrowed Witch live at least a little longer.

hakureireimu

I think all the Villains in both armies were in that meeting. We just don't know who went with whom yet.

[Adrian_V](#)

Just don't let be Barrow Sword, i like him xD

Maybe Headhunter or the one that tastes souls?

hakureireimu

It can't be Barrow Sword, since he went with Hanno.

AceOfSpade

I don't think the Rapacious Troubadour is much of a frontline combattant. If I had to hazard a guess I'd say the most likely victim is the hulk-style villain... I think she was called the Berserker?

Dexapocalypse

I dunno, circumstance can force a name on someone so Abigail could get something like The Unwilling General – a leader by necessity and skill rather than ambition or desire, analogues would be the farm boy who ends up leading an army, the retired campaigner brought out to lead a revolution, or in this case the assistant left alive and forced to take on the leading role

Thanatoss

Great chapter as always!

Which villain died damn, I hope noone fun. I bet on Berserker, she was that kind of stupid.

Also this Revenant White Knight, I can see it being big stepping stone for Cat, however no idea if it will be big grand duel or she will somehow trick him and "casually" slay him, both of this results would propagate her "undefeated" legend. Hmmm interesting

Frivolous

Noticed just now that Abigail is referred to as a fox by not just Razin but also Beatrice.

That kind of acclaim tends to lead to a Name. Look at how Akua became Diabolist by repeatedly using devils and demons, and letting others know about it. What Akua did deliberately may be happening to Abigail by accident.

LarsBlitzer

Not as "accidentally" as it may appear. Cat's been quick to recognize Abigail's talents if nothing else and has been "rewarding" her appropriately: with greater authority and opportunities to test them in the field. I'm not nearly so sure she'll get a Name as easily as we seem to think. None of the

other Legion generals or marshals have them. It would have to be something spectacularly amazing, foolhardy, or heroic/villainous to get the attention of Above or Below. This is the right time for it though.

Oshi

Akua already had a name and shaped the story. This is more mundane. Names need more than acclaim. Every named no matter the person behind it has one thing in common. They seek to shape the world. Abigail does not.

Frivolous

I think I disagree about the seeking to shape the world part.

Augur didn't. Adjutant didn't. Grizzled Fantassin didn't. Poisoner didn't. I seriously doubt Concocter wanted to shape the world, either.

I think it's enough that a person be exceptionally good at her Role, that the Role be important somehow, and that she be well known for it. Even the well known part might be negotiable; Agnes Hasenbach was a wallflower before and after she became Augur.

Velrix

Adjutant want to give a better place to Orcs in creation. He's the founder of a chess game where you steel bricks to build your tower. And said that he isn't a player but a follower because Cat's the best bet to see the world that he want.

If Catherine die, he will become the Warlord.

thearpox23

Both Poisoner and the Grizzled Fantassin were local names with little reason to act internationally before the war with the Dead King. "Shaping the world" in their case concerned their own little corner that they were very passionate about.

Abigail, for her part, doesn't have any ambition or her main point of interest seems to be her retirement fund. Even if you were to grant her a name, I struggle to think of one that would fit her, any aspects she would actually find useful. Everything she does she already accomplishes fine without a name, with no aspiration waiting to be kindled by a pivot.

Myatt

Isn't it obvious though she's gonna be the dauntless general

Halinn

The Reticent General, while she's desperately hoping to change it to the Retired General

[Liliet](#)

> Both Poisoner and the Grizzled Fantassin were local names with little reason to act internationally before the war with the Dead King. "Shaping the world" in their case concerned their own little corner that they were very passionate about.

Newborn baby Sabah.

AbraKadabra

What about something that would Tell the tale of the general WHO wants nothing more, Than retire, retreat, but instead continually advance Both in battle and the ranks? The unwilling advancer. 😊

[Liliet](#)

That's what we're getting, and it's fun for us, but it's not an in-universe meme.

[Liliet](#)

> Every named no matter the person behind it has one thing in common. They seek to shape the world.

Ah yes, especially Berserker, Concocter, and my favorite counterexample to any "all Named" claim, newborn baby Sabah.

Names need a story. They need a story that's well-known and considered a thing as such, and that is actually true about the person. It doesn't necessarily need to be known that it's true about the person – no-one but Vivienne knew she was the thief when she got the Name for it, and she didn't realize she was about to become Named either. It just has to match up, pattern match.

Is there a culturally significant story on Calernia about a hypercompetent coward becoming known as a brave soldier despite their efforts otherwise? I don't get that impression, because 1) more people would have caught on to what Abigail's like by now, 2) Cat would have commented on it.

That said, it's possible Abigail can match some kind of "shrewd war leader who can weasel themselves and their army

out of any kind of shit through trickery and risky moves” story out there with her cowardice being irrelevant to it – and she genuinely is cunning. The “Fox” moniker is a good point, as it is a good match there.

Either-or. I lean towards “not”, but it’s not impossible.

Javvies

IIRC there’s past precedent for that kind of Name being viable in the pre-Imperial Taghreb Names. And I think at least one of those Names involved “Fox”.

More recently? We haven’t seen or heard of any such Name, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there were such Names. Although, to be fair, there might well be cultural variations that support or degrade the chances of such a Name arising.

Cat might or might not be arranging things to improve Abigail’s chances of getting a Name ... but either way, I’m pretty sure Cat sees that Abigail gets results, even when things go badly, and a story could be being built around that, and, if nothing else, it’s a theme that is worth encouraging and supporting.

Liliet

Yeah.

I just feel like there’s not just quantitative but also qualitative aspect to getting Names – there can be different degrees of matching the pattern, and there can be different degrees to the weight of the story. If the weight of the story is high but your pattern is not very well-matched you might still get the Name; if the weight is low but your pattern fits one to one you might still get the Name; but if the weight is low AND your pattern fits only vaguely? You’re not getting it.

(I figure it’s multiplicative, not additive – you can’t skirt by on just one if the other just THAT low, they both have to be at least mediocre)

Javvies

True, though the “clever general/war-leader/battlefield commander that pulls success from the jaws of defeat” is a relatively broad concept, and is relatively culture neutral.

So while Abigail may be less directly aligned with any one specific cultural Name, it’s likely that the combination of a lot of people from multiple cultures

seeing her as roughly aligned with their clever warleader concept is something that can add up and compensate for the lack of an exact match. And/or contribute to the development of a new, less culturally specific Name aligned with the concept. Especially if Cat is encouraging it, either for the purpose of encouraging Abigail to get a Name, or just because it's a good theme for a general to have and for the troops to believe in.

[Liliet](#)

> clever general/war-leader/battlefield commander that pulls success from the jaws of defeat" is a relatively broad concept

Ah, but that's the problem: being non-specific means it gets less concentrated story weight that'd birth a Name.

Crash

Which is interesting because Cat matches Bardic Names on that "they're harder to kill than cockroaches and have an understanding of the way Creation works Archmages can barely grasp at" but it still doesn't feel quite right with her "justifications matter only to the just" and standing in judgement over creation, fighting for her peace.

[Liliet](#)

Cat is a DnD bard, I've been standing on that position for a while. Performance (Stage magic).

(Amadeus's is Performance (Oratory))

[Liliet](#)

* not just qualitative but also quantitative. Why are these opposite words so similar

JoshuaS

I agree. It's like everyone's just straight forgotten that we've literally seen a hero whose entire shtick was being a lucky idiot: the Bumbling Conjuror. Not too much of a leap to have a lucky coward as a story concept. (Tbf, it was an easy character to forget).

Hell it's the kind of post modern, ironic trope that the world seems heading towards, what with the Tyrant "killing an age" and all that. She'd fit right in from my metatextual understanding.

But I don't think it's likely either, if for a different reason that she doesn't really have an character arc. She's the same character now as she was in the beginning, character wise. So if she is going to get a name based on that personality, she would have already gotten it at this point.

So not really all that likely barring some major character motivation shift, in which case would she still be the fun character who only cares about survival then? And if not, then what is the point of her specifically getting a name?

Crash

It's like everyone just straight up forgot you can say NO TO A GODDAMN NAME.

I would love to know what the fuck y'all are reading when Abigail is literally going off about how much she hates the very concept of being necessary for anything important at all, ever, in her life.

Which part of that sounds like someone who wants to be Named? In the middle of a war were they're very Important and with the Accords looming over the corner no less.

If she has a Story to fit into or not, that doesn't even matter. She would never make the Choice. A Name isn't exactly something that can be forced on someone, outside of very specific scenarios like being literally born Cursed. I don't see how Cowardly General or whatever would fit that.

JoshuaS

In the extremely unlikely chance it does happen, EE will probably just pull a bait and switch, kinda like with the standard bearing in this chapter.

Like a "I'm about to die, I need this name to survive, oh wait shit I wasn't actually in danger and now I'm stuck being an important character" thing. lame and predictable, but explicable.

[Liliet](#)

One can absolutely be forced into a Name.

A Name does not depend on the person's One Big Choice To Have It, that's not a thing. A Name depends on a sequence of a person's choices on how they act in a particular situation, and if that sequence matches the Role (or if other people's actions match the Role, with

the Hierarchy), bam, you're it, no additional question on top asked.

Vivienne didn't realize she was Named until way into it. Tariq was actively against being Named but changing it would require no longer doing the thing that was making him be Named (listening to angels and going where he was needed to help people) and he wasn't willing to do that.

Cordelia would not have been given a chance to say no to her Name if Agnes hadn't fought the Bard for control of the story to give her the convenient pivot where 1) she had time to notice what was going on, 2) saying no didn't mean her death or the death of her entire country or anything else she wouldn't have been willing to trade.

Crash

I understand this, and probably should've worded my comment better it's just that this literally does not apply to Abigail. At all.

Cat is directing her in a sort of hands off way towards climbing up the ranks but this is mostly due to Abigail's own skills and not in the very pointed way in which Kairos guided and strong armed both Anaxares and the other rulers of the Free Cities into electing him.

There's no pre-made role to be filled here, Cat isn't wink wink nudge nudge Abigail into some kind of Role. She's trying to get a Callowan, a talented one, to a position of power on the Army of Callow. If this, later on becomes the groove for a Name? I'd find that very believable. But it's not the point of it right now.

I see your point about how, if given the opportunity for a Name, she might not be able to refuse and I raise you the following:

I do not believe there will be an opportunity at all, because there is no one shoving her up into a Role, currently, and she doesn't have a vested interest in forcing one onto existence.

One might argue for something that just happens due to enough repetition, i.e. Grizzled Fantassin, but if so, she's not quite there yet either.

Let the non-bender character be awesome on her own.

Abrakadabra

I think there is a case that a general is generally seen as incompetent but quite good, the only one WHO defeated theodosius the unconquered. I dont remember the exact name, something the Mad?

[Liliet](#)

Isabella the Mad?

You didn't finish the sentence though.

(If you're comparing her to Abigail, I'll note that Abigail's entire thing is that she is actually exceedingly competent. Her luck is in surviving stuff outside of her control and in catching Catherine's eye in doing so, the rest is just her complaining)

[Mental Mouse](#)

I will note that Abigail is not in fact cowardly. She's often afraid, but quite reasonably so given the dangers she's facing.

Bravery is not about never feeling afraid – it's about feeling afraid, and going ahead anyway. And that is exactly what Abigail does. In this very chapter, she's all "damn, that gonna be dangerous, but it looks like not doing it will be worse". That's not cowardice, that's thinking under pressure!

[Liliet](#)

YUP.

Abigail is a paladin, immune to fear effects. No-one appears to have ever told her that people sometimes panic, she seems unfamiliar with the concept.

An absolutely delightful character in every single way ♥ ♥
♥

mamm0nn

Akua was also one of the foremost experts on the subject aided by centuries of collected contracts and names, and she had a transitional Name. Her being involved with devils and demons helped a bit but was hardly a deciding factor.

Don't assume that people get a Name just because they get a bit of help from fate or are awesome, Robber would've been Named if that were the case. Abigail is already doing what she does without a Name so it's unlikely for Below to grant her one while Above is unlikely to grant one to the Black Queen's get when she's both a mirroring of Cat and unlikely to rebel

against her to seize Callow back. The soldiers wouldn't even follow her, either.

Liliet

Akua being involved with demons and devils and known for being such WAS the deciding factor according to her – at the very least, it was fuel to the fire and last straw on the camel.

That said, Names aren't an exact science, and it's more lots of factors piling in until the pile's high enough than strict requirements.

That said, Above and Below don't personally pick who gets Names based on deep strategic plans, Providence is blind and automatic. Names go to whoever's pile's high enough, and the criteria for what constitutes high enough come from the culture they're in, not directly from the Gods.

mamm0nn

A certain swordsman who's preferably all alone disagrees with the idea that all Names are automatically granted by a non-sentient Providence. In fact we haven't seen much proof of Providence having much pull in granting Names at all. Perhaps in enabling those with a claim or opportunity to survive or get it more dramatically, but nothing like what you suggest. And considering there's multiple accounts and versions in-story that actively contradict this claim, I have to completely disregard this theory of yours.

It's been all but explicitly stated by herself, though indeed that may not be an absolute truth, that the Wandering Bard is at least indirectly responsible for picking and shaping Named. Only certain exceptional cases like the Hierarch come into being without her say-so, though it's unknown how much her "You're not one of mine." comment suggests that she is at least partly responsible for creating or endorsing all other Named. She has suggested a bit of that at other times including her conversation with imprisoned Black too. Thus the idea that Names are granted by Providence or automatically is folly.

But even if that wouldn't be the case, what you're saying about piles is not something I've read even remotely suggested in the story itself. We have heard from various Name-experts including Pilgrim, Cat and the sisters that Above and Below are actively plotting and intervening with the other getting an equal reaction when they do, and that has never been said to not apply to making Named.

In fact, Black has been stated to be one of the foremost experts in Named lore of this century, so when he had a conversation with Malicia about the Wandering Bard perhaps being Above's counter-Name to Triumphant, that means that at least as far as highly influential and intelligent practitioners and historians of a wealthy nation are concerned, the Gods are in fact responsible for making and choosing Named and likely with active scheming and consideration granting Names to more than 'the one with the biggest pile'.

Moodprint

How do we explain neutral named then? Do we have neutral gods?

[Javvies](#)

"Neutral" Names are really just Names that aren't exclusive to one side.

They are Names that can be empowered by Above or by Below, depending on the particular iteration of that Name and the person who has it at any given time.

Transitional Names are very often such Names.

"Thief", "Ranger", "Archer", "Hunter", "Squire", "Apprentice", e.t.c.

As opposed to "White Knight", "Black Knight", e.t.c.

Plus, I'm pretty sure it's a term that originated with the fanbase, not something that was used in the story.

mamm0nn

There might be. If the Choir of Contrition can just grant a Name, then it's likely other lesser gods are equally capable of it. The sisters, the Dead King and Arcadia are probably able of it too, though of course not creating the tier of Named of Cat's (opposition and allies) rank at, that's only for the big ones Above and Below. There probably are also neutral lesser gods.

That said, I'm not saying that the Gods are solely and directly responsible for granting Names with intelligent intent. I was contradicting Liliet's claim that Named are always granted by Providence in an automatic and non-intelligent system that 'can easily be gamed'. There are going to be a few that come to be by grooves or acts, but that's not the only way or even norm.

[Liliet](#)

Being chosen by particular entities – like Choirs – grants you a Name through narrative mechanics, because that’s a significant Role. It can also work with regular mortals – election as a Hierarch grants it as a Name, through the same mechanic. If being chosen for something already constitutes a strong start of a story, then it gets you a Role, and a strong enough Role generates a Name automatically. It doesn’t mean that whoever’s doing the choosing has admin privileges, it means they found the right button to press on the vending machine.

(Like Black with Cat)

[Liliet](#)

(or, not “found” the right button to press but “were given” as is likely the case with Choirs. I’m going to stop nitpicking my metaphor now)

[Liliet](#)

“Providence” is just a word for narrative force. The thing that made sure Black bumped into Cat in that valley, the thing that powers Aspects, the thing that let Cat snatch a resurrection from the Choir of Contrition, the thing that forbade Praes from digging its way out of the hole they found themselves in.

It’s also the thing that automatically “balances the scales” whenever one side (either one!) gets an advantage. That’s what “counter-Names” are about: they’re generated automatically, not in some sort of chess game.

The one time Kairos gave as a chess metaphor, it was about how Gods cannot actually control what happens on the board. And if they could bestow Names selectively, they as good as could: just pick the guy who will only do what you want him to do, what control issues?

Yes, characters keep talking AS IF Above and Below intercede directly. Pilgrim also talks as if he knows exactly how afterlife works, even though we have specific WoG that no-one actually knows that and it’s all faith/speculation.

Hanno specifically pointed out that Above never actually communicates with their church. To the point that there’s been a fucking war before our own eyes on the page where both sides had priests capable of doing miracles. Like, fucking what? If the Gods don’t even do that much, what do they ever do?

(The answer we have is "direct the Bard to do things". That's the one lever they are stated to have and use, and they are stated to have and use it to counteract the unpredictability of the rest of the mechanics.)

The one time a resident expert was convinced was the Gods' direct intervention on-page – Thalassina – again has WoG explicitly stating that's not exactly the case.

The Wandering Bard can pick and shape Named, and frequently does. So can any other character – Black did it with Cat, Kairos did it with Anaxares. People's stories can be influenced and directed if you have the leverage for it, and Bard has made it her thing to make sure she has a finger in every pie. That's not an inherent thing to the mechanics, it's just what they allow for.

There are specific mechanistically known ways to get a Name. For them to work you don't need to know what the Gods are plotting, and never once in the history we know of did Gods go "okay yeah this claimant to Dread Emperor won the war but they're not who we want so they don't get the Name, this other claimant over there does". Warlock, Dread Emperor, Black Knight, Chancellor. Dread Emps APPOINT Chancellors for fuck's sake.

Oh, and we have WoG that the reason the Name Grey Knight does not exist on Calernia is the lack of cultural impetus for it. Not the Gods not wanting it to, but the MECHANISTIC SYSTEM not having the prerequisites.

mamm0nn

Yet nothing of this properly supports your claim that Named are automatically generated by Providence, generated without any intelligent design to it at all, or that the one most likely would get the Name. You're making a claim but I see nothing that makes it stick.

Providence is not 'balancing the scales'. The Gods Above and Below can exert a lot of influence but then the other get a similar reaction of equal power. Very explicitly Good and Evil of the divine kind, not Providence or balance.

We've been told this many times including by the Sisters after ascension, so even if we just go with your "Oh those people don't know what they're talking about." on my previous argument which is honestly not a strong counter, then in this case absolute nope that the Sisters too would be ill-informed. Providence is not evening the scales, the Gods Above and Below have been stated very explicitly to invest power and intent themselves.

And you're seeing what you want to see in Kairos's words. That can go both ways, here's his chess analogy to support my claim just as strongly and with just as much assumption as yours: What he said is that free will and people's petty desires are troublesome for the Gods to understand, predict and work with. It needs someone who gets them to use them. Ergo, he directly contradicts your point that something automatic like Providence would be a solution to this.

With the Wandering Bard, we've seen her directly speak for the gods and complain to the gods for not letting her finally die when Hierophant killed her. The latter they may not have been listening or caring, but what we've been shown makes a strong case that she was made by the Gods rather than Providence.

Plus, she's a bard. Where Book 1 Cat may have thought they were cute but weak because they only know stories, it's probably their Role to know and influence stories. She's not just the Intercessor, it's likely part of her Name and Role to have more power and influence over Stories than others of martial or magical roots.

That needs not be Providence, though. You are making a presumption that the Named power pools and powers are the same as Providence. That this would be one big pool that isn't the Gods as its centre. That following the groove of the Knight choosing a Squire or a Hierarch being elected by all Free Cities willingly, just means that Providence did a thing and granting power and weight to the biggest pile. As if those could be repeated or followed textbook. No, grooves make the trick more rigidly exploitable, but not absolute.

Yes, there are some grooves so deep that they become pretty absolute. That's not at all a point in your favour or contradicting mine, as it perfectly follows Below's mantra: Might makes Right. No Dread Emperor was ever a push-over, they got their Right by Might. Or they got replaced quickly by someone who was worthy. And that the Councillor was always Named even when they only kept office for a few months is an assumption, not an established fact. It's quite possible that assigning someone incapable and spineless would yield just a councillor. The Gods' philosophy supports the Tower's Named, and there are no equivalents on the Good side of just earning a Name by having a position.

Meanwhile the orcs are a great counter-argument. If we're talking about the biggest pile like you said, or that it's just Providence so there has to be some kind

of control to be gamed by for example having an entire steppe of orcs to make new stories and legends or still believe in THE Warlord, then there should've been orc Named. But when we're adding the Gods Below choosing the Named and the orcs being a cowed and beaten race not having the Might to give them Right, then no orcs reappearing until they're independent and proud and worthy of a Named is supported.

Now let's take a look at your argument which you're not supporting: That counter-Named just pop up as a guarantee and that Named are therefore created by Providence.

Have we seen or heard it explicitly stated that this happens? No. Is there any proof that it is Providence rather than the Gods that do this? No. Have we seen cases that are actively the opposite? Yes.

Where's the equal reaction Named against the Dead King in his lore? By your argument his careful plans should've still yielded Names to counter him when it was explicitly stated that he craftily avoided this.

What Named would Cordelia's ascension be a reaction to in the moment she came to be? Oh wait, there were none in Salia and there are already better counter-balances in place against DK while we saw no repeat attempt in the last five years if another leader Named was deemed necessary to balance the scales.

Was the plague that birthed Pilgrim a Damned?

Are there tons of anti-dwarves Named popping up to counter the dwarven Named, unchallenged superiority and secrecy of their civilisation?

Did a new equally powerful Hero show up to stop Winter Cat, or very powerful Villains to deal with Saint and Pilgrim a decade past?

[Liliet](#)

> Yet nothing of this properly supports your claim that Named are automatically generated by Providence, generated without any intelligent design to it at all, or that the one most likely would get the Name. You're making a claim but I see nothing that makes it stick.

...The fact it's abusable by Kairos?

[Liliet](#)

(Also Kairos's claim that Gods cannot control the board is weak evidence, as I described above)

(Also the fact that Catherine and Amadeus are villainous Named is imho weak evidence, but that's a different question entirely)

[Liliet](#)

Also the fact gaining certain Names by killing the previous holder reliably works in Praes???

Also the fact we have WoG that a particular Name cannot come into being because there isn't a cultural impetus for it???

This is making my head hurt. How are these not strong evidence?

mamm0nn

Because you're going around not saying it's your opinion. You pretty directly reacted to several comments with 'You are wrong, I am right there is no argument about me being correct in this.' only for you to then not have strong closers. Nothing you gave as an argument is a case closer nor did you manage to prop up your argument or debase mine with anything but adjacent and only possibly related instances and precedents. Nothing sticks.

Remember, because you are going around telling others that your argument isn't an opinion but fact, YOU need to make a very strong case. This is not an equal playing ground, unless you rephrase your initial comment to reflect it's an opinion, you need to come with a lot more than what you've got now. I mean, you even made it a song as if the other is stupid for not understanding this 'fact' meaning you don't act as if it's an opinion you hold.

None of the WoG are on this topic specifically, and all your precedents are open to interpretation. Right now, you are peddling an opinion but chastising others as if you are proclaiming an in-universe established fact.

[Liliet](#)

Can you remind me again what is NOT the in-universe established fact? That people can gain Names deliberately and reliably by following a particular strategy they can either carft themselves or copy from others? That people can give OTHER PEOPLE Names by this method?

Or are you disagreeing that it follows from the above that the Gods do not deliberately pick each Name individually?

It's just that, I really do consider my case entirely closed and proven. I'm having trouble understanding what, exactly, is the part you disagree with.

Liliet

> Providence is not 'balancing the scales'. The Gods Above and Below can exert a lot of influence but then the other get a similar reaction of equal power. Very explicitly Good and Evil of the divine kind, not Providence or balance.

We've been told this many times including by the Sisters after ascension, so even if we just go with your "Oh those people don't know what they're talking about." on my previous argument which is honestly not a strong counter, then in this case absolute nope that the Sisters too would be ill-informed. Providence is not evening the scales, the Gods Above and Below have been stated very explicitly to invest power and intent themselves.

WoG that even the flashy intervention at Thalassina was not what everyone in-universe thought it was?

Why would the Sisters be any more better informed? We've seen them rise to their current station from mortals. It did not involve, uh, insights.

> Meanwhile the orcs are a great counter-argument. If we're talking about the biggest pile like you said, or that it's just Providence so there has to be some kind of control to be gamed by for example having an entire steppe of orcs to make new stories and legends or still believe in THE Warlord, then there should've been orc Named.

No, actually, orcs are an illustration of how it works mechanistically. No orcs managed to actually be important enough to step into the shoes of any story that the whole orchood, let alone people outside of the Steppes, would have cared about.

> That counter-Named just pop up as a guarantee and that Named are therefore created by Providence.

No, they sometimes pop up when that's what the story is. Not literally every single time, I never claimed that.

mamm0nn

It has quite literally and directly been stated that the Sisters now have an understanding beyond mortals that Cat cannot hope to learn or match, and that they grant her this understanding during her miracle-weaving. This is not an opinion but hard stated by EE that the Sisters are now of understandings and insights beyond mortals. See several chapters of the beginning of Book 4 in Iserre.

For the rest, you are peddling your opinion as if it's fact. There's no point to that. See my other comment, either rephrase your initial comments or realise that others don't consider your opinion a fact just because you do.

[Liliet](#)

"Understanding beyond mortals" and "understanding of the Gods Above and Below" are not, uh, necessary synonyms. "Not mortals" encompasses a wide reference class consisting of lesser deities, of which the Sisters are one, Neshamah is another, that orc god Sabah killed that one time is one, the Deoraithe gestalt is one as well.

There is a difference between atmospheric flight and space flight.

And nothing about "maybe hypothetically the Sisters might know things" is a strong enough argument to stand against the evidence of Names working via locally predictable and mechanistic patterns?

[Liliet](#)

...sorry for the multi-reply, but I'm thinking:

Are you postulating that the Gods Below determine directly which candidate wins among Black Knight / Warlock / Dread Emperor claimants? How would you describe the process for these particular Names, in your view?

mamm0nn

They don't. Why would they care which ant wins, the one that stabs the others the best earns the Name. As by their creed; Might makes Right.

[Liliet](#)

So, uh. You're agreeing with me.

[Liliet](#)

Also: no, Providence is not a “solution” to the problem of free will. It’s actually an extension of the problem, willingly made by the Gods to be such: it amplifies free will’s effects if anything, making people’s thoughts and desires matter a lot more than they would in a non-narrative-driven world.

> You are making a presumption that the Named power pools and powers are the same as Providence. That this would be one big pool that isn’t the Gods as its centre. That following the groove of the Knight choosing a Squire or a Hierarch being elected by all Free Cities willingly, just means that Providence did a thing and granting power and weight to the biggest pile. As if those could be repeated or followed textbook.

Yes, I’m making that presumption. One source of this is Akua’s explanation of Catherine’s trick at Liesse: “It’s not the Names that matter. It’s the Roles”. That’s actually the biggest exposition/speculation dump on how Roles and Names work that we have, and a recent Q&A had EE straight up tell the readers to refer to it for what Roles are.

Here: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/villainous-interlude-chiaroscuro/>

In that interlude, Akua talks about Cat’s narrative-based trick at Liesse, which was Cat using the fact that the system is mechanistic and predictable to get a result the Gods would presumably not have intended – getting a resurrection as a villain, and ties it with her own effort to get the Name she wanted, Diabolist, as working on the same basis. The mechanistic, predictable basis, that can be analyzed as people doing things wrong or right, which she does right there and then for the Empire’s current rulers. Her analysis is missing a lot of factual points, but the basis of it? Again, EE has pointed to it as reference material for theorists instead of answering questions in the Q&A because it’s all there.

(Without WoG in play, we the audience can still infer Akua got the basic mechanics right because she DID get the Name she was aiming for by the method she was using)

(And yes, it could be repeated or followed textbook. We’ve had PLENTY of people use that textbook, and when they criticize each other, it’s for using the textbook

wrong, not for thinking there was a textbook at all. When the Pilgrim was considering the effects of Cat's surrender on his Aspect at the Princes' Graveyard, divine will did not enter his thoughts – he asked the angels on how things would work and what's the right thing to do, but never once did he think "oh Gods will reach in and make sure everything works according to their will". He needed to use the textbook, and the textbook was not getting overruled by divine entities not matter how much he wanted it to)

mamm0nn

Except Akua is a transitional Name who's literally bound to either get a better Name or die trying. Not the same as saying that Providence gives all Names to normies, or even that Providence is related to this instance.

And with the Pilgrim, in the end it's still a matter of many overlapping rules, chaos, free will and the gods Below countering the influence of the gods Above if they feel like it. Saying that it all comes down to a textbook system as you suggest it isn't what they say in the chapter you linked. That's just your interpretation of it.

[Liliet](#)

No, they don't say it, they just present the textbook. Show, don't tell?

Abrakadabra

And what if, the Dead King stops pulling his punches, and becomes an even bigger threat? If that were to happen, it reasonably can be expected, that a whole smattering of names áill crop up, to balance the scale, I think.

Frivolous

re: Robber not having a Name: Species is a factor.

It's possible that the Good and Evil for some reason don't want to extend Names to goblins, just as they didn't to orcs for a long time, until Hakram met Cat.

In contrast, Abigail is human, a species often Bestowed.

I do concur that Abigail is unlikely to get a Name if her Role is viewed as being too similar to that of Cat. But I'm not sure she and Cat have that much in common, really. Both

are Callowan female humans. Abigail is considered ruthless and canny and foxy and a great general. Cat is viewed differently. She's a terrifying monster queen with magic. Also Abi is scared of Cat.

In Praesi terms, Abi is more like the Black Knight to Cat's Dread Empress.

[Liliet](#)

> It's possible that the Good and Evil for some reason don't want to extend Names to goblins

Doesn't work that way~

Gods don't personally pick~

The process is mechanistic and hackable~

It's also culture dependent and we know fuckall about goblin culture but Black hypothesized they had secret Names.

(Sorry for the song. I'm, uh... composing one for this very common and very obviously mis- conception)

mamm0nn

This right here. This comment is why YOU need to put stronger arguments than the ones you've been given when you're going around telling people the 'facts' when what you really have are your opinions. Nothing you've said would be considered hard evidence by a neutral third party, just your take on it.

[Liliet](#)

What exactly constitutes "hard evidence" in your book?

mamm0nn

They both have a loyal orc lieutenant, they are both considered cunning and talented by everyone else while continuously considering themselves cornered and outclassed, and when we saw Abigail from a different perspective she came off as crass and confident. I mean, the only sentence I've heard her say that wasn't from her perspective or her talking to Cat was:

"Double wages for whomever puts an arrow in the shiny fucker!"

-Abigail the Fox during the Battle of the Camps.

beleester

Abigail is getting more than “a bit of help” from fate. Sure, she’s got some real tactical skills, but it’s been sheer luck that she’s been the only person available to take command on three separate occasions, not to mention that bit where she requested a bunch of knights (not expecting the request to be granted) and then they turned out to be exactly what she needed.

Liliet

I don’t think that requires “help from fate”. Statistically it’s very improbable for any one person, but with the sheer number of people – the entire army – it was actually perfectly plausible for it to happen to one person. And the fact it’s the person we’ve been following the PoV of is in no way, shape or form a coincidence any more than the fact we get PoVs from all the other plot important characters too. PoVs aren’t chosen by a lottery.

Abigail genuinely just HAPPENS TO BE the person who got rapidly field-promoted to the top end, through being competent when she had the opportunity.

Granted, there’s the part where two of her promotions were through events large enough to have Cat’s personal attention, which is less probable, but it’s still way short of implausible. Abigail was with the Third Army in position to take command BECAUSE of the first occurrence, and Cat remembered who she was for the same reason.

Mental Mouse

Probability plays second-fiddle in a world where narrative has actual power.

Liliet

Yeah, but that doesn’t mean there’s no merit to measuring how big an impact narrative actually had as opposed to a hypothetical where the situation developed by our world’s rules.

onedollargum

Abigail continues to fall upwards.

Cicero

Swamp Fox, Swamp Fox, tail on her hat
Nobody knows where the Swamp Fox ‘s at
Swamp Fox, Swamp Fox, hiding in the glen
She runs away to fight again

Didn't Callow actually have a Name in the past that had something to do with a fox?

Liliet

Just a nickname for one of their Kings, Alistair the Fox.
Nicknames are proto-Names though.

Not sure Abigail will get one, that said.

LarsBlitzer

A nickname with a folk song, a local legend, and a Story that the Intercessor was trying to guide Cat towards so she'd be more predictable. That says a potential Name to me.

Liliet

Just because it also gets the label after an animal, doesn't mean it's remotely close to the same story.

nimelennar

Abigail: Whoever is carrying the standard is "some poor bastard."

Abigail, thirty seconds later: Hey, I know! I'll carry the standard myself!

Abigail, ten seconds after that: Waitamminute... Aw, crap.

dadycool

Abby, babe, you're killing me here. I need to breathe at some point. I very much look forward to the perspectives and reactions to this latest stunt of hers.

I very much like the perspectives we got this chapter, too.

Adrian_V

OMG the final part with Abigail killed me, is the middle of the night and i woke up everyone with my crazy laughter xD

Who do you people think was the villain killed here? Or if it was even killed. Could be a fake out or aspect its waiting to strike back.....

LaNuup

As I am not sure anymore, why does Keter even fight this war? It was the Dead King that declared war on everyone and started this thing. What does he hope to gain from this?

mamm0nn

We haven't been told yet, his true motives remain yet a mystery. What we do know is that these numbers he's throwing away is inevitably just expendable bones and binds to him of little value. Even in the numbers used here. He's not losing that much to this war, and stands to gain much. Though said much is still muddled in unknown.

If it's about land however, he already gobbled up several principalities so if he can hold on to even half of those by the war's end then he would've gained much.

[Liliet](#)

The analysis in-universe has been that as the rest of Calernia continues to develop and interconnect, it's going to outpace his capacity for storing tricks. The longer he waits to war on them, the worse his chances, and if he waits long enough, they'll come to him – Bard has made sure of that.

So he wants to wipe out the living on the continent, or at least their capacity to wage war – and to organize to wage war in the future, too. Presumably the living on other continents are expected to ignore that much like the living on Calernia seemed to ignore the destruction of Sephirah.

So he needs this war just to survive, whatever other long-term objectives he might or might not have.

mavant

I am somewhat inclined to wonder why keter really needs to be an enemy of the living.

Consider the gnomes: they destroy anyone who researches agricultural technologies that might eventually lead to an industrial revolution, but don't seem to mind magical agriculture.

Couldn't skeleton-based agriculture then be the way out of the population trap?

If the skeleton donors consent, it doesn't even feel ethically suspect to employ necromancy. And it could dramatically change the standard of living for the living.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, Keter doesn't NEED it for anything. It's Bard's little gift.

May or may not be based on DK's eventual long-term plans being hazardous to the world in general (he tried to take over a second Hell that one time).

[sengachi](#)

At the very least Keter needs to war with the living every once in a while to remain 'narratively relevant'. He needs to be **the** threat, the unkillable annihilator that threatens life on Calernia itself. Being so threatening and destructive that people just **know** how unkillable he is is a protection against some half-baked Heroic Name narrative killing him automatically.

Also so long as most of the battles he engages in are ones where he can recover the corpses of his troops, he can even grow in strength by doing so, growing measurably stronger each time until finally numbers give him the weight to eat all of Calernia.

And this time, he's planning **something**. We're not told exactly what, but there's some win condition he thinks he can achieve here. The Wandering Bard seems to have been trying to sell him on the idea that this time he'll take some land permanently, but really he has some plan beyond that he thinks is going to earn him a more permanent victory.

mamm0nn

While the narrative can aid, it's hardly an absolute. The old rule that the world bends to your will when you're powerful enough should still apply even in the nascent Age of Wonders.

A Hero with one Aspect can best a Villain with one Aspect when it's the third act because it's the third act, or prevail because they get a new Aspect at the best possible moment to turn the tides. But if that one Aspect Hero goes up against a fully fledged Warlock on the field of Steges then it's quite likely that the Warlock just zaps them dead in one shot because of overwhelming might. Even if the Hero would have some narrative means of prevailing.

The Dead King doesn't need to worry too much about going out of fashion so much that some half-baked hero just smites him while out on a stroll. He still has massive amounts of power, assets and tricks, and the narrative can only do so much. Similar to how being the penultimate Evil of Calernia doesn't mean that the strongest Heroes can just slay him because there's no other height left, his life is not one to be

Oh, and it's possible that the Dead King is actually immune/ no longer beholden to Providence and the narrative. While Heroes may get a little boost, he shouldn't be dulled by the same effects.

"The existence of death is the first lie we are taught. There is little difference between a corpse and a man, save the journey of the soul. They who learn to slip this noose find the threshold of apotheosis, for in the denial of passing

they have taken themselves beyond the yoke of fate.”
– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely
attributed to the young Dead King. Chapter 27

mamm0nn

*his life is not one to be snuffed out on a whim.

[sengachi](#)

The point is thought that his life is not one to be snuffed out on a whim *only so long as he periodically reminds Creation of that fact*.

There is a big difference between being the entity responsible for the devastation of every family tree in Northern Procer just a few generations out of living memory, and being the old ancient evil driven off of Calernia that no one even remembers properly.

Whether the Dead King can survive Providence and Fate being turned against him, that's no excuse not to *get them on his side*. Regularly proving he is *the* existential unkillable threat makes it *harder* for Heroes to kill him, as they're pushing against the Narrative every single Proceran (and everyone else to a lesser extent) teaches their children. That you do not fight the Dead King with any hope of lasting victory. You pray to survive him.

mamm0nn

Him coming back in force to remind the people will indeed aid his legend and reputation to bolster his side of the Story, sure, but my point is that the opposite side of that spectrum as you suggested isn't true. If DK were to fade from memory it would do nothing to decrease his power and would only make it less likely that powerful heroes were to stumble upon him. Especially since he doesn't seem to be getting much of said power from his Name pool rather than by sorcery and the old ritual.

The Narrative isn't everything. It can give you a boost, but it cannot win the fight for you. It still needs a powerful, cunning and proper Named to win their tale, the Story can only provide the opportunity and slight boost to prevail. To quote:

“We're Named,” Archer said. “That makes it different.”

But it doesn't, I thought. We've seen it, you and I. That when all there is holding up the choice is a story

and the prediction of victory, the story fails. Because if all you do is pretend, go through the motions, then you've already lost what could have made it a victory in the first place."

-Chapter 17; Cloaks

A Story can help but will not see to a victory by itself. Pilgrim doesn't always need to lose first and the Order of the Hand and the Blessed Isle didn't always fall to Praes because first act, and Villains don't always lose in the end.

Black should've lost several times in several battles, because he denies the Villain's boons and plans against the Heroes' gains. If it were up to the Story alone, he would've died several times. They even rubbed it in that by continuously winning, Providence was stacking his own victories into a Story that he was undefeated and thus undefeatable (as in, the bad kind for Villains). And yet he survived. And remember when Warlock killed the Hedge Mage despite him being the one that Wandering Bard wanted to die from her ploy? Raw power can beat even a Story woven by WB.

Now imagine if you take a Black who has power far beyond yours, no blocs and politics and limits to force his hands, an entire country to turn into his bastion and the knowledge how to kill Named even when the Story favours them. That's the Dead King. Even if he were to lie still for a thousand years, a few heroes just strolling into the undead lands will die to him. No matter the Story, his might isn't to be just negated by lack of recognition.

[Liliet](#)

Black was rolling the dice against every single hero he fought, and his odds got worse every time. No matter how skilled you are, there's no cure against "the hero gets randomly teleported from Arcadia into your tent with a sword raised above you and already swinging down", which is not even the worst one's luck can get in principle.

DK aims to live forever, Black didn't. He was willing to accept eventually losing if he built everything the wanted first – as a matter of fact he was specifically AIMING to get killed by his successor after a certain point, because it made the story work out in favor of his plans.

DK wants to take the bad kind of unbeatable and make it work.

Moodprint

I think it has been implied, that as long as the Dead King sits in his kingdom, being the greatest evil alive, he runs the risk of a "Hero with the right story" emerging. Eventually Above will find a way to end him. And the Wandering Bard is looking for that story, so the Dead King wants to be proactive when he can. He has seen an opening, and is trying to seize Calernia, thus limiting the possibilities of new heroes. Just like Black did in Callow, but on a way larger scale

mamm0nn

Being a special kind of undead, having avoided any and all Named counters when he was still alive and being the opposite of the Wandering Bard, it may also be possible that the Dead King is actually un beholden to Story. That no Hero destined to defeat him can rise because he's an absence by having done some questionable things with his life and soul.

"The existence of death is the first lie we are taught. There is little difference between a corpse and a man, save the journey of the soul. They who learn to slip this noose find the threshold of apotheosis, for in the denial of passing they have taken themselves beyond the yoke of fate."

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King. Chapter 27

That might be literal. As a Villain he would've had eternal life anyway, but the Dead King became undead because it means that for all that Heroes may still get a narrative boost he will not grow foolish and weaker as well. And that, if it weren't for the Wandering Bard plotting, he wouldn't even attract any Heroes and Stories at all.

[Liliet](#)

Nobody is un beholden to the Story period, but it's entirely possible DK did not in fact have A story laying in wait for his defeat when he first won, and Bard had to make one from scratch!

mamm0nn

Even if it has been stated that Providence is absolute in every regard, which it hasn't, I think that someone sacrificing their entire kingdom to become an undead god can be an exception. You and I, we both don't know whether this is the ace up DK's sleeve, because the story hasn't gotten that far yet. Until then, I can have this opinion, as I've clearly stated to be one rather than hard fact, and you may have the opinion that I'm wrong.

[Liliet](#)

I'm a little confused about what you are stating here. If DK was un beholden to the Story, he wouldn't need an ace up his sleeve – he has a sleeveful already and everyone knows that, the Story is the only reason he cannot use them. Devils, demons, etc, it's just been discussed – he is forced to hold back because too rapid an escalation of force leads to a Story blowback.

That's what I meant? Unless you disagree with the assertion that THAT is an established fact by now?

Oh, also we SAW DK lose to a Story – you know, back when Masego got snapped out of his mind control by Indrani's self-sacrifice?

Or do you think that wasn't a Story thing?... And DK has another reason to be massively holding back in this war?... I'm kind of curious to hear another theory on this.

[Liliet](#)

P.S. I think you might have failed to notice I was basically agreeing with your idea while nitpicking the phrasing. I believe the terminology is correctly used in a different way, but the basic premise you've stated – that DK did not have a story of his defeat baked into the story of his rise and had Bard not interfered he might well have avoided any flak from Providence/Stories/Narrative period, setting up his eternal kingdom of undead or whatever his complete objective is without any interference unless he managed to generate new defeat-inviting stories along the way (like, say, mind controlling someone who has a Named sweetheart willing to fight for them).

dcarter8419

She's gonna find herself with a name that buffs her soldiers of she keeps it up. Hmm the General, the tactician, ...Mary Tzu?

mavant

Wow, maybe the secret to godhood in the Nameverse is to make Mary Sue stories popular enough for that to become a Name...

Juff

Typo Thread:

when back when > back when
deluded into > deluded them into

sink truth sink > truth sink
this once the horror > this horror
for al to > for all to
splashing harmless > splashing harmlessly
to move to > to move
played deaded > played deader
couldn't anything > couldn't do anything
batter of her > batted her
works is always > work is always
have argue > have argued
bloody hits to the > bloody hits so the
rotations he people > rotations her people
for the right > for the fight
The swallowed > She swallowed

Crowley

fingers tightened with fear at the tight> fingers tightened
with fear at the sight

[doominator10](#)

Would an epilog of just Abigail be too much to ask for when the story's finally over?

[Sugar Roll](#)

To avoid the battlefield, she takes on a job in Cardinal teaching the next generation of military talents. Training the suckers for battle so she doesn't have to.

[sengachi](#)

Watch her end up organizing the defense of Cardinal from the front lines when someone attacks it.

[Javvies](#)

Heh. It's always nice to see how other people view Cat.

Abigail, never change. You're not gonna get out of your job – especially since you like living.

That's a nasty weapon the Dead King just demonstrated. Fortunately the Sage is available to deal with it.

Crash

Got the impression he is less dealing with it and more learning from it, for now.

Hitogami

Callowean soldiers: that was back in the Arcadian campaign...
Everyone else: ... You mean when the Fae invaded you?
Callowean soldiers: no, after that, when we invaded the Fae.
Everyone else: ... Are you CRAZY?! Why would you do that?
Callowean soldiers: Cat said it would be fun

mavant

And it WAS fun, dear reader. It was.

Except for Nauk.

Practicality

"Small slights long spites"

Not only counter-invading the embodiment of war, but permanently ending them sounds pretty spiteful.

Frivolous

Levantines in general and Aquiline in particular are absolutely crazy.

Aquiline feels DISGRACED by getting wounded on the first day of battle. By what impossible Gigeresque reasoning does she travel from injury to disgrace?

And then, even worse, instead of doing the relatively logical thing of avoiding getting wounded again, she decides that to undo the disgrace she has to attack and kill a Beorn. A deed very likely to get her wounded again, if not killed outright.

The chance of her and Tanja surviving the war, to marry and have even one kid seem extremely low to me at this point.

Xinci

Simple enough reasoning on the injury=disgrace. In a honor culture who live in a supremely dangerous environment like the Levantines, honor serves as a dictation of competency and thus trust. It is a disgrace as it shows her to potentially be incompetent and thus less likely to be trustworthy as someone to fight beside. Remember those hunting bands that Tariq found? Getting injured showed that you wouldn't do well in one of those for example and may get your teammates killed. This is especially evident in their style of troop management, where their captains may decide how worthy they are to follow.

Crash

You summed it up yourself, Levantines are madder than sappers.

They're gonna survive out of sheer improbability, to be honest. Like "couldn't possibly lose" in reverse.

That or one of them dies and the other one immediately goes berserk and gets a Name in spectacular game breaking fashion. Probably Osená.

Daniel E

After the untimely demise of Z3 (really hoping we get a Fae BS resurrection there, b/c Cat on a Spring/Autumn horse would be amazing), I am now actively rooting for Boots.

mavant

Abigail is really growing on me. Or has already grown, I suppose.

I know the next step after General is usually Marshal, but can we upgrade her to HERO OF THE IMPERIUM?

Xinci

Hm, I wonder if those pillars have been instilled with devil or demonic essence. Given DK had control over his hell and we only really heard of devils and such being in the screaming pyramid, it would fit that area being the place for such experiments. I suppose he could have tainted the material or it could already have held such properties, that he then instilled with sorcery.

The Summoners perspective on Binding is interestingg. I still wonder if the first Binder usurped part of how Light works/ figured out the method by observing priest, since Light holds what it means to be of Creation.

So by taking parts of Creation they can make a construct that can hold a soul. It seems like the Binders and Summoner got at it from opposite ends, Summoner basically makes a spirit thats domain gradually gets shaped by Creation, while the Binders shape Creation to summon a spirit in a form that doesnt dissipate. It might be why not all Binders can have spirits that fly since those souls arent encoded with any such properties. While the Summoners summons can "learn" to do so, since they dont inherit any such limits upon being created.

[Liliet](#)

The Summoner has been noted to be exceedingly, improbably incompetent at both summoning and diabolism. I don't think he's trustworthy on this lmao

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Yeah, he failed upwards by being so bad at it his shoddy techniques became their own separate thing.

Crash

I fucking love Abigail.

Fun to see Edgar is still kicking about too! Callowan soldiers trying their best haha

Daniel E

I knew I recognized that name, but can't for the life of me remember where.

[*Liliet*](#)

His first PoV was at Sarcella during the two interludes, and I don't remember if he had PoV again but Cat borrowed his helmet randomly before she stopped Rozala's cavalry charge by standing in front of it and drawing a line on the ground.

jworks17

Is the Sage the hero Robber was talking to last chapter? I have a feeling he might end up being a top tier character.

[*Liliet*](#)

Are you confusing Sage and Page, or did Robber talk to someone else too?

[*benthelynx*](#)

General Abigail is best girl. And I'd say Cat should totally pretend to hit on her, but that might be too much with the chain of command. Maybe Archer should instead.

[*benthelynx*](#)

Damm double posting mobiles

Chapter 59: Materialism

"Victory in war comes by three parts: fighting, diplomacy and strategy. No single third is sufficient to bring victory alone, and each is neglected at great peril."

*– Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military
treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First*

It was a nice afternoon, if you discounted all the dying.

As the opening strokes of the second battle for Lauzon's Hollow fought under my command began to reverberate, I sat on high chair and watched as I absent-mindedly tore into a late midday meal. A meat pie, still warm with the juices splattering on my armour when I bit deep. The prelude had, to my mixed pleasure and wariness, unfolded largely as I'd planned. The band of five under the Silver Huntress had blown open a hole on the top of the western hilltops, allowing for both gates opened into Arcadia to hit the armies hidden beneath the hollow hills directly. Pickler had cracked open the hills beforehand, of course, since I wasn't in the market for just making cavern lakes: the entire point had been to wash out the enemy army.

"How many inside, do you think?" Akua said. "At least twenty thousand by my count."

The shade stood upright at my side, in an intricate gold-accented dark dress and veil whose occasional flickering betrayed the gate had taken a lot more out of her than she liked to admit. It'd taken even more out of me, of course, since Akua drew Night through my own connection to it. She could manipulate outside stocks of it just fine, as she had at the Princes' Graveyard when she'd called the eclipse, but otherwise she was also limited by what my body could stomach. Which was, at the moment, essentially nothing. Two large gates, precisely aligned to parts of Arcadia and for some time? And in broad daylight, to boot. No, I was effectively out of the fight until sundown and that meant so was she.

"Between that and twenty-five," I replied. "They weren't making full use of the caverns as a tactical asset otherwise, it would have been a waste."

"I wonder what general it is that faces us today," Akua mused. "Not Trismegistus himself, surely. He rarely takes the lead in such a direct manner."

Not that the Hidden Horror's consciousness wouldn't be flitting around the battlefield all day, anyway, along with his will. But Akua was right, Neshamah didn't usually serve as his own general – with good reason, since he was not a particularly outstanding one. Undead did not truly learn, after all, and he'd not been a military man while alive. His tactics were all imitations, something he was aware of and meant he usually used Binds or Revenants as generals instead. It was typical of his brutal streak of pragmatism that the Dead King would raise anew the commanders that'd been most troublesome to him and bind them to

his service. I did not doubt he was the overall strategist of the Kingdom of the Dead's campaigns, mind you.

On the grand scale, the one beyond tactics, there really wasn't a thing in existence that could think the way the King of Death could.

"The Prince of Hannover mentioned the Princes of Bones usually commands all local undead as well as his own Grey Legion," I noted. "But I've seen no sign of him. It might be the Pale Knight, though admittedly he seemed more a champion than a general to me."

Or it could be a hundred other unseen trembling souls, none of which we'd even slightly sniffed out. We'd not yet dug so deep in the reserves of Keter that the Dead King had to be stingy with generals, to my enduring displeasure. I kept tearing into the meat pie as the battle began in earnest, the Third Army under General Abigail sounding the horns and beginning to advance. By now the tide of water flowing out of the caverns and the hollow was beginning to die out, swallowed by the thirsty ground and turning it to mud.

"Maybe ten thousand scrapped by the water," I said, sharpening my eyes with Night as I studied the field. "I'd hoped for more."

"The remainder are buried in mud, in disarray and often weaponless," Akua replied. "Your hunting hound in the Third will make good sport of them."

"She's meant to a lot more than that," I muttered.

Mind you, I didn't expect the Third to wipe out all those downed undead. The Third Army only made up the centre of my host's formation, with the Procerans under Beatrice Volignac making up the left wing and the Levantines under their Blood making up the right. I expected she'd bite off a hard chunk while advancing, falling upon it while it was not yet recovered, but she'd have to spread out the Third to get them all and that was the last thing either she or I wanted. After all, in the end the Third Army was *bait*.

"I was not brought into the full battle plan," the shade idly said, "but it seems to me that you are taking great risks with the array of your forces. The Third is pulling heavily ahead, and your left wing is... undermanned."

She wasn't wrong. Black would have blanched at this kind of battle array, which was a stark departure from the traditional Legion doctrine. My centre was a steady ten thousand legionaries and my right wing a wildly overstrength seventeen thousand Levantines, while my left wing was a mere six thousand Procerans. Mostly Volignac soldiers, principality troops, with some

fantassins. The rest of the Proceran troops had been sent out to clear the lowlands with the drow under Ivah, after all, and had yet to return to the field. But then the three minds behind the modern Legions, Black and Grem One-Eye and Ranker, had built that model to smash mortal armies.

Fighting the Kingdom of the Dead was a different kind of war. One where the enemy did not tire, where being outnumbered at every turn was a near certainty and the enemy's arsenal bore a few more nasty surprises tailored to undermine your strength with every passing battle. I'd adapted to this war, though. Learned how to wage it.

"We came to Lauzon's Hollow to achieve two things," I said. "Seizing the pass itself and destroying the army defending it."

We couldn't just do one, unfortunately. Even we forced out the army and took the Hollow, we needed to destroy the enemy's fighting force here: even if it retreated weakened, we couldn't afford to have it at our back while we moved on the capital. It'd be child's play to cut our supply lines if even just a few thousand raiders stayed loose around the Hollow, and we were already outnumbered by the enemy so I was reluctantly to shake loose a garrison force to leave behind.

"The single worst way to achieve those objectives is assaulting Lauzon's Hollow," I said. "Taking fortifications is a war of attrition, and the moment the battle ends up in the narrow pass this becomes a slugging match that Keter will win nine times out of ten."

I'd seen battles turn that way before. The Dead King and his generals just began throwing corpses at us, well aware that even if the battle itself was lost they'd still win the war by effectively destroying our army in the trade-off. No, fighting in the pass was something I wanted to absolutely avoid – it was why our original campaign plan had called for the forces under General Pallas to strike at the Cigelin Sisters further north tomorrow and then swing south to pincer the enemy here as soon as they'd secured the fortress. That plan had obviously gone out the window since, but the underlying reasons for making it remained.

"Yet you are, in fact, assaulting Lauzon's Hollow," Akua drily pointed out.

"No, I'm not," I grunted. "We cracked open the hills, Akua, so now instead of fighting just at the mouth of the pass the battlefield got extended. These are proper grounds for classic Legion warfare, they just happen to be at the front of a pass."

"Which the opposing general will notice," the golden-eyed shade said. "Why prevents from retreating deeper in, where the pass narrows and your advantages evaporate?"

"Bait," I grimly smiled, "set out in two parts."

I finished the last of the meat pie, scarfing it down and licking the warm juices off my fingers. I pretended not to see the disapproving look thrown my way under the gauzy veil. In the distance, as the Third Army began plowing through the dead washed up by the waters, reinforcements began pouring out of the pass. Skeletons, yes, but also constructs. It'd be a hard fight. And as the dead who'd washed up on the flanks of the Third clawed their way out of the mud, still a disorganized horde, the enemy general did exactly what I'd wanted them to do: they sent out the horde in waves, trying to flank and even envelop the Third Army before the reinforcing wings could arrive. The enemy had committed.

The enemy's siege engine atop the hills began unleashing some deadly surprise, pillars of black stone, but Archer was with the Third and I'd left heroes floating: one of them would nip this in the bud before it turned too bad, providence good as ensured it.

"You seem pleased, which implies this dawning rout is exactly what you intended," Akua noted. "Which fits better with my appraisal of Abigail of Summerholm than that of the overeager general who struck out too far ahead I am currently looking at."

I shrugged.

"It holds up, you know, for someone who's looked into our armies," I said. "If someone else had rushed too far it might be a trap, but the *Third*? I named them Dauntless personally, they've served as my vanguard in half a dozen war and they're commanded by a rising star among my commanders – but a young one, who never went to the War College. Malicia will have records of that, which means the Dead King has them as well. If this were Hune rushing it'd be suspicious, but *this*?"

I grinned.

"Why, Akua, this isn't a trap," I said, "it's an opportunity. One Keter has seized quite eagerly."

So the dead had come out swinging from the pass in the distance, pouring reinforcements and trying to swallow up the Third before the seemingly feet-dragging Procerans and Levantines caught up and handled the flanks. From an outside eye, that tortured formation – one wing too storn, the other too wing – would have been forced on me by politics and a fear of trouble in a shared command structure, not more tactical considerations. I'd split the wings by nation of birth and was now paying the prince for it, neither Levantines nor Procerans too eager to follow the lead of a reckless Callowan general.

But the Third held, because the Third always held, and so the jaws of the trap closed.

"So now you hurt them," Akua said.

As if bid by the hand of fate, the ballistas of the Army of Callow began to sing. I saw the understanding dawn in Akua's eyes, for though she was not exactly a veteran commander she was clever and well learned in matters of warfare. The enemy had to reinforce through the pass, its entrance now stripped of all fortifications by the thorough work of Lord Soln, which meant my sappers knew exactly where the killing fields ought to be set up. The copperstone ballistas pounded the enemy into dust, again and again and again, as the flanks caught up to the Third and tore through the still ill-prepared undead brought there by the waters.

And so the enemy general slowly came to realize it had been baited into filling a box – the once-caverns, the mouth of the pass – where its numbers were being made into a disadvantage. The fighting with blades, after all, only happened between the first ranks of the dead and the living. The fire of my siege engines burned swaths behind this, and would cost Keter easily fivefold the casualties the rest of my army would cause it. Akua stayed silent for a long moment, taking it in.

"I sometimes forget how deeply unpleasant a general you are to face," Akua mildly said.

I snorted. We'd never faced each other as commanders of armies, actually, as she'd been the general of her forces at neither the Dead Dawn or the Doom.

"An inspired trick," she continued after a moment.

Such direct praise was rare, coming from her, and I allowed myself a sliver of enjoyment before setting it aside.

"I'm hardly the first to use it," I dismissed. "Jehan the Wise did the same with the banks of the Wasaliti at the Battle of the Sparrows, and Terribilis to the Third Crusade at the Danse Macabre."

"Both being famously unskilled generals, of course," Akua amusedly replied. "What terrible company you keep."

"Battle's far from over," I grunted. "Bit early for boasting."

My eyes returned to the field as time inched forward torturously. By now, I thought as the lines held on both sides and the copperstones burned bright, the enemy general would be realizing this was not a sustainable position for them. I still hadn't sent out my reserves, the entire Second Army and nine thousand drow, and there was no sign of my running out of copperstones. On their side the horrible siege engine atop the hills did not have an angle to fire down on my troops, and if the fighting continued

until after dark – which it seemed like it might – then I'd have nine thousand Firstborn to send after them.

The obvious answer would be to retreat deeper into the pass, since it restored the reason why the enemy army was at Lauzon's Hollow in the first place: being able to hold us off with the pass. I'd turned it around on them by baiting them to fight at the mouth of the pass, but they could write off what they'd committed and retreat, resuming the defence deeper in.

"Why aren't they retreating?" Akua said, putting her finger on the pulse of the question.

"Can they *afford* to?" I replied with a hard smile. "Count the corpses, Akua Sahelian."

The enemy had outnumbered us one hundred thousand to seventy thousand, when the campaign began. After the first day of fighting at the Hollow, we'd lost a little over two thousand and the dead a minimum of six thousand along with a significant portion of their swarms. Now throw in the ten thousand or so they would have lost to the water, then maybe another ten thousand lost in the killing box over the early afternoon. Meanwhile, I'd count maybe another two to three thousand dead on our side over those same hours, which meant we'd be down to around sixty five thousand while the enemy had been brutally dragged down to mid seventy thousands. If my opponent wrote off the troops holding the mouth of the Hollow and retreated, my side might have numerical *superiority* when the assault continued deeper in.

"They overcommitted," Akua breathed out. "If they retreat now, they might no longer have the numbers to hold the Hollow against us regardless."

I turned to glance at her and caught her eye, reading there an expectation of agreement.

"Gotcha," I said. "You just lost the battle."

I enjoyed the surprise that flickered through before she suppressed it more than I had the praise earlier, so at least there was that.

"That's the deeper trap," I said. "That instinct not to sacrifice those troops anyway. I want the enemy in that killing box as long as I can possibly keep them there, Akua. It's the absolute best exchange rate of casualties I'll be able to get on this field."

Her lips thinned.

"I am used to considering troops valuable," she said. "The source of my mistake, perhaps. It will not be shared by the commander of the dead."

"Probably not," I admitted. "I expect they'll hesitate but come to the same conclusion soon enough. Which is why I told you, earlier, that my bait is in two parts."

What would convince my opposing general it was worth sticking it out in there? It'd have to be a prize worth those mounting casualties. Just the losses involved in the lizard cutting off its tail to escape wouldn't be enough to dissuade a Keteran general for long, so I'd set out fresh bait for them to bite: my left wing, the Procerans. Under Princess Beatrice's command stood only six thousand souls, fewer by now. Hardy Volignac foot, mostly, but that only counted so much in a fight like this. A wing undermanned, as Akua had earlier said. Fragile. Foolish, and I did not have a reputation for that, so even counting on the impression that this was a political decision instead of a tactical one I'd also gilded the bait by putting my entire horse contingent behind Princess Beatrice's wing.

As if expecting a breach, expecting to need buying time for my reserve the Second Army to come prop up that failing flank.

"Come on," I murmured, looking at the ranks of the dead. "Bite, my friend. You know you want to."

And I laughed, laughed until my throat hurt, when Keter fell for it again. Reinforcements kept pouring out of the pass and into my killing box, scores dying to every copperstone, and the undead sent their full wrath against the left flank.

"Akua," I said. "Pass a message for me. I want these two to prop up the left wing: Headhunter and Forsworn Healer."

"As you say, my heart," the golden-eyed shade replied, bowing.

I barely spared her a glance, my own gaze still on the battlefield. Those three should be able to prevent the Revenants I suspected the enemy was about to send from shattering the left flank. That was the bet of my opposing general, after all: that it could break the left wing and manage to collapse the increasingly exhausted Third by overwhelming its flank and back in a massive sweep rightwards. Even if I sent out my cavalry, at that point, the battle would be lost. Keter's game afterwards turn to trying to inflict as many casualties as possible while my army fled back to camp, a particular specialty of the Dead King's army. I was not unaware this could still turn south on me, though I trusted the lines would hold. If it got rough, I still had some cards to play.

Beastmaster had already gone to reinforce Archer, a deadly combination that'd allow her to kill constructs even beyond her sight, and now that the Summoner was back I was keeping him in reserve with the brew I'd had Concocter working on. The remaining swarms had yet to be unleashed: most likely my opponent was

keeping them back, since they'd be brutally efficient at turning a break in my lines into a rout if they were properly employed. When Hakram wheeled his way to my side, I held in a wince. Not because I was unhappy to see him, but because if he'd come to deliver the news personally they wouldn't be good.

"Beastmaster's dead," Adjutant told me, blunt and to the point. "The Pale Knight slid behind the lines."

My fingers clenched.

"Indrani?"

"Broken army, already fixed," Hakram said. "The Silver Huntress' band reappeared just in time to drive him away, no further Named casualties."

"Fuck," I murmured. "Too close."

"Orders for the Huntress?" he asked.

"None," I said. "She's free to follow providence and judgement as she pleases."

That was the main reason I'd sent out a band of five *heroes*, after all. Some villains would have better rounded out their band, but it would have diluted the effect of providence. Best to have an imperfect force at the perfect time and place than the opposite. Hakram stayed at my side afterwards, letting his helping hands carry the rest. We stayed silent, but not uncomfortably so. We both had our minds on the field in the distance. Not long after, to my surprise the Dominion began pushing into the undead lines ahead of them. They were fresher than either my Third or the Procerans, admittedly, and significantly more numerous. I'd genuinely not expected they would, though, so I was unprepared when the enemy general decided to set them back with a decisive stroke.

The swarms came loose from the broke ceiling of the caverns, coming down as screeching tide as the binders did their best to keep them at bay.

"Summoner and Concocter," I curtly ordered Hakram.

The messenger was moving before I was even done speaking. I'd positioned them closer to the left flank, expecting the strike would come there, so my fingers were raking the arms of my seat while the two silhouettes on wyvernback went up from too far away as the first ranks of the Dominion were engulfed and shredded. It got handled, in the end, but not quickly enough. The dead pushed hard into the Malaga section of the shield wall simultaneously to the swarm assault and it would have turned into a rout without what I suspected to be Named intervention.

Couldn't be sure at this distance, not with armies so large and the constant streaks of Light and sorcery.

The next helping hand that came to report to Hakram was Scribe, which told me there were grimmer news yet.

"The Sage stabilized the break in the Levantine line," Scribe told us.

"And?" Adjutant gravelled.

"The moment after the shield wall closed up, he was sniped by an archer Revenant," Scribe told us. "I believe he might have used his three aspects over the afternoon's fighting, and become vulnerable as a result."

"Tell me they recovered the corpse," I said.

"Lady Aquiline Osenia saw to it personally," Eudokia said.

I blew out a breath. It could have been worse. There weren't clean victories outside the stories, I reminded myself, and stuck the course. When the Proceran flank began wavering despite the best efforts of Beatrice Volignac and the desperately fighting Named there – the Headhunter slew two Revenants and claimed their heads, according to the reports Hakram received – I did not panic or send orders to my cavalry. Instead I smiled and sent for Senior Mage Jendayi, Hune's senior spellcaster.

"Send word to Lady Catalina to prepare for the crossing," I ordered. "We are nearing our moment."

This very afternoon, after all, was when the detachments we'd sent out were due to return. Instead of letting them come openly across the plains, I'd instead requested for Ivah and the fantassins under Lady Catalina to take the Twilight Ways – I could, that way, unleash them as a surprise when the time came. Keter would have accounted for our own mages, there was no hiding them, but not for those that'd left with our detachments. I could, because of this, bet on surprise with good odds. It'd help with Proceran morale as well to be pulled out of the fire not by foreigners but by their own kind. After the battering they'd take today, it would do them some good.

When the first fantassin company on the left flank broke, I immediately gave the order for the reinforcements to begin crossing into Creation. I jolted in surprise, though, when the Third Army's shields winked out and they began shaping offensive magics instead. Wait, had General Abigail guessed my plan? I studied the Third's movements carefully, noting the massing of heavy companies around the standard, and decided that she hadn't. The gates were just now beginning to open, after all, to the cheering of the Procerans behind them. More likely she'd been

worried about the left flank collapsing on her and acted to cut off the threat at the source. I chuckled.

Regardless of her intentions, the timing for that charge was actually perfect: I'd gotten what I could out of my soldiers for the day, it was time to wrap this up.

"Send word to Summoner to pull back from the right flank and help with the charge instead," I told Hakram.

"Cut loose Apprentice as well," he suggested. "She'll thank you for it."

I mulled over that a moment then nodded. He was by my side and deep behind our lines, and while there might not be such a thing as *safe* when fighting Keter he was not at so great a risk he could not spare his bodyguard and assistant for a bit. I settled back into my seat, watching the last few exchanges of the day unfold. It went better than I'd dared hope, in truth. The enemy centre, while steadily reinforced over the afternoon, had also steadily been culled by hours of copperstone bombardment. I'd not anticipated that would mean it was thin on Binds – they'd need more Light to be destroyed, if anything – but that was the only explanation that came to mind as to why the undead centre shattered like a rotten egg when the Third charged into it.

I watched the enemy ranks break apart under weight of the heavy companies and almost asked Jendayi to send a signal for General Abigail to pull back, for she was getting too far ahead, but she stopped on her own anyway. Good, I thought. I'd kept the Grey Legion out of this so far by making the ground muddy and so effectively making it impossible for infantry that heavy to accomplish anything save get stuck in a mire, but there were drier grounds further in. I had a lot of faith in the Third Army, but there was a reason the standard order for mundane troops encountering the Grey Legion was 'retreat'. General Hune, sensing like me that the battle was coming to a close, came my way. She made her courtesies to myself and Hakram, then got into why she'd come here.

"Congratulations are in order, Your Majesty," the ogre said. "Another victory to your name."

I didn't disagree, even though there was still fighting on the field. With the Third having claimed the head of the narrowing in the pass, enemy reinforcements were cut off so the left and right wings were just pushing up pockets of undead against the walls of the caverns and systematically exterminating them. It'd take a while, and the Third would have to hold until they were done, but with the amount of Named we had on the field we should be able to deal with any nasty surprise the enemy had left to unleash. All that was left was for someone to sabotage the enemy's siege

engine on the hills before we could retreat, which I was already mulling sending word to the Silver Huntress' band to do.

A moment later there was a great burst of Light in the distance atop the hills, followed by pillars of flame, and I was once more reminded that the Heavens had a sharp sense of humour.

"It's only half the battle," I finally replied. "We still don't hold the Hollow itself."

"Given Keter's casualties today, and the raiding the Firstborn will no doubt undertake tonight, there can be no question of the dead still holding the pass by tomorrow afternoon," General Hune said. "The last swordstroke has not been granted, but it is a victory all the same."

We'd be out raiding in force overnight, and with the full strength of the drow: nearly twenty thousand, including several hard-hitting Mighty. I fully intended on savaging the enemy army as brutally as I could before dawn came and the fighting resumed tomorrow.

"We'll see it if pans out that neatly," I replied, "but I take the congratulations in the spirit they were meant, regardless. Thank you, General Hune."

She didn't linger after that, leaving us to our thoughts. I watched the last gasps of the battle far away without truly looking at them. Hakram cleared his throat.

"You look worried," he said.

"I am," I admitted. "Something about this smells off to me."

"It was a hard-fought battle, even if it went well for us," Adjutant said. "It is not *always* a trap, Catherine."

"Then where has the Grey Legion been?" I quietly asked. "The mud kept them out, but halfway into the battle Keter should have spit out a ritual that steadied the ground so they could fight."

Mighty Sudone had slaughtered a great many of Keter's magelings, but not so many that they would not have been able to deliver that particular 'surprise'. I'd had an answer waiting for it, admittedly, but with no certainty it'd work. They'd never come out at all, though, which had my fingers clenching and unclenching.

"Has anyone seen the Prince of Bones?" I suddenly asked. "We've seen the Grey Legion yes, but the Prince himself?"

Hakram paused a moment.

"I'll find out," he promised.

"Do," I muttered.

I closed my eyes. I was missing something, I could feel it. Roland had reported seeing a Crab, a while back, I suddenly recalled. Something to do with that, perhaps? I couldn't see any obvious links, though.

"It's not that I don't think this isn't a victory," I said. "But there will be more to this, Hakram. We're not dealing an amateur, Neshamah plans for both outcomes. He'll have gotten something out of even a defeat."

He had no answer to that, and so I left him to his work. By sundown I had estimated casualties for both sides of the battle, rough as they were. My armies had around eight thousand dead and maybe another thousand crippled beyond the current ability of our priests and mages to repair. That took us to an army fifty nine thousand strong, perhaps even a little lower. The enemy, though? Keter had begun holding Lauzon's Hollow with an army of one hundred thousand, and now it had barely half that: fifty to fifty five thousand left, we believed, though the Grey Legion counted among them. My soldiers had, without even our full army being on the field, fought like lions and won the day. A heroic victory, some would call it.

Now we just needed to win another hundred, and never lose.

Welcome to war with Keter.

ruduen

Vote! Err... Boost? Top Web Fiction seems to be doing something different now, so it's hard to say.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Sulo

Oh no, it's ugly... :c

Jernik

Wow, PGtE is only 3k votes from passing Worm as the all time high

Big Brother

Aw, Beastmaster and Sage are gone. I liked them. 2-1 odds Sage learned that secret in the obelisks and somehow uses that to come back.

JoshuaS

I'll take those odds. He already had three aspects, and I don't think normal sorcery can resurrect people, so it would have to be aspect based. I think he's pretty dead unless someone else comes with the save, but then that's not the sage using any secrets.

naturalnuke

You just brought up what Keter pulled from this battle at least in part: key parts of the force are beginning to be picked off. Weep for the crusading armies that have been bled on the march to Keter.

Sir Nil

Oof. Beastmaster was a Named you didn't want to lose. Direct combat Names are dime a dozen but one that has non-magical scouting and info gathering? We didn't see much of Sage but he also had an aspect for info gathering, but at least we can hope his death grants the mentor death power up to someone.

Also, is Pale Knight the revenant White Knight from before? It would make sense since he's supposedly ancient and foreign, so mistranslating his Name to current tongue could happen, but it seems a bit off for something so important. Oh well, not a large deviation either way.

Vallalla

In the last few chapters, the undead White Knight has been mostly identified by his "pale plate," so I'm guessing Pale Knight is a nickname/alternate name to avoid confusion. They know his official title is White Knight, but Hanno has dibs on that one

mamm0nn

They call him pale knight because he wears a pale armour that cannot be marred. Multiple White Knights would only be confusing.

Henry

Do you mean the 6th "Callowan white knight who died to Keter" Or the 9th?

mamm0nn

Wait, do we count the Squire who ascended to White Knight a day before getting slaughtered in that headcount? Because if so, we're talking the 8th.

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh no, Beastmaster)= Indrani's sib!

caoimhinh

Yeah, F for Beastmaster, didn't expect he would die so early, but EE holds his tradition of killing characters off-screen. I liked the Sage, I found him pretty interesting. His **Divine** aspect seemed to be one of those aspects that had endless potential for growth, like Mirror Knight's Dawn and Ranger's **Learn, Perfect, Transcend** combo.

Yeah, the Pale Knight refers to that OP axe-wielding former White Knight.

It was explained in previous chapters that the Grand Alliance makes up titles/names for each Revenant regardless of what was their Name when alive, makes it easier to identify and individualize.

Point Point

I think that **Divine** was the verb sense of the word, i.e. to "discover (something) by guesswork or intuition" (New Oxford American Dictionary).

caoimhinh

Yes, I know. All aspects are active verbs, so that's the sense of the word in this case.

Which is why that aspect seems to me like it had endless potential.

From every encounter, he would grow. Especially if the thing he encounters is powerful or mysterious, like strong opponents, a interesting magical phenomenon, or a sorcerous artefact. He would keep improving. Because he would always gain insight from those encounters.

Frivolous

Damn. Lost Beastmaster and Sage. I actually liked Beastmaster.

I wonder how many Revenants that Keter has available. Obviously there must be many more Revenants than living Bestowed, and most of them probably heroes because they're dead Crusaders, but how many exactly?

Probable discrepancy – “Akua,” I said. “Pass a message for me. I want these three to prop up the left wing: Headhunter and Forsworn Healer.”

Only two are named – Headhunter and Forsworn Healer. Who is the third?

Darkening

I mean, sure, Keter’s smashed plenty of crusades, but I have to imagine those crusades were able to kill some Revenants in the process too, so I doubt he’s got *that* big a numerical advantage with them, especially with Ranger murdering a few every once in a while. Honestly, having them be mostly heroes is probably a detriment for the dead king, since I expect any aspect that relies on Light like Hanno’s Ride would just be completely nonfunctional. Maybe that’s the reason one of the Spellword’s aspects was nonfunctional when Cat went digging.

caoimhinh

The easy answer is “as many as the plot requires and the author wants”.

We will probably never have an exact number of the total, but back when Catherine visited Keter, Neshamah showed **50 Revenants** and used them as an honor guard to welcome her.

So yeah, he really has *that* big of a numerical advantage with them.

The only reason they aren’t sent out en masse is because of the Law of Conservation of Ninjutsu

Crash

He also sends people from the Serenity out into the world quite often, I’m sure they’d be up for some light grave robbing of known Named.

It’s not like the legion burial is a widespread practice. Though I’m hard pressed to understand WHY you wouldn’t burn all corpses when the Dead King exists in your continent.

[sengachi](#)

I mean the answer is that you really really should burn all the corpses on Calernia, but in practice most people have never fought the Dead King, or can name an ancestor who did, or lives somewhere where the immediate threat of fighting the Dead King hangs over their heads.

Like, not to yank this too hard into modern politics, but take a look at how some people have reacted to simple masks in the face of a present pandemic. Compare that to

dictating the method by which people deal with their dead loved ones, over a threat centuries in the past and potentially centuries in the future? I'd imagine resistance would be fierce, and enforcement impossible.

Crash

This is actually a very good comparison and a reasonable explanation.

The stupidity and bull-headedness of people at the smallest personal inconvenience can never be underestimated.

Still, in the face of several Crusades you'd think they'd take it more seriously.

[Liliet](#)

Akua herself, maybe?

Shveiran

Unlikely, IMO. Cat comments earlier in the chapter that Akua uses Night through her or from an external source – and that she is therefore spent for the remainder of the day after the double watergates they made.

My two cents are that it is just a typo, EE starting to write thinking three would be sent, then recounting and figuring out everyone but FH and HH was already accounted for.

dadycool

Abigail doing exactly what she's supposed to, even though she's just flying by the seat of her pants. That's the kind of content I live for.

Ah, so it was Beastmaster. Oh well. I wonder how Archer will feel, losing essentially a brother right next to her. And Sage, too? Didn't we just meet him last chapter?

Also, love how Cat's just sitting on a hill eating lunch while her forces are advancing.

[onedollargum](#)

We met the Sage and shortly thereafter he seemed to find some kind of insight. Either he overreached and is simply dead or we're going to see something interesting down the line.

NerfContessa

Let's hope for interesting.

A Sage wraith to akua's night wraith would be useful, especially with his aspects. Destroy and divine, oh boy.

[Liliet](#)

...meawhile, the Levantines are doing what the Levantines do: take casualties because of overreaching.

caoimhinh

Lol, yeah. Those guys never learn.

Fun fact: this chapter's title, **Materialism**, refers in Chess to a style of playing where one aims to win pieces and pawns on the board (a.k.a "material") at the expense of positional considerations.

This applies both to the Levantines being so overeager for Honor and kills that they overcommit and overextend their lines, and to the reason why the undead lost this battle as their objective was to kill as many as possible of the Grand Alliance troops but were baited into giving up their advantageous terrain due to that, resulting in losing half their troops.

[Liliet](#)

oooooooooooo

I don't know any of these things and I love that there's someone actually explaining them ♥

LD77

Except it is incorrect. There is no such thing as "style of play called materialism" in chess. Source: I am a chess player.

caoimhinh

You do realize that anyone here can verify that what I said is true, simply by using Google, don't you?

The fact that *you* don't know the term does not mean that it doesn't exist.

PGTE chapters are thematic during each arc. In this case, *every single chapter* since King's Fianchetto has had a title that references something in Chess.

Source: I am a chess player.

Actually verifiable and peer-reviewable sources:

<http://www.wachusettchess.org/ChessGlossary.pdf> page 15
<http://www.glossaria.net/en/chess/materialism>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_chess#M
<https://www.peoriachess.com/Glossary.html#M>

That Guy

You are incorrect. Source: the Wikipedia article "Glossary of chess", which includes the term.

Miles

The proof is just a google search away. No wikipedia entry, just all kinds of forum discussion and blog posts about the relative virtues materialism vs other styles.

hakureireimu

[materialism](#)

[origamiflame](#)

A simple Google search turns up quite a few results, but I suppose you've delved into every aspect and nuance of chess, having played it.

[Liliet](#)

maybe it's a regional thing that you havent encountered??? goddammit i have to google it now

...well, it definitely gave a lot of hits at least.
<http://chessskill.blogspot.com/2014/08/materialism.html>
<https://www.chess.com/clubs/forum/view/what-do-you-think-is-better-strategic-or-materialistic-chess>

It certainly seems like existing terminology!

Ah, found a definition:

> Materialism

Playstyle characterised by a willingness to win material at the expense of positional considerations. Chess computers are often materialistic.

source: <https://en.mimi.hu/chess/materialism.html>

Welp, there you go.

Crash

I appreciate you educating us in how the titles relate to chess.

Thanks for always doing this, it always shines an interesting light on the chapter overall

Shveiran

Very interesting!

...Though I do worry that it could also refer to Cat bleeding Keter for corpses and then worrying what Keter strategy is with the Prince of Bones.

Do0d

I thought he was the Doddering Sage Cat met at the Arsenal.

dadycool

I wondered about that, but not only did he seem like someone who shouldn't be anywhere near the front lines, he didn't seem like the kind that would have aggressive Aspects. We may have even heard one of them, but I can't remember. It was so long ago and this series has so much material that I'd spend a solid month reading through it, not counting all the other things I spend time on the computer doing. Maybe when the series ends.

Do0d

In his POV he mentioned blocking out the outside world to better sense the nudges of providence.
Also, Cat met him on a bad day at the Arsenal so our first impression of him may not be all that accurate.

Juff

Typo Thread:

on high chair > on a high chair
still warm with the > still warm, the
Princes of Bones > Prince of Bones
Even we forced > Even if we forced
even it retreated > if it retreated
Why prevents from > What prevents them from
a dozen war > a dozen wars
other too wing > other too weak
the prince for it > the price for it
hand of gate > hand of fate
my reserve the Second Army > my reserve Second Army
these three to prop up the left wing: Headhunter and Forsworn
Healer." (who is the third?)
afterwards turn > afterwards would turn
news personally they > news personally it
Broken army > Broken arm
carry the rest. > carry out the rest.
broke ceiling > broken ceiling
as screeching > as a screeching

shield wall simultaneously to (extra space)
there were grimmer > there was grimmer
dealing an amateur > dealing with an amateur

Crowley

I was reluctantly to shake loose a garrison-> I was reluctant
to shake loose a garrison
one wing too strong-> one wing too strong
see it if pans out-> see if it pans out

jworks17

Wow beast master dead already? I thought for sure the Headhunter
was going to be the first to go.

mamm0nn

He She is the most annoying and generally loathed Villain in
the audience's eyes, therefore they will have much power and
exposure yet. The annoying ones rarely die off before cramming
themselves into the people's approval by brute force.

[onedollargum](#)

It felt really weird to see Cat sitting there eating pie, totally
vulnerable. I entirely expected Keter to capitalize on it with a
Revenant raid only for Cat reveal that she was, in fact, the
third piece of bait and close the trap.

[Liliet](#)

Vulnerable to what? She's behind the frontline, and unlike her
forces, Neshamah's don't have a convenient fourth-dimensional
shortcut to anywhere they please. Any Revenant raid would need
to get past the army first.

Clint

A big swarm of undead birds, perhaps?

[Liliet](#)

One swarm already tried to do something on this battlefield.
Didn't go so well, did it?

Again, any group of enemies has to *get to Cat's physical
position in 3D space first*. Be it by air or through the
ground, they do have to move there – and I don't get the
impression the middle of their encampment is easily
assailable from any direction, by this point.

[Liliet](#)

(Also, pretty sure even spent Cat could dive into the Twilight Ways in a moment, speaking of things Neshamah doesn't have access to. This isn't an equal fight, Cat is cheating badly, as she do ♥)

Miles

I agree it's weird. She's just having a picnic and sorta spectating.

[Burlyraven](#)

Honestly, Beastmaster dying makes a lot of sense as far as the whole Named life-meter goes, considering he's not the type of Name one sends to the front lines (or anywhere close to them, really), typically. I'm kind of puzzled as to why he was even as far forward as he was.

Sage dying feels weird, though, and I can't tell if it's because he's a senior fully developed Name that died casually, or if he's not actually defeated and the part about him grabbing the resurrection secrets from the obelisks was a hint that he's coming back.

(Also, this one was pretty rough on typos. I know there's normally a no editing policy, but some plot points might have even been muddled.)

mamm0nn

Beastmaster wasn't at the front, he was at the back granting his sight to Archer so her range was even greater. That means he was very very very far away from the front, though not as far as Cat probably. Pale knight slipped past the line to kill him. Sage on the other hand was on the front lines for some reason.

[Burlyraven](#)

Sage was hunting obelisks. He wasn't so much on the front, as making sure the back didn't become the front. And it was a sniper that got him.

mamm0nn

Though he was dealing with the Obilisks, it seems that he died a bit afterwards.

““The Sage stabilized the break in the Levantine line,” Scribe told us.

“And?” Adjutant gravelled.

"The moment after the shield wall closed up, he was sniped by an archer Revenant," Scribe told us. "I believe he might have used his three aspects over the afternoon's fighting, and become vulnerable as a result.""

It's unlikely that the Levantines had a random shield wall in the middle of their army, though now that I think of it there may have been a few circle shield walls around the obilisks which may have been raising dead? I think they only killed people, not also raise them, but they may have made a front line not on the front line.

That said, the comment of recovering the body as well as how it's written here suggest that the Sage died an hour or so after the Obilisks were dealt with and he went to aid another issue elsewhere.

dadycoool

The shield wall may have been the force field thing that they've been using this war.

Stereotype

It was mentioned that Archer could shoot farther than she could see and that she was with Beastmaster. We can assume it was with the help of Beastmaster using his information gathering.

Zee

I am convinced the thing that Cat is feeling and not seeing has something to do with Sage. He was one of the Blood, Princess of Aquitan saw to his corpse personally, plus the fact that he felt something from the dark pillars that he could not Devine screams like a plot by DK. The Destroy aspect of Sage also feels like it is meant to have a purpose down the line.

I am still hoping to see some theories who the third is that was sent on the left flank. The author mentioned "those three" twice so it is not a typo.

Zee

Correction: Aquiline saw personally to the corpse of Sage.

[Liliet](#)

Akua, maybe? The third, I mean. She did depart permanently, it was Hakram at Cat's side from that point on.

mamm0nn

Hune: Congratulations with your victory, Black Queen.

Cat: Damn it Hune, did you just red flag this battle? I expect as

much from some, but you read Black's books on what to never say when. I expected better from you.

Adrian V

My favorite part is when she started laughing, she managed to take the maniacal laugh and turn into a version that doesn't spell doom or stupid crazy evil, the crazy part may still be in effect but still xD.

And man Beastmaster is down, he was with Archer and like we saw in some parts those 4? have a bond from growing up together, so who wants to bet there is story in how he died (story as in he maybe sacrificed himself or put himself in danger due to Archer).

The Sage is obvious why he had to die: DK noticed he was close to a discovering and due to the mention of divining a word i bet he either was close to or already had discovered an aspect used to make those pillars and got a huge mark on his head.

Liliet

I'm totally expecting Lysander's death to spell out some kind of development in the Refugee arc ^^

mamm0nn

Oddball theory: DK hid his book of ascension, the one that can make capable practitioners into new DK bodies, in the obelisks. Either Providence or DK killed the Sage, and if it's the latter then DK will rise in the camp causing mayhem.

Adrian V

Nah, with Zeze around they must know about that possibility and make a practice to burn or secure named corpses, or mages, plus the general burning, i think is more probably DK knew about the sage or a named like him and baited him with the pillars and then dropped the hammer once he knew Sage used his 3 aspects.

Captain Amazing

Anyone else notice how Providence sent Huntress and co. immediately -after- Beastmaster died? I suppose Archer was sufficiently neutral to save. It reminds me of how demons seem to prefer killing heroes when placed alongside equally vulnerable villains.

Daniel E

Right, but then Above lost the Sage to even the scales.

Javvies

Things went more or less exactly as Cat planned them to.
This is concerning. Especially since major elements of the Dead King's forces are missing.

Good battle plan, but everything working out more or less exactly as expected/intended? That has to be tripping Cat's warning signs.

The loss of several Named is a problem, and might actually be the Dead King's real targets – mundane troops aren't a real threat to him the way Named are.

mavant

>these three

>Lists two names

Demon of Absence got 'em.

Matthew Wells

Nah, Scribe's just trying out some new melee stuff.

JJR

They do say that the pen is mightier than the sword.

Clint

Does Grey Pilgrim still have that resurrection ability, or was that permanently lost at Prince's Graveyard?

beleester

Permanently lost. Catherine's ability tears out an aspect and makes it into a single-use item.

Daniel E

Permanently lost. In the chapter where he & Cat return to creation, there is mention about losing an Aspect. He now only has the sight and star.

Noldo

I wonder if Cat's ability to extract an aspect to be used as a single use item could allow Cat to extract one of Sage's aspect and the information Sage managed to extract from the obelisks.

Aurelian Ungureanu

The author corrected the first mention into "these two", so my expectations for a mysterious theory about the third have dropped. Still, Akua being the third sent to help doesn't add up

since she cannot use Night anymore due to Cat's body being at its limits, so likely not much help to the left flank? Also, she might not be popular with the Proceran army if the rumour about her identity has spread outside of P. royalty. I am still giving this some thought ... for a bit longer.

Daniel E

After rereading this chapter in more leisure, I'm still betting that Dead King's elite army is attempting the mother of all end-runs; going right around the entire Alliance to strike at Callow either through the White Caps passage or the the Red Flower Vales.

Frivolous

Headhunter is more powerful than I expected. I thought them just a Named serial killer, a rogue type, but to kill 2 Revenants in a battle means they're a fighter, too.

Abigail anticipating Cat's orders and moves, without knowing Cat's reasoning, is very suspicious to me. How often does a commander do the right thing tactically without knowing the supreme commander's strategy? It stinks of Providence.

dadycool

Cat is Chaotic in general, moreso when she's planning wars and battles. Abigail is trying to be as chaotic as possible, trying to get thrown out of the army.

Cat: I'm gonna make up the craziest, most insane, suicidal plan I can come up with and hope my understanding of Reality is correct enough to grant a positive outcome.

Abigail: I'm gonna make up the craziest, most insane, suicidal plan I can come up with and hope my antics convince everyone, especially my supreme commander and queen, who certainly wouldn't try and come up with a plan this bad, that I'm unfit for duty.

Cat: That was perfect! Exactly what I was hoping for! Keep doing that!

Abigail, crying: WHY ME?!?!?!?

agumentic

It's not that mysterious – both Abigail and Cat saw the same tactical situation and both capitalized on it with the tools available on hand.

[shimizubad](#)

Damn, it would be a bad idea, but imagine Cat as a revenant under the Dead King. It would be terrifying.

Miles

She'd just give up her revenant powers along with his control, and then immediately come back to life.

RoflCat

The sisters would likely bring her back under Night first.

Or even if it become a pulling match for her soul and DK won, the sisters will likely cut her off from Night, thus leaving DK with one mouthy undead (because I doubt even DK can force her to not be snarky) who have no super power besides good knowledge of Stories.....actually that might makes her a very terrifying strategist under him.

[shimizubad](#)

Exactly

IDKWhoitis

Well RIP Papenhiem, I think the Iron Prince is about to eat a bad loss...

Armies not being where they are supposed to be, Keters elite troops not being present, Nesh not showing up at all, an offensive that's going too well, and a Keterian counterattack that stopped before it began.

I'm already sure the 2nd pincer with Papenhiem or the Twilight Ways Force were exterminated or savaged at the least.

Everyone has taken the sanctity of the Twilight ways too liberally, and I think Nesh is clever and bastardly enough to find a loop hole or bait a mistake.

Past this line only lies random speculation and raving rambling madness.

The elves have betrayed the crusaders, or Malica has brought an army (Black's former loyalists), or most likely, there is a bastardly form of "Non-Necromancy magic that can be flung into Twilight ways to create casualties and other issues..."

JJR

No undead allowed in the Twilight Ways. But Dead King has an entire hell filled with living people to turn into an army.

ruduen

Huh. Just remembered – wasn't the Apprentice being taught by the Sage? Right now, that seems like the right pieces brewing for a

'take up the mantle' or an 'avenge the mentor' story. I wonder if the Sage's role as a mentor figure was strong enough to qualify there.

Kel the Seer

Did the Gigantes ever catch up safely? I know that there were forced clearing out diving bands, and the Gugantes wanted to wait until that was done to move up, but Cat ordered them to move in anyway. I have this sneaking suspicion that the Prince of Bones has some of his groups Nick g out waiting to capitalize on something like that.

It would give DK a way to learn about Gigantes warding methods, which will be invaluable since they were going to drop wards to protect proclaimed territory, and screw Cat's political capital that is helping keep the coalition forces together.

laguz24

Nessie doesn't know about the gigantes yet. He knows about the army but not the giants, hopefully. But if he does know, then it would be a complete asspull by ee. So I don't think that it would be that.

[sengachi](#)

No he definitely knows about them. It's actually mentioned at one point that the Gigantes would have to move through some of that land dotted with undead raiding parties, and Cat was considering sending a detachment to clear the way for them. She decided against it, judging that so many Gigantes could handle just about anything.

But the Gigantes have definitely encountered undead so far, so the Dead King knows their location.

Furthermore Keter has living spies born in Serenity, some of the best scrying magics out there, countless undead vermin spies, etc, etc. It would be a surprising coup but not a Diabolos Ex Machina if the Hidden Horror knew about the Gigantes before the armies started marching and planned around them.

Graeme Dochylo

So a thought, It's been revealed that users of Night are especially ineffective against Demons, and the Dead King has been holding his Demons in reserve.

What I'd like to see happen is that the Dead King has been waiting for the most devastating moment to deploy them(possibly something around the timing of Cat being about to get a Name that is specifically focused around manipulating Night, with the

intention of breaking the one he sees as his primary rival in the story of the war), and that he's about to give the Drow an offer they cannot refuse, where evil turns on evil, the goddesses lose faith in their priest, and the Drow break alliance and move en masse through the Twilight Ways to attack Levante or southern Procer.

Then Cat has to figure out how to pick up the pieces from there with a lot of her plan having fallen apart.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

That last line...

Onos

Gods Below and Everburning, I fucking love the battle scenes in the Guide.

Nice to see Hakram's still in a good mood, the prick.

Chapter 60: Zwischenschach

"In war and politics, we are all as men sharing the same dark cave and stumbling along blindly. The keys to victory in either matter are patience and seeing just a little further ahead than your opponents."

– Luc Monseiller, thirty-second First Prince of Procer, largely remembered for the Great War that followed his assassination

A brawl. The last blows of the battle not even an hour past, and now they were *brawling*.

Sometimes I sympathized with Cordelia Hasenbach, for though I had fought her tooth and nail to keep the Truce and Terms from being beyond the reach of temporal laws I didn't entirely disagree with her when it came down to it. I bent the rules for Named all the time, didn't I? I'd made them beyond the authority of all but two of their own kind, allowed them to wield power over others and invested them with weighty responsibilities. But sometimes, Gods sometimes, they just went and did something that made it feel like I was biting down on a mouthful of embers. I knew the names and the Names, could discern the source of this stupidity, but to understand was not to excuse.

If they'd been soldiers under my command, this would end with a flogging and a demotion. If it had been allied officers, even nobles, I would have had them removed from command and sent away. But Names were rarer than noble blood, the power they gave more highly prized than titles in these days where the end times were howling at our door, so instead I would have to be *lenient*. To chide and discipline, as if dealing with children instead of hardened killers empowered by Creation. What hope was there for the Liesse Accords, when not even the Dead King at our gates was enough to force reason onto us?

I wrestled my mounting fury down as I limped through the dusty grounds of our camp, knowing calm would serve me better. It was exhaustion and anger talking, I told myself. There would be good days and bad ones in the era to come and no treaty could change that. It'd never been their purpose to fix the world, for that was too ambitious a charge for anything made by my hand. The Accords would do what they were meant to, and Calernia would muddle along with a few less atrocities splattered across the pages of its history. That alone would already be a better legacy than I had any right to claim, some would say.

In the distance, as I turned a corner, I heard cheering. The Night boiled in my veins, answering the livid streak of anger that seized me, and the closest legionaries shivered. I'd sent for a full company of armed soldiers, phalanges one and all, to accompany me. They were to serve as either escort or mailed fist, depending on my orders, and my mood was feeling more and more like clenching fingers. The cheering itself wasn't bad, it was what it meant: that Named had decided to fucking brawl in public in front of any soldier that cared to watch. On the same day as a bruising battle with the Kingdom of the Dead, our corpses not even all burned. My fingers *clenched*.

Well, at least one was going to be one of mine so maybe flogging wasn't off the table yet.

It was with that hard stomp particular to soldiers meaning business that my company entered the picture. A large crowd of soldiers – a few hundred, a thousand? – had gathered in a great ring. By their looks and armour they were from half a dozen different armies and oaths, a clean slice of our coalition shouting hoarsely as five Named brawled and coin changed hands. A quiet fell in the immediate surroundings of the phalanges, soldiers paling and hastily getting out of the way of authority having come to call. There was just enough of a quiet I finally made out one particular thread from the cacophony. An old ditty I'd learned as kid in Laure, beautifully sung by a cold-blooded monster.

"Maiden Mary, fair and merry

Your tears make poets sigh

But for a smile given sweetly

Tall banners will kiss the sky."

The Rapacious Troubadour had a nasty sense of humour, it seemed. 'Maiden Mary' was a children's song, but it dated back to the War of the Cousins – the civil war that'd put on the throne the same branch of House Fairfax that my father had later ended – and the Mary in question was Mary the Claimant. Queen Mary the Third, most scholars called her, as her Eastern Bells had won over the Southern Bells just long enough for her toddler son to die a crowned king and another cousin succeed him. I would have been impressed about the Troubadour knowing the song at all, if he'd not also been the same shit playing a song about civil war while Named fought in front of a crowd of rowdy soldiers.

There was blood on the floor, I saw, but at least no one was dead yet. Archer and the Silver Huntress were both bleeding, and I knew the look in Indrani's eyes – she'd take a killing stroke without hesitation if she got the opportunity. The Silent Guardian and the Headhunter were both in better shape, the Guardian having nothing but marks on her plate while the Headhunter had suffered only a small cut on their cheek. The only voice of sanity in there was Roland, even now trying to force everyone apart and largely failing.

"- settles nothing," I caught the Rogue Sorcerer saying. "You are only making it worse for-"

"Do it to 'em, Lady Archer," someone with a heavy Liessen accent shouted. "Callow! The Sword and Crown!"

"Huntress," an Alamans accent shouted back. "For grace and Heavens, Silver Huntress!"

The crowd roared, the crowd cheered, and the Rapacious Troubadour was still playing that *fucking* song.

"Maiden Mary, bright and lovely

What groom did you embrace?

Hand in hand, wooing roughly

Your troth is kingdom's grace."

Enough was enough. The mood might still be more joyous than bloody at the moment, but crowds were mercurial beasts – this could turn sour very, very quickly. I was still damned winded from the gates Akua and I had opened, but not so spent I couldn't muster a resounding thunderclap when I struck the ground with the butt of my staff. The clap rolled across the ring, drowning out

even the cheers, and I limped forward as the phalanges roughly shoved aside the few onlookers and gambled still in my way.

"Disperse," I said, voice cold as steel. "Now, and I will not bother with arrests."

A shiver went through the crowd, though my eye was on the fighting Named – which had ceased actively trying to stab each other, but were still close and holding weapons – and the mood was doused rather comprehensively. I'd half-expected someone to protest and to have to make an example, but instead already the edges of the crowd were fraying as people made quiet escapes. Like a crumbling stone, the whole ring would fall apart before long. There was a flicker of remembrance, just as the edge of my mind, as I recalled when I'd been a slip of a girl in Laure and I'd watched Black empty a hall's worth of lords with but a handful of words. I'd sworn, that evening, that one day I'd have that power too.

It had taken years, but I'd gotten there. I wondered, though, what that wary wild girl from the orphanage would think of the woman I'd grown into. I thinly smiled, knowing that she might well have added me to the list of monsters in need of killing.

"Queen Catherine," Roland started, "this is–"

"Utter stupidity," I mildly said. "But your role in it was minor and well-meant. Walk back to your tent, Rogue Sorcerer."

He caught my eyes, for a moment, and whatever it was he saw there it told him not to argue. My gaze lingered long enough to acknowledge his bow, then moved to the four remaining Named. I couldn't see the Silent Guardian's face under her helmet, but her stance was sheepish. As for the Headhunter, they – no, he if I understood the face paint correctly – looked rather unapologetic and entirely unembarrassed. *He had an excuse for butting in, then*, I decided. Which left the two who would have been the spark for the entire mess. Archer and the Silver Huntress.

"Who struck first?" I asked.

"She did," the Huntress said, her high-pitched voice grown shrill with anger.

"I scored first blood," Indrani dismissed. "You swung at me first, Alexis."

"That is true," the Headhunter jeered. "On both counts. And the Guardian couldn't resist backing up her friend, could she? Hardly sporting, two on one."

My gaze returned to Silent Guardian, who took off her helm and revealed a tanned and dark-haired head. While she looked like she

rather wanted to smash in the Headhunter's skull, to me she bowed in apology.

"You only intervened after blood was drawn?" I clarified.

She nodded. I hummed, eyeing the Headhunter.

"And you intervened out of your abiding love for fairness, I take it?" I mused.

"You have me pegged," the Headhunter grinned.

"You tried to stab me in the back, you-"

The word the Huntress used was in tradertalk, but by the tone it wasn't a compliment.

"You're both dismissed," I said, ignoring the Huntress. "For having participated in a brawl, you're both docked pay for five months and you'll be assigned menial work under an officer of my choosing."

The Headhunter glared at me, opening his mouth, but his gaze dipped to my side – where my fingers, without my notice, had taken to clenching and unclenching. His mouth closed.

"Dismissed," I coldly repeated.

The Silent Guardian offered a bow first, which I returned with a nod. The Headhunter did not go quite as politely, elbowing some of the last remaining soldiers in his way as he went. Of the Rapacious Troubadour there was no sign, I noted. The clever little shit had made good on his escape before I could rap his knuckles. Indrani and the Huntress were still facing each other weapons in hand, long knives for Archer and the spear for her old acquaintance. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Is there a particular reason you two are still holding weapons?" I mildly asked.

I saw Indrani suppress a wince. She knew better than the Huntress that particular tone of voice did not herald a good mood on my part.

"If she puts away her blades," the Silver Huntress began, "I will-"

"If I must make it an order, Alexis the Argent," I lightly interrupted, "I might just lose my temper and fucking drum the two of you of this army before the eyes of gods and men."

With a quiet sliding sound, Indrani's long knives went back into the sheaths. I turned a dark eye on her: she'd timed that, I knew, just so that the Huntress would look like a recalcitrant

malcontent and she the obedient subordinate. Unlucky for her, I wasn't buying it. The Silver Huntress blinked in discomfort, then reluctantly stabbed her spear into the ground. She folded her arms over her chest, looking rather defensive.

"I'm going to ask you two questions," I said. "You will reply to them calmly and concisely, without interrupting each other."

I got nod. Indrani's almost playful, as if it were set in stone she'd get out of this without losing any feathers. My irritation spiked.

"Huntress, why did you attack an ally?" I bluntly asked.

She grimaced, though I'd wager more from the phrasing than remembrance of the punch thrown. The Lady of the Lake had not raised those girls to shame easily.

"She got Lysander killed," Alexis the Argent harshly said. "Same old story: Indrani has a lark and one of us bleeds for it. Only this time it didn't stop with *bleeding*."

The anger in her voice was a hard, cold thing. I found the hate threaded in it unsettling, as it was too strong to be a fresh – this was an old poison, just brought to the fore with a fresh wound.

"I assigned her to the Third Army myself," I evenly said. "And by the reports I've read, she fulfilled her duties admirably. As for the death of Beastmaster, I understand she fought and had an arm broken trying to prevent it."

The Silver Huntress' eyes hardened, turning to Archer.

"Ranger, Black Queen, it makes no difference," Alexis bitterly said. "You'll always find skirts to hide behind, won't you?"

"Say that again," Indrani hissed, hand going for a knife.

"Watch your tongue, Huntress," I sharply said. "And Archer, I ordered you not to interrupt. Don't make me repeat myself again."

She looked mulish but did not argue. She'd been more interested in protecting her pride than my 'honour' there, I thought, so my sympathy was limited. I felt a faint breeze against my neck, gone in a moment, but did not let it distract me.

"Archer," I said. "You were struck with a fist. Why did you answer it with a knife?"

Indrani's lips thinned.

"I was insulted beyond reasonable expectation of restraint," she said.

"You lying-" Huntress began.

My anger, never far, burned cold and sharp as once more an order I'd given within my rights was disobeyed. This, this I was done tolerating. The breeze came back, but it'd never been a breeze at all: it was a breath. Warm, coming through an open maw.

"Be silent," I Spoke.

The Silver Huntress fought it. But as the Beast leaned over my shoulder, hacking out a laugh, even as she struggled her mouth snapped shut. I felt a vicious twinge of satisfaction that I did not indulge, but did not ignore. Archer's face was slack with surprise.

"The two of you are damned disgraces," I said. "On the same day where thousands fought and died turning back the Enemy, you attacked each other like drunken bulls before we'd even finished burning the corpses. *Shame on you both.*"

Indrani reared back like I'd slapped her. With a twist of will, I peeled back the order I'd Spoken at the Huntress. Her lips parted and she breathed out in pants.

"Huntress, you are no longer commander for the heroes in this army," I said. "The Rogue Sorcerer, who tried to put an end to this bout of idiocy, will take your place. The White Knight will handle the rest of your disciplining. I offer him this as a courtesy, but should you break the Truce again I will have no choice but to cease being polite."

My eyes moved to the other offender.

"Your pay is docked for this entire campaign," I told Archer. "You are not to speak with any hero outside of official duties without the explicit permission of the Rogue Sorcerer or myself. If you draw a blade on an ally again, I'll send you south like the child you insist on acting as."

Her hands clenched, but she stayed silent.

"You've also lost the right to refuse assignments for six months," I finally said. "You'll be accompanying the Firstborn on the raid tonight, so return to your tent and prepare."

Both of them glared at me sullenly, in that heartbeat eerily resembling each other for all their starkly different appearances. Grief was a bitter brew, I knew that better than most, and they were both fresh off the death of someone they'd cared for in a very complicated way. I understood why it'd come to this, I really did. But I was also a high officer of the Grand Alliance, sworn to enforce the Truce and Terms – which they had just broken in a spectacularly public and untimely manner. My

duty was clear, and my anger not faked in the slightest. I stared them both down until they left, not bothering with a proper dismissal. The moment they left the Beast brushed against my shoulder, almost affectionately, and without a single lingering wisp it was gone.

I could Speak again, I knew. It hadn't been a fluke. I could feel the way my will once more struck against Creation like a queen's decree. *One step closer*, I thought, and breathed out. To what I did not yet know, but the shape I was beginning to discern was not unpleasant to my eye.

—

"Bleed them," I ordered the Firstborn. "Under this moon, your only mandate is the reaping of deaths."

With nightfall had come our opportunity to savage the Dead King's forces badly enough that tomorrow's fighting would be the final stroke of annihilation. The Twilight Ways would allow the drow to harass the enemy's camp on the other side of the pass from every direction, all the while staying out of the jaws of the trap that'd been sprung on us the previous night: here would be no wards to keep us penned in, this time. Only skirmishes in the manner that'd been the lifeblood of the Everdark for a millennium, perhaps the only manner of war in which the Firstborn could be said to be the most accomplished of all Calernian peoples. And out the sigils went, under the command of Ivah and its subordinate sigil-holders.

We went with them, a band of Named under my own lead. Archer, naturally, for I meant to keep her out of trouble and the camp for a span. To some a place in such a raid was considered a prize and so I awarded it accordingly: the Vagrant Spear came with us and the Headhunter as well. Roland I'd dragged along mostly on account of his expertise in breaking magics, knowing it was never wise to bet on Keter not having that one last trick up its sleeve. The choices had also been a balancing act, which naturally some noticed.

"I'm sure it's just a coincidence," Archer sardonically murmured, "that your picks are even on both sides of the fence. Ever the diplomat, eh?"

It was not an approving tone. Even the band was a good one, well-fitted, I suspected that in her eyes politics having had a say in making it tainted it irremediably.

"Are you complaining I'm calming waters you helped unsettle?" I replied.

"I didn't pick that fight," Indrani told me flatly.

"You still fought it," I said. "You could have taken the lump, walked away."

Her face tightened with genuine anger.

"I don't owe you that," she said. "I don't owe *anyone* that."

"Then spare me the comments," I curtly replied. "I'll take shit for you, Indrani, but I won't take it *from* you as well. If you want to talk of things owed, best remember that."

Not the most pleasant exchanges to precede going into battle, though only Roland seemed to notice the tension between us as we sidled through the Twilight Ways. He did not ask, that very Alamans instinct for discerning when a question would not be well-received sparing me the irritation of having to offer even a cursory explanation. Before long we were back in Creation, anyhow, and the raid claimed everyone's full attention. I'd left the command in Ivah's hand, knowing my Lord of Silent Steps was perfectly capable of leading sigils in war without my breathing down its neck, so I had the freedom to pick where I wanted to meddle. I had some thoughts already.

I rather itched to get rid of the Pale Knight, if it could be done without paying a ruinous price.

That plan went the way of dust, though, the moment we emerged from the Ways and found that the enemy was *retreating*. The pass was still in the hands of undead forces, and if anything the northern end of the passage was more heavily defended than before, but we'd come out to the north of the enemy's camp – in the flat plains between Lauzon's Hollow and the Cigelin Sisters – so it was impossible to miss that there were departing columns. I sharpened my eyes with Night, seeking numbers. Maybe ten to twenty thousand massed to hold the pass in case we struck overnight, but the rest were mobilizing to leave. Hells, there were already scouting detachments north of us in the distance.

"Leaving?" the Headhunter sneered. "Fools. We'll catch up through the Ways."

She – it was she, tonight – would have been right if our soldiers were things of stone instead of flesh and blood, but it wasn't the case.

"I'm not sure we can," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Not after today's battle."

One of these days, I was going to have to ask Roland exactly what kind of an upbringing had forged a man like him. He was surprisingly well learned in a variety of subjects, including quite a few that mages in the Praesi mold would have considered beneath their notice.

"He's right," I said. "Our army's fit to battle, tomorrow, but not to march."

Practically speaking parts of the army would be – the Second Army and the Proceran detachments freshly returned, as well as a healthy chunk of the Dominion's warriors – but it'd be risky to engage in pursuit with low numbers and it'd leave the force behind us very vulnerable. Unlike us, though, the Dead King did not have to give a shit about wounded or exhaustion or supplies. He could just order the march. There were three days between the Sisters and Lauzon's Hollow, so if we took a day to recuperate and immediately marched maybe we'd arrive at the Sisters before he did. *Maybe*. But it'd be risky. If the Cigelin Sisters had been reinforced, we might end up walking into a positional disaster.

"Then what is to be our purpose this night, Black Queen?" the Vagrant Spear asked.

I chewed on my lip. I wasn't comfortable risking a night battle with Keter, even assuming I could muster enough of my army to wage one alongside the Firstborn. That left only one logical move.

"We'll not be hunting Revenants, after all," I said. "Damage is our purpose. We thin their numbers as much as we can – Binds over Bones, constructs over anything else. We avoid Revenants unless they're alone and keep close as a band. Understood?"

Archer, even after our terse exchange, remained entirely dependable.

"Understood," Indrani replied, stringing her bow.

"We hunt," the Vagrant Spear agreed.

Roland sighed, offering a nod, and the Headhunter rolled her eyes.

"I'll take a kill if it's offered," she insisted.

"By all means," I mildly replied. "Though if you disobey my order I will, naturally, discipline you accordingly."

The Levantine villain met my eyes and I smiled thinly. I'd killed harder women than her, and without too much trouble. After a moment she nodded.

"Good," I said. "Let's get to it, then."

It'd be a stretch to say that what followed was boring – the danger might be limited, but it still existed – but it did get... repetitive. And it was dull from the start. Moving on foot we struck hard at the enemy's columns, targeting Binds and the occasional constructs or supplies before retreating back into the

Twilight ways and popping out elsewhere. We were quick enough no Revenants came even close to approaching us, though part of that must have been from the Firstborn being a larger and significantly more damaging threat. We saw, maybe two hours in, that things were actually turning starkly in favour of the drow.

Mighty were burning entire swaths of the enemy with impunity and casualties were mounting among the dead with only paltry costs to the Firstborn. Some of the sigils got too bold, though, it cost them. Revenants, at first, but the struck sigil doubled down and called allies – only for the Grey Legion finally to make an appearance. It was a major enough development that I parted ways from my band temporarily and called a sigil-holder to me for a report. Lord Soln bowed deep, but talked briskly. It wanted to return to the fray.

“The ironclads unmake the Night, Losara Queen, much as the carved pillars did during our previous raid,” Lord Soln said. “It appears they have also been invested with a ward that prevents access to the Twilight Ways. That surprise was... costly. Between them and the Revenants, we were forced to pull back.”

“Give me a look,” I ordered, extending a hand.

The sphere of Night was promptly offered and my damning suspicions were confirmed. I’d seen the Grey Legion before, those hulking dead encased in armour so thick it more of a rampart. Those armours had been well-maintained and quite distinctive, so it was easy to tell that the Grey Legion had been quite recently refitted. *So that’s what you got out of this, Neshamah, I thought. You tested the pillars and wards on our Firstborn, and when they proved effective you used that Crab lurking around somewhere to refit your Grey Legion into drow-killers.* It wouldn’t matter much here, where we could harass away from their ranks and avoid them, but there would come a time in this campaign when the drow would have to stand and fight.

And when they did, the Prince of Bones and his legion tailored to kill Firstborn would be waiting for them.

“Go,” I told Soln. “Return to the fight. Pass my order that the Grey Legion is to be avoided, lest we allow the enemy to further refine ways to kill us.”

It was worse than those troops just being a hard counter to drow, I knew. It also meant that two of the three assets we had at hand that could possibly deal with the Grey Legion without horrendous casualties – namely Akua and myself – had just been made equally obsolete. Some tricks would work to a limited extent, like flood gates, but I wasn’t confident in smashing them by myself anymore. And our last answer to their kind, the Blessed Artificer, worked exclusively in Light. I was not so confident that the Dead King

did not have something to counteract that as well, considering how much he'd invested in building up this army. *Fuck*.

Unpleasant as the revelation was, there was nothing to do but to continue our raiding. I returned to my band and we resumed our attacks, continuing to inflict bloody noses wherever we went until around Early Bell. We were all beginning to slow, close calls were getting closer and victories getting sloppier, so I called it at an end. The Firstborn remained until a full hour before dawn, only then retreating into the Twilight Ways. I slept for as long as I dared, which wasn't much, and woke all too soon to be presented with corpses. Named and Revenants, this time. I took two aspects from the Beastmaster before it grew unfeasible to do more, but unfortunately I did not have the rights to the Sage's body.

The way the Headhunter took heads from the foes they defeated fucked with my ability to steal aspects, I discovered with displeasure after a very frustrating hour pawing at Revenants fruitlessly, but I still got two out of the kill the Vagrant Spear had made. Disappointingly weak, those two, but I was never one to sneer at having another artefact up my sleeve. When the war council held session afterwards, once more with the full roster, there was no real disagreement over the decisions to be made. The morning's scouting parties and found Lauzon's Hollow abandoned, so we'd send out Named to smell out the traps no doubt left behind and after them a forward force to hold the end of the pass.

The full army would only begin moving tomorrow at dawn, when we took to the Twilight Ways in an attempt to catch up to the enemy. If we were lucky, our surprise strike would seize the Cigelin Sisters before the enemy arrived and we'd be able to pincer the Dead King between the fortress and our field army. If not, we'd have to get... inventive. There were still too many unknowns for a proper battle plan to be made, unfortunately.

There was a bit of a commotion before Noon Bell when the Gigantes delegation finally caught up to us, but the giants were polite and it did wonders for morale. I was sent a polite yet firm reminder that the Gigantes would not fight unless attacked, and could not be used as war casters by my order, but I had no qualms with that. Just as ward-makers they'd be worth a dozen times their weight in gold, which would be no small sum. The Gigantes, though, had been largely expected. I'd known they were coming from the messages received from Neustal. When there was once more a commotion at a sudden appearance though, it came as a genuine surprise to me. I figured it might have been an early supply convoy, at first, but Hakram swiftly send a phalange to inform me otherwise.

It was Scribe herself who escorted the surprise arrival into my tent, helping him into the chair with surprising gentleness. I dismissed her with a look afterwards – Hakam I'd trust with such a conversation, but she was not Hakram.

"Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim greeted me tiredly.

Tariq looked a month past exhausted and all too frail even for a man of his age, which did not bode well. He was also supposed to be with Prince Klaus' army, which boded *significantly* worse.

"Tariq," I quietly replied. "Can I offer you a drink?"

I did not bother to ask if something had gone wrong, for he'd not be here otherwise. To my surprise, he took me up on my offer.

"Something stiff," Tariq Fleetfoot asked. "It will keep me awake long enough to get through this conversation, at least. I've not slept in weeks."

I silently revised my estimate of the trouble from 'pretty bad' to 'fuck' as I poured him a full glass of brandy and pressed it into his hand. He drank deep and offered thanks.

"We finally learned why the army in Juvelun did not chase us when we marched past it towards Malmedit," the Grey Pilgrim told me.

"Did you," I said, already grimacing.

"We also found that missing army of two hundred thousand," the Peregrine mirthlessly smiled. "It was, after all, waiting for us in the latter city."

ruduen

Vote/Boost! Er, voost? Bote? Neither of those really work.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Sir Nil

Oh, dear. If Cat's Name is taking up the form of authority over Named. Then such butting heads will be inevitable, even among her friends. I just hope this isn't the middle slow fall from her relationship with her friends to her Name. Vivienne, then Adjutant, now Archer...

Anomandris

I don't know whether it's the POV, but to be fair to Cat, it seems like the Woe are being a bit more standoffish socially with her than usual. Harkram doesn't want sympathy from a close friend, Archer is just being childish in public, and Viv is more down to distance.

dcarter8419

Can't be a queen and have friends

NerfContessa

Sure you can.

8f your friends are kings, queens and such as well 😊

But you can't be both their queen and their friend, one will have to go.

As for her name, I am still going for Queen of Named, at worst judge of them.

Big I

I've noticed, over this book, that Cat is being deliberately isolated. She has a nice conversation with a fresh made Villain, looks like she might become his mentor? He's dead the next chapter. Relationship with the Repentant Magister seems to be on the cards? She dies too. The only member of the Woe she's not bickering with yet is Masego; she's even at odds with Hakram. Akua's being set up by Cat herself for whatever her payback is going to be. I think the story's setting her up to be alone when all's said and done. Something like the Lonely Wanderer perhaps?

Itarion

Lonely Wanderer neglects the law aspect of the nascent Name. The most recent stirrings have been from the just execution of a traitor to Callow (sort of) in the aerial fight against the Revenants, and the delivery of summary judgement to soldiers under her command. There is law there, and authority, that no mere wanderer would have.

caoimhinh

Yeah, her new Name is about judging and overseeing Named.

naturalnuke

Lone Arbitrator

KageLupus

Close, but I am leaning more towards Arbiter.

Arbitration implies being a middle man, hearing both sides and making a decisions. There is a judicial feeling to it that I think would fit someone more like Hanno than Cat.

An Arbiter is very similar, but also has an extra connotation of power and finality to it. The Arbiter has the final say in a dispute. They make a decision and are fully equipped to enforce it.

From the very first chapters of the story, Cat has been someone who's principles are so firm that she would change the whole world rather than compromise on them. She is pragmatic enough to accept things she doesn't like, but she never actually stops believing that her way is correct. All of that makes me think that if Cat's name were to involve judging in any way it would also have to reflect the fact that her judgement is final and based on personal beliefs rather than set laws.

[onedollargum](#)

Warden of the East, as it were?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Wicked Warden

Practicality

I think she's going to pull a "monkey's paw" by making her a dread empress. If she does, it will likely be the cruelest reward she can give, and she'll do it knowingly.

Remember how Akua was rather introspective after Kat invited her to a celebration, she was shocked that the people were genuinely laughing etc. she muttered something along the lines of "that she could have had this years ago" and then she thought back to sending her only friend to die. That chapter Kat's political advisor (cannot recall atm) asked her if she intended to make Akua a Dread Empress, and if not then she made a mistake:

Like Abigail, Kat is a pragmatic soul at heart, and like Abigail, Akua will get foisted into a role that benefits the Black Queen. Unlike the canny general, Akua will end up alone, years of service rewarded by a tower of solitude. A tower that she had always wished for, but no longer wanted.

Small slights, long spites.

[Rudy Samuel \(@RushArt\)](#)

Combining Lonely Swordsman and Wandering Bard? How edgy can Cat go?

Crash

To be fair bard is trying her best to set Cat up haha

Not that it will work, cat has enough Bardy-ness going on all by herself but her... Let's call it strong arming, of people and laws to achieve her goals is much more important to her character.

Whether they be gods or kings and all the armies in creation is not for the meek after all.

I like the suggestion of Arbiter, further up. Something that implies neutrality but, more importantly, authority.

As for the situation with Indrani, this is very much unfortunate timing. She might be grieving in her own way and then somebody she doesn't get on with picks a fight? Unfortunate. But THEN, Cat has to go and order her around like that? This is practically handmade to piss Indrani off. It's expected she'd be prickly.

Give her a little time and some alcohol, she'll show up and very pointedly not apologize to Cat but show her she's sorry anyway.

Daniel

Cat is similar to Eleanor Fairfax in major ways, namely in ruling Callow and in uniting the continent against Evil. She is also extremely prominent, arguably the most important person in Callowan history. That's the closest match Cat's culture has to who is now is. And we learned back in Book 1 that a name usually comes from the originating society's culture, although that's been muddled since.

Eleanor Fairfax was the Rebel Knight first and got a new Name later, which has not been revealed. I guess Cat will get that one, or some twisted dark variant of it.

Callowan aristocratic rulers were also the judiciary, so a Callowan royalty name fits the judgement-related hints we have.

Shveiran

I don't want to rain on your parade, but even if all you say has merit... isn't it likely that Eleanor was the first Good Queen?

After all, she founded the dynasty and we have been told that the Callowan monarch usually had that very Name.

caoimhinh

I think she was Queen of Blades, no?

[Liliet](#)

Elizabeth Albam was Queen of Blades

AbraKadabra

So, does that make Cat the Bad Queen?

Shveiran

I mean, to be fair, she kind of IS.

Albert Wen

The Black Queen, in every way.

Anonymous

White Knight was recently alienated too.

Morgenstern

Well, they'll have to be, I'd guess, if the Accords are going anywhere. The supervisors over all the Named on either side cannot be friends with those they should supervise/judge, can they?

Zach

This chapter basically confirmed a suspicion I've had for a while that Cat is gradually having her relationships with the Woe weaken. Vivienne could be considered just a circumstance of them being geographically separated, and Hakram could be considered an individual incident, but this situation with Archer is just too conspicuous (and particularly the direct link drawn between that situation and the development of her Name). Like you seem to be mentioning, it seems like this might be tied to her developing a Name which somehow involved authority over other Named (and is thus inherently incompatible with being part of a band of Named like the Woe).

Frivolous

Damn shit damn. Catherine can Speak again, already, and her Name hasn't even coalesced yet. Which is very bizarre, I think we'll all agree. Like reversed causality, cart before horse, effect before cause.

I'm pretty sure that means one of her aspects will be Rule. It almost has to be, right?

I find it interesting that Catherine felt schadenfreude and pleasure at commanding Alexis. I wonder what it means. Maybe that pleasure is common for all Named who have Rule.

Also I think Prince Klaus is dead and has been turned into a Bind. Which is very very bad, since he's one of the best generals in the Alliance.

Could it be, though, that Tariq foresaw Klaus's fate and decided to kill Klaus first and destroy his body? That would be a Mercy indeed; Klaus would have hated serving Keter.

Miles

Judge, I'd say. She probably can't Speak on a whim yet, just when she's particularly immersed in her Role

Aston Whiteman

+1

Frivolous

Judge implies a Role that mainly deals with Named, yes? Or am I misinterpreting?

I think Command is more likely, if Rule is off the table, because Cat is famous as a brilliant military commander, and the setting and context of her Speaking are military. She wasn't just Judging other Named; she was reprimanding a lesser officer in her chain of Command.

I think Command or Rule are also more likely because Cat's Role involves much dealing with regular folks. Her Role won't be limited to dealing with other Named. She won't be like the Intercessor that way.

The Intercessor is a shadow, almost unknown save by the Named until very recently. Cat will be a very public figure, leader, general, diplomat, and administrator, Ruling over people of all kinds.

Raivshard

An Arbiter can deal with anyone and render Judgement as they see fit. I see no implication that it should only deal with Named. That said, having explicit power over Named even more than others is certainly one of the things she's been working towards.

What I find interesting is how everyone seems to assume that it will be a Name solely from Below, as that doesn't really fit with the narrative she's crafting. I think the Name will be neutral in that respect.

I'll toss up a theory while I'm here:

Considering how strong her ability to Speak is before her Name has fully coalesced, I think that one of her aspects will allow her to remove or suspend their abilities; to judge them fit or unfit ... Or Worthy, as it were.

Frivolous

Yeah, I think it is very possible Cat becomes a hero or neutral, given that her natural tendency is to Above, not Below, as Kairos noted.

Which would cause all kinds of problems for the Truce and Terms, because she heads the villains.

Governing the abilities of other Named is possible, yes. It meshes well with the apparent power and significance of her imminent Name.

Still don't believe Arbiter is very likely, though. It lacks any kind of military or governing connotation. It would be a narrow Name, whereas Cat's Name seems likely to be vast and almost divine, in the vein of Living Goddess or She Who Must Be Obeyed or Great One.

Raivshard

The Queen of Names

SpaceDorf

The Dreaded Judge

Tenthyr

Considering Cathrines whole life is based about bossing people around and her prior experience with Speaking, I'm not surprised that the moment she found herself aligned with her forming Name she was able to do it- she had the power that moment and knew precisely how it could be used. If black is a claimant he might be able to do the same.

caoimhinh

She must have really missed that power, hahaha.

Also, wasn't Catherine's ability to loot Aspects limited to only one? Now she can loot two out of the same body.

Also, considering that it seems to be standard practice to give the Black Queen any body of villains and all bodies of Revenants that are killed in the battle, I wonder how many artifact-aspects Catherine has stored.

Must be quite a few, considering she got half a dozen just from this battle.

Oshi

I don't remember there being a limit just that the dead king burned out some aspects and in the Pilgrims place she only took one to prevent weakening him beyond where he was.

caoimhinh

There was an established limit of only one, that was shown every single time she did it.

It went to the point where she had to choose which one to pick, because she could not take both of the available ones from Revenants. She was limited to one at a time when she had **Take** as an aspect, then she was limited to only one artifact-aspect lootable from a corpse when she became Sovereign of Moonless Nights.

This was shown as First Under the Night, when she took aspects from the Spellblade and from the Thief of Stars, it was explicitly and clearly stated that Catherine had to choose one aspect. And the text showed us Catherine analyzing what she felt from each one and trying to guess their uses before picking because she could not take both and thus needed to choose the one that would be more useful.

Also, the Dead King only destroys one aspect.

This is the first time we see Catherine looting more than one aspect from a corpse.

Either she got able to do that during the 2-years timeskip or she *just* got able to do that right now thanks to being closer to her new Name and thus being stronger.

Shveiran

Small correction: I think the Dead King destroys aspects that may lead you to free yourself from his control (allegedly). I don't think there is an hard limit on how many aspects he can do that with out of the three a Revenant has.

caoimhinh

Hmm, but that's an assumption. And I doubt it considering that one of the aspects the Thief of Stars had in her was about freeing oneself and escaping. Plus, it's unlikely that every single Revenant so far had an aspect that would have let them escape Neshamah's control. A more likely explanation is that one of the

aspects is sacrificed in the process of raising them as Revenants.

But in the end it's all speculation on our part. We currently don't know exactly why or how he destroys one of the aspects.

And I didn't say that the Dead King cannot destroy more than one, just that he only destroys one in each Revenant, not two as Oshi implied in their reply.

Zach

You might be thinking of her old Aspect, but what she's doing now uses the Night.

Basically Catherine gets high flexibility of use of stolen Aspects in exchange for only getting to use them (I think) once.

caoimhinh

No, I specifically cited examples of her aspect, her time as Sovereign of Moonless Nights *and* as First Under the Night

. In every single case, she can only loot one aspect from a person.

There is an established limit of exactly one, and that was reinforced by having to choose which one to take to make the artifact, as there's no point in debating which one to loot if you can take both.

This is the first time we have ever seen her loot 2 aspects from the same corpse.

Miles

Noun

zwischenbach (plural zwischenbachs)

(chess, rare) A zwischenzug that is a check.

Noun

zwischenzug (plural zwischenzugs)

(chess) A tactical move which interrupts the execution of the current plan.

caoimhinh

When I read the chapter's title, I knew what was going to happen would either be something very good, or something very bad.

I'll try to offer a larger explanation about the term.

Ok, so do you guys recall those interludes in volume 5 when Amadeus was burning bits of Procer and the Grand Alliance chased after him, while Vivienne was in Laure getting depressed thinking she was not important, and losing her Name, and Hakram had to *chop off his hand* so Vivi would get a self-esteem boost and snap out of it?

Good.

Back then, there were two chapters called "Zugzwang" which means "compulsion to move" in German. A Zugzwang is basically forcing your opponent to make a move at a time when any move will put them at a disadvantage. This can be done in several ways, either by simply putting them in check or by positioning the pieces so that all the options available to the opponent are bad ones that will either cost them a piece or make them lose a good position.

This is somewhat related. It's similar, yet different.

In Chess, a "Zwischenzug", (meaning in-between move or intermediate move in German), is a chess tactic in which instead of playing the expected move (commonly a "recapture", which is taking an enemy's piece that has just taken one of your pieces), the player first interposes another move which often (but not always) causes either a greater or more immediate threat to which the opponent *must* answer, and only plays the expected move *after* the opponent has moved to handle that threat.

Now a *Zwischenschach* (which means "in-between **check**") is when instead of moving what was expected, you first play a surprising check that the opponent did not consider when plotting a sequence of moves, thus forcing them to respond to the check first (an obligation in chess), and *then* you play the move that you were meant to do before anyway, but now you got more out of that exchange, either in materials or positioning.

Basically, a *Zwischenschach* it's a *Zwischenzug* done through a check.

This was the Grand Alliance's plan, attacking these places so the Dead King would be forced to respond and weaken his defense of the Capital of Hainaut which the GA troops would then attack, but Neshamah played his *Zwischenschach first*.

That's how it relates to the end of the chapter, the objectives of the campaign on both sides are still largely the same, and the end goals remain, the originally intended targets still need to be attacked... but now there's a more immediate threat that needs to be taken care of.

It also relates to the Epigraph, which talks about the importance of seeing further ahead if one wants to win. A zwischenschach won't happen to you if you are attentive and able to anticipate your opponent. Though of course that's easier said than done.

Sorry if the explanation was too long.

P.S: I totally called it, that mysteriously missing army of two hundred thousand undead was gonna bite them in the ass. Story logic practically demanded it.

Navi-Hank

Story logic? Regular logic called that

[Liliet](#)

Im pretty sure the chapters back then were Zwischenzug, not Zugzwang

caoimhinh

Weird. I may be under a Mandela's Effect, as I clearly recall it as Zugzwang.

I can't even claim that the title was changed afterwards, since there are comments calling it zwischenzug right there in 2018.

An alternative explanation is that I jumped to a different timeline where the only difference is the title of those interludes. But that seems unlikely.

[Liliet](#)

More or less unlikely than a typo in Berenstein Bears? XD

[Burlyraven](#)

It's been known that Cat's Name would be inclined towards rule and supreme authority, but it's interesting that she seems to have so much power over others, without even having an established Name.

Archer's always been wild, and expecting her to be eternally loyal to Cat is foolish (especially seeing as it would go against the roles carved by the Calamity), but something about how pouty she's being in this chapter doesn't sit right. She may be wild,

but she knows Cat's an authoritarian; this kind of interaction should have been expected, no matter how close they are.

Also, this "sudden" turn of events isn't that shocking. It was kind of obvious. I legitimately thought Cat even recognized it as likely in-story. The only major problem I can think of is the Dead King managed to capture Klaus, and now he has a new Bind with high level knowledge of the campaign.

caoimhinh

Maybe, but not necessarily. Cat's new Name seems to be about overseeing Named, keeping order, administering judgment, delivering justice, and punishment for their actions. Now that might sound like a Hero, but let's not forget that Catherine is one of Below's because of her methods, not because of her end goals.

About Archer, this was not about her being loyal to Cat. You can have discussions and fights with the people you love and trust, and this isn't even the worst disagreement Cat and Indrani had ever had.

The reason she is angry is because:

A) one of the people who could be considered her siblings died, so she is grieving.

B) another of those "siblings" is blaming her for Lysander's death, and accusing her of not caring at all.

Of course she is pissed off. She might even be feeling horribly responsible about it, as she was there and failed to save him.

This goes a long way into Indrani's past and her relationship with the pseudo band of five that Ranger raised. They resent her because they think she doesn't care about them, and she found a Band of Five outside of her "family", they want the place that the Woe have in Indrani's heart.

Also, Indrani was forthcoming to Cat and probably the rest of the Woe that she is going to eventually leave to follow her wanderlust, her pursuit of the Horizon is the core wish within her. That does not mean she isn't loyal to Catherine, and being snippy at her now that she is angry doesn't mean much either.

And yeah, Cat should have known that army was going to appear, but then again she really couldn't do anything about it, since they failed to find that army despite their best efforts and couldn't just wait for it to appear.

Shveiran

Pretty much, yeah. Spot on.

What I'm very interested in, is why Silver is blaming Indrani.

I mean, yeah, there is a lot of baggae there - "you tied me in a sack filled with vermins I was afraid of" kind of baggae -

but the Huntress struck me as rather clear sighted so far. Hanno would not have chosen her as leader of the contingent's Heroes otherwise, after all.

So I can buy her overreacting, but I'm assuming that she had a clue to start from, whether or not she misinterpreted it. I believe her Band of Five arrived on the scene momentarily? So she might have seen something?

[zaddek](#)

Really? I didn't think it was out of character for Silver to blame her or that there was any sort of clue that Archer was responsible.

The story goes out of it's way to mention that Silver and Archer almost always fight whenever they are around each other. Her dislike of Archer is mentioned constantly in other's POV when she is brought up. That kind of baggage and that Archer was there when he died? Of course Silver made a snide comment about Archer getting him killed and Archer reacted violently. That's who they've been show (or really told since I don't think we've really seen them together in a chapter) to be.

People usually tend to act like they used to around old friends/family instead of how they currently are. Current day Silver might be clear headed, but around Archer she's going to revert (somewhat) to her mindset from back in her days studying under Ranger. Archer will too. We saw something similar with Concoctor and Archer back in Stronghold.

Shveiran

Well, sure, you are right. I agree on pretty much all counts.

I just feel that what has been described is MORE than what we saw so far, and wonder if there was an additional ingredient in the brew.

Like, this is not just a snide comment.

Silver got on the scene, witnessing an undead abomination stepping over the corpse of one of her acquaintances to cleave off the arm of another of her former bully, and then decided Archer was so much to blame for what happened to punch her in the face. That sounds to me like she actually believed, on some level, that she caused it; that Archer didn't just fail to kill the unstoppable Revenant before their companion fell.

I mean, sure, she was grieving and all that, so maybe I'm reading too much into it.

But it strikes me as the Huntress needing a catalyst to get so far so quickly.

Then again, maybe that catalyst is simply her grief over Beastmaster? it could be.

Crash

Your timeline makes no sense with the Interludes in mind. Beastmaster would have died before the band left the cave system.

That said, you're jumping at shadows in this. This makes perfect sense with the knowledge we have, a bad relationship (in which some extreme bullying, honestly even torture, you could argue, in the incident with the insects, figures heavily), some very real danger in her mission to the caves, where several revenants came after her and she only really escaped because Cat and Akua intervened, and then she comes out of that into a heavy battle where some nasty surprises came out.

Then, when it's all over, she finds out one of the people she grew up with is dead AND he was assigned with Indrani? Heck, if Indrani passed by, going about her own business, and didn't look like she was bawling her eyes out about Beastmaster's death?

There's no way the Silver Huntress didn't jump on that, to take out some of her grief as anger at a very clear target.

The knowledge we have very easily explains all this. What I would like to know is why the hells you think Indrani would be out there trying to get folks killed in the middle of this war. That is a much more pressing question.

[Liliet](#)

Don't forget John also died while on an outing with Archer. The sheer history here overrides any evidence. Archer might have been shielding him with her life right before Silver's eyes, and she'd still accuse her of being at fault, because emotions this strong and old override reason like SNAP

Morgenstern

The Troubadour was instigating, once again. I have been vaguely disappointed ever since the last chapter that Cat did not immediately go after him to make that stop, NOW, at least now that it should have become clearer what kind of threat his always instigating strife (for whatever reason; another part of his "rapaciousness"?) is. He has been doing this before (she accounted for it during the meeting of the

Villains), it seems a bad idea to not keep a closer eye on him and prevent such things, even more so in the current situation.

Shveiran

This is true. It might be the simple answer.

And I agree, I hope we are treated to a "Cat disciplines the Troubador" scene in the coming chapters.

edrey

well, cat's name would be queen something, not black queen i believe, not with the new age coming but really, the curiosity is killing me.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Lately Queen.

Crash

I hope you have an absolutely amazing week, mate.

Aston Whiteman

The whole purpose of the war imo seems to be to provide Cat with a Name and push the Bard out of the way.

Then the Dead King has access to a good/evil Named balancer who won't keep interfering.

I'm sure Cat becomes the new Bard.

I mean Cat is basically a weapon against the gods.

[Adrian_V](#)

Ok i will opine more of the chapter later when i am more awake but there is 1 big question i have: how? i mean did he move that army without anyone knowing or seeing it? I hope they Pilgrim knows how he did it.

Anomandris

Underground? Dangerous tactic doing that for human armies long distance, but not that risky for the Dead...

Matthew

I kind of hope they did...

Because the Dwarves are at war with the Dead King as well.
Cat got the Drow out of the way and essentially ceded the
entire Calernian underground to the dwarves...

The Dead King made no such treaty and the Dwarves have no
desire for the Dead King to win.

mamm0nn

But the dwarves don't control the shallow underground, you
can dig for a bit before you dig into their territory.

[Adrian V](#)

Is mostly that they are pragmatist, so long as you neither
touch a tunnel from them or find something shinny they are
happy to look the other way

Djinn O'Cide

A Zwischenzug (literally an "in-between move") is a tactical move
(usually a check or an attack which can't be ignored), which
breaks up the expected sequence of moves, with the result of a
gained tempo for the player who makes it.

For example, if you take your opponent's queen with your queen,
expecting that he'll recapture your queen on his turn, he may
instead check you—and then after you reply to the check,
recapture your queen. In this case, the check was a zwischenzug.

dadycoool

The Name begins to take shape, and the Queen SPEAKS a Decree upon
Creation.

Juff

Typo Thread:

learned as kid > learned as a kid
gambled > gamblers
as the edge > at the edge
Silber > Silver
I got nod > I got nods
to be a fresh > to be fresh
the drow the > the drow to
night: here > night: there
Even the band > Even though the band
might be limited > might have been limited
Twilight ways and > Twilight Ways and
though, it cost > though, and it cost
ways form my > ways from my
parties and found > parties had found

There was a bit (extra space in the front)
Hakam > Hakram

Javvies

I'm pretty sure that the potential Cat Name stuff is more evidence for a Name along the lines of Arbitrator (with or without descriptors).

Troubadour is suspicious. I suspect that he was helping cause trouble for personal entertainment.

Gigantes have safely arrived – that's a good thing.

On the other hand, it seems like the unexpected army gutted, or at least mauled, and effectively stopped the other army from advancing further.

And the Dead King has a tested and proven hard counter to Night. That's going to be a major problem for the Drow battlefield. In addition to the problems it causes for Cat and Akua and the drow in Procer.

Morgenstern

I wouldn't put it past them to do it for politicking as well, not just personal entertainment (though that as well, likely as not). Make way for his ambitions by shining a bad light on 'higher-ups' in the Named hierarchy. Maybe, just maybe it's even a drive to let things get so bad he might be allowed to eat a Named's soul eventually, or at least that there might be so much chaos his doing so might somehow get overlooked? (Not that this would have to work out, but he might still be speculating on it. He might be brilliant or at least sly in other ways, but he's still rapacious, after all. Probably it blinds him to seeing the hurt in his actions.)

Morgenstern

... past him .. damn you wordpress, implement an option to edit posts already.

caoimhinh

WordPress really is weird. Not only there's not an option to edit posts, but I think it needs to be customized to each site.

I have seen WordPress implemented differently on different sites, some in horrible fashion.

PGTE has the best one I have seen so far, here all comments remain neat and the thread of replies is long.

In the Wandering Inn site for example, after 2 replies on a thread, the words of the comments will start to pile up

vertically, until the point where there's only a *single line of letters*. Urgh. *Shivers*

Matthew Wells

That still happens here on mobile.

Sinead

I wonder where Mirror Knight is?

Konstantin von Karstein

Maybe he staid behind to help Klaus's army? Or he's somewhere else in the camp?

Anomandris

Or maybe he is the one that got turned rather than Klaus as people are suspecting....

Shveiran

Damn. So soon after the mentoring started? Now I'm really worried.

mamm0nn

Aw yeah. My odd-ball theory from last chapter remains feasible; Sage may have grasped DK's knowledge of ascension and is now another DK body to be used. The body has not been burned.

Also, DK has brute-forced the Grey Legion into their old groove again. The unbeatable force appearing at the worst time to check or break armies, rather than a single revenant to check a single Named. Guess that the Alliance having three or more means to counter the Grey Legion appearing really didn't sit well with him. I hope Cat makes sure to warn the Sisters that the Grey Legion may march to their front now.

Morgenstern

One would assume that the bodies have been burned, as stated as standard method before? The important bit after that statement seems to have been a) that all the bodies of the freshly dead Named **HAVE** been collected (wasn't sure for Beastmaster) and b) that Cat got to rip out aspects (before the heavily implied burning afterwards, even though it was not outright stated again in this chapter that they would do this, after having been described in the one before), but only from Revenants and Villains, not the Heroes.

What a waste, really. One would think that in such an all-or-nothing war, moral conundrums about ripping out aspects would

be trumped by pragmatism _for the time being_. Too afraid to create a precedent?

mamm0nn

If Cat has no authority to gain the body but the writing suggest it hasn't been burned yet, then it may not have been burned yet. Also Pilgrim just showed up so Providence or coincidence may have seen to them not burning the Sage yet.

panic

She spoke. She Spoooooooookkeee. Aahhhhhhhhhhhh

thearpox23

"So that's what you got out of this, Neshamah, I thought. You tested the pillars and wards on our Firstborn, and when they proved effective you used that Crab lurking around somewhere to refit your Grey Legion into drow-killers."

What absolute bull. And I do mean that. More often than not this story takes me with its good sense and structure, but there are other times like this where an obvious play is written like some sort of dramatic reveal that's supposed to shed light on Neshamah's past tactics.

The guy has an entire front to try out his tricks on the Firstborn on. And barring that, Rumena's raids over the past two years, or even random drow detachments that might be plastered in off places across the front.

Tactically speaking, testing new designs against the same army you're going to be using them against later is the absolute worst decision one could make. What if there's an imperfection and the enemy finds a way to exploit? In fact, it's missing the whole point of having a disembodied intelligence that can possess any creature under its control; the ability to have such tests to be carried out several thousands of miles away and without waiting for the opposing army to arrive.

Instead, he loses a bunch fortifications and has his elite troops twiddle their thumbs during what appears to be a last minute equipment retrofitting.

alele

Would you risk your Elite Troops with untested tech? This particular scenario made him able to test his anti-drow counter-measure against Cat. If anyone had a counter it would be her. Since no counter-stroke came he can now be assured of its current efficiency – and that it will take time for counter-measures to appear. So for now his Grey Legion will

ALWAYS beat the drow on equal engagements. The same way the alliance only recently started to use the Unravellers in big engagements recently, since they want their edge to last longer (until it gets inevitably countered) so they saved their big new reveal for this campaign only.

thearpox23

Cat is no less likely to get a counter ready within a couple days of encountering the issue than she was to have it ready from the get go. And she is only NOW seeing the thing as a serious issue. So if I want my troops to achieve anything worth a damn with my shiny new toy, then yes, I'd want it revealed where it can make a difference.

All that said, I'd like to retract my objections on account that Cat is dumb. As in, her inner thoughts elevate her own importance and miss the elephant in the room. Sage is dead. He was the one capable of countering Grey Legion's new enhancements, and Neshamah can only now commit that he is out of the way. When thinking about the tactics and strategies involved, the whole thing makes sense if Cat's monologue is off 100%.

mamm0nn

Why would she know of Sage? Named are notoriously cagey about their Aspects and don't just summarise themselves by their Role when introducing. Even if she already knows the guy, then she needs not know his specialisation.

Practicality

Honestly I think he's just intending to grind them down while luring 'em in deeper into his territory, you need to remember he is frightened enough of the WB that he for the most part stays cooped up in his territory till she loosened his leash and removed the sword from his neck, he knows Kats track record and that she has beaten the intercessors plots before so it would make sense for him to be wary while he pokes and probes her and her army for strength and weaknesses.

IIRC he also has a story driven need to be this ancient enduring evil, that suffers just enough minor setbacks to stop the gods above from sending some provenance guided prick from wiping him off the face of the planet.

If the only endgame was to stop if not kill this expedition I'd assume that he or one of his proxies would have torched (if not spread a plague to) the fields and cattle, hell he could've just send some groups of revenants aided by a flock of flying critters to intercept the supply trains.

After all Tactics win battles, logistics win wars.

Quite possibly a cat

Or Cat got the ordering wrong. DK had some antinight stuff on the drow front. Presumably this is a more refined version

Shveiran

Wouldn't the Sisters have informed her though, if that was the case?

thearpox23

Sister's can't inform Cat of jack if all your stuff is dead. And if your counters are to actually be effective and the drow overextends they should be.

That said, I'd like to repeat (because I can't edit my main post,) that all my annoyance was entirely misdirected. Cat is dumb, the reason Neshamah made the reveal now was because he managed to snipe Sage. That's why the timing is awkward, not because of the testing nonsense.

Shveiran

I was replying to Quite possibly a Cat; I meant, if a counter to the Night was displayed on the drow front, I'm pretty sure the Sisters would notice whether or not the army involved got wiped, and pass that knowledge to the remaining Generals and their Prophet.

We have been shown that they can commune with her directly and periodically do, so why wouldn't they?

caoimhinh

Well, didn't we see the previous version of this stuff in the visions that the Sisters showed Catherine back in Chapter 12: Contest?

Honestly, there were already statements on the Dead King evolving his tactics and adapting, I don't know why she and everyone insist that Neshamah "can't learn, not really" when he has shown time and time again that he is constantly learning. At most he is simply stuck in the same personality and thought patterns that he had in life or the beginnings of his undeath.

He is not a mere undead, he is the freaking god of the undead.

The visions that Sve Noc passed Catherine showed:

A) The Dead King is able to slip past the Drow scouts *with entire armies* now.

B) He has adapted his armies to fight in the different fronts and use different tactics against each host. Even having

specialized units.

C) The tactics change over time, and using a trick against him repeatedly doesn't work, which means Neshamah continues to learn.

D) The Dead King has adapted to fight Night and units that previously disrupted magic but not Night, now are capable of disrupting Night.

E) He has created artifacts that can direct Night away from the Drow down into the earth, thus rendering them unable to use the Secrets and their resurrection tricks.

So yeah, Catherine knew that the Dead King was making advances in creating Anti-Drow tactics and Anti-Night artifacts. This is simply the latest version, and it is allocated to elite troops instead of the mooks that held artifacts of similar effect in the Drow Front.

mamm0nn

What you said is pretty much correct: "At most he is simply stuck in the same personality and thought patterns that he had in life or the beginnings of his undeath." Neshamah can gain new information and think, obviously, same for Binds and Revenants. Just being able to remember Cat's name proves that much.

Your issues lie with you taking the statement too literally. Neshamah cannot learn, as in what he wasn't already able of or prone to do in life, he cannot do now. He can never make the same mistake twice and prepare for tricks pulled before, because he already knew that before ascension. He can create new magical spells (by Trismedeus theory only, probably.) to counteract Night.

But if it were him that Cat offered peace and her Winter to instead of the still alive Sisters, then she would've failed. That would be something completely new to him that he cannot learn, not even to escape WB's grasp, because it's something he wouldn't have done or known in life. And it's quite likely that his words upon introduction that he won't hold a grudge no matter what Cat does to him are true, because he never learned how to hold a grudge while alive.

Neshamah prepared for his apotheosis for a long time, it's quite likely that he knew this known undead limitations and learned all the skills he knew he'd need in the afterdeath. He can still gain and interpret information, that's not necessarily learning as they meant it.

mamm0nn

Better example: The Winter King chewed off his own foot to break the eternal cycle. This kind of unprecedented plan

is something that Dead King couldn't do, because it would be something that goes against what he was when he was first created.

DK is more like the other fey: As much as he can learn and interpret and interact, he cannot truly change certain inherent and stubborn traits that lay at the heart of him. His are more subtle and less meant to be exploited, but they're there somewhere, camouflaged by his personality and mystique.

Salt

That doesn't make any sense. At all.

You have to test it on Drow wielding Night to see if his counter magic works, before relying on it in a critical situation. If he tests it on any Mighty anywhere in the world, no matter how secretively, the Sisters will know about it because the ARE Night itself, this was explicitly mentioned. He can't hide the existence of the damned things from the Sisters seeing through Mighty eyes any more than Cat can hide weapons from him seeing through Revenant eyes.

And as for whether or not the Dead King knows the Night works this way? Of course he does. He's literally the original mortal that went through Apotheosis as a minor god that sees through the eyes of their minions. He'd have to be an absolute idiot to not suspect that the exact same applies to the sisters who went through the same kind of Apotheosis. He'd all but know for a certainty after the first time a tactic he tried on one battlefield was suddenly made public knowledge to all Drow on every battlefield, and you bet your sweet ass that in a protracted war this has happened at least once.

At which point the question is, will the Sisters tell their literal high priestess who is actively fighting a war against the Dead King about his newly developed weapons? Well, yeah. Of course they will. So why in the world would the Dead King bother wasting fruitless effort trying to hide it?

IDKWhoitis

Can't be too happy about calling it...

Well that leaves which brand of fuckery is Nesh going to try to block off Twilight tactics. And the actual damage report of the other army. I'm betting on them having faced 50% casualties. Nesh wouldn't destroy the army, as that would spawn heroes and give too much weight to Above, but he would savage it to the point of being a heavy cost.

beleester

I had to go back and reread the chapter with the battle plan (Chapter 47), because I'd completely forgotten what those cities were and what Klaus was supposed to be doing with them.

Short recap: Malmedit controls the network of tunnels that the Dead King is using to send in reinforcements. Juvelun is a nearby fortress-town that holds a big army. Klaus's job was to bait out the force at Juvelun by threatening Malmedit. Ideally he'd take the city, collapse the tunnels, and then turn around to destroy the Juvelun army, but he's mostly a distraction – so long as he's out there, he's stopping the armies from reinforcing Hainaut.

So Klaus found himself sandwiched between an army of 100k (big, but something he expected to defeat), and a new army of 200k (probably too big). Not great, but remember, he was the distraction – if Klaus retreats in good shape, then he's still keeping 300k dead soldiers busy. And the main thrust is still going to threaten the capital on schedule. And "What if this missing army moves to stop one of the prongs of our assault?" had to be at the top of the list in contingency planning, so I'm pretty confident Klaus's army can handle itself.

No, my question is, why was it there to begin with? Did the DK just pick one of the three prongs and decide to smash it as hard as he could? Or is there something big in Malmedit that he was looking to protect?

Shveiran

I was going to say that Neshamah could smash the army with that kind of numerical superiority and that he could chase it with the tireless undeads.

Then I remembered that if it looks like they are getting sandwiched, Klaus can retreat to the Twilight Ways.

caoimhinh

I'm sure they will be some reason why they can't just do that. At least not without taking many casualties. Cat's current Field Army was able to open 72 gates, which is a damnably low number when your army numbers hundreds of thousands. Besides, it was said that "most weren't even large enough for two people, with a mere twenty of proper size to let carts and engines through". and undead mages can mess with them if they are nearby.

So as an evacuation measure, the Twilight Ways are only really usable for the Drow as they all have Night and thus are able to get in the Twilight Ways easier than other species. Back in chapter 57: Battery, it only took them "30 breaths" to evacuate a host of close to ten thousand. If the human armies wanted to evacuate while under attack,

they would need to open the gates and evacuate while large parts of them are keeping the attacking undead at bay, and once the undead army gets close the gates would get disrupted.

That said, the Twilight Ways are still horribly underused.

Just opening a gate under a Revenant would be enough to destroy it as the whole realm would violently burn them. And this should be a weaponized method for Catherine as she can simply *will it* for gates to be made around her. She barely needs a flick of the wrist to open one. The Drow too should have developed techniques to do similar things. Like, when the dead are breaching the Gloom, open a gate to Twilight right in front of that breach, it would at the very least buy some time and at best it would be like an artillery blast that would destroy any undead nearby.

And I still strongly object to having the supply lines going through Creation instead of through the Twilight Ways. It seems horribly inefficient and also an unnecessary risk.

Daniel E

Oof, in every sense of the word. Even going on the assumption that Klau's forces escaped through Twilight, I'm betting they got whooped hard; half dead or crippled. This sounds like a move that could only come from DK's star General, The Prince of Bones, which would explain why he wasn't with the Grey Legion. On a lighter note, Cat starting to get her Name powers back is very cool. I'm still thinking that her Name will formally be 'Intercessor', since Wandering Bard only has it attributed as a nickname / insult.

Crash

Something completely unimportant but have we heard of the Early Bell before? I can't remember it.

Morning bell is most likely 8am so would this be 4am?

(Sidenote: what kind of absolute bastard rings a bell at 4 am, the real monster.)

caoimhinh

No, this is the first time "Early Bell" was mentioned. It seems to be equivalent to "First Bell" which was mentioned before.

Although it has never been properly explained, it was intuited that each Bell is 4 hours, and yeah First Bell corresponds to 4 a.m.

There are 6 Bells:

First Bell -or Early Bell in this chapter- (4 a.m), Morning Bell (8 a.m), Noon Bell (12 m), Afternoon Bell (4 p.m), Evening Bell (8 p.m), and Midnight Bell (12 a.m).

P.S: many people have to wake up at 4 a.m to get ready for the day's work, even in our modern world. From personal experience, I know this is true for farmers and ranchers, but many other professions, especially those of low and mid socioeconomic stratum, also wake up at those ungodly hours.

Crash

I'm aware, I was one of those people for a while. Ringing a bell at that time tho? Heck no bud. Wake up the whole town for funsies.

Also yeah, that checks out with the bells I knew (tough I didn't remember first bell either haha)

[tigerquoll](#)

Typos

The Silber Huntress blinked in discomfort, then reluctantly stabbed her spear into the ground. -> the Silver Huntress

I got nod. -> I got nods?

Even the band was a good one, well-fitted, I suspected that in her eyes ... -> Even if the band?

I'd seen the Grey Legion before, those hulking dead encased in armour so thick it more of a rampart. -> it was more a rampant?

[Liliet](#)

Rampart is right, it's fortification

Frivolous

I believe the heroes of the Alliance will soon become (even more) terrified of Catherine, once word gets out that she can Speak.

The information leak will probably be through Alexis, once she reports on the occurrence to Hanno. Hanno will of course warn his heroes that Catherine can Speak, and that they should avoid provoking her into Speaking at them.

I think it will be really really good (or bad, depending) for Cat's reputation that she can Speak to heroes, and that the first person she Spoke to was a hero. She can now tell Valiant Champion to screw herself and Rafaella would be forced to do it. And Cat has a very good reason to bully Rafaella.

I wonder if the Truce and Terms have any clause that mentions exactly what kind of punishments can be given to heroes by the rep for the villains.

Hell, Cat could now Speak to Hanno. What does it mean for the Truce and Terms when the rep for the villains can Speak to the rep for the heroes? What are the limits of Speaking? Can Cat now tell Hanno to give orders to heroes, without giving away that he's operating under her command?

Could Cat duplicate Malicia's trick of implanting subliminal commands?

In other news: I wonder what Klaus knows about the Alliance's overall strategy. What military and political secrets could Klaus the Bind give over to Keter? It's horrifying to think of.

Can Klaus fight the Dead King's power over him even temporarily? That is a really important question now.

Abrakadabra

Nah, you are overselling speaking.

caoimhinh

- 1) You are overthinking stuff
- 2) The kind of punishments that can be given to heroes by the rep for the villains is exactly NONE. Hanno is the only one who can punish heroes and Cat is the only one who can punish Villains. Unless extraordinary circumstances arise, like self-defense or preventing the death of an ally.
- 3) Speaking is not that powerful, and not that easy to use. Many Named can Speak, but not all make a great thing out of it. There's a reason only Malicia is so dangerous with it.
- 4) We don't know if Klaus is dead yet. Nor if the army under Klaus is gone. Odds are that the situation is dire, but it's not yet unsalvageable.

Frivolous

You must have missed how Cat was able to dock the pay of the Silver Huntress in this very chapter. So she can definitely punish heroes. Unless you think that docking someone's pay is not a punishment? I'm truly uncertain how much heroes value things like money.

Therefore it's only the extent to which Cat can punish heroes that is uncertain.

I think you must also have forgotten that Black was able to Speak to Akua and make her stab herself with her own knife.

If self-injury is on the table, making Rafaella do something dishonorable could also be possible.

Cat was strong in Speaking even when she had the transitional Name of Squire. When she has a mature Name, I suspect she'll be Malicia's equal. And she's more subtle and crafty than she once was.

To explain why I think Cat will be able to match Malicia – Remember that her Name started to arise when she declared to Tariq and Hanno that she would put the East, meaning Praes, in order. To defeat Malicia, she must in some way be Malicia's equal.

Thinking Klaus is still alive seems very optimistic to me, but I grant that maybe the worst was indeed avoided. I really hope so, actually. I quite like and admire Klaus.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat can dock the Huntress' pay and alter assignments, because Cat is her commander – she could do the same for any other person under her command, Named or otherwise.

Isaac Martinez

Cat is a thresher.

She doesn't judge in base of morality, or wills. She jugdes the Act, not the Conviction. So, I don't think Justice have anything to do here.

She is a fervor believer in consequences and is a woman of her word.

She looks for peace, but is not afraid of looking the hard way.

She is the daughter of the Carrion Lord, looking for trinkets between the dead. And is a good friend of Crows.

Creepcluster

Would it not be funny if Cat became "Dread Empress of Callow" and Amadeus became "Good King of Praes".

Just had the thought

Frivolous

That would be funny, yes.

Chapter 61: Adouber

"Fear is the prerequisite to any genuine learning; anything that can be learnt without questioning the foundations of your world is essentially decorative."

– Dread Emperor Sorcerous

It was easy to forget that the Grey Pilgrim was, for all the power of his Name and the favour of the Ophanim, very much mortal. An old man with an old man's frailties, whose relentless march towards my camp had brought to the brink of collapse. His loose grey robes looked half made of dust and even drabber than usual, his rheumy blue were clouded with exhaustion. It made me uncomfortable to look at, someone of that strength so openly at the end of their rope. His brandy was sipped at carefully and he declined my offer of sending for a warm meal, claiming that exhausted as he was he'd probably retch it right out. After gathering his bearings some, the Peregrine needed no prompting to begin speaking.

"The campaign went well, at first," Tariq said. "The Enemy's raids were heavy and sustained, but we held strong through the days and the nights belonged to the Firstborn."

I'd poured myself a cup of brandy as well before dropping back into my seat. I had a feeling I was going to need a stiff drink before this conversation came to an end, and maybe second when it had.

"The last messenger I got from your column told me the army was preparing to pass Juvelun," I said.

The Iron Prince's part of the campaign plan had been relatively straightforward, when it came down to it. His smaller column – fifty-four thousand to my seventy – had left days earlier than mine from one of our defensive strongholds to the east of Neustal, just north of the town of Cassain. It'd then quickly advanced north along the old mining roads. Our intention had been for Prince Klaus' army to draw the undead army at the town of Juvelun into battle, as the town sat over a passage through the hills towards the central valley where the capital lay, the army holding it also being the undead force closest to said capital.

Unfortunately the army in question had refused to leave Juvelun, instead remaining in a dug-in and defensible position that it would be difficult for Prince Klaus' numerically inferior army to invest. We'd anticipated that was a possibility, though, and planned accordingly. To the north, further up the mining road,

lay the city of Malmedit. To the Dead King it was a place of some strategic importance, as the mine shafts surrounding the city had been connected to tunnels he'd had dug through the northern hills and he now used Malmedit as a major staging area to pour warbands into the lowlands of Hainaut.

If the Iron Prince made it to Malmedit he could collapse the tunnels, which would be a significant setback for Keter. Knowing that, our working assumption had been that if Prince Klaus' army kept marching north towards the city the undead army in Juvelun would *have* to engage him: the Dead King would just be pissing away his eastern road into Hainaut otherwise. Yet we had, it seemed, made a grievous mistake along the way.

"The plan seemed a success for the first few days of the march on Malmedit," the Peregrine said. "Raiding parties began harassing our supply lines, and though young Hanno kept them open sword in hand our generals believed this to be the prelude to an enemy attack against our back."

The old man paused, pressing down an errant tuft of white hair from the sparse crown around his head and sipping at his brandy.

"Yet the days passed," the Grey Pilgrim said, "and that attack failed to take place."

I grimaced. That'd be the point where I would have smelled a trap, so I refused to believe that a commander as experienced as the Prince of Hannover had not.

"I'm guessing he ordered a heavy war party forward as reconnaissance," I said.

Suspicious as he would be, Prince Klaus wouldn't have turned back at the first suspicion. The Dead King could have been bluffing, or simply writing off Malmedit as a lost cause while focusing his attention elsewhere. In his place I would have encamped relatively close to the force I *knew* I could handle in a pitched battle – the Juvelun army – and sent out a strong contingent to probe the enemy's defenses ahead.

"Six thousand horse," Tariq agreed. "With the Witch of the Woods as magical muscle and two champions to escort her. One day shy of Malmedit itself they ran into the enemy's own vanguard."

I drank from my cup, fingers tight around the silver. With horses and that calibre of sorcery on their side, they would have gotten away mostly clean. It was the strategic situation being described that had me aghast. The Grey Pilgrim had earlier intimated that the army two hundred thousand we'd thought in the far north of the principality had been the one waiting for our eastern column in Malmedit, which meant pressing an attack forward against it would have been suicide. The Iron Prince would suddenly have

found himself stuck between a massive force to the north and a smaller one to the southwest, the latter even being able to cut his supply lines if it was willing to bleed for it – and when was Keter ever unwilling to bleed?

“How bad was it?” I grimly asked.

“Even using the Twilight Ways, the war party only returned quickly enough to give us two days of forewarning,” the old man said.

Which sounded like a lot, if you’d never commanded an army. But I had and so I knew they were ungainly, lumbering things. Especially when being made to turn around.

“You retreated, I assume,” I slowly said.

“That was our intent,” Tariq said. “Until the Young Slayer and the Harrowed Witch found an enemy raiding party to our south yet strangely heading away from the army, further south. They followed it down and-”

My eyes narrowed. The pieces were falling into place.

“- found the dead dismantling the mining road,” I finished quietly.

The old man nodded. So that’d been Neshamah’s game: by ripping up the road, he was making sure that even if the Iron Prince’s army tried to march back to our defensive lines it’d be slowed enough that his large ambush army marching south from Malmedit would be able to catch up to it. That left only the Twilight Ways as a way out, but even that was... risky. Not on a tactical level, I meant. With two days of warning, an evacuation would be quite possible: so long as he wasn’t under attack, with a pharos device Prince Klaus should be able to shift his entire army into the Ways in a few hours. On a strategic level, though, his disappearance could lead to a disaster.

If the Iron Prince bailed on the eastern theatre of our campaign entirely, there would be nothing standing between a massive army of two hundred thousand – maybe even three hundred thousand, if the army in Juvelun joined forces when it passed near – and our dangerously bare defensive lines. Our reserve was already marching on the Cigelin Sisters, meaning all that was left there was the reinforcements from Daoine under Vivienne and a fresh wave of Proceran conscripts. Klaus could instead take his army back to our defensive lines, but if he did then he was leaving my column out to hang: all enemy armies would converge on my army and even with the Ways there was no possible way for him to reinforce me in time.

He read us like a book, I admitted to myself. The Dead King had seen us coming and now we were being made to bleed for it. I couldn't even claim that at least that fucking surprise army in Malmedit had flushed out Keter's hidden hand: we'd found *that* missing force, sure, but only after the *other* force of one hundred and fifty thousand in Luciennerie had vanished into thin air. The wily old monster had managed to keep the story of his 'hidden threat' going even after revealing another hidden threat – he'd baked a second cake while eating the first one, so he quite literally got to eat his cake and have it too. Gods but I hated fighting the fucking Dead King.

Tariq had kept silently sipping at his drink, letting me wrestle my thoughts into place, but when he saw my attention fully return to him he set the cup down.

"And after?" I simply asked.

I'd been able to make decent guesses as to what the Iron Prince would have done until then, with the benefit of multiple sources of information and insight, but now we were out in the wilds. I'd never fought the old prince on the field, and records of his campaigns against the ratlings and the dead were near nonexistent – Lycaonese marked only victories, defeats and tallies of the dead. Anything else was considered pettily boastful. And while the Iron Prince's victories during the Great War were much better known, they'd been won waging a very different sort of war. I wasn't sure what I would have done in his place, much less what would have gone through the Prince of Hannover's mind at that crossroads.

"A war council was called," Tariq said. "And after some debate, it was agreed on that the wisest course would be to attack the enemy army in Juvelun to break through."

My brow rose and I forced myself to think. I could see the sense in it, squinting a bit, from his point of view. Assuming my column broke through with swift victories at the Cigelin Sisters and Lauzon's Hollow, seizing Juvelun would allow us to link our armies in the central valley of Hainaut. The undead army from Malmedit would still be able to march south on our defences, but at that point our unified force could answer by leaving a strong garrison at Cigelin and then outmarch that army of the dead through the Ways. A neat trick, turning the destruction of the mining road against those who'd done it. Sure he'd take losses taking Juvelun from pushing out the dead, an uncomfortable amount of them, but it would salvage the strategic situation.

The problem was that Klaus Papenheim didn't know that the army in Luciennerie had disappeared: I'd tried to send messengers, but I very much doubted they'd made it through the gauntlet the Grey Pilgrim had described. Another army had vanished into thin air, and rubies to piglets that it was going to reappear near the

capital around the time we finally took the Sisters. You know, right between a bloodied Papenheim and my own forces as the even larger Malmedit army marched on the Iron Prince's back. That was going to turn into a bloody, ruinous mess.

"You were there for the battle?" I asked.

"I left before," Tariq said. "Of all our Bestowed it was agreed I had the best chance of making it to you unharmed and in good time, so the duty fell to me. The battle for Juvelun will have taken place by now, but the outcome is known to neither myself nor the Ophanim."

I slowly nodded.

"You arrived in time," I admitted. "What you just told me will influence our pace quite a bit: I can no longer afford to take my time wiping out the remains of the enemy here and reducing the Sisters if the other column is in danger of a wipeout. We'll have to hurry forward."

Which was compounding risks with risk, I grimly thought. Already the Iron Prince had rolled the dice on taking Juvelun, and now I was going to have to rush taking Cigelin or his efforts might be in vain. The illusion of control we'd had when this campaign had begun, that bold armada of plans and schemes, was now dead and buried. We'd gained tactical victories but we were headed towards a strategic disaster. The only way to salvage this now was to push forward and through. *If we don't, all that's left is measuring the scale of the losses we'll incur.* I drained the rest of my cup, letting the warmth pour down my throat, and set the silver down.

Gods, silver. Who would have thought I'd end up drinking in that one day, when I'd first started sneaking sips of beer at the- I froze. Oh, *oh*. Fuck me, I'd had the clues all along hadn't I? I knew the movements, I even knew how the enemy thought of us. I'd just not put them together, taken that last step.

"It's a rat trap," I murmured.

Limpid blue eyes narrowed at me, the exhausted old man turning back into the Peregrine in a heartbeat. The marks of bone-deep weariness were still there, but the flame had lit again.

"Explain," Tariq demanded.

"Back when I worked in a tavern," I said, "the owner would make these little rectangular boxes with the front almost open and bread at the end. It'd have a 'door' angled like this-"

I formed a roof with one palm, and angled another palm inwards to represent the door.

"- so that the rats would go after the bread and push the door up a bit. Only when they were inside the box-"

"They found the 'door' couldn't be pushed to let them out, as the wood only bent one way," the Grey Pilgrim quietly interrupted. "I've seen their like before, they are used in Levant as well."

"That bridge up north is our bread," I said. "It's not fake, I wouldn't think. If it does get built we're in a load of trouble, and we might actually lose this war the regular way. But that's not why the Dead King built it."

"He wanted us to enter the trap," Tariq said.

He wasn't getting it, though, I could hear it in his voice. A trap was a trap, to him, and it'd never been in doubt we'd fallen for one. I spelled it out more bluntly for him.

"You don't make a rat trap to protect the bread, Pilgrim," I said. "You make it to *kill the rat*."

The old man frowned.

"He means to destroy our armies," the Grey Pilgrim slowly said. "The battles, the bridge, even the capital – none of it means anything to him. Even if he loses all of Hainaut, so long as our armies are destroyed he doesn't care."

"It's all expendable," I agreed. "The army that disappeared from Luciennerie could be assaulting our defence lines around now, with an even larger army headed down the mining road to attack the eastern strongholds – with our own armies so far, and kept in the dark by lack of scrying, he might actually have had a shot at breaking through and into Brabant. But he didn't even try, because what he wants is to trap us in the central valley and annihilate us. Not in one big battle where the odds are so utterly stacked against him-"

Which we'd probably win, given the amount of heroes in our ranks.

"- but in smaller engagements that will bleed us dry, be they victories or defeats," Tariq muttered.

He didn't disagree with my assessment, finger circling the rim of his cup.

"But why the sudden obsession with the armies in Hainaut?" he finally asked. "What changed?"

I'd been wondering the same thing.

"The Gigantes came up on our side," I tried.

"Not in force," Tariq said. "They commit to help, not alliance."

"He might not know that," I said.

"Might is a thin foundation to build on," the Peregrine said.
"Perhaps the Hierophant's work in the Arsenal?"

"It might spook him into coming after us this hard," I admitted.
"Masego knows a lot more about him than can be comfortable for the likes of the Dead King. But the secrecy around Quartered Seasons was well-kept, Tariq. We were paranoid, and there's been breaches but I don't believe Malicia got through and so he should still be largely blind."

The Peregrine smiled sadly.

"You fight the Bard, Catherine," he said. "Neither walls nor locks nor oaths are enough to keep her from learning secrets if she wishes to know them."

I blinked.

"You think she sold us out to the Dead King?" I skeptically said.
"If there's one person I'd buy she *wouldn't* sell us out to, it'd be him. What would she even-"

I froze the dreadful thought that came all too soon. The Grey Pilgrim sighed.

"So he comes after us with his entire hateful might," Tariq said.
"So we suffer a stinging defeat at his hands and, like children in the dark, we pray for deliverance by our own guardian angel."

I rose to pour myself a second goddamn drink, and when the Pilgrim silently extended his own empty cup I filled it without qualms.

"I thought you trusted her," I finally said.

"I did," Tariq tiredly said. "And now I don't. If you live long enough, Catherine, you will find that time warps even the bonds you believed unshakable. And that we are never so wise as we think, even when we believe ourselves to be fools."

I held my tongue, even though it would have been pretty easy to stick a dagger or two in him now considering how badly we'd butted heads over the Intercessor over the years. It'd been a rough year for everyone, and there was no need for allies to make it worse.

"I got the shivers when you said that," I finally said, "and it makes me sick to even consider. So I'd tend to think you read this right. But he's not coming at us with his full might, Tariq. I've seen the battles up north he wages against the drow, and they're..."

I blew out a breath. In the back of my mind old words came to me as a harsh refrain. *Where are the devils, Catherine?* the Intercessor had once asked me. *Where are the hosts that darken the skies, and the demons he has kept leashed for centuries? Where are the rituals that poison the land and the sorceries never before seen?*

"Well, he's pulling out tricks there we haven't seen down here," I said. "And I know he has more: we haven't seen either devils or demons yet, for one, and he's perfectly capable of calling on both."

The old man shook his head.

"He cannot use either," Tariq said. "It would represent too steep an increase in strength on his side of the scales, Catherine. Providence would allow us to bridge the gap, and the last thing the Dead King wants is a war of equals with such power in play: it would put his forces at a genuine risk of annihilation."

The Grey Pilgrim leaned back into his seat.

"He has been most careful to limit his efforts to grinding us into dust by attrition for good reason," Tariq continued. "It is a method of victory that involves very little risk for him and has proved difficult to handle."

I frowned. That... held up somewhat, I supposed. I honestly wasn't sure what providence would be able to spit out to even the odds, but arguably that was rather the point. I'd known for a long time there was a risk to villains winning by too large or obvious a margin – invincibility as a prelude to failure, my father had once phrase it – but I'd not considered that on the scale the Pilgrim had. It was the crusading mindset, I supposed. It was not only battles and Named that had a story, but the crusade itself. It was what I knew of the Dead King's rise to power that had me inclined to believe the Peregrine: carefulness had always been his priority back then, even if it meant slowing his advance.

He'd always preferred giving his enemies no opening to swift victories.

"This changes things," I finally said.

He wetted his lips, sipping at the brandy.

"Does it?" the Peregrine asked. "Retreating serves no purpose. We are committed to war, even knowing his intentions are different than we'd expected."

I went rifling through my pockets for my pipe, the long shaft of dragonbone that Masego had gifted me years ago comforting to the touch. A packet of wakeleaf, still from the White Knight's gift,

was carefully stuffed and I lit the leaf by tapping a finger against the rim and letting black flames slither in. I breathed in deep, the acrid smoke filling my lungs before I breathed out a long stream of it upwards.

"If it's our armies that are in his sights, it means he's gotten sloppy elsewhere," I said. "His resources aren't unlimited, and while it might seem like this trap has been years in the making I'd wager it's a lot more hastily assembled than that."

"The Intercessor would not have wanted him to win cleanly, that is true," the Pilgrim mused. "The more costly the victory to him the better, in her eyes, and that means a warning as late as she could feasibly give it."

I grunted in agreement, pulling at my pipe and blowing out a ring of smoke.

"We thought he'd guard that bridge up north like it was his own baby," I said, "but I'd wager it's been stripped clean. Sure we still can't account for the Luciennerie army, but it can't *teleport* – there's no way it could have gone all the way up there so quickly."

"You're suggesting a raid," Tariq said, sounding genuinely surprised.

"I am," I replied. "First we'll need to reunite with Prince Klaus' army, but when do I believe we need to send at least one band of five up north to demolish that bridge. We won't get that opportunity twice."

"You suggest sending away five Bestowed, and they would have to be among our most powerful to have a real chance of succeeding, before a series of battle that promise to be the decisive clash of this war," the Pilgrim slowly said. "That is... bold."

Which meant he'd wanted to say foolish, I amusedly thought, but my favourable record against him had earned a more diplomatic phrasing.

"We can argue the point later," I dismissed, "but I'd be a mistake to find out at this late hour we lack the stomach to take opportunities when they are afforded us. Regardless, we now need to move forward as quickly as we can and link with Prince Klaus' column. If you rest through the rest of the day, will you be fighting fit tomorrow?"

"A few hours will have me back on my feet," Tariq hesitatingly said. "I have never needed much sleep, and less so after I was blessed with the friendship of the Ophanim."

He kept hesitating, so I cocked an eyebrow at him. It finally moved him to speak.

"You seem... invigorated," the Grey Pilgrim said, and raised a hand as if to ward off a protest. "I mean no ill by it, only that a conversation that would have set others to despair seems instead to have lit a fire in you."

Had it? I pulled at my pipe, considering it, then ultimately shrugged.

"This is the most confident I've felt about this campaign since it started," I admitted.

The old man started in surprise.

"I take it you're not making sport of me," Tariq said.

I nodded and, to my own surprise, he snorted.

"Ashen Gods, *why?*" he asked. "I do not believe this will end in tears, though many will be shed along the way, but little of the news I brought you strike me as sources of confidence. The Enemy has fooled us and led us into great peril."

"It was always going to get ugly," I frankly said. "But now we knew the forces in motion, Pilgrim. We know – or have a good guess, at the very least – why the Dead King is acting now, what it is he is after and where all those things sit in the greater tapestry of the war. For the first time since our armies went marching north, we are no longer blind. We can finally find a way to win, and I mean *properly* win. Not just survive by the skin of our teeth or settle for a bloody draw."

My fingers were already itching for ink and paper as well as a quiet place to think. Oh, we were in the pit for sure. I was pretty sure the Iron Prince was about to get stuck between two large armies while I caught up, and if either of us made a mistake then this could turn into the single worst military defeat the Grand Alliance had suffered since the beginning of the war. Hells, it could turn into the kind of defeat it was simply impossible to recover from by sheer dint of lives and resources lost. But this pit, it was an old friend. I'd been here before, through my own mistakes and the machinations of others, and the feeling of the bottom of the barrel under my feet did not scare me.

I grinned at the Grey Pilgrim, baring my teeth ferally.

"It's the eleventh hour, Peregrine," I said. "Midnight Bell is on the verge, and when it rings we'll all have to pay our dues, but the song isn't over. Not yet."

"You have a plan, then?" Tariq Fleetfoot asked.

Blue eyes in a tanned face met my gaze, and in there I found a light that was not Light – no, that one was entirely his own. It was cold and patient and ruthless in a way that even some of my kind would blanch at, qualities that a lifetime of service to the Choir of Mercy had sharpened into a razor's edge. There wasn't a lot a man like the Grey Pilgrim wouldn't do, for the sake of the world. Looking into those eyes, I wondered if there was really anything at all.

"I have the bare bones of one," I said. "It begins by taking back the initiative."

"There are still enemies ahead of you," Tariq said. "The remnant of the army that held Lauzon's Hollow, as I understand it, now heading towards the Cigelin Sisters."

"And that force needs to be destroyed," I agreed, "but I don't need our entire army to do that. Not when our reserve under General Pallas will be joining the fray as well."

"You would split your host in two," the Pilgrim said. "And then take half to relieve the Iron Prince?"

"We're going to do better than that, Tariq," I said, rising to my feet.

I went looking through my desk, opening drawers until I found what I wanted: a small scroll, inked by Scribe's own hand. It was a neat, lovely map of the Principality of Hainaut whose accuracy meant it was probably worth as much a herd of horses. I unfolded it across the table, gesturing for the Pilgrim to come closer as I set down a bottle on one corner to keep it down and an empty inkwell on the other.

"If Prince Klaus won the battle for Juvelun," I said, tapping the town with a finger, "then right now he's marching into the central valley of Hainaut, what the locals call the highlands."

"And you believe an enemy army, the one that was once in Luciennerie, will have travelled unseen to strike him by surprise there," the Pilgrim said.

"I do," I said. "But I also think that the Dead King believes us more conservative in our attack than we actually have been: there's nothing about the way his troops are moving that even hints at his being aware that the Cigelin Sisters are about to be attacked by General Pallas. So from his point of view, even if a hero like you manages to bring word about what happened to the Prince Klaus' column I'll still be stuck here clearing out the dead heading towards the Sisters."

It actually shed some light on why the army defending Lauzon's Hollow had been so willing to retreat, even considering the bloody nose I'd given it. At this point holding the Hollow was no longer a strategic priority for him, it was a lot more important to tie down my army for a few more days while he finished mopping up Klaus Papenheim's column. And the worse was that the Dead King wasn't even wrong about my needing to clear out the dead ahead of us. It wasn't a force that I could afford leaving at my back while taking the Ways to reinforce the Iron Prince. If I did, I would then be stuck with a massive army behind enemy lines and with no supply lines. Hells, at that point he would barely even need to fight: he could just keep harassing us and let starvation do the work for him.

Fortunately, General Pallas was still in the wind and about to make her bite felt.

"I'll be leaving behind the Third Army and half the Firstborn along with some of the Proceran fantassins, but most of my army will be headed..."

I trailed off, leaning forward and squinting at the map before finally laying a finger at the height of halfway up the stretch of Julianne's Highway connecting the Sisters to the capital, but a little to the east.

"There," I finished.

The old man's gaze followed my finger, taking in the map as he considered it all in silence.

"And what is it that you intend to do in the middle of nowhere?" the Grey Pilgrim finally asked.

I breathed in deep of the wakeleaf, enjoying the burn and taking my time before spewing out a stream of grey smoke. I smiled coldly at the Peregrine.

"Why, Tariq, but we're going to ambush the force about to ambush the Iron Prince."

Djinn O'Cide

"Adouber" quite probably continues the chess motif, although it's not used in this particular form very often. In tournament chess, if you touch a piece, you need to move that piece. If you just want to put a piece back in the center of it's square, you need to alert your opponent of that intention by saying (before you

touch the piece) "J'adoube", which is French for "I adjust". Adouber would be the infinitive form of that verb, and thus mean "to adjust".

[Liliet](#)

NICE

NerfGlaistigUaine

Huh. In the chess tournaments I played in we just said "Touch." Admittedly they were all amateur but "J'adoube" sounds a bit tacky.

[Daniel](#)

Tacky? No, it is stylish, perhaps flamboyant. Proverbs, even.

Crash

Aspect confirmed.

stevenneiman

I used to go to chess tournaments, and I remember that rule but we would just say "adjust" in English.

[sengachi](#)

Oh that is a *hell* of a chapter name.

Esharro

Adouber does not mean to adjust in french. It means to confirm, to validate. It was the name of the ceremony to knight someone.

[Javvies](#)

Fucking Bard.

Hah! Finally, Cat's not working blind – she knows enough to figure out what's going on. And now she's can properly plot and plan.

Heh. Ambush the would be ambushers. That's going to be quite useful. After all, it's said that the only thing worse than getting ambushed is thinking you're doing the ambushing when the other guys know you're there.

Sparsebeard

We are once again reminded of the true antagonist. Sure Cat is fighting the Dead King, but it's the Bard she's playing against... and the king is but an important piece.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The fact that the true antagonist's plan revolves around careful deployment of a king meshes so well with the recent chess motif. No doubt part of why EE went with said motif to begin with.

Gippart

Even more fitting if you consider the sides at play as Cat vs. Cat's enemies. You have a king whose movement is heavily restricted, whose death will result in the loss of every other piece on the board. And a queen who can appear and disappear nearly anywhere following certain rules, solely holding more power than any other piece could dream.

Fits both Cordelia/Cat and DK/WB as the king/queen motif. More complicated than that when you add in all of the details, but it's a good likeness.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

It's things like this that make this my by far most favorite web serial, and puts it into my total top 10 books as a whole.

Well done once more, EE!

miles

Heck the dead king isn't even a king in this game. He's more of a rook.

Useful to leave in the starting position until the late game, ready for a defensive surprise, but mostly just devastating once the board is sufficiently cleared.

[vernal.ancient](#)

"...we are never so wise as we think, even when we believe ourselves to be fools."
Wise words.

How is the strategizing before the fight consistently just as interesting as the fight itself in this series? I love it

Levi Kalden

More interesting

TeK

At some point this became too smart for me. On the other hand: more interludes!

Mennolt van Alten

This is meant to show the genius of the greatest commander of this age, so it makes sense if we cannot completely follow why Cat thinks things are the way she thinks they are or replicate her reasoning. But most individual points make sense to me, like how she cannot leave her back open, the move of the dead king to pincer the Iron Prince, and the idea that if Cat knows where the ambush is (which is probably what she was thinking about while looking at the map and deciding where to go) she can counter-ambush it.

[Liliet](#)

[Casey Glick](#)

Will the Gigantes' warding prevent the Dead from crossing the Tomb at the point of the bridge? If so, wouldn't it make more sense to keep the bridge as the warding goes up, pinning the Dead Armies against the water? Or perhaps the warding could only go up once the dead were gone?

[Mental Mouse](#)

More generally, what options does Cat gain from the Gigantes?

[Liliet](#)

What do you mean?

It won't prevent the dead from crossing the bridge. To pin them against the water, on either side, the bridge needs to go down.

Cat's side literally doesn't need it – *their armies can teleport*.

Yes, I'm still reveling in the sheer absurdity of this logistical advantage. Go go ill-advised fae bargains!

Frivolous

Yes! Klaus didn't get killed and raised as a Bind after all. Yes!

Forum Solipsist

Captain is gone, but it was a name.

Black Knight and White Knight are often looked to as leaders of their respective sides.

At one point Warlord seemed like a potential Name for Cat, but this is so much bigger and longer in the making. Able to

command both sides and bend them to her will, forming alliances and making the whole world dance to her tune with no pretensions to ruling afterwards.

I think we are witnessing the birth of a "General" and possibly a neutral name at that.

Shveiran

She has the skill and the requisites, but not the aspiration: her dream is one of peace and regulations imposed on the great game of the gods.

That is where her story is headed, and that story's protagonist will not be called General.

I do not know what she'll be called. But it will not be a purely militaristic Name; of that I'm quite certain.

Crash

The military names are becoming the new -insert adjective-Knight

I'm gonna join in, Cat's new Name is Squire (Redux)!

Ninestrings

Verb. adouber. to dub (bestow the title of knight upon) to name (a minister, successor etc.) to adjust a piece in a board game, such as chess or backgammon.

All definitions work, wild.

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, so the Grey Pilgrim was just playing messenger. The story could still go either way on Klaus' army being annihilated at this point, but they were still kicking when Grey left.

This is going to get really chaotic, really quickly. If Cat's rapidly approaching Name was planning on providing an aspect related to commanding multiple forces across vast distances, now would be the time.

LarsBlitzer

Agreed on Cat's Name being very martial. She's on the cusp of it becoming, and at her choice as well. Remember her card game with the intercessor; she was being guided onto the story grooves of something like Outlaw Queen, a Robin Hood trope according to the song that came to her time and time again leading up to it. She staved it off differently than the First Prince. Instead of outright refusal she feigned ignorance and acted contrary to type. I'm calling the ambush of the ambushers to be when she gets the full whammy.

Itarion

It's not a general's Name, it's a magister's. We've seen the name stir while she has been passing judgement. It's a Name that follows from the Terms, and especially the intention of the Accords. Cat intends to make new Laws, Laws that have dominion over the Named of a whole continent. If Akua is right and it's ambition that grants villainous Names, there's very little more ambitious than that.

With that as her ambition, her Name will follow from that. Not from military might or strategic acumen, but a desire to rewrite the Laws of Creation and pass Judgment on those who break that Law.

nick012000

Cat's gonna get her Name when she stands in judgement over the Dead King, isn't she? Calling it now.

[Raved Thrad](#)

With a little luck, her new name will be Judicator, and she can call down Arbiters to warp her troops in and cloak them.
😏

John

Twilight Ways already allow some degree of stealth and strategic teleportation.

[Raved Thrad](#)

But not time travel. 😏

[Liliet](#)

MORE BARD IS TIME-TRAVELING CAT FORESHADOWING

[Raved Thrad](#)

"Do you seek knowledge of time travel?"
"Eh, been there, done that, drank the rotgut."

Daniel E

Only flaw I see there is if that were true, then Bard would not have been surprised about needing to do things the hard way following her card game with Cat & Masego.

[Liliet](#)

The only flaw I see is that EE keeps insisting the series ends this book, not giving us space for an additional ten books of epic explanation of alternate timelines that make it all fit together.

Cpt. Obvious

My take on that was that the Bard wasn't surprised as much as slightly disappointed that she woke up again in yet another body. She doesn't really care who wins this war. All it's intended to do is to force the coalition to use the doomsday device they dredged from the bottom of the tomb. She's ready to sacrifice all of Calernia to achieve what Cat and Masego couldn't. She wants to die for real and she's tried so many times over millenia that she no longer cares if it takes an entire continent or even the annihilation of Creation to achieve that.

Remember just a millenia or two back, when she talked to Nessie? Back then she was well dressed with well kept hair. Her lute was a beautiful instrument and her flask a expensive piece of gold or silver working containing good quality spirits or wine.

Now she's a drunken Bard with a piece of shit lute and a banged up flask of rottgut. She's tired of running around and straightening up Creation after Named and the Gods has screwed up. She's also tired of always losing anyone she cares about by them or her dying. She just want it to stop.

miles

The bard can time travel but only one way.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As can we all.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, that all but ensured their survival. There was important information the general of the armies absolutely needed to know or all was lost. The army had to stay and fight, but one man went to deliver the message while the rest fightt for their survival, without one of their most powerful to stand amongst them.

As pointed out in this chapter, Campaigns have their own narrative weight. The Grey Pilgrim marched himself to near death to deliver the message, just in the nick of time. Unless that army is dead and there is no hope. Then everything he did

is pointless. So Klaus' army has survived. Bloodied no doubt, but enough to matter will show up so that it all had meaning.

Miles

Shooting the shaggy dog has its own narrative weight. Dead weight, sure, but it's there.

Captain, prepare for a Tvtropes deep dive in 3... 2... 1...

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ShootTheShaggyDog>

ruduen

It's good to have all of the cards on the table now. Previously, story-wise, we all knew there had to be some type of hiccup coming along the way – things were going far too smoothly at the strategic level to leave things up as is. Things have to go downhill before the story gives a lift later on.

Also, do the thing!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Black Spiral Dancer](#)

Awesome part of the story, as always. In fact, it makes me irk to play Tactical Games now, although their campaigns are never so brilliantly laid as this novel's.

[pirateddesigns](#)

Typo thread:

his rheumy blue were clouded : rheumy blues were
and maybe second when : maybe a second
But now we knew the forces : we know the
and in there I found : in them I
a hero likes you manages : hero like you
happened to the Prince Klaus' column : happened to Prince Klaus'
column
And the worse was that : the worst was

fbi open up

his rheumy blue were clouded-> rheumy blue eyes were
but when do I believe we need to-> but then i believe we need
to
before a series of battle-> before a series of battles
now we knew the forces in motion-> now we know
And the worse was that-> Even worse was that/ And the worst of
it was that

[Liliet](#)

or perhaps rheumy blue eyes

Adrian V

"he'd baked a second cake while eating the first one, so he quite literally got to eat his cake and have it too. "

Who else imagined old Nessi with chef apron and hat baking a pair of mountrously giant cakes (those you sometime see on tv competitions)? xD

I smell interlude coming soon, also who do you think will be part of that Band, and would it be heroes only or mixed?

caoimhinh

Definitely mixed, I think Pilgrim would be part of it. There are just too many possibilities to be sure, but I can make a few guesses.

Cat is likely to stay with the army as she needs to remain in command of the host and keep the menagerie of Named under control, plus she is needed to pull through her bold strategy of ambushing the ambushers that are about to hit Klaus's army. And she is going to leave Abigail to lead the other forces, so Cat is not gonna be part of the Band of Five.

Roland seems the most used Named mage in Cat's army right now, so I think he is bound to be part of it, probably the Blessed Artificer too, considering they are about to go destroying a huge undead construct, so her Light will be very useful, the others would have to include villains of the fighting type, which would mean probably the Headhunter or the Troubadour, and maybe the Berserker since they might need her brute strength to bring down stuff that Neshamah has built over there.

Maybe throw in a sixth member to reinforce them through Providence?

Liliet

Blessed Artificer is the only one left who can possibly stand against the Grey Legion atm. She'll be staying where THAT is most necessary, and my wild guess would be "not with a detached band of Named"

caoimhinh

How so?

She is not a fighter, and her constructs can cause large damage to structures as we saw during the interlude Old Dogs, that's exactly what's needed to bring down the bridge that the undead are building.

Her use of Light would be a huge asset there.

Why do you say she can stand against the Grey Legion? More so, the only one.

Liliet

Catherine has talked about it. The Grey Legion now has anti-Night inscribed armor, meaning that where previously huge workings of Night from Cat and Akua the hard hitters could dismantle them where necessary, Blessed Artificer is now the only one who can do it. Presumably they had anti-sorcery protections already.

mamm0nn

Troubadour is a bard, so I'd skip him if we're talking damage-dealing Names. Though he would probably be a good addition for Story-molding purposes.

Shveiran

He's also, you know, highly unreliable and has an hard-on for harvesting Named souls.

He really, really doesn't strike me as a good fit for an high-risk mission. The chances of him nudging things so that he gets to collect the soul of a "tragically" fallen comrade are not low.

mamm0nn

Yeah, but he's also a Bard. Their Role is probably standard to influence the Story to their favour and make Providence forcing a win more likely.

Mental Mouse

"In Keter, cake eats you!"

dadycool

She's so energized because she's found a pit to Struggle in. She can see the walls, the opponent, the blood on the sand, and the audience. Her situation is hopeless, to the point where if she plays it right, she can't lose.

Silverking

Minor spoilers for Worm

There is a scene where Taylor ends up being caught flatfooted in her civilian identity by the heroes. No preparation, no allies, no escape route, and any direct retaliation can (and is, in fact, intended to) escalate the heroes' response from "capture" to

"justifiable homicide". It seems almost surreal to some that this is the villain who has been causing them trouble for so long.

And then she smiles. And one of the heroes starts freaking out because that is the moment it sinks in that this thin teenage slip of a girl is indeed the Warlord of Brockton Bay, and in defiance of all logic and reason, she's about to win.

That is the feeling I imagine Tariq has when his news to Cat brings not despair, but a sort of peace through understanding. To paraphrase Sun Tzu, she now knows her enemy's plan, she knows the status of her remaining allies, and she will win a thousand battles.

RoflCat

To quote some lines from Aplomb (book 2, ch 17):

"Ah," Nauk grunted with a distinct undertone of satisfaction. "Looks like we're going to win this one."

"She's doing the face, warlock's get," Nauk continued, "Doesn't matter what they throw at us now – we're going to eat them alive."

"You do that thing where you almost smile and you show a little teeth," Juniper told me frankly. "It looks really creepy on a human."

Or as I tried to imagine 'the face': She's doing the Grinch evil smile.

edrey

that is a mess, but cat's battles are always like that. also that memory of her job in the tavern looked just like providence, just enough to give her a spark of inspiration to connect all points, i think that fit the story of cat, the saint of impossible victories, just like Hanno said in the arsenal.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, I think it was a "Newton's Apple" thing. Cat's brain was working in overdrive, she was on the verge of figuring it out, and just a little nudge brought it over the edge.

It's not like she saw a rat trap or anything else blatantly hint-y. No, it was the taste of beer, which she was drinking because it's a common thing, that completed the association chain.

Providence made sure Tariq Fleetfoot got there in one piece and in time, and that Catherine was not too busy/tired/distracted

for this conversation. The fact she figured it out from there?
Was basically inevitable 😊

[Liliet](#)

whoops, not the taste of beer, *the fact the goblet was made of silver* and the contrast of it with her beginnings

which is frankly a straight line of Cat taking a step back and considering the context

ohJohN

Her sentence cut off immediately before the words “Rat’s Nest”, which I think was the actual connection.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. It was random, but I think that’s because the idea of a rat trap could be arrived at by a thousand possible paths, this was just the one that happened to be taken.

Miles

Well obviously Good will blatantly cheat to maintain a perfect “winning” streak but they’re facing Cat now. Their usual pigeon chess strategy just does not work no matter how many pigeons they use. The only way they’ll win there is to claim her first.

Juff

Typo Thread:

rheumy blue were > rheumy blue eyes
me uncomfortable to look at > me uncomfortable to look at him (or
him uncomfortable to look at)
maybe second > maybe a second
army two hundred > army of two hundred
should be able > should have been able
once phrase it > once phrased it
series of battle > series of battles
I’d be a mistake > it’d be a mistake
now we knew > now we know

ninegardens

Huh...

Tariq *Fleetfoot* indeed.

... Gawd I love that guy. Even if he’s not the hero they need here and now, he is kinda fabulous... even when just acting as a worn out messenger.

Onos

I don't suppose we could get some tactical maps of the campaign EE? Even rough sketches would be great, understandable if it's a bit much on top of the writing though.

[Liliet](#)

There IS a new map

<https://ibb.co/ThHXPCg>

Let's see what I can do with marking stuff on it...

Mennolt van Alten

Someone sent this in the reddit thread as a response to such a question Onos: <https://i.ibb.co/0JfNYwG/Lakeside-Fronts.png>

That should allow plotting out the tracks: Klaus up the right across the mining roads, Cat up the middle and the Highway, and I forgot the commander but another army went up the blue road to Lucifierenne. I think the dotted line with the diamonds represents the original defenses.

Klaus is currently breaking out of his entrapment on the last part of the mining roads, then moving to a point between Laurons Hollow and the Mining Roads, Cat thinks the missing army of Lucifierenne (lost since the very start) has been moving crosscountry past Cigelin Sisters to take position in that area to crush the exhausted army of Klaus. Cat is now going to move crosscountry to ambush the ambush.

[Liliet](#)

Luciennerie, Lucifer wasn't around XD

<https://imgur.com/dBXDxi4>

Does this look right to you?

[Liliet](#)

<https://imgur.com/Y30Nu74>

Here we go!

The black line is the defensive line, including the mountains showing where an army CANNOT pass (aka effectively part of the defensive line)
(the defensive line is marked on the map, but it's not big and not obvious)

The white crosses mark expected battles

The rest is labeled

beleester

The defensive line should go through Coudrent and Trifelin rather than Luciennerie, I think, as that's where Rozala's armies are based. The plan called for her to send a raid against Luciennerie, which is how they found out that the army had gone missing, but she didn't actually siege the city.

(That means that the Luciennerie army has been moving **very** fast – about as far as Klaus's army despite not having roads or the Ways – but that's the way I'm reading it)

[Liliet](#)

Thank you!

grogna

<https://ibb.co/ThHXPCg>

This is in Art, Maps and other.

scottcahoon14

Hopefully pilgrims comments about bonds turning sour isn't a premonition about Adjutant....

Adrian

I... Do believe you might just be a God of Writing

spencer

What does Bard hope to gain? Death?

RoflCat

That's what we speculate due to the last bit after Arsenal.

More precisely, she want out of this whole Bard thing. That she setup the Arsenal to make herself as 'mastermind who got outplayed' thinking that with Catherine as the new, better 'story expert' she'll be replaced. But then she still got revived, and basically shouted at the Gods that she's going to use some extreme options (more than the whole Arsenal stuffs), and whatever shit happen it's all their fault (for not letting her die)

I think she's on the mindset that until Dead King is dealt with (since she has a hand in his rise) she's not allowed to quit.

JRogue

Yes. Bard is Tired. Capital "T" Tired.

She is Tired of the game, she is Tired of the maneuvering, she is Tired of the endlessness. If she could have a fourth Aspect, it would probably be Tired.

She has been around thousands of years and is ready for it to end, but the gods won't let her go. She even set it up so that people with the power and the story to end her had a shot, and the gods still noped her out of it.

The last time we saw her, she said the gloves were going to come off. I think she is, at least in part, responsible for Cat's new Name, and what it will do to her. If a new Name emerges that can hold sway or judgment over other Names it gives her another chance to be ended. Bard is a Name like any other, even if old and powerful. If Cat's Name develops like it is looking like, then she gets domain over Bard as well. That new Name may not be able to abide by someone like Bard to continue to exist. Which, once again, might be part of Bard's plan.

Bard does not care if the Dead King, or Cat, or anyone else wins. She cares that she ends, and is using all of her vast resources and intelligence to see that through.

Moodprint

Am I the only one who worries, that if Cat becomes Named, the Bard gets more power against her?
Is it not known that Bard's powers work through Named specifically?

Silverking

I think it was already established that 1) Cat's current condition was considered "close enough" for the Bard to do one of her little visits, and 2) all the Bard can really do is talk, which can be effective if you swing by at a Named's lowest point to offer them a deal (Bard was really hoping to get unrestricted access to Cordelia), but less so when the person has resolved to "reject all she peddles".

beleester

The Bard has already had two face-to-face meetings with Cat despite her not being Named, so I don't think it matters.

The Bard has *said* that she can only work through Named (plus some narrow exceptions that allowed her to talk to Cat), but Cat suspects that she's lying or leaving out important details. And even that limitation has loopholes – the Bard managed to

set up Cordelia to claim a Name despite never personally interacting with her.

mamm0nn

The granting of Names is probably a whole different matter than directly interacting with someone. It has been suggested that she has a hand in the coming into being of all Named of Calernia, even if the results thereof may be vague to her. At least, that's how I interpreted her talk with Hierarch including "Well, you're not one of mine. Please get in line, kiddo." Her being able to influence non-Named to gain a Name is likely entirely different than her direct intercession, as she seems to be a bit of an admin of Calernia Named.

[Liliet](#)

as Silverking said, Bard's "powers" are:

- watching (which she can do regardless as long as the events are sufficiently important, Cat isn't getting out of this one)
- talking to people, which is to say:
- regular ass convince people of things (has yet to work on Cat lol)
- bullshit mind games (Cat is not Amadeus, she is a great bit more stable and besides surrounded by people who actually for real share her goals and can prop her up if she starts slipping)
- storyweaving (it's... only mild direct effect, and Cat's been pretty good at keeping out of traps when talking to her, achieving all her own story goals when talking to her last)

...and even if she couldn't already do all of the above to Cat directly just due to her narrative importance / Role, she could 100% do all of the above to her allies, which is so much nastier than directly to Cat, Cat's own Name or lack of such is a rounding error.

Moodprint

While I don't disagree with your points, I just worry a little. I don't find it unbelievable that the Bard has some hidden trick that only really works on Named, and that Cat's approaching Name is actually part of Bard's grand plan.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, Bard has plenty of hidden tricks.

It's just that it's been thoroughly established that they come in the form of connections and convincing other people to do things for her.

(or Choirs as the case may be)

A hidden trick of the sort you're referring to would be a little like Masego suddenly growing mantis legs and revealing his hidden martial arts insectoid heritage.

mamm0nn

Cat: Hey Abigail, I'm leaving with most of the army to ambush one of the Dead King's ambushes. You're in charge of the remaining forces to defeat the remnants we've defeated.

Abigail: *Cold sweat* You want me, the commander of the army with the most heavies still worn out from being the vanguard of your previous battle, to chase fleeing lighter and tireless foes? Maybe you should give this task to the Levantines, they would be much better suited for it.

Cat: Nope.

Abigail: Roger that... What troops will you leave me with.

Cat: Some fantassins, the ones most likely to slow us down on our march.

Abigail: *Begins to shiver from stress* Not just the Procerans, but the slow ones. On a chase mission against enemies that I have to catch up on but who will no doubt pounce on any haste and over-extension I'd commit to. Oh joy...

Cat: Don't worry, I'll also leave some Firstborn behind. About half-ish.

Abigail: Th-

Cat: Jindrich will be their leader, I'll tell him to listen to you.

Abigail: *Shivering turns to vibrating* J-Jindrich? The berserker prone to rush into battle without thinking?

Cat: Oh, and I'll also be sending out our five strongest Named on a new mission while taking most of the leftover ones with me.

Abigail: *Flatlines*

beleester

To be fair, Abigail might have made that decision herself, given the alternatives...

Cat: I'm going to take half the army and go fight an army of 150,000 without most of my heaviest hitters.

Abigail: I volunteer to lead the other half!

[Liliet](#)

BEST COMMENT CHAIN YET

Weapon of Mass Guesswork

If Cat gains a neutral, judgy name, it could be trouble, politically.

Right now, the Truce and Terms work because Cat has been rigidly yet fairly enforcing them for her side. Her position as Below's representative is maintained under the assumption that even without a Name, she is still essentially a Villain. If she gains a Neutral Name, one of Below's could claim that they don't feel comfortable being represented by someone who isn't even a Villain, calling for a new Representative to be named (I'm looking specifically at Troubador, here). Since this would be fair and lawful under the Truce&Terms, Cat couldn't strongarm them into not using their rights without crippling her own Name. She's made no friends enforcing her position so far, so the Damned could actually vote her out, and since everyone knows how invested Cat is on the T&T working, whoever runs against her/ replaces her could fairly easily hold leverage over Cat just by threatening not to enforce the T&T as well as they should.

Cat hasn't even considered the possibility that she could awaken to a Neutral or even Heroic name, but considering Above has offered her power twice (once at Liesse, and again at the Twillight Ways), She really should. This would be the third time, marking a Pattern, and she seriously might not be able to reject the offer this time, given how much she needs the power-up. This could actually be a trap by the Bard, since Cat has gradually been isolating herself and pushing away others since the beginning of the Book, under the assumption that her current position means she can afford it (and possibly, needs to do it). If she suddenly gets her political power undercut, while also getting a serious identity crisis to go with it, and Cat's support system under someone else's nominal authority that Cat nevertheless can't overrule without destroying her own dream, it could legitimately get her out of the game for a while. Her so-awaited Name turning out to be a curse, rather than a blessing.

As to the nature of the name itself, I could see it having the prefix [The Just...], both to bring her motto of "Justifications matter only to the Just" full circle, and to make it fairly obvious she's no longer just a Villain.

[Javvies](#)

The so-called "Neutral" Names are actually just Names that can be empowered by Above or by Below, depending on the incarnation of the Name. They're Names that can switch between sides and are not intrinsically linked to Above or Below. They may also have some measure of variation depending on the Story they were gained through, and might be able to switch power sources if borne through enough side specific Roles in enough Stories that an alignment change happens without changing Names, assuming the Aspects aren't relying on Alignment specific powers (ie, Light).

Like Squire – it can be a Heroic Name and lead into White Knight (and probably also Paladin variations) or be a Villain Name and lead into Black Knight. Squire is a Neutral Name and a Transitional Name. Same with Apprentice. Probably most Transitional Names have similar potential. Ranger is probably technically, or at least originally, a Name that can be either, as is Archer.

Any Name Cat gets will be assumed to be empowered by Below, unless she tosses Light or other Above-exclusive powers around. Or she starts showing signs of aging despite being Named ... but that's not likely to happen anytime soon even without a Villain Name's immunity to aging.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree with Javvies on the fundamental nature of Names and won't be addressing that directly right now.

That said, Neutral Names don't come with labels saying "STRICTLY NEUTRAL" on them. The only way for Cat's Name to contradict her categorization as a villain at this point is for it to allow her to wield Light, and while I believe that would be absolutely hilarious and the best, a Neutral Name would not do it.

A Neutral Name means the Named is free to be a villain or hero, contextually. Catherine is contextually very much a villain. That would not change.

Miles

To summarize the other 2, a Name can be neutral. A Named can not.

edrey

Well, there is other way for the Bard to call that angel, if the titanic ward of the gigants protect them from the Light and not only the dead, and call it on trifelin, keter is done, i am sure sve noc can copy the ward too.

Barrendur

@Weapon of Mass Guesswork

Great observations; well reasoned and thought through. I think you also take into consideration the author's style, which often tends towards ironic wish-fulfillment; i.e. be careful what you wish for. Cat has been so focussed on the punishment she is preparing for Diabolist, she may just blunder into the long-deserved one waiting for HER. After all, Cat is not a hero... but I think she sometimes forgets that as a villain, she is due a "comeuppance" – and the Name may end up being just that.

I LIKE your post, but the system won't let me use the "like" button, so I had to settle for a "reply".

[Liliet](#)

The punchline being that the reply function didn't work either?

ChillyPepper

I wonder, if the Bard is meant to be some kind of maestro to the Named – would Cat's new name be some sort of Critic role. making and unmaking and judging everyone in that play.

Daniel E

I can't predict how Abigail will get the tail-end of the plan this time, but I'm looking forward to it.

Miles

She could just nope out of there. It would be just like her to turn around and squash the DK's forces by doing so.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ahem – please notice that for all her scaredy-cat mumbling to herself, Abigail has *never* actually routed or turned tail. As I've said before, she *thinks* she's a coward, but she's no such thing.

[sengachi](#)

I love this chapter. It feels so perfect that after all she's been through, all Cat needs to make the Dead King hurt is to know everything that's in play.

Frivolous

I thought this episode was going to reveal that the army under Prince Klaus was a near-complete wipe, with Tariq being one of the few hapless survivors, come to Cat to tell her of the disaster.

So glad that was not the case.

And yeah, I'm one of those who, like LarsBlitzer, thinks that the ambush on the ambush is when Cat finally receives her Name, especially if the Revenant of Albrecht Papenheim is there.

Crash

Honestly the fact that Tariq is even surprised is proof he just doesn't get Cat.

This is her thing. The mess, the horrible odds. The chaos.

It's where she shines.

Good luck, Dead King.

[*Liliet*](#)

Tariq's still in denial that Amadeus is him but a few degrees south, what do you expect of him? XD

Onos

Endless Hells, the stragety scenes might be even better than the battles! Do you wargame this stuff out before writing or something EE?

Chapter 62: Adjournment

"Empires die to wars, emperors to knives."

– Free Cities saying

General Abigail of Summerholm, I'd noticed, always entered a tent like she expected it was going to be filled with a pack of hungry wolves. *Or maybe just mine*, I mused. She'd never quite managed to hide that she was rather terrified of me, which made toying with her something of a guilty pleasure – kind of like ringing bell near a particularly twitchy rabbit. With the seemingly permanently sunburnt cheek and watery blue eyes, the first Callowan general since the Conquest didn't look like much. That delicate little nose made her look almost dainty, and the messy hair was seemingly match with dark rings around her eyes that over the years I'd seen thin but never entirely go away.

She was also one of the sharper field commanders in the Army of Callow, though I doubted she'd agree if asked. I'd not bet on her against Hune, not for a few years yet, but General Bagram of the Fourth had some bad habits from his Legion days – too prone to being defensive, too fond of using his heavies as a hammer to smash everything – to match the experience those years had given him, so that fight would be a much closer one. Mind you, it had to be said that this was true in part because the Army was horribly thin on senior officers. Hells, it'd been thin on those even after it'd cannibalized two full legions in the wake of the Folly and we'd taken considerable losses since then.

If Juniper and I had been able to spare a few years between wars to build off a proper officer corps she'd merely be one of the finer youngbloods, marked for advancement but still needing seasoning. As things stood, though, the decision to appoint her as the head of the force that'd hit the Cigelin Sisters wasn't me playing favourites with a fellow Callowan: I was genuinely putting the person in charge I believed was the finest pick. Hune herself might have been even better, but I'd need the Second with me. Though the sapper corps was now nominally separate from the rest of the Army of Callow, in practice the largest part of it had been lodged with the Second Army for years.

General Abigail saluted, biting the inside of her cheek, and approached my personal desk. At my side I felt Hakram shift in his wheelchair, trying to hide his amusement at the sight. The phalanges regularly seeded flattering rumours about Abigail to facilitate my long-term intentions for her – I'd need someone with an unimpeachable reputation and absolutely no ambition to hold the Army of Callow for Vivienne, when she became queen – and I knew for a fact that he'd indulged some of his gossip tendencies by crafting a few himself. I was pretty sure that delightful yarn about the good general having impaled a Revenant with the standard of the Third was his work, for one.

"Your Majesty," Abigail of Summerholm said. "I came as summoned."

I leaned back into my seat, regarding her gravely, and drummed my fingers against the desk. The general visibly wilted.

"That is *cruel*," Hakram said in Kharsum, tone appreciative.

"You're right, Adjutant," I somberly said, "it's best to get this over with."

The rabbit whimpered and I was a bad, bad woman. I wasn't going to stop, this was *much* too entertaining, but dues where they were due.

"Ma'am?" Abigail squeaked out.

"You know why you're here, general," I severely said.

The other woman twitched, like nervousness made into a body spasm, and out the stream came.

"I'm sorry," General Abigail stammered, "I know it's Proceran wine, and that makes me unpatriotic, but it's just so *good*-"

I sat back in my chair, smothering a grin.

"- I didn't even know they were loaded die, I got them from this goblin sergeant in the Second and-"

Oh Crows, she was still talking.

"- I wasn't sure if they were really flirting, I mean they're Blood and they're engaged-"

Had I broken one of my most valuable officers? Had I finally taken this too far?

"- in my defence Brotel is a very confusing name for a town, especially with Alamans pronunciation, and I didn't know he was an *actual* lord-"

Nah, I decided. This was just my reward for suffering through the last few weeks of soul-grinding warfare. It was like having a good smoke, only better because it came at someone else's expense. It occurred to me, after that thought, that perhaps the company I had kept over the last few years had not done wonders for my moral character. It was probably Black's fault if you went back far enough, I reassured myself. Not at all something I'd picked up all on my own.

"- I didn't really mean that we should eat all Proceran children, I mean how would we actually do that – okay, so maybe if we did like another sort of magistrate dedicated solely to baby-eating, but that would be really expensive and I don't think the House of Light would-"

Hakram cleared his throat, which silenced her in a heartbeat.

"You know what must be done now, I think," I solemnly said.

"You'll send me back home, where I will officially be a general but in reality stripped of all authority," General Abigail hopefully said.

"Even better," I said. "Adjutant?"

He wheeled up to her, passing her a folded parchment which she opened warily. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of the royal seal at the bottom.

"Congratulations, Lady Abigail," I said. "You'll have to pick a last name, now that you're a noble in the formal peerage of the Kingdom of Callow."

"What," Abigail weakly said.

"Quite right," I agreed. "It's not a landed title, mind you, but I've made my stance clear on handing those out."

I'd largely inherited a nobility with its back broken from my father, but Gods knew I would have gotten rid of even my last few northern barons if I could. I had no issue with court titles and even knighthoods, but the notion of legitimate rulers whose only talent was having the luck of being born to the right womb still rubbed me wrong. The governorships weren't a perfect system, but they were a damned sight better than the labyrinth of noble laws and privileges that'd preceded them.

"I don't understand," Abigail tried again.

"In recognition of your bold and heroic charge at the Second Battle of Lauzon's Hollow," Adjutant said, visibly enjoying every moment of this, "you have been made a noble of the Kingdom of Callow. The crown rewards exceptional service, General Abigail, and yours has not disappointed."

It also cut off any avenue of retreat if she tried to retire. Being a noble war heroine would make her one of the most eligible women in Callow after the war – she'd be dragged into the kingdom's affairs whether she wanted it or not.

"I," General Abigail hesitantly said, "thank you?"

"It was my pleasure," I grinned.

I meant every word, if not necessarily in the sense she might expect. It looked like she was trying to convince herself she was out of the woods, so immediately I hit her with the second announcement.

"It was also my pleasure to name you as the leading commander of the force that will continue with the assault on the Cigelin Sisters," I casually added.

Abigail froze.

"I don't mean to question your judgement, Your Majesty," the general delicately said.

"I don't think anyone's ever told me that without adding 'but' afterwards," I noted, and cocked an eyebrow.

She swallowed.

"However," General Abigail gallantly tried, "would General Hune not be a better fit for this appointment?"

"I've got other uses for her," I dismissed.

"It is only natural the command should fall to you, general," Hakram gravelled. "You are, after all, a member of the formal Callowan peerage."

I hid a grin behind my hand, admiring the sheer bastardry involved in that sentence. He hadn't lost his touch, evidently. General Abigail glared at the parchment that'd turned her into a noble as if the sheer depths of her hatred would be enough to set it aflame, though sadly for her Creation did not deign to indulge her.

"Surely Princess Beatrice-"

"Coming with me," I idly said, "you're getting the fantassins, though."

She paused a moment, considering the odds of my agreeing to pass overall command to mercenaries before rightfully dismissing the notion.

"Grandmaster Talbot?" she attempted, with remarkable tenacity.

I looked at her steadily and she deflated. The Summerholm girl gathered her courage though, and back into the breach she went.

"Perhaps the Dominion should-" she began.

I watched the wheels turn as she weighed whether Razin or Aquiline being in charge was more or less likely to get her killed.

"- leave a few companies of scouts behind, to compensate for the departure of the goblins," she hastily adjusted midsentence.

"Poor lordlings," Hakram amusedly said in Kharsum. "That'd sting, if they ever got wind of it."

"Quite right, Adjutant," I happily said. "She should get Firstborn instead. Ten thousand under Mighty Sudone and Lord Soln will do the trick, I would think."

She stared at me woefully.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," General Abigail said, in the tone of someone who'd just been asked to kiss the axe about to take their neck on the chopping block.

"I understand I'll be putting something a burden on you, as you'll still be commanding the Third while leading this part of

the campaign," I said. "For that reason, I've assigned you an assistant you should find helpful in many regards."

With impeccable timing the guard outside my tent parted the flap to introduce the newest arrival, the young orc announcing the entrance of 'Secretary Elene'. Scribe had objected to our using her true name, if 'Eudokia' truly was that. It'd been the name she used as a Calamity, at least, which counted for something. I found it fascinating that though Scribe's aspect – **Fade**, she'd eventually told me, though it could be a lie – was pulsing as it always did and Abigail was in no way proof for it, the general's perpetual wariness meant she kept noticing that she wasn't noticing much about Scribe every few heartbeats.

A fascinating demonstration of the virtues of paranoia when you... oh Gods I was starting to sound like my father wasn't I? I cleared my throat, addressing both women.

"General Abigail, allow me to introduce you to Secretary Elene," I said. "She is a member of the adjunct secretariat."

Which was true, she even had a salary. I'd already ordered her pay docked twice for 'indecorous skulking', which was an official breach of regulations in the Legions of Terror because it was an institution that'd had goblins in its ranks for over two decades.

"I mean no offence, Your Majesty," General Abigail said, "but is she perhaps a magical assassin meant to kill me if I displease you?"

I choked on a startled burst of laughter. My lack of immediate denial had those sunburnt cheeks turning pale.

"For shame, general," Adjutant chided. "We don't enroll our magical assassins in the phalanges, it's the first place people would look. We're not *amateurs*."

"That makes sense," the dark-haired woman muttered, actually brightening some. "So this whole magical whammy I'm feeling is, uh, accidental?"

"Secretary Elene is Named," I said. "But I'm speaking for her too much already. Why don't you introduce yourself, secretary?"

"I am Secretary Elene of the adjunct secretariat," Scribe told Abigail in a tone so dry it rivalled the Hungering Sands. "Pleased to meet you."

"And you," the general replied, seemingly by reflex.

There was a pregnant pause.

"She's shy," I confided. "You might know her better as the Scribe."

General Abigail blinked in surprise.

"The old one's finally dead?" she asked.

"There's no need to be insulting," Scribe mildly said, "I assure you I am still quite spry."

"You're a *Calamity*?" Abigail wailed.

"Retired," Scribe noted. "I am now gainfully employed by the Kingdom of Callow. Which has my adequately remunerated loyalty."

"You *conquered* the Kingdom of Callow," the general said, voice gone shrill with dismay.

"It's a fair point," I admitted.

"She has you there," Adjutant agreed.

Scribe shot us a look that was deeply put-upon, though I'd met the godsdamned Calamities so if she was going to try to sell me she was used to less fucking around she was going to have to do better than that.

"I promise not to do it again," Scribe tried.

"See," I beamed, "already we're all getting along. I'm sure the two of you will both bloom from the cooperation."

Abigail twitched.

"Of course," she said. "I'm sure you're right, Your Majesty."

"I'm glad of your support for the notion," I said, "I wouldn't have forced it on you otherwise."

I'd never seen someone die a little inside before, it was quite riveting. I dismissed them both afterwards, and by the time they were walking out already Scribe was asking questions about the supply situation that the general was clearly lying her way through answering. A promising pair, I decided. Abigail of Summerholm was too used to scraping by when the danger wasn't immediate, which having Scribe keeping her on track should fix, while Scribe was too used to being the enabler of someone's grand design: it would be a genuine challenge for her to assist someone as inclined to improvisation as General Abigail.

Named liked a challenge, deep down, and I suspected that having one would do more to keep Scribe bound to us than everything else I'd done so far.

With them leaving Hakram and I were left alone, though only momentarily – within moments one of his helping hands drifted in, bringing a report. He looked through it and dismissed the man,

wheeling up to the desk where I was pouring myself a finger of brandy. I raised an eyebrow questioningly and he nodded, so I rustled up a cup to pour another.

"Roland's band has killed the last creatures previously bound to Beastmaster," he said. "Casualties among the companies that accompanied them were light, mostly caused when the manticore went berserk."

The least dangerous of the creatures the man had mastered had either fled or grieved, but those who preyed on humans had instead gone violently rabid. Fortunately standing orders had been for Beastmaster to keep his menagerie far from where the Dead King could weaponize it, so it'd not turned into a costly rampage. Not that the hunts had been bloodless, for all that the Vagrant Spear had been wildly enthusiastic and the Blood had treated it like the social event of the decade.

"Burn the corpses and go through the standard measures to ensure none of it ends up in the Dead King's ranks," I said. "Anything else?"

"Archer's drinking," Hakram said. "Heavily. The Concocter joined her not long ago."

I grimaced, considering what *heavily* would mean when it was Indrani doing the drinking. I'd have to dip a toe there later and see if my presence was welcome. I'd not been light-handed while handing down discipline, so it might be that even though grieving she genuinely would not want to see me. Still, that she'd broken out the strong stuff before night even fell was not a good sign.

"I'll see what I can do," I said. "But it seems delicate situation to step into."

He hummed in agreement, offering up his cup. We knocked them and drank, the gesture smooth and practiced from years of repetition.

"She rarely talks about Refuge," Hakram said afterwards, "it's not shame, I think, but perhaps the absence of pride."

"She talks about Ranger all the time," I grunted.

"She *mentions* the Lady of the Lake," Adjutant corrected. "When does she ever speak of the woman beyond a few words? Even Vivienne shares more easily."

It had admittedly occurred to me in the past that Vivienne had been the Thief – a sneak and keep of secrets – and my enemy for years, and yet I'd still known her name before Indrani's. For someone so outwardly rambunctious Archer actually kept her card pretty close to the chest.

"It's how she is," I eventually said. "We're not all built for deep talks and scrutiny, Hakram. Some people prefer their dark corners without lights shined on them."

"I'm not sure that is truly the case," he gravelled. "Maybe a few years back, but now?"

He hesitated.

"Since the Everdark," Hakram specified. "And I don't mean because you two started sharing a bed down there."

"Great Strycht," I murmured.

Where I had died and risen again, First Under the Night. Where Archer had fought in my name against Mighty by the battalion, only to end up drowned in ice when my arrogance saw me eviscerated by the Sisters and Winter's power spill out like a sea. That near-death, one that she'd admitted she would not have been able to avoid even if she'd known it was coming, had shaken her greatly. She'd grown past it, past the fear, but it had changed her nonetheless. Sometimes just seeing what lay past the door was enough, even if you managed to close it after.

"She'd never have admitted a thing to Masego, before that," Hakram said. "She would have figured there was time enough later, and eventually that it was too late. No more, though. And I think it will be the same with Refuge, if the right person asks."

"That might not be me," I bluntly said.

The orc shook his head.

"It's different, what she has with Masego," Adjutant said. "He wouldn't judge, it's why she wouldn't mind speaking. But you're the one she confesses to, Catherine. Not me, not Vivienne, not the ties she's made since she became a captain of Named."

I leaned back, passing a hand through my hair.

"We'll see," I finally said. "I had to bring down the hammer on her yesterday, Hakram. It won't have gone over well."

The trouble was that, the way I figured, Indrani had joined the Truce and Terms largely because she was already part of the Woe and it was what we were doing. But the way I'd run the Woe wasn't the way I had to behave as an officer of the Grand Alliance, and even if it was tempting I couldn't just mark 'the Woe' as a different category within the Named I had authority over. It would undermine all I was trying to do if I treated them differently when it came to my duties. I wasn't sure, though, how much Indran actually cared about the Terms – or even the Accords,

in the long view. She'd not take the lash for a cause she was indifferent to, that much I knew.

It just wasn't in her nature.

"You do her disservice, I think," Hakram thoughtfully said, "but I understand why you would. Sometimes it's more comforting to pick at a wound than have it healed."

My lips thinned in irritation. It was not a charitable interpretation of this, and it would have earned more than a scowl for anyone else.

"I'm not sure what wound you're supposed to be talking about," I said.

"That she's going to leave, eventually," Adjutant calmly said. "That she made that choice long before she made the one to love you."

I almost cursed – and not amusedly, not in poor humour. I almost cursed because that was the reflex, when something suddenly pricked you. I'd forgotten how sharp Hakram's truths had a way of being.

"Figured it all out, did you?" I said, tone a tad bitter.

It was not a pleasant part of me he'd dragged up to the light of day. There'd been a reason I'd pushed it in a corner where the day didn't reach.

"It was not insight, Catherine, but recognition," he said.

His licked his chops then stayed silent for a moment.

"I have done the same," Adjutant abruptly said. "With... this."

He gestured all around us, encompassing everything as I went still. We'd not even come to close to addressing the subject since I'd refused the proposal to support the Clans in rebellion against the Tower as it currently said.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I carefully said.

"I needed to know," Hakram quietly said, "if it was trust in principle or in truth. If you'd make a mistake simply because I asked you to, out of pity. More than anything else, that would have been intolerable."

My eyes narrowed.

"Your proposal," I said, "you botched it on purpose. It was never meant to be accepted."

"I hacked away what might make it feasible," he admitted. "And had them present you with what was left."

My fingers clenched, but I forced myself to breathe out.

"I don't think you understand how difficult the position you put me in was," I said, tone forcefully calm.

"I do," Hakram replied. "But I will not apologize for it, no more than you will apologize for barring from the battlefield and saddling me with a Named bodyguard."

"That's different," I hissed.

He bared his fangs the slightest bit, but his neck remained straight – not bent to the side, which would imply apology or submission. He was unmoved.

"You did it so you'd sleep soundly at night," Adjutant said. "So did I. And I will forgive you your shade of selfishness, if you forgive me mine."

It wasn't the same. I knew it stung, that I was keeping him away from the blades and saddling with what someone might consider a minder, but I was doing it so he wouldn't get killed. What he'd done... *But he doesn't want to stay in the chair*, Catherine, I reminded myself. *He wants to risk the steel*. And it was a decision I considered stupid and unreasonable, more a spasm of empty pride than anything with sense to it, but it wasn't mine to make. Not really. He'd bent his neck because it would help me sleep at night, and now he was asking me to do the same. It tasted like ash, but I would not deny he was not asking more of me than I had asked of him.

Perhaps less, even. That tended to be the way with us.

"It stings," I finally said. "That you didn't trust me."

He slowly nodded. I sighed and looked away.

"But maybe you're not wrong, about picking at wounds," I admitted. "Half the anger is fear that I could have failed the test."

"You didn't."

It was simply said, without frills or false promises. It did not reassure me as much as I would have thought it would, for all that.

"It's not going to be the same, is it?" I quietly asked. "Even when time passes. When it's not so fresh."

"Things change, Catherine," the orc replied. "We are not the same people we were when this all began."

Grief seized me by throat, as much for what had been done as who we'd once been. It had my eyes burning, for the first time in years.

"It's not a failure, Cat," Hakram gently said, taking my hand. "It's what we were after from the start. We can't change the world without changing with it."

"Yet it feels like a failure," I murmured, "doesn't it?"

Like I'd broken something. Those days in the Arsenal had cost us all more than I'd first understood. As all things touched by the Intercessor, they were poison in every way.

"We pay our prices," Adjutant simply said. "That's what victory is, even at its finest."

I blinked and rubbed at my eyes, parting my hand from his. My throat felt raw, like I'd swallowed glass and some had stayed lodged.

"So it is," I breathed out.

He patted my leg, then took his wheels in hand and began to make his way out of the tent. He paused, though, after a few armfuls.

"One last thing," Adjutant said, turning just enough to meet my eyes.

I waited in silence.

"If you ever speak to me of debt, Catherine," Hakram of the Howling Wolves evenly said, "I will leave and never come back."

It felt like a gut punch and I took it about as well, fingers clenching as he wheeled himself out of the tent without turning back. Gods. He'd said that and meant every word, hadn't he? The fear that flowed through my veins at that realization was almost paralyzing, and it was with trembling hands I reached for my pipe and lit up a packet of wakeleaf. *Fuck*. I'd known that nothing was absolute, that everything had a breaking point, but for him to just say it outright... I stayed alone on my tent, eyes closed and seeking calm that would not come.

After most of an hour passed I gave it up for the lost cause it was, and forced myself to seek out Indrani. Just because I felt like someone had yanked out the ground from under me didn't mean I could afford to stop moving.

I'd not been sure what to expect, exactly, when I entering the tent where I'd been told Indrani and the Concocter were drinking together. The two empty bottles of Creusens red abandoned on the ground were hardly a surprise, but I'd figured they would at least be seated. Instead the two women were leaning back against a flipped table, toppled chairs around them, and between the two of them a large glass bottle containing what looked like boiling water – though inexplicably the inside of the tent *reeked* of cherries – and half a dozen shoddily-made clay cups that were chipped from use.

Indrani, out of her armour and in a rough linen tunic with little usual scarf hanging loose around her neck, was very sloppily pouring herself some of the transparent boiling liquor and spilling more than she realized. The Concocter, on the other side of the flipped table, took a moment for me to recognize: every hair on her body was now coal black, and her eyes the darkest I had ever seen. She was seemingly a lot more invested in mocking Archer's pouring skills than noticing there was a third person in the tent, so it was Indrani who noticed me.

"Cat," she breathed out. "You're here."

She started, then scowled.

"Cocky's a villain," Indrani said. "I didn't break your rule."

"I'm not here for that," I assured her, then glanced at the other woman. "Concocter, always a pleasure."

"The very same," she replied, in the slow and careful tone of someone trying to seem less drunk than they actually were. "Would you like to sit, Your Majesty?"

"She hates nobles," Indrani confessed to her. "It's hilarious, she can never resist stepping on them even if she's the big noble now."

"Nobles are always big," Concocter solemnly replied. "Fat. Fucking Consortium pricks, they always gouge me on prices. S'why I sell them mostly poisons."

"We've been drinking, I see," I said, reluctantly amused. "Thank you, Concocter, I will."

I grabbed a chair, though instead of setting it aright I kept it on the side and pulled back my cloak as I sat down on the ground and leaned back against the legs. My leg twinged with pain, but it passed.

"See," Indrani slurred. "I told you she's not prissy."

"I never said she was," Concocter said, sounding irritated. "You always put words in my mouth."

I felt a pang of envy. Much as they seemed to genuinely rub each other wrong, there was an underlying closeness that I'd never really had the likes of. I'd made my own family, when I got older, but those two looked nothing all and yet in that moment of familiar irritation they'd seemed like sisters.

"So what are we drinking?" I asked. "Smells strong."

"Orchard Elixir," Concocter proudly said. "My own creation."

"Kickin' Cherries," Archer snickered. "You gotta call it that, I keep telling you."

"I would rather kiss John," Concocter replied.

A heartbeat passed, and then laughing drunkenly they loudly shouted '*and he's dead*' together.

"Gods rest his soul," Concocter added. "So pretty. So dumb."

"Ah, Tinkles," Indrani breathed out, still laughing a bit. "At least he went out like a champion. It was a good scrap, Marchford."

"If you're going to keep laughing that loud, I'll require a glass of that elixir," I said.

I ignored Indrani's accusations of treachery and leaned forward after Concocter poured me a glass more deftly than I would have expected. When she took the clay cup in hand and began to pass it to me, though, she froze. So did Archer. They were both looking at the cup, the laughter gone.

"Fuck," Archer sighed.

"I'm missing something," I noted.

"Lysander made those," Concocter said. "We must have been what, twelve?"

"He was a little older, but yeah," Indrani sighed. "He needed help for his first shot at a pack of stryxes, so he made these little gifts for everyone."

"It's tradition when you're asking a favour, in some parts of the Free Cities," Concocter told me. "Shows goodwill. He was from there – outskirts of Atalante, he figured, but he was never sure. His family were hunters, moved around a lot."

"I got a leather bracelet with stones sowed on," Indrani said, half-smiling. "It was shittily made, like the cups, but..."

"He'd put in effort," Concocter echoed. "It was hard to say no after that. We weren't as hard with each other, back then."

"I don't have to drink from it if you don't want me to," I gently said.

"No," Concocter softly said after a moment, pressing it into my hand. "It should be used. It's what it's for."

I took it up and nodded thanks, taking an experimental sip from the transparent liquor – which was, even now, popping small bubbles like faintly boiling water – and immediately choked. The taste, Gods, the taste. It was exactly as strong as it smelled, and kicked just as strongly as aragh.

"Sisters," I cursed. "That is *abominable*."

They both cackled with laughter.

"I usually cut it with fruit juice," Concocter smirked. "I could always fetch something lighter if you'd prefer, Your Majesty."

"Call me Catherine," I snorted, waving dismissively. "And I've drunk worse for worse reasons, Concocter. I pretty much switched exclusively to aragh after I ate Winter, and I think it might burn even worse."

"She pretends she's all tough, but you should see her guzzle that Vale summer wine," Indrani said.

The traitorous wench. I drank from the cup again, and it wasn't as bad. Presumably the first sip had killed everything inside my mouth capable of feeling taste, so this was just flogging a dead horse.

"I should have let the Prince of Nightfall have you when we first got to Skade," I said. "It would have saved me heaps of trouble."

"I'll toast to that," Concocter drily said, raising her cup.

Even Indrani drink, because evidently it was that kind of a night. Well, afternoon anyway.

"This is our wake for Lysander," Indrani told me afterwards. "Such as it is."

"Never drank much, Beastmaster," Concocter said. "Didn't like the loss of control. He was that kind of a prick."

"I'll toast to that," Archer said, and again we drank.

I didn't actually talk that much over the following hours. I didn't need to: they were, I grasped almost eager to tell their stories to someone who'd not heard them before. I suspected that

the Concocter was a lot lonelier than she seemed, for all that she proud as a cat. On occasion I used the power of being less drunk than the others to steer away from squabbles, but the two of them proved surprisingly amiable with each other. Eventually the Concocter fell into a drowse, slumping against the table, and Indrani rested her head against it as well. She closed her eyes, and I almost figured she'd fallen asleep as well until she spoke.

"I'm glad you came," Indrani quietly said.

"So am I," I replied, just as quietly. "Almost didn't."

"Why?"

"Figured you might not want me there, after yesterday," I admitted.

She snorted.

"Silly," Archer said. "Not angry about that. You were fighting for your way."

"Not yours," I said. "And I had to rap your knuckles."

"It's just what happens, in those situations," Indrani said.

The well of gratefulness I felt at her words did not quite silence the curiosity.

"Thought you'd be angry," I said. "You don't really care for the Truce and Terms."

"I don't," Archer easily said. "Don't mind them either, they're not likely to get in my way. But they're your way, Cat. Your mark, what you want to get done. I stepped on that, even if I didn't mean to. I'd do the same if it was the other way around, if clapped chains around my feet."

I slowly nodded. Hakram did have, I thought, that nasty habit of being right.

"You going to be all right?" I softly asked.

Silence followed for a long moment.

"Yeah," Archer finally said. "I just... I thought there was still time, Cat. To make something new."

She smiled bitterly.

"Stupid," Indrani said. "Should have learned better, after Great Strycht."

"I get it," I said. "Nauk wasn't what he used to be to me, not at the end, but when I heard he'd died at Sarcella..."

We shared a comfortable silence after that.

"He wouldn't have been as easy to live with as the image in my head," Indrani smiled. "I know that. Probably wouldn't even have worked. So I guess it's just having the possibility that I'm really grieving."

"It's still something, 'Drani," I replied.

"I guess it is," she murmured. "I guess it is."

After a moment her breath evened out, and I realized she'd fallen asleep. Reluctant to wake her so soon, I stayed seated even if my leg was beginning to ache and polished off the last of that atrocious Orchard Elixir. I was keeping an ear out for breathing, which was how I realized that the Concocter was no longer asleep almost immediately.

"It's a nice thing you did," Concocter whispered. "Coming here. Taking her of her."

"She's one of mine," I simply said.

"She used to be one of ours," the dark-haired villainess said, "but nice was never our game of choice. It's done well by her."

She sighed.

"You've done well by her," Concocter said. "The Woe."

"She's done well by us," I said. "Miss her?"

The other woman snorted.

"No," Concocter said. "She was fucking horrible, you know? To all of us. And we were horrible right back, but she had this need to *win* and..."

She shook her head.

"But it was us, at the start," she murmured. "The five of us. Other students came and went, but it was us and the Lady. It counts for something, even if we don't want it to. Lysander was a vicious shit of a man, Catherine. Selfish and brutal. But I miss it too, just like her. The... possibility."

"You weren't asleep," I said.

"Only half," she shrugged. "Drifted in and out. But I don't miss her, no. Maybe I'll see her again in the years to come, and maybe

I won't. I'm not sure if I forgive her, or if there's anything to forgive. But I like..."

She softly laughed.

"I like that I have the possibility, now," Concocter said. "So thank you for that, Catherine Foundling. Because she wouldn't have gotten there alone."

"She would have," I replied, meaning every word.

"And believe that, I figure, is what made her want it in the first place," Concocter murmured.

I wasn't going to argue the point, not with a grieving woman whose history with Archer was even more complicated than my own, so I stayed silent.

"The Huntress," I said, "will she be all right?"

"Alexis never learned to cope with anything but her fists," Concocter said. "It does her no favours, when tragedy strikes. But she'll get better, if you keep them separate. They've always brought out the worst in each other."

"Thought you might go see her instead if Indrani, at first," I said.

"She's with her friends right now," the dark-haired Named shrugged, "people she actually likes. I'll look in on her tomorrow. I don't expect much to come out of it."

"I thought you two were closer," I frowned.

"You measure us all by your band," Concocter murmured. "You shouldn't. It's rare, what you have. I've seen the other side lives, Catherine, and they don't get it handed to them either. It's rare, and it's precious. Don't let it go easy."

"I won't," I quietly said.

She nodded, and made herself comfortable against the table. I waited until her breath was even again, then slowly pushed myself up to my feet. Night had fallen, and with it the time I could spend here. I would soon be needed. Still a little drunk, I limped out into the dark. The time agreed upon was soon, very soon. I wasn't surprised when a grey-clad wanderer crept out of the shade, falling in at my side as I headed to the edge of the camp.

"Do you even know why you're here?" I curiously asked.

"Not yet," the Grey Pilgrim said.

I snorted. Fucking heroes.

"You asked me what my contingencies were, once," I said. "You're about to see one."

And at the edge of the wards, the two of us stood in the dark until Creation was opened with a slice and a dark-clad man strode through the opening. He smiled at seeing me. I smiled back.

"Welcome back, Hierophant," I said.

[ErraticErrata](#)

First update of the month, that means extra chapter in the eponymous tab. This one is titled "Disjunction" and is from Vivienne's POV, shortly after the end of Book V.

[Javvies](#)

Ooh, Masego's back in play. Excellent.
Reconciliation between Cat and Archer and Cat and Hakram (kind of). Even better.

Heh. Abigail thinks she's in trouble for something and then tries to talk her way into getting fired or demoted over it and instead gets a title of nobility out of it. She's stuck – no way to get out of responsibilities now.
She's gotta be wondering what, if anything, could have gotten her into enough trouble to be removed from her position without crossing the line into treason or some other execution-warranting offence.

And we're going to see an Abigail and Scribe team up. That's going to be hilarious.

[Javvies](#)

That was supposed be on its own, not a reply.
Dammit, wordpress.

caoimhinh

A bit of a continuity error: twice in this chapter Catherine mentions that her disciplining of Archer was "today".

It wasn't, that happened yesterday in the afternoon. And then in the night, they went raiding with the Drow until close to 4 a.m.

We were then told that by midday the Gigantes arrived, and then

Tariq arrived, so this is the night of the day of Tariq's arrival, which makes it well over 24 hours after Indrani's brawl with Silver Huntress.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat's had a really long day!

Risser

Really tho did Abigail kill a revenent with the standard?
Please let it be true

Morgenstern

Wording never said anything about killing. Just sticking it with one 😊

waffleblaster

Somehow thats even better

[Javvies](#)

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[doominator10](#)

Bets on what Abigail is going to pick for her new surname? My guess it will be after an alcoholic beverage.

Abigail Vale.
Abigail Aragh.
Hmm...

nimelennar

Abigail Orchard Elixir.

[doominator10](#)

Abigail Cherries!

TeK

She will probably try picking a name that has a chance of stripping her of title. Abigail Childeater, Abigail Drunk, Abigail Wifebeater, Abigail Realqueen (although that one might get her hanging, so it's out).

I am personally more interested in what motto she'll choose. I am partial too "Not The Freckles".

[Adrian V](#)

Nahh, her coat of arms, or standard, whatever i mena her simbol every noble house/line has: i bet she will choose ferrets xD

Salt

She'll pick something controversial to lower her standing and responsibilities, have schemers interpret it as a sign of her great political ambition and try to bring her into the fold, at which point she immediately reports them to Vivienne out of a complete lack of desire to fight another war at all, let alone a civil war.

Cue this being interpreted as a selflessly loyal and extremely shrewd subject, who's willing to taint her own reputation to root out the disloyal and traitorous.

Abrakadabra

Run to the hills. Thats the perfect motto for her. 😊

Raved Thrad

Abigail Notatanner. To remind herself of why she stayed a general, and is now a noble. 😊

beleester

Family motto: "They all look like ferrets."

Raved Thrad

This means, of course, that Talbot is going to try to match Abigail with some noble-get ferret who doesn't look like a ferret...

aran

She already picked her name:

"You'll have to pick a last name, now that you're a noble in the formal peerage of the Kingdom of Callow."

Lady Abigail What.

Possibly a contraction of the longer name Lady Abigail What The Fuck Just Happened

dadycoool

First third, my stomach hurts from laughing so hard. Abigail is a blessing upon Creation.

Second third, gut punch after gut punch. The Adjutant swore to his Warlord, but even he has limits. The thought of the Woe shattering is terrifying, even if we know intellectually that it will end eventually.

Last third, catharsis and some feel-good juice. It's REALLY good that Indrani has legit siblings, with Ranger as the mother. It grounds her in a way that Cat completely misses out on.

Yay! Masego's back!

Anomandris

You know what would be dope – "Mom" coming back to wreck a bit of behind the scenes havoc on DK for this....

Cicero

Strange that Ranger and Black are two Calamities that ended up "accidentally" having children.

In a very odd way that makes Archer and Cat sisters too.

If Ranger is the abusive mother, that makes Black the emotionally distant father.

sutortyrannus

>In a very odd way that makes Archer and Cat sisters too.

"What are you doing, stepsis?"

"No chromo".

[Liliet](#)

STEP sisters.

Black, emotionally distant, yeah right. He's the guy Catherine fell into habit of greeting with hugs after knowing him for less than a year.

Mental Mouse

I think that's on Cat. Remember that she was a teenage girl...

Liliet

Yes, a very feral and suspicious of the world teenage orphan.

And he made a hugster out of her.

""""Emotionally distant""""

KingJulius

If Adjutant left for any reason Catherine would simply break. She would either become a shell of a person and retreat into a corner or she would become a monster that makes even Black warn her of going too far.

Liliet

I don't think he's going to leave any more than Cat was really going to walk away from the Grand Alliance if Bard acted against her when she told Tariq she would, back in book 5.

It's just... a setting of boundaries. Long in the coming.

Burlyraven

Hmm... I wonder if Scribe might just be the catalyst to get Abigail into Name territory, or if it's just going to be an odd couple comedy pairing? Second one seems more likely, but I'm amused at the thought of how either could go.

And at least everybody's starting to be honest and open with one another, now. Things are both more and less stable as a result.

Anomandris

The most interesting part was Abby actually shrugging off Scribe's aspect! Haven't we seen/heard of Named who failed to do that?

mamm0nn

She didn't shrug it off, she's just paranoid enough to notice it/ /paranoid enough to notice it/ /paranoid enough to notice it/ /paranoid enough to notice it, infinite loop.

Mental Mouse

Which is at least as good as what Cat manages.

hakureireimu

Abby didn't shrug off Scribe's aspect; Abby overcame it through sheer paranoia!

NerfContessa

You mean to say

Abbymon uses paranoya.
It is extremely effective.

Sir Nil

She knows she's so paranoid that even if she forgets about Scribe, she'll quickly realise that "Oh shit I haven't noticed anything about her!"

Also, I recall there was a Procerean spymaster who was able to do a similar thing, but he only realised he didn't catch anything when he was trying to think how to get info on her appearance back.

[Javvies](#)

It's not so much that she shrugged it off. It was working, but Abigail is just that twitchy and paranoid, plus she went extra paranoid because it was Cat's tent and Cat and Hakram were both right there.

It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you. And Abigail knows the universe is out to get her. Which means that the blank spot of nothingness that Scribe was standing in was enough to trip Abigail's finely honed survival sense into noticing "hey something's not right here".

Eleron Pfoutz

Why not both?

nimelennar

Wait, is Hierophant back, or is he _back_?

Raivshard

I had the same thought. Did he nail down a source of magic to claim as his own?

[Javvies](#)

Masego's the fucking Heirophant.

He doesn't need the Gift/mortal magic that you normally get born with anymore.

He can craft miracles, utilize Fae arts, all by force of will and the right knowledge. He can probably emulate Night abilities as well, or will be able to with sufficient time and examination of them.

So ... while he might not officially have the Gift anymore, I fully expect that he can emulate it.

Though, we haven't actually really seen him in action since the founding of Twilight. Just when Blessed Artificer used a Light-based artifact on him and he broke the shit out of it.

Mental Mouse

He was also working with Cat against the Bard at the Arsenal.

Q

If she keeps climbing the ranks at this rate Abigail is going to reach apotheosis before Masego!

TeK

All hail Abigail, Goddess of Why The Fuck Is This Happening To Me

NerfContessa

Sooo... Athena?

TeK

Ok, I thought I don't get strategy stuff, but this is even worse. Can somebody give me a play by play of what happened here between Hakram and Cat for a person less in touch with his emotions than Aqua Sahelian?

Itarion

A while back, Hakram gave Cat a test. A proposal for aiding/arming the orc tribes that was utterly imbalanced and thoroughly flawed. Cat's refusal showed that she would not grant him things from pity, or rather that she did not pity him.

Hakram's injuries are crippling. He's missing much of his lower body, and in a way that cannot be repaired. This nearly broke him, and for a while his Name was slipping because Cat's handling of him – to keep him alive – made him lose trust in

his abilities. The proposal response was an indication that she did not pity him for his weakness, and thus that her actions were to protect him because she still needs him.

In the now, the implications of that are discussed. Hakram has made it clear that he will not be coddled, and that what he and Cat do for each other is not because it is owed, as a debt. Both have asked and recieved great and terrible prices from each other, and trying to measure that will ruin it.

aran

I understood the test part, but I'm somewhat confused by his statement that he "hacked away what might make it feasible". This implies that while he gave Cat a *bad* suggestion to see if she would humor him out of pity, he also had a *good* suggestion that for some reason he hasn't given her.

Cpt. Obvious

It could also mean that he had to really work at it to make the proposal somewhat believable. If it didn't at least require some serious thought to decline or approve Cat would have smelled rat. She knows how Hakram would put something like that together. If he'd not put all effort into it she'd known something was up.

caoimhinh

I guess you mean from the "I sent you that proposal as a test" part?

It's a bit hard to explain, and this kind of stuff can have multiple interpretations depending on who sees them, some will justify these actions while others will condemn them. If you think some of Hakram's actions made no sense, don't worry, it's because they were illogical. Emotion is what moved him rather than his usual rationality, and being crippled leaves a huge emotional wreck on any person.

Now, I am not a psychologist, but here's my take on it:

Hakram needed reassurance that Cat trusted him without being blind; and that she was keeping him with her out of more than pity and friendship. His wounded ego and stressed mind needed "another proof" that Catherine still saw him as a valuable asset. Have you heard those stories about how a girlfriend sees her friend to seduce her boyfriend because she wants to see if he would cheat? Kinda like that.

Hakram's test to Cat consisted of an unfeasible proposal that Catherine could not reasonably accept. If she had agreed to it, it would mean that she was doing it for him rather than for the

actual content of the proposal, and Hakram would take that as an insult, he would take it as her feeling pity of him due to his crippled state and how her

Sounds toxic? It is. However illogical it may seem, this makes sense in context, because of the state in which Hakram is (plus his cultural background as an Orc). People who are in emotional distress tend to take wrong decisions, often do self-destructive things that they wouldn't do if they were their normal selves. Also, since Hakram was a nihilist without a motivation to move in life until he met Catherine, the notion that she might not find him useful must be terrifying to him.

Despite how calm Hakram seems to be, he is actually suffering, and he is lashing out due to his emotional state, and he needs to talk about it openly before he keeps deteriorating his friendship with the person who is the most precious to him. People tend to do such when they are in situations of extreme emotional distress, like experiencing withdrawal symptoms, grieving, or coping with trauma.

Notice how in Hakram's mind putting him away from the battlefield because he is missing an arm and a leg is an equal insult to the emotional crossroads that he made Catherine face with his little test. And he says he won't apologize for doing it because Cat won't apologize for not letting him go fight.

It's not even a matter of making mental gymnastics, it's an instinctual response of hurting others because you are feeling hurt, and giving offense because you perceive that you have been slighted.

It's something that's even seen in a conversation, when one person says something hurtful, you say something hurtful back.

Matthew Wells

Hakram thought Cat might be compromised by her grief at him being crippled. So he gave her an intentionally bad plan that she could approve as a favor to him. Since she didn't, she's still trustworthy.

Also, if she had done it out of a sense of debt, she would have impugned his honor- he took his wounds in combat, fighting for what he believed in. That's why he threatened to leave.

[Liliet](#)

tl;dr Hakram didn't REALLY give Cat a horrible awful no good proposal to support orcs because he wanted it. He just FAKED giving it to her because he wanted to make sure she wasn't doing things out of pity. I don't think he noticed how much he would have terrified her – how much he DID terrify ME over here – with the idea that he was making shitty stuff now, but I

guess even if he did he wouldn't care, because of how bad it was to be him at that moment.

She had committed the grave offense of trying to keep him safe, you see. It's, like, grounds for a duel to the death among orcs, or something.

I'm just really fucking happy these idiots are chugging along.

Liliet

On second thought, uh, I think I was wrong with the "didn't realize how much he terrified her" thing.

I think that was his terror first actually.

I think he was afraid that Catherine was compromised, that her affection for him was a burden and that he might have been dragging her down for some time already without either of them noticing.

All Dogs are QUEENS

Basically, he felt he needed to know if Cat was just keeping him around because she felt she owed him/out of pity, or if she was keeping him around because she still needed him. To him the first one would be unacceptable and could have lead to him leaving on his own, he'd rather be nothing than be a burden, while the second one would mean that Cat still trusted him and had meant what she said when she told him that she still had things she needed him for even though he couldn't fight anymore.

From our perspective that's obvious, we've seen the inside of Cat's head and we know that she would both emotionally break without Hakram as a rock and that she wouldn't be able to manage a fair bit of what she's built without him; Hakram is going through a lot right now though, it makes sense that with Cat being Queen of Callow, First Under Night, and Queen of Villains he's start to wonder if after getting crippled he really had a place in her machinations. She proved that she still trusted him and that to her he still did

Frivolous

Speak to me of debt – Debt owed by Cat to Hakram? Debt owed by Hakram to Cat? I'm not certain, but I guess Hakram means it both ways, that if Cat ever tries to use debt as a reason why she does anything for or to Hakram, Hakram will leave. Because love shouldn't be about owing.

I'm not even sure if Hakram made the threat out of pride or simply because he loves Cat and won't allow her to weaken

herself. The threat could have been solely prophylactic in intention, to keep Cat from thinking that way about Hakram.

I continue to hold hope for Hakram to eventually be healed or to find his own way past or through his mutilation. Though even that may not bring the old relationship with Cat back.

I do know that Hakram would rather die or lose his Name than be a figure of pity to Cat.

I quite like that Hakram tested Cat by passing her that botched proposal. And that Cat passed the test.

I love love love the part about Abigail. The babble about everything she feels Cat might execute her for was very funny, particularly the phrase "magistrate dedicated solely to baby-eating, but that would be really expensive".

I wonder what last name she'll choose. Something ordinary like Brewer, after her mother's previous occupation? Abi will try to blend in, I think.

When she gibbered about them flirting, does that not mean that a couple of Levantine nobles, engaged even, tried to get her into a threesome? How risqué if so.

I wonder exactly what indecorous skulking means, and also how goblins do it.

I'm rolling my eyes yet again over Dominion craziness that they think an eruption of monsters is wonderful. Dominion women must have lots of kids to make up for their horrible attitude towards self-preservation. Otherwise they would have died out long ago.

I like how Concocter's opinion of Cat matches Wekesa's opinion of Cat and the Woe when it comes to Indrani and Masego, respectively. Cat and the Woe have been good for them emotionally.

Matthew Wells

I'm betting not only did she nearly end up in a threesome, it was with our favorite pair of reckless young Blood.

Frivolous

Probably is Razin and Aquiline, yes. There can't be that many engaged couples in the army.

On the other hand, maybe Abigail got her wish and became pregnant, which could make her ineligible for continued military service. Wouldn't that be a plot twist, to become pregnant by Razin Tanja?

Raved Thrad

That would result in a scene with Aquiline, though, wouldn't it?

"General Abigail, I must regretfully invite you to an appointment, with knives, tomorrow at dawn. Unless you agree to permanently join the House of Tanja, then I must kill you for my honor and the honor of the Blood. *I* will bear Razin's heir, and no other!"

Frivolous

Definitely a possible consequence.

On the other hand, are the Blood of the Binder and the Slayer even allowed to mix together? Are they allowed to have one single kid who inherits the lands and property and allegiances of both Tanja and Osenia?

If the answer is No, then Abi's potential kid by Razin might solve that little problem.

I suspect there must be some traditional response to illegitimate kids in the Dominion. The Levantines are so hot-blooded, violent, and probably horny that it must have happened before, and often. Either they go for vendettas as per the usual, or they're completely blasé about illegitimacy.

I have no idea which is more likely.

Raved Thrad

Maybe a Trial of Bloodright, quiaff?

Morgenstern

Why can't there be "that many engaged couples in the army" when it comes to the Dominion's army, though? They obviously have no gender bias when it comes to fighting and killing, and the whole thing can (see Aquiline vs Razin) even serve as love-maker for them... it would seem to be "a wonderful pastime" for Levantine couples to go out and fight together, judging by what we've been shown of their culture so far. 😊 What with the "social event of the decade" this very chapter and all that "honor and blood" stuff.

Frivolous

I suppose there could be many engaged couples, but I'm suspecting most are either single or already married.

Engagement, after all, is usually a temporary condition.
Like being pregnant.

BringBlackBack

What he meant when he said debt is her pitying him. Remember earlier, when he made a bullshit request to give Orcs stuff and she said no? She passed his test. She put the lives of people over her friend's feelings. So, when Hakram says he doesn't want to hear anything about debt, he means that he doesn't want her to pity him and his crippled state, rather than treat him like an equal and as a man who decided to follow her and live with the consequences.

mamm0nn

Alright, it's a bit creepy how close I was with predicting Cat's conversation with Abigail last chapter. Different names, but the same sentiment. That said, Viv might have some competition for the Queenship of Callow now. At this point there are few ways to screw over Abigail with promotions left.

[Daniel](#)

Queens can abdicate. If she gets to Queen (another chess metaphor?) she can finally rest.

Although that's just the legal side of it, she might still have some other moral, emotional, magical or Name-related bonds on her that keep her even then, and I guess she probably would.

mamm0nn

Abigail: Oh shit, I can't abdicate because angry mobs will lynch me if I leave, let the government implode and also the Tower will probably try to assassinate me just to make sure I cannot make a heroic comeback to rally Callow defeated a few decades from now.

Captain Amazing

I think the Bard is trying to sever all of Catherine's close relationships. The attack on the Arsenal weakened her friendship with both Hakram and Hanno and killed the Repentant Magister. This leaves the starcrossed lover plot to the Kingfisher Prince, and that couldn't last. The mentor relationship with the Scorched Apostate was killed in the cradle. I think that fear she's feeling is left over from the demon attack as Bard had the demon target the relationship. Masego doesn't know about the effects of terror demons.

Notably, Cat's friendship with Vivienne is still intact because she doesn't have a name anymore.

Cap'n Smurfy

Damn I hadn't picked up on that at all. Plus if it wasn't for Hakram Cat would have left Archer alone after Beastmasters death, creating more distance between them. I wonder how Beastmasters actually died, considering we didn't even see his perspective but got that Monk's one. The one who also died not five minutes later...

Morgenstern

The Sage, you mean? (The Monk was one of the traitors in the Arsenal, quite a few chapters back.)

We got a very roundabout quick summary of Indrani being there with Beastmaster during the fight he died in, what with the broken arm and all that. So my second gut instinct of him getting killed when he just found vital information that will now never reach the army – right after the first of them not recovering the body and him coming back as Revenant – went right out the window, when it was confirmed that Indrani had been with him and his body recovered. Well, shucks. Simply not a really relevant death then, I think – other than as emotional plot hook for further character development.

Other than the Sage who seemingly did find vital info – just to get sniped before he could tell anybody what he found out (or make use of it himself). Sad.

[Liliet](#)

Actually Cat had a pretty bad rift with Vivienne too, until Vivienne went out of her way to try and fix it after Indrani chided Cat for it.

Jircniv

Now THAT is what I would call a roller-coaster of emotions. Thanks for a magnificent chapter EE. Well done.

Frivolous

Hmm. Now that General Abigail has become General Lady Abigail and is eligible to give herself a last name, I wonder what happens to her family, the brothers and maybe mother and the uncle and ferret-faced cousins. Do they get the last name, too, or is it only Abigail's own children?

And what if Abigail gets married to someone else with a last name? Does her last name get swallowed up by her spouse's last name, thus disappearing?

Does anyone know the historical precedents for such?

beleester

From what I can gather, a hereditary title is inherited by descendants of the original grantee, so Abigail's kids could inherit, but her existing family isn't affected. Which child exactly depends on Callow's rules of succession – typically it's the firstborn male heir, but Calernia tends to have more gender equality, so it might be firstborn of any gender.

If she marries another noble, she and her children get the man's last name – during the crusade, a Callowan noble mentions that the Procerans wanted to marry her daughter specifically so that any children would take Proceran last names. (Callow apparently allows same-sex marriage, but no word on what happens to the title then.)

I believe the noble title still exists, last name or no, but Abigail's title doesn't seem to include anything *but* her last name. She's not the Lady of anywhere, she's just Lady Abigail. So I think the title would disappear for most purposes, but it could pop up again if it became relevant somehow (divorce? widow? husband gets his title revoked?).

Morgenstern

Maybe that's where some double and triple titles of nobles come from, not just them owning multiple regions?

I would wager there are different rules about that in different countries, though. Some losing the name of the less relevant partner (rules for which being which might vary), others making double titles out of the two, ... there might be others yet, but I'm seemingly too tired to grasp the thought that just went by 😊

Frivolous

I think it would be a shame if Abi's new last name were lost simply because she married someone who also had a last name. I mean, new original noble last names must be pretty rare, right?

Abi is a little like the Callowan version of Lorenzo Malanza, elevated to the nobility because he was a great general. And, you know, defeated his predecessor Juan Osuna.

I wonder if old Lorenzo had Malanza as a last name before or only after he became Prince of Aquitan.

Black Spiral Dancer

Interesting chapter. Hard to mow through, but worth it.

Crowley

Poor Abigail getting the short end of the stick again. And paired with Scribe, this should be interesting. I'm looking forward to an interlude with them together, maybe even from Scribe's POV for once.

Cat and Hakram needed that talk. And just when you think they're cool, he pulls that line. Hakram, you gossipy bitch, there were enough feels around, that threat's gonna keep Cat and readers on edge.

Lysander's wake and its aftermath was all lovely in every way. Glad to see how well those three get along.

Masego at the end though, it's this kind of cliffhangers that make me curse the day i caught up.

Didn't see a typo thread, so i guess i'll start one.

hair was seemingly match-> hair was seemingly matched

keep of secrets-> keeper of secrets

Indran-> Indrani

His licked his chops-> He licked

barring from the battlefield-> barring me from the battlefield

seized me by throat-> seized me by the throat

with little usual scarf-> with the little usual scarf

looked nothing all-> looked nothing alike

if clapped chains-> if you clapped chains

Taking here of her-> Taking care of her

instead if Indrani->instead of Indrani

I've seen the other side lives-> I've seen how the other side lives

Valkyria

Poor Abigail, Cat unfortunately likes her.

But props to her to still believe in those early retirement plans. Being this convinced against all the odds takes some hardened resolve.

JJR

Cat is smart enough to not make the mistake of toying with her enemies. But she is still a cat, and she needs to toy with someone when she's bored; friends it is then.

Juff

Typo Thread:

ringing bell > ringing a bell

match with > matched with

build off > build up

loaded die > loaded dice

inside before, it > inside before; it

to us than everything (extra space)

seems delicate > seems a delicate
afterwards, "it's > afterwards. "It's
her card > her cards
Indran actually > Indrani actually
His licked his chops > He licked his chops,
currently said. (i'm not sure what this should be)
barring from > barring me from
saddling with > saddling him with
alone on > alone in
them a large > there were a large
looked nothing at all > looked nothing at all alike
sowed on > sewed on
she proud > she was proud (or acted?)
if clapped chains > if it clapped chains
Taking care of her > Taking care of her
And believe that > And believing that (or your belief in that?)
if Indrani > of Indrani
seen the other side > seen how the other side

Shveiran

This chapter made me laugh like a fool, then it punched me in the
guts, then it moved my heart, and to finish me off filled me with
a sense of expectation fully worthy of a weekend cliffhanger.

Do I even need to say that this was amazing?

I suppose I will, just in case. You are a wonder, EE. Thank you
truly for these amazing gifts you keep offering us.

[Liliet](#)

"“You’re a Calamity?” Abigail wailed.

“Retired,” Scribe noted. “I am now gainfully employed by the
Kingdom of Callow. Which has my adequately remunerated loyalty.”

“You conquered the Kingdom of Callow,” the general said, voice
gone shrill with dismay.

“It’s a fair point,” I admitted.

“She has you there,” Adjutant agreed.

Scribe shot us a look that was deeply put-upon, though I’d met
the godsdamned Calamities so if she was going to try to sell me
she was used to less fucking around she was going to have to do
better than that.

“I promise not to do it again,” Scribe tried.”

I MISSED THIS

I MISSED THIS SO MUCH

nimelennar

Come on, Scribe, don't make promises with caveats unless you explicitly state those caveats.

Which is to say, if Black asked her to conquer Callow again, you know she'd totally do it, promise or not.

JJR

"Well you see, I only conquered 99% of Callow this time. This bit over here is still free and independent!"

-Scribe probably

[Liliet](#)

Well, it's kind of like Cat's thought process in agreeing to employ her at all. They both know he's got Callow exactly where he wants it.

Crash

Glorious.

ninegardens

So, does this mean that we'll get Hakram's *actual* scheme soon enough (without critical details torn out?)

LarsBlitzer

Another chapter title relating to Chess! This time it's "Adjournment." Which, in this context means to suspend the game in progress so it can be continued at another time, typically the following day. The rationale is that games often extend in duration beyond what is reasonable for a single session of play. As in chess, there is sometimes a sealed move, where the next move that would be made is sealed in an envelope, to be played out when the game resumes (normally played by the director or arbiter). This practice ensures that neither player knows what the board position will be when it is their next turn to move.

In this case, we're at a lull between battles; the war is temporarily suspended, and the "sealed move" in this context is pretty blatant: the bestowal of title to Lady Abigail Cain-Blackadder (a placemaker until she decides on a surname) and saddling her with the Scribe to keep her focused.

Daniel E

Totally called Abigail getting a raw deal from the previous chapter. I am actually in tears from laughing, even the drama afterwards can not detract from my joy. Best part is Hakram with

a legendary poker face talking about their magical assassins, and Abigail actually cheers up a little as she agrees that placing them in the rank & file is too obvious. Gods be with you, Admiral Abigail.

[sengachi](#)

The Abigail scene was glorious, had me laughing the whole time.

And Idrani's scene was just as good, but in a way that left me very quiet.

Thank you for this story. It's really better than I can do justice with words.

Frivolous

I have been trying to remember what Abigail's situation reminds me of, and I realized her situation mirrors the plot of Going Postal by Terry Pratchett.

Abigail is Moist, the overly competent and very slippery criminal who flourishes under pressure. Scribe is the golem, assigned to follow Moist around and keep him in line. Cat is Vetinari, the resourcefully sadistic tyrant.

Only Abi isn't a criminal, she just really wants to go home. Scribe doesn't want to kill Abi, though Abi probably thinks differently. But Cat really is a lot like Vetinari, especially from Abi's perspective.

Abigail's reputation will probably skyrocket once it becomes known that she has been assigned not just any Named but a Calamity. Her own personal Calamity, both literally and figuratively. Or her reputation would, if Scribe were not so completely forgettable.

Crash

Think this might be my new favourite chapter.

It has everything. Abigail being mercilessly needled by Cat and Hakram. Heavy Woe interactions but also loving, in their own way and... Who am I kidding?

"I promise I won't do it again."

Absolutely broke me. Completely lost it.

I love this.

[Mental Mouse](#)

What broke me was Abigail's response to being ennobled. "What."

aran

"You'll have to pick a last name, now that you're a noble in the formal peerage of the Kingdom of Callow."

"What," Abigail weakly said.

Congratulations, Lady Abigail What.

Relai

I love how through the pure virtue of who Abigail is, she as a normal non-named person can break through one of Scribe's aspects.

Interlude: Theism

"Seventy-four: if your lover does not have martial training have a rescue plan ready and waiting, as the eventual abduction by your nemesis is essentially inevitable."

– 'Two Hundred Heroic Axioms', author unknown

Klaus breathed out, quashing all hesitation, and struck.

The axe-blade bit deep into the skull, killing Ratbiter before the horse realized what was happening. The Bremen *stampfen* dropped, mercifully, but the spray of blood still went high and hot. Messy thing killing a horse, even when done right. Some would have said that the Prince of Hannover should have ceded the duty to another, that the arm he'd lost in the fall of Hainaut would make a clean kill harder, but he'd refused. Klaus Papenheim had ridden that horse through death and doom too long to let someone else swing the axe. Wiping the bloodspray off his cheek, the prince knelt by his old friend's corpse and laid a hand on the unmoving flank.

"Rest, old friend," the Prince of Hannover murmured in Reitz. "And if there is a place for you on the other side, I will find you there."

Klaus Papenheim was, in the end, Lycaonese. He'd miss Ratbiter, but he would not burden the army with a lame horse. His people knew well that hesitation in the face of the dead only deepened the losses, and the virtues of pragmatism had been ground deep into their common soul. Sentiment was of no use from the grave,

or from the uglier end of walking death. The old general forced himself up, feeling his knees groan under the weight. Behind him, two bodyguards and a pack of army cooks were waiting.

"Butcher and skin him," the Prince of Hannover ordered. "Throw the bones and offal in the disposal pit."

Pitch and magefire would make sure the Dead King found nothing there to use. Klaus passed the axe's handle to one of his bodyguard – Dieter, whose scarred scalp had turned white as he became just another boy aged too soon by this infernal war – and strode away. His steps took him down the slope, towards the heart of the beleaguered army's camp as his bodyguards followed in his wake. His parents would have disapproved of it, his leaving. If they'd thought they glimpsed squeamishness they would have made him watch, if not take up a skinning knife himself. *A Papenheim cannot hesitate*, Father had always said. *A crown is a cage of hard choices*, Mother had whispered, tucking him in a child.

Both had set out to burn weakness out of him so that Hannover would not perish under his watch.

The white-haired prince almost smiled. It'd been many years since he had last thought of Ludwig and Sieglinde Papenheim, neither of which were remembered fondly by many of their kin. Klaus had come to understand, as a ruler in his own right, that much of what had seemed cruelty as a child had in truth been cold pragmatism of the breed necessary to survive at Keter's gate. He'd even come to be grateful for the hard lessons, in time. Yet the passing of the years had not made him love the imperious and high-handed pair any more than he had whilst they still lived. Ironically enough, he figured neither would have minded: what did his aversion matter to them, when their ways had become his just as they had wished? Some legacies were insidious, he'd learned, and all the harder to shake for their quiet creep.

There were songs, among Klaus' people, about the love he'd borne for his late wife. How even as a man in his prime he'd never considered remarrying. The truth was not as clean as that. Part of why Klaus had never remarried after Suse's death had been his many failings as a father. He had, without even noticing, become his parents come again. No wonder Wilfried had pressed that charge too far against the ratlings: when had he ever smiled at his eldest save when the boy came back bloodied and victorious? And Gregor, his sweet secondborn he'd tried to harden for the days ahead, had hidden the sickness until it'd been much too late for even the priests.

Would he have, if he'd not been convinced his own father saw him as a weakling?

And so Klaus had decided he would not fail any more children, that legacy would die with him. Margaret had been the one to draw

him out of the darkness of those days, after she gave birth to her own little daughter. His sister had been a hesitant mother, and sometimes distant, but rarely unkind: in this she had fared the best of the House of Hasenbach. All it'd taken was for Klaus to hold that bundle named Cordelia in his arms once and he'd been lost, besotted with the little blonde curls and at the laughing eyes. She'd been a merry child, his niece. Prone to gurgling at strangers and trying to eat her uncle's beard.

More than once Klaus had found his hand reaching for ink and quill, after the talk that had buried their closeness. Where the First Prince of Procer had sent him to fight and die and Hainaut, ordered him to abandon the principality – the people! – he'd sworn to defend. Always he'd drawn back at the last moment, and only official reports had left for Salia. Yet he often found himself writing that letter in his mind, when he had a spare moment. Bits and pieces of it. *Sometimes, niece, you remind me of your grandfather*, Klaus would write if he took the quill today. *When I was a boy of nine, Prince Ludwig Papenheim ordered the town of Ebelburg burned when he heard ratling warbands were two hours away.*

If he hadn't, the townsfolk would have insisted on fighting and standing their ground, the white-haired prince wrote in his mind. *They would have said the children could not run quick enough, that the elderly would not survive the trip. Instead he had torches thrown, and four hundred people were saved. They did not thank him for it, Cordelia.*

Klaus still remembered the soldiers talking when they returned to Hannover, the way they'd described his father. Carved in iron, they'd said, and it had been as much invective as praise. Yet they had respected him for it, he remembered. Even the townsfolk he'd burned out of their own homes and brought back to his capital even as a larger force assembled to drive back the rattlings. *So I understand it, the decision*, Klaus Papenheim silently penned. *It's in our blood. But I am the townsfolk of my childhood, niece. I cannot thank you for having ordered the torches thrown at Hannover.* The old prince knew his home would have fallen even if he'd ridden out to defend it. He'd read the maps, counted the days. Hannover had been doomed the moment this war began.

And yet Klaus Papenheim had not been there to fight for it, and this he could not forgive himself – or anybody else.

The old general found his tent nestled near the bottom of the hill, surrounded by sworn swords from Hannover. There the rest of their makeshift war council still held session, sifting through heap of troubles that the last bloody push to take the town of Juvelun from the dead had brought down on them. His second, Princess Mathilda Greensteel of Neustria, was sharing the table

with Captain Nabila of Alava – a short, stout woman with a heavily painted face – as the Dominion's man and Prince Arsene of Bayeux held down his own corner as the voice for the Alamans and the fantassins.

The last two men stood for smaller forces, but in their own way crucial ones: freshly back from healing the White Knight sat with a pleasant smile as he methodically ate his way through an apple, commander of all Named with the army. For the Damned it was the Barrow Sword that had been elected to stand. Klaus counted the man a rogue and a vicious specimen of the breed, but he was also solid in a fight and a devil against Revenants – the Prince of Hannover was willing to forgive much in favour of that. The Dominion villain often clashed with Captain Nabila, but it seemed more like sparring than the venom Catherine Foundling had warned him might ensue.

The Gods only knew where General Rumena had gotten to, for it came and went as it pleased, but in its absence it had left behind a dark-skinned drow that spoke perfect Chantant and called itself Mighty Sagasbord. It was both habitually sardonic and eerily knowing, which usually made for good advice unpleasant to hear.

"- then we should split our forces and strike now, else the enemy will delay us further," Captain Nabila insisted.

"We're still uncertain how many escaped into the valley," Prince Arsene skeptically replied. "We could be headed into-"

"She's right," Klaus cut in, striding into the tent.

The splatter of blood on him got a few surprised looks as he lowered himself into a seat at the table, but nothing more. Everyone here had gotten their hands bloody taking Juvelun, and if they were to survive this trap it wouldn't be the last time.

"Dare we hope for an elaboration, Prince Klaus?" the Prince of Bayeux testily asked.

"We took the town but the dead retreated in good order," the Prince of Hannover replied. "It could be ten thousand made it out, it could be thirty thousand. Either way, every drifting warband in the central valley of Hainaut will be headed that way now. If we don't strike before the enemy musters up properly, we'll lose the battle ahead of us."

It'd taken three days and night of brutal fighting before Juvelun fell, the ditches and walls dug by the dead stormed at all too high a cost. Yet there'd been no final keep to assail, no last redoubt: instead the undead had retreated under cover of night, leaving behind a token force for the drow under General Rumena to annihilate. Though their scouts had insisted that a hundred

thousand undead had been holed up in Juvelun, in practice the Prince of Hannover suspected they'd fought around seventy thousand at most. The rest had been kept back, and most likely were down in the valley preparing to prevent Klaus' army from linking up with the Black Queen's. Should the enemy succeed in that design, no one in this tent would still be drawing breath by the moon's turn. They'd make a fight of it, the Prince of Hannover knew, but it'd be a defeat engraved in stone.

"Strike hard, then keep moving," the Barrow Sword approvingly said. "A sound notion."

Dominion officers always thought like raiders, the old general deplored. It wasn't always a weakness, as there were similarities between the glorified raids that the Levantines called 'honour wars' and an offensive into enemy territory. But the distances and numbers involved meant a lot of their instincts pulled them the wrong way. It'd been too long since the Dominion of Levant had been in a real war, one that didn't end with a summer's fighting and a few promises traded between Blood.

They lost the learning, Klaus thought. The Army of Callow had gone through a bevy of rough campaigns and sharpened the skills with war schools while Procer had been given a refresher in the art by the Great War and the latest round of the Uncivil Wars, but the Dominion had nothing of the sort. All their learning was done on the field, with bloody costs for every mistake.

"We're not in fighting fit for a pitched battle," Princess Mathilda of Neustria bluntly said. "It's been a day since we took the town and the priests are still overwhelmed with wounded. We lost a dozen soldiers to *infections* this morning because the healers would have died if they kept drawing on Light."

"I forced the Stalwart Apostle to drink a concoction that'd make her sleep," the White Knight admitted. "She'd still be in the tents otherwise, and burned out permanently."

She was a good kid that one, Klaus thought. A little soft and with too much faith the Heavens would swoop down and fix everything, but prayer had never gone amiss when things got dark.

"Exactly," Prince Arsene said. "Are we to send forces into a battle without priests and mages, Your Grace, or consign wounded to death so that our hasty vanguard is not bare of protection?"

This is why your people lost the Great War, Prince Klaus Papenheim thought. *Why none of you were able to win it, beyond the Tower's manipulations. None of you were willing to pay what it would have cost you.*

"We will consign wounded to die," the Iron Prince flatly said. "If the Enemy still has swarms to spare, we would be facing a potential wipe without priests and mages to compensate."

"The Witch of the Woods-"

"- will do what she can, but cannot be relied on," Mathilda Greensteel interrupted the White Knight, nodding at Klaus. "If Revenants come after her, the protections she has to offer will not be enough."

"This is *madness*," Prince Arsene insisted. "We are to leave our own to die and risk it all on battle with a force we know little about?"

"Would you prefer to be besieged in this lovely ruin of a town?" the Barrow Sword drily asked.

"Yes," Prince Arsene emphatically replied. "We still have supplies for a few days – more, perhaps, considering our losses – and if we dig in the Black Queen can come relieve us as soon as she has secured the Cigelin Sisters."

"What impressive eagerness to die," Mighty Sagasbord noted, laying its chin on its palm. "Your confidence surprises, Prince of Man. We took this Juvelun from a numerically superior force, yet you now believe that should we be besieged by an enemy many times our greater we will prevail?"

"Our men are worth easily three of the dead," Prince Arsene harshly said, pride clearly stung. "*Ours* anyway, dark elf."

"No Firstborn will ever take your life, Prince of Man," Mighty Sagasbord smiled, without a single speck of friendliness to it.

The Alamans prince looked surprised and confused, but those more familiar with the ways of the Firstborn winced at the bald insult. The drow ate the skills and knowledge of those they slew, Klaus knew, so the Mighty had been implying that there was nothing worth taking from Arsene of Bayeux. Best to step in before this went further astray, the Prince of Hannover thought.

"We might be able to hold the down, if we can put up defences before the dead arrive," Klaus admitted. "For a few days. But they won't fight us, Prince Arsene. They will surround us and wait us out instead. The Hidden Horror is patient, he will starve us into the grave."

The army that'd come out of Malmedit like devils pouring out of a Hellgate was not far behind them. Three, four days at most. If Klaus' army stayed in Juvelun, it risked annihilation: the enemy in the valley would pen it in from the west, the great host of Malmedit from the east. If that happened, even using a pharos

device to escape wouldn't be enough. The dead would strike in force the moment the gates opened, on both flanks, and the more of Klaus' soldiers made it into the Twilight Ways the higher the risk of those staying in Creation being overwhelmed by sheer numbers and horrors.

They'd ran the games, him and the Marshal of Callow. Any army trying to evacuate through the Twilight Ways while giving battle was facing at least half its number in losses, and more frequently up to two thirds. There came a tipping point early in the process that made it impossible to maintain cohesion in the ranks, and the moment panic set in a massacre was inevitable. No, Klaus Papenheim would not allow the enemy to slip that noose around his neck. Better the wounded perish today than a hundred times their number tomorrow.

"The Black Queen's column will relieve us," Prince Arsene pointed out. "With her numbers-"

"She does not have the supplies to feed us, Your Grace," the White Knight calmly said. "Her force is even larger than ours, and stretched the Grand Alliance's capacity to supply. Even if she empties all her stores, all she can accomplish is join us in our starvation after a few more days."

The Prince of Bayeux's face soured, but he argued no further. The man was overly cautious, but not a fool. He understood what a combined army of over a hundred thousand, surrounded and far behind enemy lines without any supply lines, meant in practice. The Prince of Hannover's insistence to take Juvelun had not been, contrary to what some wagging fantassin tongues insinuated, out of desire for a victory to gild his name. The other choices had all been worse: either turning back to the defensive line, and so tossing the Black Queen's army to the wolves, or allowing a massive army of two hundred thousand to march down on threadbare defensive lines.

By taking Juvelun and smashing the army holding it, Klaus had forced the Malmedit army to pursue him west into the valley. He'd bled his army achieving this, but it was better than the disaster that would be the destruction of Catherine Foundling's army or the end of Procer that the defensive lines breaking would represent.

"I have voiced my thoughts on what must be done," Captain Nabila said. "And I do not take back these words. Yet I add this: if there is no appetite for the fight, we must withdraw. Take to the Twilight Ways and leave. I will not swear the warriors of Alava to a desperate end in Juvelun."

Prince Klaus kept his face calm. That had been, however delicately put, a threat that if the army stayed in Juvelun the Levantines would take to the Twilight Ways and leave them all

behind. His control over the coalition was slipping, the old general realized. Eyes turned to Prince Arsene of Bayeux, whose face had grown conflicted. The man, Klaus knew, did not enjoy being at odds with most of the table when it came to making war plans. But he saw it as his duty to speak not only for the soldiers of Bayeux and Brabant but also for the fantassins companies, which meant espousing their causes even when they were unpopular with other commanders.

"I'm not certain if an order to march towards another battle would be followed," the fair-haired prince admitted. "My men will follow me, but the Brabant conscripts have been unruly since Prince Etienne died and half the fantassins are mutinous. They were hard used with the breaches on the second day, and have not forgot it."

"Alava led the charge on the first, and the Lycaonese on the third," Captain Nabila harshly said. "What sets them apart from us, I wonder?"

The appearance of cowardice was like throwing red meat at a starving dog, for Levantines. They couldn't resist sinking their teeth in it, and they were especially quick to point those fingers when it came to Alamans.

"The hardest defences to assail were the second day's," the Iron Prince acknowledged. "And their losses were significant. I have not forgotten that."

The other prince looked relieved.

"It is not mutiny, Your Grace," Prince Arsene said. "Your command is not contested. They have simply reached their limits."

It was a mutiny, whether the other man wanted to admit it or not. It was simply not yet an open one, not that illusion would survive his giving an order. The rank and file did not understand why they were here fighting and dying, could not grasp the broader theatre of war. That was why trust between soldiers and generals was so important: they had to trust in the person commanding them to steer them right even if they could not understand what was being done and why. It now seemed like trust in Klaus Papenheim was running out. What was it that'd done him in, he wondered – the darkly comical march to and away from Malmedit, or the brutal fighting taking a heavily defended town seemingly in the middle of nowhere? Either way, the horse had grown lame from the hard riding.

"They must be made to understand what is at stake," the Iron Prince said. "Gather the officers for me, Prince Arsene. I will address them personally."

The other man looked unconvinced. Klaus did not have a reputation as much of an orator, it was true. The only vote he'd ever personally cast in the Chamber of Assembly instead of letting an *assermenté* do it for him had been the one that'd put his niece on the high throne. Still, Prince Arsene nodded in assent. Likely he figured that after the old general failed to sway the vacillating captains discussion of a compromise could begin in earnest.

"Let us part ways until then," Klaus said. "There is no need for further discussion."

The Prince of Bayeux took his leave, and after a lingering look Captain Nabila did the same. Mathilde slowed as she passed by his seat.

"Veitland?" the Princess of Neustria asked.

"Hauptberg," the Prince of Hannover replied.

She nodded, and strode away without another word. Nothing more needed to be said. Klaus found that the Barrow Sword was looking at them, eyes considering.

"Nabila is young to the Lord of Alava's service, did you know," the bearded Damned casually said. "Only a decade as one of his captains, most of them spent far from Yannu Marave himself. She rose to her position on merit, not closeness or years."

"She has proved a fine officer," Klaus replied, for it was true.

"There's a reason she held borders, back home, and did not stay at her lord's side," the Barrow Sword smiled. "In Levant, authority flows from either Blood or blood."

The Prince of Hannover met the other man's gaze, unblinking. It would take more than cryptic talk from a mouthy grave robber to impress him.

"I do wonder how you'd do there, Iron Prince," the Damned chuckled.

Someone, Klaus thought, ought to have beaten the smugness out of that man by now. He gave no reply to the villain, who seemed to take it as a victory and left the tent. Behind stayed only the White Knight, whose look of unruffled patience had not changed a whit.

"You have something to say?" Klaus asked.

"The Enemy breathes down our necks," the White Knight said. "I do not understand its great designs, for I am no general, but the jaws of the trap are closing on us. That much I can sense."

"We reach the turning point soon," Klaus quietly agreed. "One way or another. There is a battle taking shape in Hainaut that will decide the fate of the Principate."

"Not here in Juvelun," the White Knight mused. "It has not come together properly. And you might be surprised, Prince Klaus, by the roar of this army should it allow itself to be surrounded here. There is a... power behind such stands. Even more so when there is salvation on the way, awaiting the darkest hour to deliver dawn."

"There are not many things I would not trust the swords of the Lycaonese to prevail over, White Knight," the Iron Prince replied, "but steel cannot triumph over hunger. There can be no victory over an empty belly."

"So I've gathered," the dark-skinned Chosen amiably replied. "And so now we must prepare for the storms on the horizon and pray that the most terrible of our allies will come to our aid."

The old general stared at the other man, wondering at the tone used when speaking of the hero's equal and opposite under the Terms. He'd never put any stock in the rumours about the Black Queen and the White Knight, but like many he'd always been unsettled by the cordiality between the two of them. Often the warmth in the voices when they spoke of each other had startled him, but now he heard no hint of it in the White Knight's words. There had been a distancing there, he thought. Not enmity, but a cooling of relations. Merciful Gods, what was it that'd really happened in the Arsenal?

The rumours spread by the dozen, each wilder and more fanciful than the last, but truth was in short supply.

"We will have order," Klaus Papenheim simply said. "And we will march west, as we must."

"I expect we will," the White Knight tiredly said. "I will ready my Named for the march, Iron Prince."

The white-haired prince looked askance at the other man, almost surprise.

"That is all?" he said.

"I do not judge," Hanno of Arwad said, rising to his feet. "This has not changed, and never will."

The Chosen left the tent after offering a small bow, not speaking another word, and Klaus dragged himself upright once more. His day was far from over. The old prince attended to the army of Hannover, speaking to his captains and preparing them for what was to come, and awaited the word of the Prince of Bayeux. Yet it

was not another Proceran who came for him first but something altogether more eldritch. General Rumena, the only drow in all of the army come south to bear such the title, was stooped and old in a way that Firstborn never were. It was ancient, Klaus knew, in a way that it was hard to truly understand.

The fucker was also a bastard soldier of the old breed, so Klaus Papenheim had never found him difficult to deal with. He'd yet to manage to talk the other general into no longer invading his tent whenever it felt like it, but aside from that their relationship had been rather amiable from the start.

"You have something for me?" the Prince of Hannover asked.

Complaining about the habitual intrusion would be wasted time in a day that already had too few hours.

"We went down to have a look in the valley," General Rumena agreed. "The dead gather, Hannover Prince. The valley had been stripped bare of warbands – Losara Queen's work, I wager – but the dead salvaged a host from the fall of Juvelun. Perhaps thirty thousand, though they are not yet properly mustered for battle."

Klaus grimaced at the news. He'd hoped for closer to twenty thousand, fool's hope as it had been. That much could have been handled without leaning too heavily on the Alamans to supply soldiers for the force that would sally out.

"How long do we have?"

The wrinkled and grey-skinned creature considered that a moment.

"The dusk of tomorrow," the drow finally said. "They will be ready for war then, and waiting for you. The disarray from the fall of Juvelun will last no longer than that."

Klaus stiffly nodded.

"My thanks," he said. "Will your sigils be in fighting fit tonight?"

"We always are," General Rumena smiled unpleasantly. "Chno Sve Noc."

"So your lot keep telling me," the Iron Prince grunted back. "Get ready for a strike after dark. We can't afford to linger here much longer."

"Do your people not have a saying about the weakest link?" General Rumena mused.

"A curse," Klaus corrected. "May you be the weakest link in the Chain of Hunger."

"Yes," the old drow nodded. "That is not us, Hannoven Prince. See to your own sigils, before speaking of dragging feet."

And just as boldly as it'd slipping into his tent, the Firstborn strolled out after seizing the last word. Klaus could have fought it, but what would be the point? Better to let it keep its prize and remain pacified. His pride was not so overgrown as to be unable to tolerate the occasional pointed quip from a peer. It still took half a bell after that for the Prince of Bayeux to send a messenger to him, giving word that the other royal had at last gathered the captains in need of swaying. The reason for the delay became clear when the Prince of Hannoven headed to the pavilion mention by the messenger.

That it was a *pavilion* and not a simple tent where the talks were to be had said much about the numbers involved.

Twenty handpicked Hannoven armsmen followed him inside, his bodyguard, but there must have been almost a hundred men and women already packed tight within. Fantassins captains, mostly, but many peasant officers from the Brabant conscripts as well. Prince Arsene himself stood to the side with a handful of bodyguards, as if to make it clear he was not one of the wavering souls. From the start Klaus found that the mood within was mutinous. He spoke clearly and concisely, avoiding frills and japes out of respect for the grim deeds he was asking for, but twice he was interrupted by a challenge from a captain and more often than that by jeers.

"To stay in Juvelun is death," the Prince of Hannoven told them. "We will be surrounded and destroyed."

"And where would we go instead, bloody *Keter*?" a woman called out.

"Retreat," another voice called out. "We must *retreat*."

"We must go west," Klaus roared, his voice rising above the din. "General Rumena has reported to me that the remnants from the defenders of Juvelun are gathering in the valley, and we must strike west to disperse them before they can mount a true threat."

The shouts of dismay were deafening, interwoven with jeers and calls for retreat or holing up in the town. There would be no convincing them, the Prince of Hannoven thought. It was Prince Arsene who called the crowd to order, in the end.

"Hauptberg," the Iron Prince spoke into the silence, "is the name of a town two days away from the Morgentor by horse."

His bodyguards had closed ranks around him when the crowd had grown wild and stayed in formation since.

"My people," Klaus Papenheim said, "know it as where the first of the Iron Kings, Alrich Fenne, was crowned ruler of all Lycaonese before smashing the ratling hordes in Twilight's Pass."

There had been seven kingdoms back then, though in time they became the four modern principalities of the north. But the first of the Iron Kings had not used to sweet words to convince the other royals to kneel to him, on that day. The truth was altogether bloodier. On the last day of the talks held at Hauptberg, none of the kings had been willing to swear to another and stand as a single force against the implacable foe coming their way.

And so Alrich Fenne had, in the dark of night, killed them all.

"Sometimes," the old general said, "someone has to order the torches thrown."

He curtly brought his hand down and the head of his bodyguards screamed out the order. Like a tide of steel, soldiers of Hannover and Neustria began pouring into the pavilion.

"Arrest those who kneel," the Iron Prince ordered. "Kill the rest."

[ErraticErrata](#)

For a general announcement I expect several of you saw coming: given the size to which Book VI has already swelled, it would end up absurdly large if I finished the series with it as originally planned. Consequently there will be a Book VII to wrap things up before I move on to my next project. The cutoff point where I split the plot actually ended up meaning we're close to the end of Book VI, which should end before Christmas if nothing goes off the rails again. There'll be a more elaborate announcement down the line, this is essentially just a heads up.

E.E.

Par

WOO!

also no one is surprised 😊

NerfContessa

Booooh, how can you force us to read another excellent book for free, you MONSTER!

Also, dang Klaus is true Iron, sharpened.

Ninestrings

Thank you!

[Adrian_V](#)

Yep that is like Robert Jordan saying "Just 1 more book" xD

LarsBlitzer

Better than the Mountain That Doesn't Write saying "One more book... eventually."

[Javvies](#)

Let's not forget that he also says that there are "only" two more books before he's done.

But the state of the various storylines suggests that there's too much yet to get through to fit into two books. Unless it ends in a hack job like the show. Or they're fucking huge.

Ed

Have you seen the size of the books and the fact they keep growing I suspect those two are more like six normal ones



stevenneiman

Is GRRM becoming the next Andrew Hussie?

[boballab](#)

David Weber told Jim Baen that the Honor Harrington series would be around 6 books, 30+ books later...

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah and the "finished" is in between big "" xD

[Mental Mouse](#)

It didn't help when he opened up the universe to other authors...

Harrent

To be honest, seven books fits a lot more with the intended five books than six; special numbers and all.

Bcurly

And so ErraticErrata wrote seven books and one

[Mental Mouse](#)

The “and one” would be the Cardinal epilogue.

NerfContessa

You mean PROlogue, right?

^^

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, epilogue to this story, prologue to the next.

dadycoool

It's been a nice year of Book VI. I've very much enjoyed having this as a constant through...everything.

caoimhinh

Anything you could tell us about your next project?

Like, what's the name, the synopsis, or something?

Maybe (fingers crossed) a preview of the prologue for the sake of hype?

OldSoldier

I understand that all things must come to an end, but I truly love your work. I've read the entire series countless times. It's the only literary work I've been able to re read and actually enjoy. Whatever you do, I'm sure it will be phenomenal. And I want to thank you for it, because your work has inspired me to read more.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

Oh no please don't end the series I only just found it a couple weeks ago and I've been binge-reading it every day since. D: Shoot for a maybe-ending on Book 97??

[Javvies](#)

Things are not going well for this army.

Though, as Hanno noted, they have the potential for Story/Narrative based buffs. Plus Cat is marching to relieve them “in the nick of time” and that's got a solid Story behind it too.

Klaus is hardcore.

Taking the rebellious captains probably isn't going to be a long term solution. On the other hand, Klaus knows that surviving the

short term is necessary to deal with the long term.
Plus, I could be wrong about how effective the measures he's taking here will be.

IDKWhoitis

He can spend the next 8 hours and get stuck in a shitty compromise that still screws him.

Or

He takes the next 10 minutes, decapitates the mercs, and starts marching in a direction. Either the rest of the mercs and conscripts follow or they die. A decapitated mutiny doesn't mutiny in the short term, and the long term doesn't matter if they can't move now.

[saiorthepyro](#)

It's implied that part of the reason they are doing this is because they need the manpower in order to pull this off, so that could just as easily backfire.

Salt

It's effective if it does come to a pitched battle, but it also leaves a MASSIVE opening for a backfire, especially if the Dead King manages to get a read on the current state of the army.

Klaus has already lost enough trust from the fantassins for an outright mutiny, and we know for a fact that (aside from the Drow who only give a shit about the will of the Sisters), he's seeing loss of trust and doubts from the others about the necessity of his hard measures – leaving the wounded behind, abandoning the town instead of trying to hold it, etc....

His hard measures are fine and dandy if they're really about to get into a last stand-esque pitched battle like they expect, but if the Dead King simply sandbags his fights for many smaller, less decisive battles via a war of attrition? That basically guarantees a mutiny within the army. It reaffirms every notion that they could've held the town, that leaving the wounded behind wasn't necessary, that there was no need to kill many beloved fantassin leaders. It appears to justify every doubt about whether his necessary hard measures were really necessary.

Hanno isn't the only one who understands that there is a narrative power behind last stands, either. The Dead King knows it even better than Hanno, having personally survived more crusades aimed at him than any entity that ever lived in

all of Creation. Catherine's instincts from the last few chapters were most likely spot on, about him planning to waging a war of attrition to slowly exterminate them rather than engaging in pitched battles that let them make full use of their Heroic narratives.

Realistically, this means Klaus might be kind of boned (no pun intended) no matter what. Nessie just has to play it patiently, without leaving any gaps for mistakes – two central qualities that quite define his entire character – for Klaus' army to turn on him on their own. Even if Catherine successfully ambushes the ambushing force to relieve them, then every hard necessary sacrifice that he made in retrospect looks like pointless sacrifices, in the eyes of enough people to make the difference.

[Liliet](#)

...You really do sound right, and that really is kind of horrifying.

Oshi

The nice thing is that Catherine is aware of this. Which means whatever plan she has to wiggle out of this will involve pushing the Dead King into a trap of her choosing. This battle will likely be where the setup for the next book comes. Keter will occupy the end.

[Liliet](#)

Anyway I also realized that Klaus is coming into a Name and will probably have an Aspect for dealing with this shit.

Shveiran

You sound rather confident. I'll admit it is certainly a possibility, but is there something in particular you noticed that makes you certain?

[Liliet](#)

The repeated moniker of Iron Prince, which fits him to a T, has been used by both of the Named this chapter to refer to him. It is also used in narration about him at the end at the climactic bit, in much the same manner as Cordelia once upon a time "signed the fucking order". Which was later confirmed to be Warden of the West foreshadowing in this exact manner: when it fits perfectly in the narrative to use that address for the person when they're doing

the very Them thing, that's the kind of thing that Name is.

He also has the requisite story weight. Unlike Abigail before the armies split, he's not just one of multiple commanders: he's THE commander, the one everyone knows bears the onus of responsibility for everything that happens. And he's not just a someone, he's famous, he's THE Iron Prince to Procer entire after winning the civil war for Cordelia.

And the Role fits with the Name. Hard people making hard decisions is the whole Lycaonese narrative, and Iron Prince is the Name *about* that, it's what the "iron" part refers to. He's doing exactly what people telling stories generations down the line will talk about him doing, for the exact, very iconic reasons.

He's in a story, and the way he's being addressed is hinting that the Named around him see it too.

Also, the Blood/blood thing Barrow Sword was talking about might be referring to that, though I'll listen if you have an alternative interpretation.

[Zim the Vixen](#)

I believe the Barrow Sword was warning (or seeding distrust in) Papenheim about Captain Nabila's mutinous intentions. The quote is:

"There's a reason she held borders, back home, and did not stay at her lord's side," the Barrow Sword smiled. "In Levant, authority flows from either Blood or blood."

Careful Yannu keeps her away holding the borders, because he knows authority is obtained through blood, and so she would murder him to gain his authority. That's why Barrow Sword later taunts him about wanting to see how "he'd do there". At least that is my read, but I can totally see where yours comes from; Papenheim gaining authority by having blood in his hands.

[Liliet](#)

Er, Levantines don't do "succession through murder". Blood is Blood, they're *descendants of heroes*.

Barrow Sword was either referring to her not being allowed the honor of being at Careful Yannu's side

when she wasn't either Blood or blooded, or the fact she needed to get blooded since she wasn't Blood. Which are actually the same fact with different emphasis.

Liliet

(That said, this IS a theory. I'm fairly confident in it but I won't be pretending it's confirmed or anything. We've had heavy hints and it's coming together perfectly; there's still room for a twist or for me and others saying this to be straight up wrong)

Mental Mouse

Part of the problem is that anybody Klaus leaves behind will be coming back as an enemy – with their arms and armor, to boot.

Cicero

The Pen Is Mightier Than The Sword.

But...

The Sword speaks louder at any given instant.

Klaus is a man who lives in the here and now. His army might end up killing him for this, but not until after they fight the battle he demands.

Frivolous

EE – a possible discrepancy. Does Stalwart Healer = Stalwart Apostle? If so, you need to change Healer to Apostle, or retcon Stalwart Apostle's Name to Healer.

I think Veitland must have been a code among Lycaonese that means relative mercy when dealing with mutiny. Hauptberg, of course, means total ruthlessness.

I'm surprised to learn that the reason Klaus never remarried is because he realized he was a bad father. That's surprisingly enlightened on his part. I didn't think he'd be so good at self-awareness.

I'm touched that he really really loves his niece Cordelia and has since her infancy.

TeK

No, it's that girl that isn't Scorched Apostate, she was an Apostle from the beginning.

hakureireimu

The Stalwart Apostle is also supposed to be up North, unless she had a change in itinerary:

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I didn't think he'd be so good at self-awareness.

Both of his kids died of the stuff he taught them, that's a hell of a mirror.

[nimelennar](#)

Damn. Very nice bookend here; the start of the chapter neatly foreshadowed the end and explained why it was necessary.

MrRigger

The Iron Prince lives up to his name as a hard son of a bitch.

Raved Thrad

He puts the iron in "Iron Prince." It's fascinating how people seem to have forgotten how he gained his name.

Juff

Typo Thread:

martial training have > martial training, have
him in a > him in as a
heap of troubles > the heap of troubles
days and night > days and nights
hold the down > hold the town
They'd ran > They'd run
today that > today than
accomplish is join > accomplish is joining
not that illusion > not that the illusion
of that mean > of that man
it'd slipping > it'd slipped

IDKWhoitis

Fucking bad ass.

All there is to say.

Jircniv

Iron Prince indeed

[Adrian_V](#)

Mmmm there is still a problem, while they are the "leaders" of the mutiners killing them just basically leaves a group of confused angry soldiers ready to do something even more stupid, worse the fantassins do have a chain of command so they could still organize to rebel.

Apart from that i found interesting that Klaus at the begining basically said that while no way of life is perfect time can teach a person a lot, he could probably have mor eluck with 3rd son or daughter but by then he was either to old or tired. Although he aparently was really close to Cordelia so maybe it all worked out.

Also i still won't give out my Hanno x Cat ship!!! 1 or 2 fights just adds more drama to it!

Cicero

It's a temporary measure.

It won't stop a mutiny, it just delays it.

No one is going to volunteer for an immediate mutiny, since they just saw what that gets them. Instead they will begin to plot mutiny in secret.

So if Klaus gets his big battle in the next three days he'll probably get what he needs. And if they get rescued in the next week he'll probably survive, but the fantassins will basically be done for this campaign. Have to send them back to the rear guard for a year or two.

caoimhinh

Though they could just be reassigned to another column and serve under a different commander. They *did* try to mutiny, and that's punishable by death.

The armies are supposed to unify for the coming assault to Hainaut, so they are likely just going to keep participating in the war, just not under Klaus.

Insanenoodlyguy

It will if by the end of it, they believe he did it to save their lives. It goes into the whole narrative that might become his Name. A man "Forged from Iron." They won't thank him for it, but they won't rebel either.

burlindw

Hanno x Cat would be a weird relationship. The core of Hanno's belief is that humans aren't fit to judge each other; Cat's name is shaping up to be the judge of basically everything.

Unless Cat takes the place of the Choir of Judgement, then I don't think Hanno can be that close to Cat, and if she did, Hanno would end up as Cat's subordinate.

dadycoool

Whoa, now that was an ending! I like this grizzled old general. He's hard, yes, but that hardness comes from being tempered by necessity. Also, Mighty Sagasbord? You really have a way with words, the way Archer has a way with arrows. Drow are a delight.

Burnsy

Rumena always gets the last word in.

He'll probably live until the end of the world, just so he can get one last snarky remark in at the Gods.

Raved Thrad

"You Pale Gods suck. Chno Sve Noc! Now I can die, venting spleen at the sky!"

Miles

"My people, know it as where the first of the Iron Kings, Alrich Fenne, was crowned ruler of all Lycaonese before smashing the rattling hordes in Twilight's Pass. Sometimes, someone has to order the torches thrown. Arrests those who kneel, kill the rest."

From the perspective of the mercenary leaders this is a really strange non-sequitor. Terrible orator confirmed.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

Cicero

Terrible orator indeed. Good thing he's depending on stabbing people with swords instead of words.

Raved Thrad

"Terrible Orator" would make a hilarious Name, though. Possibly with aspects such as Demoralize, Confuse, and Incite. 🤪 Except they'd only ever worok on *allies*.

[vernal.ancient](#)

I suspect Confuse would be indiscriminate in who it works on, but the other two? Definitely only allies

Shveiran

What good are orations to the dead?

General Chaos

Stalwart Healer -> Stalwart Apostle's fixed, but wasn't she supposed to be in Twilight's Pass apprenticed to the Astrologer?

Big I

After rereading parts of this chapter, it seems to me that the Barrow Sword and the White Knight know or guessed what was going to happen. Rumena as well maybe. Interesting.

Klaus reminded me of the Legions of Terror in this chapter: one sin, one grace. Couldn't help but think he'd make a good Warlord. I think if he got a Name he'd be a grizzled anti-hero, no wonder he and the Saint of Swords got on so well.

caoimhinh

Yeah, 50-50 chances of Klaus getting a Name out of this campaign.

I mean, Hanno is already saying that he feels the weight of Story in their current situation. Narratively, that weight gathers at the commander of the host, which is Klaus.

[Liliet](#)

Considering the amount of context of mentions of Iron Prince, I think the chances are a fair bit better than 50-50.

Beside the obvious climactic bit at the end which mirrored Cordelia's "signed the fucking order" Warden of the West early bird, both Named called him that.

Raved Thrad

The question is, with this set of murders to his name (or is that "Name,"), would "Iron Prince" be a heroic or villainous Name? I personally would like to see the latter, if only because of the chaos it would cause.

Also, Klaus possibly healing his arm and not dying of old age would be awesome. I can see him and Rumena on the last day of the world, trading barbs and old war stories.

Raved Thrad

Klaus somehow manifesting an iron arm as part of his being the Iron Prince would be cool as hell, too. 3:)

Javvies

It's still a Heroic Name. Probably.

After all ... you don't need to be a good person to be a Hero.

Look at the records of Lone Swordsman, Saint of Swords, and Grey Pilgrim.

Probably also some of the Named Callowan Kings/Queens of old.

Heroes who are more than willing to drop whatever bodies they think they need to (or in some cases, want to). Heroes who will readily make examples out of their foes or just those who hey in their way. Heroes who don't have a problem committing what we'd probably call atrocities and/or war crimes.

After all, the Narrative here is that he's more than willing to preemptively decapitate an attempted mutiny/mass desertion in the face of armies of the Dead King, during what is effectively Crusade. That's a grim and gritty hardcore Hero, not a Villain.

Liliet

Eh, he can be a super badass old guy without one arm, too.

And I won't lie, I'd adore either, for various reasons ♥

Liliet

Oh man.

I wonder if Hanno will eventually warm back up to Catherine, and I wonder if he will manage to win back the respect he lost from her.

I feel bad as fuck about Klaus's kids, and I hope he does manage to eventually write that letter to Cordelia. Did he notice she ordered torches thrown at Rhenia too?

I love that Klaus gets along well with Rumena. I want to see so many scenes with him and Cat, too.

As for the Book VII announcement: we are all shocked by this! Shocked, I say!

Hmm, so the three arcs this leaves in this book are: the Arsenal Bard fight, the Arsenal diplomacy and the beginning of the campaign. Not quite as clean a division as Book 4 ended up having, but still three is right I think.

(Tancred's sequence is just a Cold Open, not a full arc)

hakureireimu

Geesh are you trying to get him killed.

[Liliet](#)

Eh. He's got plot armor now.

Morgenstern

That's what I thought at first, when he thought about Cordie and those letters in his head – death flag for Klaus, weepy drama for the readers that this/those letter(s) will never get sent. =/

medailyfun

>Did he notice she ordered torches thrown at Rhenia too?

"Sometimes, niece, you remind me of your grandfather, Klaus would write if he took the quill today. When I was a boy of nine, Prince Ludwig Papenheim ordered the town of Ebelburg burned when he heard ratling warbands were two hours away."

[Liliet](#)

Yes, and he compared what she did to Hannover to that.

He didn't mention Rhenia at any point.

Insanenoodlyguy

It would be best resolved with kissing. Lots and lots of kissing.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing you mean Hanno and Cat?

I'm more partial to hugging, myself, but I can see what you're driving at!

TeK

Klaus had more death flags this chapter than Dead King.

Salt

Every senior Hero would be appalled if they knew Klaus was dwelling on not making amends with a loved one, just before a climactic battle. There has to be a Heroic Axiom about not doing that.

Are you intentionally trying to die tragically or something, Klaus?

caoimhinh

Nah, he is fine so far. But the Death Flags are like, hovering nearby.

He'll be fine so long as he doesn't write that letter and gives it to someone so "it can be delivered in the event of my death", and if he doesn't say "after this war is over, I am going to -something-".

[vernal.ancient](#)

I mean, he's Lycaonese, the most likely thing he'd do after the war with the Dead King is go fight some ratlings. I feel like "after this war I'm gonna go fight another" wouldn't trigger the trap. The letter certainly would though

ninegardens

I kinda love the way Hanno just instantly knows what Klaus is planning (or rather, guesses it based on two words using his history powers)... and just sits back and says "I do not judge".

... Also, a very dangerous moment for Paperheim, being in that tent with a Hero. Many others might have judged.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, and there's a reason those others weren't in that tent.

Salt

Interestingly enough, it's many of the most powerful/influential Heroes that would be most likely to accept it under dire circumstances. Hanno does not judge, Saint would've beheaded every leader herself just to set an example, and the Pilgrim would butcher every fantassin in the army without batting an eyelash, if he was convinced it would relieve the world of suffering.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

It's a nasty thing, but the alternative is nastier. You have to be Antoine level of green to not accept that.

mamm0nn

White Knight: I do not judge. Never have and never will.

Iron Prince: Then what do you call the change of your opinion

towards the Black Queen?

White Knight: Now listen here you little shit...

[Liliet](#)

White Knight: "A cooling of relations. I never said anything about judging her did I?"

Shveiran

... which is based in an emended judgment of her character.

It's not like opinions change because the wind now blows from the west, you know? They don't just happen, they follow a mental evaluation of the subject, however instinctual.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno: "I don't judge"

Catherine: "You make judgement calls all the time?"

Hanno: "LOOK IF IT DOESNT HAVE A COURT SEAL ON IT IT DOESNT COUNT OK"

[Liliet](#)

Also: "I never said it was my OPINION of her that changed. Just our relationship 😊"

Crowley

Typo thread below. Feel free to add.

Where the First Prince of Procer had sent him to fight and die and Hainaut-> Where the First Prince of Procer, who had sent him to fight and die in/for Hainaut
through heap of troubles-> through the heap/heaps of troubles
today that a hundred times-> today than a hundred times
bear such the title->bear such a title

Frivolous

I'm guessing there are no significant Callowan forces, and especially no significant magical Callowan forces, in the army led by Prince Klaus. If there were, they might have asked to use the mutinous fantassins in rituals of human sacrifice. That way their murders would have been constructive and useful.

On the other hand, Klaus was playing it close to his chest and wouldn't have told them. He's not learned enough in magical ways to see the opportunity. And I guess the Rapacious Troubadour is not there, either, to eat their souls.

So the best that can be done with the mutinous fantassins is to let the drow at their corpses, to harvest their Night. Which is bog standard.

On the gripping hand, if Catherine were there, I think there would have been no mutiny at all. Soldiers' belief in her as a general who never loses is too strong, stronger even than their belief in Klaus, the Iron Prince, and also most everyone is terrified of her. No ordinary person wants to piss her off.

That's the reason why I continue to believe her upcoming Name will be martial, and not limited to command over other Named.

Note that Hanno, for all that he's Catherine's opposite and equal in the Truce and Terms, couldn't have rallied everyone the way Cat does. He only commands small groups of heroes, not large armies. Cat is like an unholy combo of Klaus and Tariq and Cordelia – peerless general and dark savior and great queen.

Hey, that makes me think of Neshamah, also called Trismegistus – Thrice-Great. Could Cat's new Name be something like that, alluding to a great Three of some sort? Maybe reminiscent of the Triple Goddess, or the Norns or Fates.

Earl of Purple

Praesi war mages aren't trained in rituals. Some might be able to cast them- highborn and those trained by Masego when he was Apprentice. Most don't have that skill, and instead provide healing and massed fireball assault. They would not be able to use the deaths.

Cat has mentioned the Rapacious Troubadour, he's with her. He ate the soul of a captured Bind to interrogate it, and the Ashuran Apprentice said it was disagreeable.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's army doesn't do human sacrifices. As Earl of Purple points out, they don't have the learning, and those few who do – Hierophant disdains the method as amateurish and Akua knows better than to so much as peep in that direction right now.

So no, Callowans wouldn't. Not even if Black's Legions of Terror were with them they still wouldn't, for the same reason – War College mages aren't taught that, Black was heavily marginalizing the practice.

agumentic

Not to mention that using Trimegistan rituals powered by death in a war against the Dead King – who literally wrote this whole magical system – is asking for them to be subverted.

medailyfun

>Could Cat's new Name be something like that, alluding to a great Three of some sort?
She's next level: Quattuormegistus.

agumentic

"It is a bitter truth that in trying to escape the flaws of our parents we inevitably inherit the worst of them." – King Pater of Callow, the Unheeding

Heroic death in an ensuing battle might be one of the best ways out left for Klaus, really – no one speaks ill of those that died doing their duty, and it would make his hard measures look justified. Otherwise, he might have to literally fall on his sword to prevent riots both in his army and back at home. Ordering something like that would really fuck even Catherine up, I won't even mention Cordelia.

[Burlyraven](#)

Honestly, even if the White Knight were to judge, he'd be in the wrong to judge against Klaus. Anyone not willing to fight beside their comrades in this desperate of a situation needs to die before them so as not to die beside them. This isn't the type of war where multiple companies of soldiers can just leave.

I feel somewhat bad for the conscripts, as they had the least voice in the matter, but as peasants, they should know better than any how putting one's head down and doing one's job is the best way to survive this kind of situation.

Of course, we're all living through the evidence of just how selfish and stupid fear can make people.

[Liliet](#)

Also, a stark illustration of how Abigail is a goddamn paladin.

SpeckofStardust

na she just know that if she runs she'll be shot first, being in the center of a host is far safer if she cant run, and leading from the front to keep everyone from dying keeps her from dying too....
She is the shinning example of practical nobody, rather then Cats practical evil or Klaus's practical good.

[Liliet](#)

> na she just know that if she runs she'll be shot first
> and leading from the front to keep everyone from dying keeps her from dying too

And what the fuck were these fantassin leaders counting on, how do you think?

The difference between them and Abigail is that *Abigail always keeps her head*.

Shveiran

Absolutely agreed.

... That said, that's your definition of paladins? 0.0

[Liliet](#)

"Immune to fear effects" is the refrance

SpeckofStardust

Did I offend you? I was comparing her to Cat and Klaus not to the fantassins, unless of course you somehow think practical nobodies include those fools who want to munity in the middle of enemy territory?

[Liliet](#)

Huh? **I** was comparing Abigail to the fantassin leaders. I didn't mean to sound aggressive, sorry if it happened anyway. My point is that you cannot say she "just" thought clearly under the pressure when we have a chapter detailing exactly what "commander coward" NORMALLY ends with.

[Liliet](#)

That said, "practical nobody" is a good saying, sorry for not noting that separately 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Abigail *thinks* she's cowardly. But where she's going "if I run they're gonna hang me!", a coward would just be running. (And never mind the pension!) The saying is, bravery isn't not being afraid, its about being afraid and going ahead anyway. Abigail is afraid, but she goes ahead anyway.

Wen Yang

Abigail of Summerholm is *literally* EE's own Ciaphas Cain, honestly.

Inb4 after thie campaign she becomes known as the *HERO OF THE CALLOWANS* or something similar 😊

[Liliet](#)

This lmao

Daniel E

I wonder if we'll ever get to see Rumena go 'full powerup' mode. Like, I'm having doubts that even Trismegistus in the flesh (or equivalent) could take him, given that he fought Saint to a draw without using a weapon.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Nah. Saint was powerful, but she was no goddess. Rumena is powered by a pair of goddesses, but DK is at least their peer (and IIRC older), and he's certainly made preparations to fight other deities. A direct fight between Sve Noc and DK would add badly for the Sisters and the Drow.

hakureireimu

Why wouldn't they eat the offal?

Frivolous

I've been trying to think of a logical reason not to eat the offal, and I come up with nothing.

Therefore the only reason that makes sense is sentiment or culture. Maybe the Lycaonese just don't think of offal as edible. This would be fairly odd since the Lycaonese environment is so bleak and hostile and their society so survival-oriented; you'd think they'd try to maximize their scope of edibles.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They have a lot of horses with them. Given that this is likely happening regularly to ordinary cavalry, they probably aren't short on horsemeat. Also, offal takes more effort and preparation to prepare properly, (if you just throw it in the stew, people will start waylaying the cooks down by the latrines) which is not so good for in the field.

Captain Amazing

Offal literally means the inedible parts of an animal. Mind, goblins would define that differently, but I don't think he brought any Callowans along.

[Mental Mouse](#)

In practice it includes some parts that are "dubiously edible", like intestines (tripe, sausage casings), and various organs with odd textures (heart, lungs, pancreas, etc.)

In areas where meat is scarce and people do their own butchering, people do tend to use whatever they can, but where meat is plentiful, that tends to fall by the wayside, and offal gets fed to animals or used for fertilizer.

[308924810a](#)

Either this gambit will work or it'll result in units deserting to try to make their way back to civilization through the Twilight Ways or by cutting their way cross-country as a company. Like, if this was a normal war I'd say this is hella risky, and assumes a lot about it not fracturing his army and the merc captains not fighting/trying to kill him with the advantage of numbers when arrested, on the other hand it should be clear that if the army actually fractures everyone is dead, they don't have good chances of escape from their current position, and this is a holy war, so trying to bring pressure against their commander is both foolish and impious, and this could just be viewed as the iron prince calling the mercenaries' bluff when they tried to act like they had the options to be able to have a negotiating position with him.

[Mental Mouse](#)

>units deserting to try to make their way back to civilization through the Twilight Ways

And who's going to open gates for them?

Interlude: Ietsism

"There is a natural order to the world and the peoples of the world must reflect it through law. Should all serve as ordained by the Heavens, all of Creation will be as a garden without sin."

– Extract from 'Ten Scales', by Madrubal the Wise

They were not alone out here.

Leaning against the tall rock, the White Knight reached for the coin that was never far from his hand and palmed it, deftly sliding it between his thumb and forefinger. With a satisfying twang it went spinning upwards and for a heartbeat his heart soared before he mastered it. His fear was proved true a heartbeat later, as the coin ceased spinning at the apex and

simply hung there as if frozen in amber. After a few heartbeats, it simply dropped down and back onto his palm. At no point did either the laurels or the swords take primacy, as the Hierarch of the Free Cities would brook not even the shadow of a verdict to be passed while he watched. Flicking his wrist with a defeated sigh, Hanno of Arwad disappeared the coin once more.

"Stern Singers again silent, huh," Rafaella said, peering down at him from atop the stone.

"Anaxares the Diplomat is proving to be remarkably obstructive man," Hanno replied with forced calm.

And on occasion he had proved more than simply that. That over the last three months the coin had begun to occasionally be seized instead of simply inert had been worrying enough, for not even the Grey Pilgrim knew whether it meant that the Hierarch was fading with a last hurrah or *gaining ground* against the Seraphim. Rather more troubling had been the word that'd come to Hanno that for the first year after the Peace of Salia, the heads of Bellerophans who had broken the city's laws had taken to spontaneously exploding. Not for every infraction, but frequently enough that rumours had spread out of even the famously closed republic. The madman had succeeded at arrogating the powers of the Choir of Judgement, if only for a brief time.

"Bellerophon like bag of wet cats," the Valiant Champion sympathetically said. "Never good idea to put hand in."

"So I've been told," the White Knight mildly said.

Catherine had graciously refrained from reminding him that she'd attempt to warn him off the course of action that had seen the Choir of Judgement sealed whenever they disagreed, but Tariq had not been shy in voicing his own opinions. *Evil knows Evil in ways that we cannot*, the Grey Pilgrim had chided him. *To refuse expertise leant in good faith is not wisdom, it is vanity*. Hanno had accepted the reproach for it was: not the lesson of a would-be mentor, which he would have cared little for, but the frank assessment of a peer. Few ever cared to offer those to him, which made such talks all the more precious.

"It seems our friends are not biting today," Hanno added, changing the subject. "Any sign of the Hawk?"

"Just Wolfhound," Rafaella sighed. "And he still boring loaf."

Hanno cocked an eyebrow.

"Loafer?" he suggested. "Or perhaps oaf?"

"This too," the Valiant Champion agreed.

Rafaella turned to look downslope, among the rocky expanse leading into the valley where central Hainaut awaited, and waved her greataxe eye-catchingly.

"Hear this, Wolfhound?" she yelled. "Fight me!"

The White Knight, though mildly amused, was now forced to admit that their little incursion looked like a wash. He'd thought it possible to bait the trickiest of the Scourges now that the camp was about to look vulnerable, but the Hawk had refused to bite. Even putting out the Young Slayer as well as the Valiant Champion had not moved to Revenant to try an attack. Hanno pressed against the stone to his side with his boot, and with a heave gave himself just enough momentum he was able to leap out of the dip where he'd been waiting and join Rafaella atop the stone. Further downslope, the sculpted iron helm of the Wolfhound could be glimpsed among the rocks as the Revenant studied them unmoving.

He seemed unmoved at the notion of being alone around three Named with significant bite to them, not that Hanno was surprised. Of all the Scourges, that one had proved the hardest to put down save perhaps the Prince of Bones. Not that 'Scourges' were a formal band of any kind, mind you. They were, in essence, a loose designation for the Revenants that the heroes fighting on the lakeside fronts found to be the greatest threats. Each among the greatest of their kinds, they were considered to require either a full band of five or one of the greatest champions of the Grand Alliance to handle. Who actually counted among their number was the subject of lively campfire debate, though there were at least ten that all agreed on.

Nine now, Hanno mentally corrected, if word about the Stitcher being destroyed by the Firstborn was to be believed.

"Slayer," the White Knight called out, "return. We're done here."

There was no sign of movement until the young hero seemingly popped out between stones, stalking towards the two heroes without a sound to his steps. The Young Slayer was tall for a Levantine and unusually slender as well, but the lithe build lent a grace to his movements that was almost fluid. Armed with a slayer's arsenal, all hooked swords and darts and ropes, the dark-haired youth was among the more promising of the upcoming heroes. One of his aspects allowed him to most forms of armour as he cut, which had proved deadly against Revenants preferring close range. He was also something of a political headache, as it happened, which was why he'd been assigned to Hanno's care.

The Young Slayer came from a family rival to the Osenas, the descendants in Blood of the Silent Slayer, but had come into a Name that was widely considered to be the transitional one leading into the highly regarded Name of Silent Slayer. For the Osenas this was something of an embarrassment, and though Lady

Aquiline Osenia had not proved outright hostile to the young hero she'd also made it clear there was no place with him in the ranks of the warriors of Tartessos. Hanno had promptly passed him into Rafaella's care as much for the shared heritage as the fact that the Valiant Champion had managed to remain on good terms with Lord Yannu of the Champion's Blood without being married into the Marave.

"Our hunt was fruitless, Lord White," the Young Slayer sighed as he returned to their side. "For all we know, the Hawk is-"

Providence nudged at Hanno's hand before his senses could, and he followed the current without resistance. His sword left the scabbard in a clean, crisp arc and cut through the arrow a hair's breadth beyond the arrowhead. The Young Slayer flinched, the harmless steel arrowhead falling against his leathers with a slap instead of piercing through the back of his neck.

"Hawk still there," Rafaella cheerfully noted.

"As a rule, it is unwise to tempt irony without being prepared to meet the consequences of it," Hanno calmly told the younger man. "When you have come into the fullness of your might perhaps you will find the opposite tack to your liking, as it can prompt the Enemy to move at the timing of your choice, but until then I would advise a more restrained approach."

The Young Slayer swallowed loudly.

"I understand, Lord White," he feebly said, making the Mark of Mercy against his chest.

Promising but still so very young, Hanno thought as he sheathed his sword. There was still no sign of the Hawk out there, and now even the Wolfhound had disappeared into the rocks. Fighting against the Revenant he believed had been an Archer whilst she still drew breath had made the White Knight dimly grateful for having never fought the Woe in earnest. For all that the powers of the Black Queen and the Hierophant drew the eye the most, he suspected that it was Indrani the Archer that would have been the deadliest of the lot. The Hawk – named for the feathers she liked to fletch her arrows with – had certainly proved to be among the most lethal of the Scourges.

Christophe would have died during the taking of Juvelun if the Stalwart Apostle had not been by his side, and Prince Etienne of Brabant *had* died. The Hawk might not be as visibly destructive as the Archmage or the Unseelie, but she'd done more damage to the army than either so far. While Antigone fought the former and Hanno the latter, the Hawk had set about methodically killing her way through the captains and commanders of the Grand Alliance's army. It was the Hawk's head that the White Knight had been hoping to take today, betting on the disorder of the camp being

enough to tempt her into an attack. Yet it seemed she was not to be baited into exposing herself.

The deadly arrows would resume when they went on the march, then.

"Back to camp," the White Knight ordered. "We've lingered out here long enough. Best be gone before they bring in other Revenants and the hunt turns around on us."

It was not a long walk, but it somehow felt like it anyway.

—

While Hanno had not reddened his blade today, the same could not be said of others. The pavilion had collapsed, its drapes drenched with blood. Half a hundred men and women, several bruised and cut, knelt outside in the mud surrounded by a ring of bared swords. Behind them Lycaonese armsmen, bearing the colours of Neustria and Hannover, set to the work of dragging away the corpses with brisk efficiency. Few of the northerners had died in the ambush, having gone in fully armed and ready while most of the Alamans captains had kept swords and daggers but few bothered with even chainmail. Not a quarter hour had passed since the last of the steel was sheathed, but already the camp was like a kettle about to boil over.

Rumours had flown with swift wings, for the Iron Prince's seizure and killing of the mutinous officers had been impossible to hide. Already two fantassin companies had holed themselves up behind their carts and hollered loudly at treachery and breach of contract, but they would not be the last. Lycaonese respected ruthlessness suborned to greater purpose, and in matters of law the Prince of Hannover had been within his rights, but to southerners this was a grave overreach. Hanno had already sent the Balladeer and the Harrowed Witch, two of the more level-headed among his Named, to prevent that particular situation from spinning out of control.

Respect for the Chosen would stay hand and the Balladeer was highly popular besides, while the Witch had the means to quickly send word to him if need be. In truth, though, the White Knight did not believe that this would escalate much beyond the current trouble. The Prince of Hannover had been hard-handed but also clear-sighted. There was no real support for the would-be mutineers among the broader army: the Lycaonese remained loyal to their rulers, the Levantines seemed to approve more than not and the Firstborn were either indifferent or amused. Hanno had spoken with their General Rumena on several occasions over the last month, and found the ancient drow to be contemptuously amused with what it deemed to be 'human foibles'.

Its interest in the politics of its allies began and ended at their intersection with the interests of the Firstborn.

The Barrow Sword's footsteps were not as quiet as the man believed them to be, but Hanno did not give it away until the bearded villain was almost close enough to be struck. Rafaella had twice warned him of how dangerous this one truly was, and she was not one to hand out such praise easily. She'd also had a few unkind words about the Black Queen's protection of him, but then Hanno figured that the Barrow Sword would have had a few of the same to Catherine Foundling about his own protection of the Valiant Champion. That tended to be the way, with the Truce and Terms.

"Ishaq," the White Knight acknowledged without turning. "Come to have a look?"

"Something like that," the other man drawled. "Wasn't sure the old man had it in him, truth be told."

More the fool you, Hanno thought. The Lycaonese were a strange folk at first glance, but not so difficult to understand when studied in depth. In some ways their culture was more permissive than that of the Alamans and the Arlesites, especially when it came to privacy – though with the unspoken understanding that anything done in private could not be a danger to the community – and mores, but their land had made them a hard people. None of the northern soldiery had been affronted by the Iron Prince's ambush today because, in their eyes, it was his undeniable right to act this way. They had never taken fully to Salienta's Graces, up north, where instead it was strong rulers and hard choices that were trusted to get them through the dark.

The Iron Prince had never acted the tyrant before because he'd never seen a need to. It was as simple as that. Not all ruthless men needed to trumpet about their ruthlessness.

"It will be settled soon," Hanno said.

The Barrow Sword let out a noise of disbelief.

"There's four companies barricaded now," Ishaq said. "And there'll be more, mark my words. He only sent a few envoys there to inform them their officers had been arrested for high treason and they must set down their arms before letting them stew. He's lucky they didn't lynch any of them. Not the wildest of schemers, our Prince of Hannover."

Hanno glanced at the other man, whose neatly-trimmed beard and elegantly subdued facepaint were both twisted by a jeer as he watched the bodies being stripped naked and dragged to the disposal pits. The Levantine villain did not seem to share the enmity much of his countrymen held for Procerans, but his general callous disregard for life meant there was little difference in practice.

"Not a schemer," the White Knight agreed. "Yet not a fool. Where are the rest of the Hannover armymen, Barrow Sword, if they are neither here nor forcing the fantassins in line?"

Pale brown eyes flicked to him, narrowing in thought.

"Ah," the Barrow Sword exhaled. "The conscripts. Not a fool indeed, while I have been yapping my jaw like one instead."

Hanno bent his head in acknowledgement. The Prince of Hannover had, correctly he believed, decided that the conscripts would be easier to get in line and so focused his efforts there. It went with the way Brabantines – and many Alamans armies – appointed their officers. A prince would usually name most his relatives and closest highborn allies to a command, but when the stock of those and trusted career soldiers were exhausted it was tradition for levies and conscripts to elect their officers from their own ranks. Given the high rates of attrition and the realities of raising an army by conscription, it had in truth been mostly lowborn captains who'd been in the tent.

And so by seizing or killing the Brabantine captains in the tent, Klaus Papenheim had effectively removed all the men and women who would have had the popularity and leadership to rouse the conscripts into organized resistance against him. His actions would still breed deep resentment and involved killing trusted officers shortly before seeking a pitched battle, but for now though the conscripts were mutinous they were a disorganized sort of mutinous. The kind that could be herded into companies and forced to prepare for a march west by Lycaonese soldiers, as was currently taking place while the fantassins failed to realize they were being isolated.

It wasn't that the Iron Prince was unaware that a third of the camp now despised him, Hanno mused, but that in the old prince's eyes that mattered little if no one here was alive to hate him in a week. He was not wrong in this.

"I take it we're not going to intervene either way?" the Barrow Sword asked.

Hanno almost smiled. The man's reason for seeking him out finally became clear.

"There will not be a need," the White Knight said. "I have sent Antigone and Christophe to oversee the capitulation of the conscripts, and anything other than our visible presence would be interference beyond our mandate."

The Barrow Sword turned to study him for a long moment.

"Huh," Ishaq idly said. "Thought you'd be up in arms about all the killing, White Knight. It seemed like the kind of turn you might flip a coin over. So to speak."

Hanno turned to level a calm stare on the villain, who met it defiantly. He said nothing, simply waiting in silence until the other man looked away.

"No offence meant," the Barrow Sword said.

"Of course," the White Knight mildly replied. "A good evening to you then, Ishaq."

The bearded man balked at the implied dismissal but did not contest it. It would have been easier, Hanno suspected, if they had fought. It would have allowed the Barrow Sword to place him as the more powerful among them, and so end the incessant challenges that uncertainty in this matter drove him to attempt. Yet Hanno was a high officer of the Grand Alliance, and the Barrow Sword was not one of the Named in his charge. Duelling the villain, even if Catherine would likely end up excusing the matter, would be an act with repercussions. Gods but there were a great many of those, these days. His world had grown increasingly complicated since the inception of the Truce and Terms.

Duties had grown like weeds even as old certainties now passed like sand through his fingers. Hanno reached for the coin that was never far from his palm, though it had never been found by another, and closed his fingers around the silver. Laurels on one side, crossed swords on the other. The only verdict the Seraphim ever cared to give. Watching the corpses be dragged away in silence, the White Knight casually flipped it. It spun, a blink of silver, and landed on his open palm without anything beyond Creation's laws having moved it. A relief, almost. At least it was not a spurt of the Hierarch's madness again. It still left him feeling unpleasantly blind.

It was not that the White Knight believed himself to be unschooled in matters of law or in matters of right and wrong. He knew better. His interest in both matters – sometimes aligned, sometimes opposed – had begun early. As a boy, Hanno had once been a court scribe for the Outer Tribunal of Arwad. The courthouse of Halan District had been a minor one even among the lesser of the Thalassocracy's two tribunals, but it had often deal with foreigners and their laws, as well as possessed a surprisingly large scrollhouse that the senior scribes and archivists had been lenient in allowing a young Hanno to use.

These days, when looking back in search of the first steps taken in becoming the man he was today, the White Knight had often lingered on that alignment of coincidences as a likely source. He had learned of many laws while quite young, not only those of his native Ashur but also those of Free Cities – Nicae and Delos,

mostly – as well the southernmost of the Proceran principalities. He had also seen judgement given day after day, the law measured and applied by the tribunes of the courthouse for which he had kept records. It had fostered in him an interest in justice and law long before injustice slew his father and befell his mother in the wake of that death.

He'd read the famous treatise on Ashuran law, the *Ten Scales* of Madrubal, as much out of curiosity as because he had nursed ambitions to one day become an archivist at the courthouse. That same abundance of knowledge had come close to leading him astray, when he had sought the Riddle of Fault and earned the attention of the Seraphim, so in a sense it was not without peril. It was all too easy to become drunk your own learning and confuse it with wisdom. Yet Hanno had continued to learn, over the years that followed, for though it was not his place to judge there was rarely virtue to be found in willful ignorance. And so he had sought knowledge of the laws of Calernia, sifting through them in search of wisdom.

He had found sense in some places, be they the graces the Principate granted to all from princes to beggars or the shrewdly even-handed way the Tower collected taxes, but always it had been... situational. Impermanent. Nothing at all like the timeless wisdom of the Choir of Judgement. And more often Hanno had found the laws twisted and turned into a tool of oppression by those who made them. The Magisterium of Stygia made property of men while calling it a godgiven right, Callowan nobles inherited the right to pass judgement along with their titles and Ashur in the same breath condemned slavery while buying foreign criminals whose sentences would be spent labouring in the Thalassocracy's mines.

Watching soldiers in mail drag butchered naked corpses away, Hanno considered justice. Law, it could not be denied, gave the right to Prince Klaus Papenheim. Yet justice was not the same thing, and it rarely nested on the side that dragged corpses into mass graves – for all that the appellation of 'disposal pits' tiptoed around that words, that was what they were in truth. No, Hanno would not put blind trust in laws. Men were flawed and that imperfection bled into all that they made it was the simple way of things. Even laws. *Especially* laws, perhaps. So the White Knight had observed those that he could while pursuing what he knew to be right, and ignored those that he must while doing the same.

It was a straightforward path, in a way. While he was as blind as anyone else on Creation, he'd had the light of the Choir of Judgement to heed and follow instead. That had removed uncertainty. Allowed for purity of purpose, if not always action. Hanno had been blessed enough to benefit from the wisdom of the Seraphim since his first breath as the White Knight, and in a way

the coin that represented it had become as much a part of him as his hands or feet. Even when he had not called on the judgement of the Seraphim, not tossed the coin, that he still held it at all had been a reassurance. A sign that he had not lost his way, that as the instrument of Judgement he still brought good into the world.

Now all that was left was a coin more silver than miracle and the growing awareness of his own imperfections.

Hanno's hand went to trace the stumps of his missing fingers. He had not grown to question the worth of that bargain, but there had been other doubts that crept to his side under cover of night. The end of the troubles at the Arsenal had been no such thing, simply a transmutation of one form of trouble into another. And though the White Knight knew better than to linger on the attribution of fault, he had wondered much over the last months of how the parts of the blame there should be assigned. Some of it was his, but how much? Hanno had refused to bend on the principles at play because those principles simply could not be bent if the Truce and Terms were to remain worth enforcing.

But he'd not conveyed this properly to the First Prince and the Black Queen, and so they had joined hands to work around him.

It had stung. Not that they'd treated him as an obstacle, for he had absolutely been one. But rather that two women he'd held in high regard had so utterly failed to understand that the Truce and Terms were already a compromise on principle and they'd been asking him to compromise those *even further*. Behind all the talk of necessities and dues, what they'd wanted of him was to go back on the rights and protections promised to someone in his charge, with little more justification for it than 'the fears of the Highest Assembly require quelling'. Which, while likely true, was not a valid reason to break half the oaths that made up the foundation of the Truce and Terms.

It was as if they'd believed he was being inflexible for the pleasure of it rather than because it was the only morally potable stance to take in that position. Even from a long-term perspective, a willingness to discard any Named that became inconvenient at the first... Hanno breathed out, reached for the calm. He would not fall into the trap of the backbiting, into the inherently losing game of beginning to think of this in terms of victory and loss. Yet he'd allowed the eminent reasonableness of the foremost villain of their age to lull him into a sense of comfort, and that was an illusion that must be discarded. While the trick with the corpse of the Red Axe had been disgraceful, it had mostly served as a reminder of a simpler truth.

Catherine Foundling did not have lines in the sand that she would not cross, if she thought it necessary. It did not erase her virtues, but neither must Hanno ever allow himself to forget that

all that stood between the Black Queen and atrocities was the perception of need.

It was Cordelia Hasenbach's complicity that had most troubled him. The White Knight was not an utter fool, he grasped that regardless of her character her position would make demands of her. Yet Cordelia Hasenbach had, once, been on the verge of being Named. The Heavens themselves had measured her being and not found it wanting. He'd honestly not believed, deep down, that she was someone who would put political needs over doing the right thing. He'd been wrong. The grim theatre of the desecration of young girl's corpse, a trial that was a farce going back on the Principate's own word – that Named alone would stand in judgement over Named – had proved otherwise.

Cordelia Hasenbach had and would place the preservation of the Principate of Procer above all other callings, no matter how wicked or virtuous they might be.

It had been a disappointment. One less person he could trust among a number already exceedingly small. And there were even fewer he could both trust and be challenged by. The Grey Pilgrim was one, but Tariq was deathly afraid of stepping back into the role he had as a younger man and that made him... hesitant to speak up, sometimes. And so few of the other heroes ever cared to question Hanno's actions, his reasons, save for those that questioned them *badly*. Or worse, for the wrong reasons as Christophe de Pavanie once had. The trust that had grown strong between the keystones of the Grand Alliance at the beginning of the war was fraying, slowly but surely. It was, Hanno had found, an unsettlingly lonely feeling.

And so now it was alone that Hanno of Arwad looked at the last of the corpses being dragged away, knowing he had tactically allowed this to happen. *Veitland*, Princess Mathilda of Neustria had succinctly asked. A cliffside village halfway through Twilight's Pass, where Iron King Konrad had once shamed fleeing armies into turning around and facing the enemy. *Hauptberg*, Klaus Papenheim had just as succinctly replied. A small dip into **Recall** had been enough to confirm what he'd already suspected, that there the bloody birth of the Iron Crown had begun in murderous treachery. Even the Barrow Sword had sniffed out the nature of what was coming, giving a warning about Captain Nabila being a skilled captain but green to the Dominion's bloody politics.

"It was lawful," Hanno murmured, eyes lingering on the streaks of red trailing the ground.

But was it just? His hand itched for the coin, but the coin was just that now. A coin. The White Knight why this had been done, and that some restraint had been shown. He agreed with the Iron Prince that if the army stayed here, it would most likely perish. The Dead King was too canny an opponent to give them the kind of

hopeless battle that they would end up winning. Which meant they must win in the mundane, in the dirt, and that meant marching west even when thousands among this army were unwilling. Leaving the mutineers behind would not have been possible, Hanno also knew. They would have been eaten up in a day and risen as soldiers in the service of Keter. These, the dark-skinned man knew, were all good reasons.

That this had been necessary was, in truth, difficult to deny. But had it been *just*?

No, his heart whispered. *It wasn't.*

There had been better ways. If he had stepped in, involved himself regardless of authorities and restraints and how it would be seen as overstepping, there might be fewer corpses in the pit. Or none at all. And the heart was just as blind as the rest of him, but these days what else did Hanno have to follow? It would have been a mistake to step in. It had been a mistake *not* to step in. If he had acted, lives could have been saved. A simple answer. If he had acted, the potential ramifications might have killed rather more than fifty people. A complicated answer. Hanno knew himself to be in the right place, for he was the White Knight and doom was creeping across the land. Between it and Calernia was where he must stand

Sometimes, though, he wondered if he was there right man to be standing there.

The thought came lightly, and left just as easily, but it was not far. The White Knight eventually forced himself to look away, for soon the fantassins would be called to heel and he intended to be there to keep an eye on matters personally. Likely, he thought, the Prince of Hannoven would try to begin an early march west so that the mutinous soldiers felt like there could be no turning back. The afternoon air was chilly and so Hanno called Light to him, letting it warm his bones as he had learned from the life of a Paladin long dead.

It came slower than it used to.

ruduen

Oof. When it comes to moments like this, I think we've seen these 'last trials' result in the loss of a name more often than not. It's possible that this would lead to a transition to something other than White Knight or a re-affirmation that reconnects

Hanno, but even so, now's a dangerous time for a Name to be in shaky waters.

Considering the Heroic Axioms stating that powers are more likely to return once a lesson is learned, I guess the key will be just what Hanno's learning or what he's willing to learn.

Also, do the thing!

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Matthew Wells

I think the lesson he needs to learn is that Not Judging is the same as declaring everyone innocent- there's no such thing as a neutral stance when lives are on the line.

Matthew Wells

Thinking about it now, I'm a little worried that he's going to learn his lesson by murdering Cordelia before she can use the Angel Corpse.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that's going to be a thing anymore. It high key shouldn't be up to Chosen to stave off that outcome after Cat's intervention, and also the war will be decided in the north before Hanno would have had a chance to be anywhere near Cordelia Hasenbach again.

Shveiran

Yeah. If that catastrophe was only avoided through heroic intervention it would be rather disappointing.

shikkarasu

I'm wondering if his Name is weakening. He is doubting himself, not unlike how Thief did, and his Light is coming slower when called. He lost not an Aspect, but one of the core parts of his Name, like the Black Knight's necromancy, shadows, or Speaking. I hope he transitions, but we might get an official of the Heroes who isn't one anymore.

...What am I saying, that would be amazing. Unfortunate and heart wrenching, but so in line with the themes we've seen since Cat went into the Everdark. Sacrificing raw power in the pursuit of long term stability for the Nation/Continent/Warlord.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> He lost not an Aspect, but one of the core parts of his Name,
In fact, the Bard said explicitly that the coin was indeed an Aspect, albeit one of a rare type.

dadycoool

If you're right, then it's interesting how he's losing his Name as Cat's gaining hers.

Insanenoodlyguy

It will be even more interesting when he becomes her Black Knight. And boyfriend.

This ship will never die for me.

[Mental Mouse](#)

heh heh heh....

masterofbones

Worried? Cordelia is poison to the entire treaty, getting rid of her would be a great step.

[Liliet](#)

And what's the next step, putting Rozala in charge? She'll be eaten in two days.

Matthew Wells

Also, a Named murdering a member state's ruler before the talks are finished would be a diplomatic disaster.

TeK

I think the lesson Hano has to learn, is either that he was right all along and humans really are inherently flawed and Justice can only be found in the eyes of the divine (which would be appropriate if it was Gods Above who made the rules), withstanding the temptations of using his own petty morals to judge the world, or to be the guide for the Seraphim in the new era where rigidness of principles is not a virtue (although whether or not it is and to what point is a subject of a heated debate, brought to you live by the comment section), becoming a partner rather than a child holding hand. Exploring this new Age together, one showing the other what he cannot see, another sharing with others what They cannot comprehend (due to not being mortal). Perhaps something along the lines of "just because you are correct doesn't mean you're right" and "have a little empathy you jerks". Although now I am mixing my own bias in here.

Which is why the final lesson would probably play into the theme of the series and align according to Erratic's own moral beliefs. However, as to what they are, the judgement will probably also differ. Not like he will answer us directly.

[Liliet](#)

> Which is why the final lesson would probably play into the theme of the series and align according to Erratic's own moral beliefs. However, as to what they are, the judgement will probably also differ. Not like he will answer us directly.



[Mental Mouse](#)

I think the chapter title is a clue here (look it up on Wikipedia). It may be that the lesson Hanno needs to learn is that the Choir of Judgement is ultimately just another authority, and not necessarily right by definition. (In short, Anaxeres' lesson!)

[Liliet](#)

I don't see how that would possibly follow from any premise Hanno has to work with here tho.

I think the chapter title refers to Hanno believing that there is an Objective Justice Criterion that the Choir of Judgement can access directly and he can imperfectly approximate by thinking about things / listening to his heart. The opposite statement to "there is no justice, there is just us" and "not a single molecule of mercy in the universe".

It's an obstacle, but more of an obstacle is how he doesn't know HOW to approximate it better. He never tried, always dismissing complicated judgements as something he shouldn't even try doing and doing simpler ones easily and automatically because he's really smart actually (think gifted kid in school cruising on no effort until they hit uni and suddenly find out they have no idea how to study).

[Mental Mouse](#)

Heroism almost by definition implies deferring major morality calls to the gods (or the angels, their representatives). Hanno just had a particularly literal version of that.

But I'd say Hanno has surprising wisdom despite his frustrated dependence. Certainly his political and story-

fu abilities are still strong. The question is what happens if and when he gives up hope of the Choir returning.

Liliet

> Heroism almost by definition implies deferring major morality calls to the gods (or the angels, their representatives)

Where'd you get that?

Most heroes aren't on tap with Choirs, Choirs don't provide full feedback on their decisions if any at all (William got 0 feedback), and Gods don't provide any whatsoever.

It's physically impossible for most heroes to defer ANY morality calls to gods/angels/whatever.

Mental Mouse

The Gods Above don't speak directly, but there are plenty of humans willing to speak for them, and various books purporting to recount their commands. That part works basically like our own world....

And the point is that Heroes consistently defer to at least the idea of commandments "from above". Compare that to Cat's response: "Woe on us all, but if the Gods demanded my home be ashes then *the Gods will burn.*"

Liliet

Heroes are consistently at odds with the House of Light actually specifically because they don't respect their claim to be speaking for the Heavens.

> And the point is that Heroes consistently defer to at least the idea of commandments "from above".

Commandments?

Heroes defer to the idea of giving Heavens room to help them, possibly at the expense of taking action on their own, which pisses Cat off but actually works for them, see Providence literally guiding Hanno's hand to save another hero's life this chapter.

Commandments, they just don't receive. Not even the Choir heroes. Maybe if they did they'd defer to them, but I don't think it's reasonable to describe heroism as doing something thoroughly hypothetical at the moment "by definition".

Mental Mouse

I have phrased myself poorly, my point here is that still defer to whatever their idea is of what the Heavens want. If a hero strays from their laid-out path, they eventually stop being a hero.

When young Tariq didn't do what his Choir advised he stopped being able to hear his angels for a while... I'd originally thought that was just manipulation, but now I'm thinking it was more story-mechanical: "The Grey Pilgrim is guided by angels", so when he refused their guidance, his ability to hear them wavered – not by their action, but because he was drifting off-script. But that's still a pretty solid incentive to do as the angels "advise"!

EE made it clear that the Heroes are indeed being guided: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/06/17/chapter-12-squire/comment-page-1/#comment-106>

Liliet

> I have phrased myself poorly, my point here is that still defer to whatever their idea is of what the Heavens want.

And their idea of what the Heavens want happens to be what they want, usually, because that's how the mechanic works.

> When young Tariq didn't do what his Choir advised he stopped being able to hear his angels for a while... I'd originally thought that was just manipulation, but now I'm thinking it was more story-mechanical: "The Grey Pilgrim is guided by angels", so when he refused their guidance, his ability to hear them wavered – not by their action, but because he was drifting off-script. But that's still a pretty solid incentive to do as the angels "advise"!

>

> EE made it clear that the Heroes are indeed being guided:

This is accurate! But they aren't being guided very *closely*.

> Liliet The Adorable Nerd:

> How much input did William get from his Choir on... anything he did during his career?

- > EE:
- > William did not have the kind of relationship with his Choir that Tariq does with Mercy
- > Contrition is more formative than guiding

And that's a Choir hero!

Cpt. Obvious

The choires are all wearing blinders. They only care about their single aspect. Justice knows law but doesn't care if the law is just. Neither does it know, understand or care for mercy or malice. Justice applies law and Judge strictly from that. Hanno says that he doesn't judge, but at the same time he did choose when and whom Judgement would judge. Knowing that almost everyone has done something that breaks the laws of Judgement, even if it is something as simple as being born in some cases, Hanno was providing moderation to the choir of Justice.

Now he is starting to doubt that Justice is perfect, he has doubts about the laws always being just and right. And I think he's starting realize that he has effectively been passing judgement every time when he chose to throw the coin or not.

So he either is going to lose this name by losing his faith in Justice, or the realization that he's in fact very much a participant in the the process of passing Judgment instead of just being its instrument will strengthen his Name. Perhaps he will transition into the White Judge...

[Liliet](#)

Judgement does not base their judgement on any mortal law actually, and Above doesn't have laws for Judgement to follow, they really do go for actual justice as best they can.

Hanno's entire backstory is finding out that laws are not always right, that's how he CAME TO Judgement. He used to be a court scribe and then

Sir Nil

No Judgement... No White Knight.

Crash

Knight of the Free, baby! sworn sword of Bellerophon, most beautiful of the Free Cities, may she reign forever!

All Hanno has to do is murder the second bird god and say a sweet fuck you to Stygia, fuck knows they deserve it.

Time to die, and offer Redress. (Or would Retribution be more fitting in this mad situation?)

Javvies

Heh.

Blind dependence on the Choir has left Hanno increasingly adrift and indecisive.

Plus for all that he's said he doesn't judge ... he's judging people for the actions they take. It's just a different kind of judgement he's making, with different consequences than the life or death Coin Flip.

He might be drifting away from his current Name ... which could be incredibly bad.

Hanno ... you have an incredibly narrow and short sighted perspective. This is a bad thing for someone on your position.

Klaus's decapitation of the would be mutineers and deserters?

What the hell else was he supposed to do?

Besides, don't you always say you don't judge?

Your monomaniacal focus on "Justice", especially since you delegated all decisions on the matter to the Seraphim in a life or death Coin flip, leaves you blind to other factors. Especially the fact that sometimes there are no good options, only bad and worse ones, and leadership requires taking the least bad long term path.

To be fair, how Klaus's move here plays out in a slightly longer timeframe has yet to be determined, but he couldn't realistically just ignore the problem, and he had to make a decision when no good decisions existed.

You cannot let the perfect be the downfall of the good enough. Nor can you allow a perfect plan implemented tomorrow to prevent a functional plan executed now.

WuseMajor

I mean, at least he's not the Mirror Knight?

Chris would have gone in and defended people, hopefully by inspiring everyone to join together in holding this position, but he probably would have had to kill the Iron Prince to do it.

And then, right after he'd gotten everyone together and built the defense of this place...the Dead King would just sit there,

everyone would starve, and Chris would likely end up running out to fight the entire army himself and eventually he'd die.

Hanno at least has considered the long term and decided that it was a choice between everyone dying or those people dying and that, since it was legal, he wouldn't stop it.

Honestly, I think the real question is, was there another way? Maybe? A sufficiently charismatic Named might have been able to convince everyone that this was the only option, but then you've got mind control allegations going on. Alternately, if you had someone who could miracle up supplies, staying for a day or two to let everyone recover might have been feasible. But if they had someone like that, they'd already have factored that in.

I feel like this is going to end up having been a bad idea on Klaus's part, somehow, but, based on everything he knows, going out to fight now is going to keep more people alive than staying behind. And, while I feel the waste of those lives, I cannot exactly disagree with him.

mamm0nn

Saying that there would be idiots that take the easiest path leading to a worse end is not a good endorsement of the actions of those less foolish. Mirror Knight already is both out of story and in the Story the designated fool that makes the shortsighted bad calls loudly, using him as a measuring stick is hardly a good means to endorse White Knight.

TeK

Regardless of anything else, it was a mass murder. Dude, come on, don't act like you can't see that Hanno perfectly understads the "necessity" and all that jazz, you are being willfully dishonest.

We see a conflict between deontology and consequentialism, and Hanno had the unfortune of having his deontological beliefs being divinely ordained. Now they aren't and he, like the rest of us mortals, has to find a different foundation for his beliefs or abandon them in entirety. I kinda wish someone introduced him to Kant's categorical imperative, I wonder what he would've thought.

On a sidenote: God, but am I glad living in the world where I have such an abundance of knowledge at the tip of my fingers. It is truly a blessing.

Also, I don't think he is casting judgement. He is stating the facts. It was a mass murder. A mass murder he could've possibly prevented. It was necessary. But it was still a mass murder.

And for him, necessity does not justify mass murder. And yet he still tacitly allowed it. And yet it was a mass murder of largely innocent, even heroic people. And yet if they didn't die, many more would've. And yet, it was a murder of a scared, lost, confused people. You can't deny all of those things. How can you say he is blind to many factors? He sees it all.

I would maintain however, that he does not judge. It is similar to late stoic philosophy. He is not ascribing good or bad to other people actions, nor to the happenings of nature. He just acts according to his own principles, consequences be damned. Because, the outside world cannot be controlled, and it's a folly to pretend that it is. What we can't control should be ignored and we should focus on what we can control. Our thoughts and our actions. While accepting the happenings of fate without judging.

He does not judge. He never called actions of Cat, or Cordelia, or Klaus as either good or bad. He does not ascribe a moral value to other people or their actions. He just tries to see the things from many possible angles. He tries too keep in mind all the facts, without ignoring or discarding the facts because they are uncomfortable to admit. He is the opposite of blind.

Javvies

Mass execution.

For those who intended to lead and organize a mutiny and/or mass desertion of their units in the face of the enemy in time of war, and who did not surrender. Possibly also of lower ranked people who were involved and didn't surrender.

There's a difference, and in this case, it's important. Armies are not democracies. They cannot function as one. They are autocracies.

Think back to Cat's footing of the Gallowborne – had she not formed the Gallowborne, each and every one of the initial membership would have been executed.

Unfortunately for Hanno "Justice" is not a concept that is fully compatible with armies fighting wars.

Officers will have to give orders knowing that following those orders will mean that at least some of their troops die, and sometimes it will be most or all of them who are expected to die. Those troops don't have much choice about following orders, even if they think those orders suck and will probably get them killed. Because not following orders is not something an army can tolerate.

None of that has anything to do with "Justice" – simply military imperatives.

There usually are not clear cut options, and it's looking a lot like Hanno is having increasing trouble coping with the shades of grey that most people, especially leaders, have to deal with on a near daily basis, rather than purely black and white situations.

Salt

I'm not sure why you're framing it like being uncomfortable with having to choose a lesser evil is a bad thing.

It SHOULD be something you're uncomfortable with, and getting numbed to it is a shitty part of reality, not something to be praised for. Any respectable person would feel like absolute shit for having to kill those people, and it's a sentiment Klaus and Hanno almost certainly share. Klaus isn't lounging on a sofa patting himself on the back for being an edgy, teenage-angsty executioner of the cowardly, the dude hated having to do it as much as Hanno hated having to stand back and let it happen.

Realistically, Hanno is being pretty sensible here. Having to put up with a shitty reality – which he did just now – is no excuse to be satisfied with only being able to put up with awful and worse for options. He's wanting to do better and find a way to not be forced to choose between awful and worse next time, which is the correct mindset.

If anything, a lot of the other characters should take a leaf from Hanno's book, not the other way around.

TeK

Hanno (and I) never denied that it's lawful. The "do not retreat" order back in WW2 was also lawful in the Soviet Union – and if not for it, perhaps many more lives would've been lost. But it is not, not even remotely, just. And yet it was necessary. Maybe. The opinions differ. But the guys who made the order thought it was necessary.

Klaus didn't exhaust every other option before resorting to this. He didn't exhaust any other option for that matter. He called them to talk and then stabbed them in the back. It might've saved the campaign and hell, I might've done the same on his place, but it does not absolve it of what it is. A cold-blooded murder of decent men, without even an attempt to reason with them first.

He treated them like animals for the slaughter and sure it's army and it's war, and it was his lawful right to do so, but it merely puts the facts into perspective, it does not erase them.

Also Hanno never stopped having a problem with the shades of grey. His is very dilemma of a ln idealist encountering a flawed world. He had a magical crutch in a face of eldritch abominations that may very well be ideal, but it was also taken away from him. And now he is faced with no choice but to live with his own imperfections, oh the folly of men.

See, the fact that Hanno needs to grow up does not somehow invalidate all his concerns. They are perfectly valid, it's just that we have no option but to live with them.

Shveiran

Minor correction: Klaus did, in fact, try to reason with them. After confirming they weren't listening, he went ahead with it.

Granted, he still acted and there may have been other things he could have tried first.

It is a small thing, but a meaningful one, I feel.

Frivolous

TeK –

I think the above argument is mistaken. I present as counter-argument these paragraphs from Theism:

====

He spoke clearly and concisely, avoiding frills and japes out of respect for the grim deeds he was asking for, but twice he was interrupted by a challenge from a captain and more often than that by jeers.

"To stay in Juvelun is death," the Prince of Hannover told them. "We will be surrounded and destroyed."

"And where would we go instead, bloody Keter?" a woman called out.

"Retreat," another voice called out. "We must retreat."

"We must go west," Klaus roared, his voice rising above the din. "General Rumena has reported to me that the remnants from the defenders of Juvelun are gathering in the valley, and we must strike west to disperse them before they can mount a true threat."

====

So Klaus did try to talk to the Brabantine captains. They wouldn't listen, and I think Klaus decided that further argument would only waste time and not change anyone's minds.

Darkening

Calling it mass murder and saying he treated them like animals feels a bit disingenuous when he gave them the option to kneel and be arrested instead of dying. Sure, it's a chaotic situation and a lot of them are probably confused, but he *did* have the option for them, and we do in fact see some people being dragged off afterwards with that having happened. The folks that died are implied to have drawn blades and resisted the soldiers coming to arrest them, and when people draw weapons on people trying to arrest them there tend to be consequences to that. Sure, Klaus knew going in that's how it would go and he could have done it in a way that intimidated more of them into surrender, but that doesn't strip the captains of their own free will to choose their own fate. And if he'd tried to be gentler about it, the lack of surprise might have meant more of his soldiers died facing the mutineers, which would be unfortunate in a lot of ways. I dunno, there probably was a better way to go about this, but no good ways.

Salt

Lol, I think the thing about taking "I do not judge" started out as a facetious joke and it just flew over some peoples' heads as an actual legitimate argument.

The phrase quite obviously is just a paraphrasing of his answer to the riddle of fault – it just means he doesn't consider himself worthy of wielding the authority to judge objective right or wrong.

It doesn't mean that he doesn't /have/ any opinions at all on things like whether someone is trustworthy, or if raping and killing people is wrong. It just means he thinks his flawed mortal opinion isn't good enough to be an objective measure of whether someone is Just or not, so he refuses the action of standing in Judgement over them based on those mortal opinions, as much as he can.

It's honestly kind of hilarious to see people seriously giving him shit for it, since most of the comments section from the first four or so books had a very angry circlejerk about self-righteous Heroes who considered their opinions to be made of gold or something, and treated said opinions like some sort of objective truth.

Enter a Hero who strongly believes that his own flawed opinions are unworthy of being used to stand in judgement of other people, and now "Heroes R Bad" because... he doesn't think his opinions are made of gold?

Damned if you do, damned if you don't, I guess.

TeK

I mean, Heroes are against the protagonist, so can they really be good?

Shveiran

I think the gut reaction of some of the commenters (myself included) stemmed from the fact that Hanno's perception of his own flawed ability to judge did not, in fact, stop him from trying to carve the world into a better place one bloody swing at a time.

In practice, he was still making a choice each time, and it kind of sounded like he didn't really realize it.

Salt

That's sort of the problem though.

When he doesn't do anything, he gets lambasted for being "indecisive", naïve, or shrugging off the responsibility of making a morally grey choice when forced to.

When he does do something, he's "trying to carve the world into a better place, one bloody swing at a time". It seems rather strange that even in this very thread of comments, we're seeing two mutually exclusive standards.

As for how much it makes sense to take "I do not judge" as a sign of naïveté or hypocrisy for not being literal?

I'll be honest, I think it's pretty simple to recognize a protagonist-centered bias on the side of some of the comments section there, when you consider that "justifications only matter to the just" has always been interpreted very leniently even though Catherine has cared heavily about justifications from the beginning of the story, while "I do not judge" is taken as a rather literal rule that needs to be perfectly adhered to, else be considered some large degree of dimly unaware or hypocritical.

One line catchphrases like either of those are very loose/simplified summaries of a more complex ideology, and are therefore always going to be some degree of inaccurate in a literal or technical sense. How much they make sense is going to be dependent on how intentionally lenient or harsh the reader is with the interpretation, just as much as how well it's actually followed.

[Liliet](#)

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GOD YES. THANK YOU FOR ARTICULATING IT

Shveiran

Those standards are only mutually exclusive in a vacuum.

I cannot talk for the others, but I personally criticize Hanno, and every other character, for the faults I see in their actions. If their approach varies, it is only natural that the faults may change as well. I disagree with this "he'll be criticized no matter what he does" conclusion.

Besides (again, speaking personally here), comparing mottoes and their interpretation by the reader like that is rather unfair.

Catherine's motto is bullshit. It has always – been – bullshit. For all that she had it sown on her standard, I have a hard time coming up with a meaningful moment that started from that reasoning and not her more general "I'll do what's needed for things to stop being screwed".

I mean, for fuck's sake, MARCHFORD happened not long after the Blessed Isle.

Meanwhile, for a long time we had very little to go on about Hanno aside from his motto.

This isn't "protagonist bias", so much as "I don't know as much compared to the protagonist about this guy, but I still want to talk about Hanno because the chapter I just read was cool".

[Mental Mouse](#)

Even Catherine eventually agreed that the motto was bullshit....

Halinn

>You cannot let the perfect be the downfall of the good enough.

Isn't that more or less Cat's entire issue with heroic idealism, that Above is all about anything short of perfection being bad.

[Liliet](#)

Above itself does not express any opinions or make any judgements. We've repeatedly had comments that the church just makes things up because there's no input from Above.

So it's more the opposite problem: they accept anyone who meets some very, very minimal standards (WILLIAM OF GREENBURY) and then people try to build on that with very varying results.

Like, Cat herself has a problem with Tariq not letting perfect be the downfall of good enough by SEEDING A PLAGUE.

Crash

This is why Hanno has always rubbed me the wrong way.

"I do not judge" is my berserk button. You are fucking judging bud, whether you sugarcoat or have the cool angels telling you it's fine or hide behind their skirts and say that you are merely following order, it's a judgement all the same. Inaction is not an excuse, it is a choice.

The fact he is still allowed to pull this bullshit speaks to the wild way Heroes are allowed to do whatever the hell they want because the Heavens say so.

Imagine a villain coming out and saying they're not responsible for any of their actions, it is simply the result of orders followed. Instant band of five.

Him showing a bit of spine, excuse me, -doubt- this chapter was great.

jack

Hanno always judged. He was just in denial about it.

The man decided when to flip a coin, knowing that it might result in the death of the person he was talking to.

He was absolutely judging.

[Liliet](#)

He was deciding whether to open a court case!

And I think people who pointed out "I do not judge" was not literal are right: he was not in denial. He knew he was

making decisions and he was taking responsibility for them. There was a cutoff of complexity though where he stepped back and either let it be period (bureaucracy in Delos) or asked the Choir if he considered it warranted.

ChamberJack

Have to admit WK is sounding a bit hypocritical here, even acknowledges it faintly. While still more sensible than most heroes, he still has a sense of self righteousness that being the White Knight gives.

Jason Ipswitch

Hmm. The White Knight is troubled by the absence of Judgement. The Heirophant had his native ability to work magic destroyed by the Dead King. The Grey Pilgrim is missing one of his aspects (because Catherine ripped it out of his corpse and used it to return him to life). The Black Queen's army is stalked by a Revenant whose Aspect makes him nigh-invulnerable. There's a band of extra-deadly Revenants hunting the forces of the Grand Alliance.

And Catherine is coming into a Name that is about managing Named. My prediction is that she's going to end up with an Aspect that lets her manipulate Aspects.

Shveiran

Considering that aspects are at the core of a Named' identity and soul, I certainly hope not. That strikes me like an invasive procedure a la Taylor Herbert, and I certainly hope we don't get to that kidn of scenario.

"hey Indrani, Wander is at the core of what you are, right? Well, too bad, I need someone to lead this contingent, so you are about Marching now. I'll change it back later... maybe".

No. Just... uhg, just no.

Lady Serpentine

"Manipulate" and "control" are not the same. Cat's already had an Aspect to manipulate Aspects once, it's how she spent a book and a half running around like she had Rise.

Shveiran

Oh, definitely. If she gets a way to seal up Aspects as a sanction when she judges Named, I've got no beef with that.

I thought Jason was picturing something more akin to her molding others' aspects to what she thought was necessary, and thus "solving" issues like Masego's crippling or, more

importantly, Hanno's crisis of faith.

That is a much more risky territory, even when done for the greater good. It's a power I'd rather she lacked, because she tends to use what she has.

Raved Thrad

I think you have something there. Each time she's interacted with dead named, she's thought of herself as a "thief of Bestowal." I can't help but think that this is going to be part of her Name, that she'll have some sort of meta that affects Named and Aspects.

It'd also be interesting if she ends up with a Name like "Thief of (foo)". I wonder how Vivienne would react to that.

Musou Majo

There's also the whole "Queen of Lost and Found" business. She's very much been representative of making hard choices and sacrificing things to forge her own path. So very likely if it relates to Names it will involve her being an instructor of sorts. A teacher, at a school perhaps. Or, if you'll bear with me, a Guide. Something that'll let her maybe not manipulate aspects or Names, but help people fill the roles they're meant to, with a degree of control over who and how they do it according to her and her terms.

Also side note: it's very interesting how as the White Knight's Name fades with his wavering will, Cat's Name strengthens and involves judging other Names in some way.

Mental Mouse

As someone else has pointed out, "Queen of Lost and Found" is just a translation of "Queen Foundling". Admittedly, it certainly sounds cooler!

Anomandris

This is ominous.... So very ominous.

Kinda like the doubts an important character feels before upcoming clarity that either leads to an antagonistic path; or a heroic Last stand.

Burlyraven

So Hanno's power wanes as Catherine's waxes, and both are marching towards what could very possibly be the bloodiest battle of this campaign so far. Considering Cat's Name is oriented

towards judgement and rule, and Hanno is desperate for guidance and losing his faith in the Heavens, there's a story of corruption brewing, methinks. It's still a few steps away from inevitable, but it's there.

David

With the Black Knight role off the board for now (as far as we know there hasn't been another claimant), and the White Knight in decline, it would be interesting to see the Black/White dicotomy end and Cat take up the mantle of the Grey Knight or something more neutral but significantly broader/further reaching.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Catherine is already well past the Knight tier. Something like Shadow Queen would be a possibility.

Darkening

Yeah, I've been eying the contrast between Hanno's 'I do not Judge' catchphrase and Cat's name seeming to be about standing in judgement with a great deal of interest. I highly doubt Hanno's going to fall to villainy or anything, but I could see him being pushed too far by one of Cat's Necessary Evils and doing something Unfortunate that leads to an ideological clash via mortal combat. It's the only way to have a proper philosophical debate based on all the anime I've ever seen lol. Honestly, it would be a hell of a thing for Cat to come into her name by putting down Hanno. Like, holy fuck.

Crash

Interesting view, especially since we keep being reminded people have opinions about how cordial they are/were with each other.

Would also be an interesting funhouse mirror to Malicia/Black in some ways.

Burnsy

Hanno's either going to go the way of Vivienne, or he's going to come to some life affirming epiphany at a climactic moment and reconnect with Judgement long enough to go out in a blaze of glory.

Also, every single background detail of the greater war going on is so interesting. I want to see Hawk and Archer in a sniper duel immediately.

Raved Thrad

I don't remember exactly, but isn't Archer able to shoot things like other arrows out of the sky with her own shots? If both she and Hawk are capable of that...

Cpt. Obvious

It seems like Archer can hit whatever she can see. And her Name makes seeing things at just about any distance easy. It was even mentioned in an earlier chapter that Beast master loaned her the sight of some of his beasts and she was able to use that to hit targets that were out of sight from where she was. So yes I think it's highly likely she can shoot arrows out of the sky.

Big I

A thoughtful, philosophical chapter. I like it. Hanno's problem is that he thinks the Heavens themselves are just. Even when using his power to Recall the actions of the first Iron King, he can't accept that all his bosses' superiors really care about is winning their bet.

Two chapters sprang to mind when thinking about this one. First, the interlude where he became White Knight; "the fault was the King's for thinking he could be just". Second, the Tyrant POV at the beginning of Hanno's trial where he used Wish, where Hanno's was "I wish to be just". The King's fault is also Hanno's and always had been.

This chapter made me think that Hanno's either going to die in this war, or transition to another name. Knight Errant maybe?

TeK

His struggle is precisely the cognitive dissonance of wishing something you believe is inherently unachievable to you. And not just a passing fancy like "I wish I could cast fireballs" but a life-defining desire like "I don't want to die". I can relate way too much.

Salt

I mean... whether the Seraphim are infallible is arguable, but it's actually pretty sensible to believe that they are pretty much the closest thing to "Just" as it's possible to get

That kind of abdication to higher expertise happens all the time. No one argues that it's silly or stupid for a random Proceran soldier to take Cordelia's word for it on matters of justice – she's more knowledgeable, experienced, and has a better understanding of context

The seraphim? They have more knowledge on the subject of justice than any being currently alive, has all the experience from being fanatically devoted to the correct judgement of justice since the dawn of Creation, and has greater context than any living being on Calernia by virtue of being able to simultaneously see every single past action, every current circumstance, and every future possibility at the same time.

So I guess the question is... what possible reason does anyone have to believe the bronze scaled birds are less correct on the subject of justice than any other character?

Darkening

Because Judgement without Mercy isn't Justice but Tyranny.

[Liliet](#)

Bronze scaled birds?

Curtopolis

Because this entire world was created by two separate factions of gods as basically a giant chessboard with mortals as pawns so they can win a bet. Justice is part of one of those two factions which makes it inherently partisan by nature.

[308924810a](#)

I think Hanno's issue with his name is that he's having trouble viewing himself as animated purely by the same sort of principle as drove him to take up his Name.

Big I

I noticed that ten is becoming a significant number in the Practiverse. Ten Scourges, ten Firstborn generals, ten Emerald Swords. Maybe signifying that Sve Noc, the Dead King and the Forever King are all on the same tier, or are similar in other ways?

TeK

Ten fingers...

[Liliet](#)

Not on Hanno though

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nor Hakram

[amit27592](#)

"Fifty-five: if your powers are lost, they will nearly always return greater than before so long as the appropriate moral lesson is learned. With kindness and humility comes overwhelming martial might."

-*"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms"*, author unknown

Hanno is struggling to learn the appropriate moral lesson. His name seems to be waning due to it.

Xinci

Indeed, either he will learn a manner of finding problems in the frameworks/institutions he is acting in and rectifying them or he will be replaced. So it goes on the wheel of Creation

Salt

Yeah, the other half of the axiom (left unsaid) is that if you don't learn the lesson or learn it too late? Then you, uh, die.

Black Spiral Dancer

Well, now that wouldn't feel as inspiring with such a threat behind, would it?

Mordant Moose

True, but what is the lesson to be learnt? To me it seems the very nature of his Name Ideology is so steadfast in carrying out justice based on action not outcome, any lesson learnt would be at odds with the beliefs that lead to his Naming. If he does learn a lesson and come back stronger im eager to see what the lesson EE has in mind because I actually have no idea here, does he learn that he HAS to judge because if he doesnt everyone dies to DK (which would be a 180 to his "I Do Not Judge" and would cripple his current White Knight Name)? Or is it something completely different that I just cant conceive right now?

Super keen for conclusion to the Hanno dilemma.

Xinci

It was nice feeling the narrative tropey feeling providence being close gives. Like a warm blanket instead of the freezing night that being without it can be like. Hm, justice as a concept in all truth could be broken down to finding broken parts of a system and rectifying them. Its finding a trillion little things and improving them, truly ceaseless work. The perspective of a angel might be on othe few things that could properly know when a improvement is a improvement. After all, everything does, so how

do you know when deaths may end up with a better or worse result long term?

Even so, if there is a natural order to the world, even a mortals view may have similarities that may be used to bridge perspective to higher levels? Perhaps Recall may aid in this, perhaps not. Creation is a wheel ever turning and if one cannot fill their Role, they will fall off and get back on or be crushed beneath its merciless tread.

[Adrian_V](#)

This can be summed up with 2 simple words: OH SHIT!!

Unless he transitions (wich is unlikely) or this goes into a restoration of faith kind of character arc they are in deep shit, the whole thing depends too much on Hanno being a reasonable authority figure for the heroes to check in the idiots like MK or the zealouts, Pilgrim is too old for it.

[308924810a](#)

Huh, is this what the ominous foreshadowing around whatever the Bard was plotting around Cordelia and Hanno(as alluded to in their card game) was leading up to?

Hanno loses trust in Cordelia, and thus loses trust in the idea that what they're fighting to defend is Good, and thus loses his confidence that he is doing Good, and thus loses his Name?

If Hanno loses his Name there's not much to keep the Truce and Terms together from the Heroes' end, no one can replace the guy.

I think we need to start seriously thinking about what exactly would happen if the heroes lost their leader-figure and started a mutiny/started killing other Named mid-war.

That's certainly one way for heroes to foil the Villain's(Cat's) continent-spanning scheme at the last minute. Only problem is that foiling this scheme might kill all of Procer.

And all this is completely aside from my suspicion that there's an 'evil turns on evil', or a Dead King-driven 'I have a better scheme and am willing to be more monstrous' situation brewing up north, with the possibility that the Dead King might unleash his Demons into the force with a type-weakness against demons, and engage in some gunboat diplomacy, holding the possibility of their destruction by demon over the Drow to make them switch sides in the war.

Shveiran

Losing faith in the fact that he is doing good while defending life on the continent would be kind of ridiculous.

What he is losing faith in is whether or not he is still trying to uphold justice in what he does, because that's at the core of his Role.

[Adrian_V](#)

Or that he is the right person for it

308924810a

The issue is that in Hanno's mind good is indistinguishable from justice, while to the Grey pilgrim it is the prevention of as much suffering as achievable, and to Cordelia good is indistinguishable from duty.

In the worst case it might be possible for him to come around to a perspective like the Saint of Swords, where he views the structure of Procer as incompatible with justice, ceases to really care whether it exists and even wants to tear it down and rebuild, and thus feels guilt for helping to preserve its injustices even as he remains enthusiastic about bringing down the Dead King.

If he comes around to viewing Procer as primarily evil(unjust) but is locked in to defending it by his oaths and desire to protect the people, well, his Name isn't really supposed to be about defending the people or keeping to his duties, it's supposed to be about punishing injustice.

It's the classic Id, ego, superego problem, the Id is problematic because it wants what it wants immediately with no ability to learn or reassess those desires, and both useful and problematic because it can be satisfied either by getting that thing or by imagining it has gotten that thing, while even if the superego can learn to want different things, it is incapable of accepting anything less than perfection and will cause unproductive guilt at imperfections that a person has no ability to control. It sort of seems like both villains and heroes almost have to subordinate themselves to a particular Id or Superego drive to gain their power, but the problem is that the superego demands perfection, so a hero could potentially lose their power by failing to live up to the original drive(hence the whole 'lose your power until an appropriate moral lesson is learned' trope).

Shveiran

I'm not seeing it, honestly.

Sure, Hanno's core is justice, but... it doesn't really matter if your hero is about freedom, love or protecting others: if you can lend a hand in an "end of the world"

scenario?

It's... kind of a give you'll do it.

No matter what Hanno may come to think of Procer, he'll not leave them out to die to the Dead King.

His problem is one of self worth and purpose.

James Halloran

I could be wrong, but I think the following is very similar to a quote from much earlier in the series about the Black Knight:

"It did not erase her virtues, but neither must Hanno ever allow himself to forget that all that stood between the Black Queen and atrocities was the perception of need."

Who knows what name Cat will come into, but damn the character growth from her time as Squire, to the Folly, to now is really great.

nimelennar

Three thoughts:

First, does Hanno know about the plague that Tariq used to take down Black Knight? If not, that might be one fewer person he'd trust, given the attitude displayed here.

Second, the point Hanno fails to grasp is that the Truce and Terms need someone alive to enforce them. Yes, compromising on them for the sake of political realities weakens them, but that same compromise, if not made, would have lost them a large chunk of the armies of Offer, and therefore the war against the Dead King, and /then/ what would have become of the T&T?

Finally, I again have to compliment EE on how the chapter is structured. Last chapter, it led off with a lesson that the character had learned, which then explained and justified the actions at the end of the chapter. This one, it does exactly the opposite: it leads off with a lesson that the Grey Pilgrim was trying to teach Hanno, and, in the end, it's the failure to truly grasp that lesson that is plaguing the White Knight. Evil knows Evil, as Tariq told him, and when all paths ahead are evil in one way or another, it will probably be a Villain who will have the best insight of which of those evils is the least. No one is arguing that it wasn't evil to desecrate the Red Axe's corpse the way they did, but every other path they could have taken would have just piled more corpses onto hers.

Sometimes, if only rarely, putting practical necessity over deontological morals /is/ the right thing to do. And while that's probably an attitude more suitable for a follower of the Choir of Mercy than Judgement, I think that, given time, Tariq will be able to hammer it through Hanno's skull. And maybe when he stops

judging people for doing just that, his powers (and maybe even his Choir's) will be restored.

[Liliet](#)

> First, does Hanno know about the plague that Tariq used to take down Black Knight? If not, that might be one fewer person he'd trust, given the attitude displayed here.

I'm actually thinking that maybe realizing that Tariq matches the exact same pattern he accuses Cat of – anything in the face of sufficient necessity – might let him feel better. Like, if there's *literally no-one* who can match the ideal, maybe he can just... stop holding people to it, and accept imperfection. It won't be easy and it won't be painless but maybe he'll figure out a framework where he can hold onto his principles while also accepting these facts.

Shveiran

It's possible, though I personally believe that Hanno's harrowing comes from being unable to see a just path for himself to walk.
in that vein, realizing no one seems to ever find it would just be disheartening, not liberating.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's a risk.

On the other hand, it might lower his standards for what a "just" path is – and while lowering standards sounds bad, standards that are too high lead to procrastination and nothing getting done to any standard at all, which is precisely Hanno's problem right now.

Shveiran

It's possible.

It would be healthy, don't get me wrong, I'm just not seeing that shape in the stroy right now. But I'm often wrong, so...:P

[Liliet](#)

you are right but there are all sorts of good options still >x>

nick012000

Hanno's powers are weakening because he's losing faith in the righteousness of Justice without the angels there to help him

out. I wonder what would happen to the Truces and Terms if he winds up going full Villain, akin to Two-Face from Batman.

[Liliet](#)

No, he's losing faith in his own ability to act and make decisions. A very different song.

Crash

He has never had any ability to act and make decisions. The man had never made a choice in his life as a Named. It was either Providence or the Coin.

Now he has spent two years on his own and is having to grapple with the consequences of having to make choices that have repercussions and not having a neat and clean fallback of "the angels made me do it", he is understandably buckling under the pressure. Not helped by the fact his Name was very much tied with the concept of Justice provided by the choir of Judgement.

And that is my(very) uncharitable view on the matter.

[Liliet](#)

> The man had never made a choice in his life as a Named.

Yes, he has. Every single time he flipped the coin, he made the decision to flip it. It wasn't slipping out of his sleeve all providence-like, he chose when to throw and when not to.

Crash

He chose to avoid making a choice, leaving it in the choirs hands. You could argue this is a choice in itself, which it is; but as far as Hanno is concerned that wasn't him, it wasn't his hand, his thought, his decision. He was simply the instrument through which the Seraphim worked.

I doubt he's take responsibility for any of that, before these two years.

[Liliet](#)

No, you don't get it. He CHOSE WHEN TO ASK THE CHOIR.

And did it very rarely.

[Liliet](#)

00F.

Hanno is not having a good time, huh.

Frivolous

EE – a possible discrepancy:

"I have sent Antigone and Christophe to oversee the capitulation of the conscripts..."

" Hanno had already sent the Balladeer and the Harrowed Witch, two of the more level-headed among his Named, to prevent that particular situation from spinning out of control."

Antigone is the Witch of the Woods and the only Christophe I know of is Christophe de Pavanie, the Mirrored Knight.

The Harrowed Witch, on the other hand, is Aspasia.

So are the 2 sentences above both correct and referring to separate incidents, or are they referring to the same incident, and thus are a discrepancy?

Noldo

Don't they clearly refer to two different situations? Antigone and Christopher are with conscripts while Balladeer and Harrowed Witch are with fantasists.

Frivolous

Yeah. No change in the text, so I'm guessing they really are 2 different situations.

Evgeny Permyakov

A tin soldier starts to think a becomes a human being. I'm so glad for him, he isn't a completely lost cause I though he is.

mamm0nn

Ietsism (– "somethingism") is an unspecified belief in an undetermined transcendent reality.

Well, that doesn't sound like Hanno is just trying to grasp faith in Above but in his own special way to feel special while inevitably making all his opinions and judgements moot or flawed by trying just that.

At least other Heroes that have a faith in the good book can realise when they're wrong, very rarely but still. But when one has a faith that they haven't even determined yet cling on to as righteous and proper, then they are just setting themselves up to sneer and judge on their whims without the foundations to know when they are wrong themselves.

For all that Hanno repeats his old mantras, it seems like he's about to make some foolish judgements without good foundations the moment he leaves this state of indecisiveness.

Frivolous

Hanno is having to develop his own value system after years of having his hand held by the Cherubim. It may weaken him as far as his Name goes, and it may get him and a lot of other people killed, but this is actually growth. The Cherubim were a crutch to Hanno. I'm glad he got to learn for himself what he values while he was still alive.

I'm surprised a bit that one of the other Choirs haven't gone to figuratively knock on Judgment's door and lend a helping hand. I guess they can't interfere in each other's bailiwicks. Which seems lame, but whatever.

Also, this quote by Masdrubal the (so-called) Wise really irritates me:

"Should all serve as ordained by the Heavens, all of Creation will be as a garden without sin."

It advocates a caste system where people are nothing more than cogs in a machine. I hate it. Masdrubal was probably an authoritarian asshole.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Minor correction: Hanno's former minders are the Seraphim, not the Cherubim. That quibble aside, I think you're right.

Frivolous

Oh right. Sigh. Thanks.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Masdrubal quote can also face a simpler retort: Everybody thinks "The world would be paradise if everybody else would just do as I say."

[marillius](#)

I'm having trouble writing my comment. Maybe this summary will get through.

The White Knight, leader of the Heroes in the Truce and Terms, is a grown man who doesn't know any wit about how Context matters when making a judgement. 'Is it right?' In a perfect world, this question matters. 'Is it the best that could be done?' This is the question that needs to be asked. The White Knight did nothing to solve any of the problems he's whining about and blaming

others for, in fact caused one of them because he thought his Oath to an Oath Breaker who took his oath under false pretenses specifically to hurt the rest of those under his protection and cause millions to suffer at the behest of an immortal for funnies, and only now kind of sort of gets how mentally crippled he's made himself?

Why is he leading instead of the Grey Pilgrim? Fricking Dumbledore the Grey Pilgrim right now please and get this man child out of a position of authority. Make him your feel good customer service manager for heroes and put someone with some actual critical thinking skills at the head of one of the most powerful and important forces in the world.

[Liliet](#)

I... really don't think Tariq is a better candidate.

We're talking about the guy who well into his thirties was surprised/saddened by the idea that the same person could be good to one group of people and bad to another.

Just, please, not him. No.

[marillius](#)

Right now our only other option after those two is MK, I think.

[Liliet](#)

Well, how do I put this.

No.

[marillius](#)

That's pretty much my point right there. We got Hanno the man-child, Tariq the guy who had that same issue but who grew out of it, and MK the child-child.

[Liliet](#)

THERE ARE OTHER HEROES

LET'S RESURRECT NEPHELE I'M SURE SHE WOULD DO A GOOD JOB

Faux pas

"That this had been necessary was, in truth, difficult to deny. But had it been just?

No, his heart whispered. It wasn't."

Well, it looks like the heart of Hanno "I do not judge" of Arwad

passed a judgement. Looking forward to more development on his side.

Silverking

"Catherine Foundling did not have lines in the sand that she would not cross, if she thought it necessary. It did not erase her virtues, but neither must Hanno ever allow himself to forget that all that stood between the Black Queen and atrocities was the perception of need."

Funny, that's exactly what Cat thinks of the Grey Pilgrim.

[Liliet](#)

Yup! Can't wait for Hanno to realize that.

...He's going to, right? Right??

Salt

I think this is probably the most accurate part. Hanno doesn't realize that he and Catherine have something very much in common – they're both very heavy idealists.

Being OK to suffer with the state of Creation forcing you to choose between the lesser garbage choice is the mentality of Malicia, the Saint, the old Grey Pilgrim, who were all too busy asking "what is the best we can do with what we've got", to remember to also ask "is it **right** for this kind of decision to be forced on us at all?"

Cat has been on what is now a six book long crusade against Creation itself after asking that question, and finding it's answer lacking.

The mistake Hanno is making is misidentifying the difference between him and Catherine. It's not that Catherine isn't an idealist or that she's less principled than he is. It's that his vision of an ideal world is one that's Just, and her vision of an ideal world is one that's Peaceful. The two are, quite often, not the same thing.

[Liliet](#)

I think the mistake he's made here is misjudging the nature of the conflict / problem with the Red Axe situation. Well, scope more than nature, but these are the same thing in context.

So he came to an erroneous conclusion from there)=

Zach

Catherine acknowledges that she's this way also, though. Post-Everdark, Catherine doesn't really have any major philosophical disagreement with Pilgrim; she understands why he felt that killing her is necessary given what he knows and has experienced, even though she obviously thought he was wrong about that.

I think that Pilgrim's goals probably align more with Catherine's at this point than most other heroes (except for maybe Roland); he's always been more of an "ends justify the means" guy, like Catherine herself.

Nvm

I wonder if Hanno is on the way to a new Name. Cat is his counter part and she's coming into a new Name herself.

Major events have changed his Role pretty significantly. Whether he doubles down on his principles or becomes a bit more grey, he might not be the White Knight anymore either way.

Frivolous

If Hanno loses his Bestowal and is no longer White Knight, or is killed for some reason related to his angst, who replaces him as leader of the heroes under the Truce and Terms?

To put the question another way, who do the heroes hate the least and is also considered tolerable by the other factions in the Alliance (villains/Catherine, Procer, Levant, drow, Callow)?

I'm guessing Roland the Rogue Sorcerer.

Shveiran

Several of the heroes don't trust him, though, for precisely that reason.

Frivolous

Yeah, but I think Mirror Knight and Blade of Mercy were the major ones. After their humiliation at the hero meeting, I doubt they'll try to speak up again.

Giggles. Maybe the heroes can have an election! Vote either in person or by scrying network.

Wouldn't that be funny?

Shveiran

I can think of worse options, though few among them have the clout to do it. Except maybe Pilgrim.
Then again, a younger hero could maybe grow into the role?

Frivolous

Is clout really an issue? I think organizational and administrative ability, coupled with inoffensiveness and the ability to convince others with logic, would be enough.

Note the hero meeting that Hanno chaired and that ended so disastrously for Blade of Mercy and Mirror Knight. Hanno had to use moral suasion the entire time when arguing. He was more a manager than a real leader.

I think Roland would be a good choice simply because he's smart enough and gregarious and inoffensive. He won't piss people off, and unlike Hanno, he isn't likely to suffer a crisis of confidence anytime soon. His Name and Role are not as rigid or as brittle as Hanno's.

Valiant Champion could do the job, actually, but Catherine hates her. It would be difficult for Rafaella to represent the heroes when her opposite number fantasizes about murdering her.

Shveiran

Hanno used logic, but he did so while also being the White Knight.

It's kind of hard to judge whether or not one without clout could deal with, say, Cristophe or the Blessed Artificer just through logic. I'm unconvinced, myself, but I'll agree it is far from certain.

I agree that Roland would be qualified, but unless they listen to him, it doesn't work.

As for Rafaella... no? Just... no. She has no ability to consider who fits where and who can't interact with whom. She just isn't leader material. I mean, in a battle? Sure, maybe, she could fit that role and grow into it. She'll never be a general, but she doesn't have to be.

But she is the Big Guy in a band, possibly the Heart in the right story, not the Smart guy or the Leader.

Mental Mouse

Roland also has a secret which the Dead King would love to exploit. Even if Roland is at peace with his past, Neshie could probably use it to sow distrust or otherwise make trouble for the Alliance.

Shveiran

>>>The afternoon air was chilly and so Hanno called Light to him, letting it warm his bones as he had learned from the life of a Paladin long dead.
It came slower than it used to.

Damn, it's Hanno starting to lose his Name? Holy shit.

Anyway, great chapter. I'm glad we got to see what's going on in Hanno's mind. I was very put out by his decisions in the Arsenal, and I'm glad we got to see what he is thinking on the subject. I mean, I still disagree with him, but I understand him a little better.

There is a part of his reasoning that really stuck with me, though.

>>>Catherine Foundling did not have lines in the sand that she would not cross, if she thought it necessary. It did not erase her virtues, but neither must Hanno ever allow himself to forget that all that stood between the Black Queen and atrocities was the perception of need.

I was like... I mean, that's true, but...

... dude, before this Bone War business, wasn't your shtick to go around and murder those the Seraphim deemed deserving of the sentence?

That's like... literally the same. You are committing an atrocity (since I'm pretty sure Hanno considers murder to be an atrocity) because you perceived it as necessary (the Seraphim deemed it necessary and you deemed it necessary that their will be done).

I mean, really... weren't you about to do the same thing just now? You deemed it necessary not to compromise your principles, and I can sort of see your reasoning, but the consequences of it would have been atrocious and you were fine with it.

I don't mean "fine" like you didn't mind, but then again I doubt you think Catherine enjoys her own atrocities?

I think you are kind of lost, pal.

Which may be the problem with your Name and the point of the chapter, of course.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Hanno has failed to notice multiple inconsistencies in his beliefs, here. "It's not an atrocity if it was ordained by the Choir" is a band-aid, not a complete answer.

The problem is, there are multiple ways to reconcile these inconsistencies, and some of them are uh. Worse than others. Staying inconsistent is better than some of these options.

Andrew Smith

A big difference is that any one else is mortal and flawed and so can be wrong while the seraphim will always know what is JUST aka they can't be wrong. It is basically the same trust Traig has of the choir of mercy if they tell him to kill someone that it will 100% lead to less suffering and so is clearly the right thing to do.

Shveiran

Well, yes, of course.

But if one goes with that logic, the only people allowed to make a call are those that are not in fact making it because they have a choir whispering in their ears.

That is... rather narrow? I don't think a choir can even have multiple chosen at a given time, but even if I was wrong on the subject most heroes still don't interact with them... and heroes are a subset of the rare Named subset of the population to begin with.

It's... not a good parameter to use?

[Liliet](#)

And now we wait for Hanno to realize that!

Andrew Smith

A thought I had if he thinks that since he became the white knight because of his belief in Judgment and pretty sure most of the above is the whole belief in the will of the heavens to be correct(or at least in something bigger than yourself)

Some of the ways he could come to terms is that of below(aka the I know best) and so will cost him the name of white knight

Also yeah the whole choir are the only ones qualified is a bit narrow but it pretty much comes from the exact same place as the page quote And the person who wrote that is apparently called wise

Juff

Typo Thread:

for it was > for what it was
moved to Revenant > moved the Revenant
heave have > heave gave
them unmoving (should have comma, also unmoved is in the next

line, so maybe reword)
to most forms (missing verb. bypass?)
daggers but > daggers, but
loudly at (maybe of? about?)
stay hand > stay their hand
often deal > often dealt
drunk your > drunk on your
corpses way > corpses away
made it was > made – it was (also, maybe the simple way > simply
the way)
of young > of a young
Cordelia Hasenbach had and (extra space)
Knight why > Knight knew why
where he must stand (missing fullstop)
was there right > was the right
could be no turning (extra space)

Zee

Cat's name wants to pass judgement on Names and Hanno is losing his name.

I suspect Cat's new Name wants to make White Knight's and Black Knight's roles redundant for a while, starting the Terms and the Accords as the only handler for both Above and Below Names.

[Liliet](#)

Oof.

That would be... kind of bad, wouldn't it?

Like, that is decidedly not a long-term setup that Catherine can pass on to the next generation.

Zee

Unless her Name is a new groove for others to fill ...

[Liliet](#)

Too rare. Hierarch 2.0

superkeaton

This was a neat chapter. It reminded me of the discussion between Black and the Pilgrim. And it reflects the waxing of Cat's nascent Name with the waning of Hanno's.

jworks17

I think Cat is going to end up killing the white knight.

They are growing into archenemies, even if it isn't apparent. Cat is growing a name based on judgement and Hanno does not judge.

Hanno even makes it clear in this chapter that he thinks her judgment is wrong. What will happen when Cat comes into her name based on a Villain judging by her own accord, in the same place as the White Knight who lets the Heavens do the judgment he thinks himself unworthy to do? Nothing good.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree.

hakureireimu

Cat and Hanno being rivals would have made sense last book. This book, Cat has grown beyond the White Knight; notice how much broader her role is compared to his. Hanno no longer is big enough to be Cat's rival (only the combination of Hanno, Tariq, and Cordelia would).

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not really buying it. If only because both of them are top-tier story-wrangers, and are quite capable of telling that story to go fornicate itself.

hoser2

The Truce and Terms seem broken. The Red Axe did suicide by police to try to break it at a fissure. It seems possible for Hanno to realize that the Truce and the Terms can be fixed fairly easily.

It isn't just for imperfect rules to cause multiple countries to fall to the Dead King. The Truce and Terms as they stand contain a trap for temporal rulers. Hanno is himself somewhat responsible for not seeing and fixing it before it became a problem.

So I see solutions for Hanno to grow and the timing could have Hanno growing at a vital moment. I like that Hanno is becoming more dimensional and look forward to what EE makes of it.

[Liliet](#)

A trap?

Ernest Pereira

Usually, a PoV from the heroes or those who are otherwise nominally opposed to Cat in a given moment makes them sympathetic.

Not in Hanno's case. Not really.

Abrakadabra

Not YET. 😊

Black Spiral Dancer

Summary of all posts above mine: Idealism is stupid. Get over it.

P.s: All hail Anaxares the Hierarch!

XPMonster2121

As I was reading the comments I came to the conclusion that Hanno an argument to Hanno can be boiled down to two points.

Point 1, the choir of judgement isn't all knowing. Many commentors have said that they are so they should be the one to judge but we know they aren't. Anaxares was able to keep them occupied for a long time and according to Hanno he may even be winning ground. If judgement was all knowing this wouldn't have happened.

Point 2, judgement must be judging by something. What I mean is that to judge you must value something over something else. They seem to judge based on if something is right or wrong based on some standard that the gods above set. We don't even know what that standard is to my knowledge, so we can't come to the conclusion if it is right or wrong. What we do know is there are entities of similar standing that don't share the same values. I am not talking about the gods below or their servants because I don't believe that Hanno would accept them as a point against judgement. I am talking about Mercy, we know Mercy values the most good for the most people or the least evil. Mercy would commit an unjust action for a good end, I don't think Judgement would. I would use these two points to talk to Hanno.

laguz24

I disagree with you, judgment could see what was going on but was powerless to stop it due to their own nature and the nature of everyone involved. The hierarch would have judged the choir, Hanno would have attended the trial, and the choir of judgment would have judged. If not they wouldn't have gotten there in the first place. Also the criteria I believe that the choir of judgment uses when making a decision is, "was/is it just".

masterofbones

Sadly, Hanno doesn't see the mistake he made with Red Axe. He refused to talk. The lack of compromise wasn't the issue, it was the fact that he refused to even discuss the best course of action.

If you refuse to take part in the conversation, you are going to be left out. That's not talking behind your back, that's you plugging your ears.

nimelennar

Agreed, 100%. Had Hanno participated in the discussion with Cat, Cordelia, and the others, they may have been able to come up with a just compromise (e.g. having the Red Axe's punishment under the Truce and Terms be that she is stripped of the T&T's protection and handed over to Procer). Yes, the idea that they would only be discussing the punishment for "a hypothetical crime" would only be a fig leaf, but nothing they decided there would have bound WK to find RA guilty, or impose the sentence discussed, if the details revealed at trial turned out differently from expected. He could have participated by bending his ideals but not breaking them.

Instead, Cat and Cordelia had to find a way to make all of the various factions happy, without Hanno's input, but having to take into account what they expected his actions to be. Small wonder they came to a solution he didn't like.

masterofbones

I still don't get why they didn't just say that since Red Axe had openly admitted she signed in bad faith and broke the terms, she had no right to the protections given by the treaty.

[Liliet](#)

Because that's not how law works. A person insisting that they don't want to obey laws of the country they're currently in because they're an anarchist and all laws are unjust, won't get shot in the back of their head by police because it means laws don't apply to them then.

There's a difference between "law" and "treaty", but Hanno is locked into a maximalist view, there.

hoser2

Hanno has locked himself into various positions that don't work together, I agree. I would argue that that is his problem. But doesn't his position as judge of the "good" Named require him to exercise judgement? Is he really locked into a maximalist view?

I think there are multiple ways out, but they require him to change one of his currently fixed positions. If he figures it out, he will have grown into his promotion. If not, he will be another example of the Peter Principle.

When the treaty is based on people joining it voluntarily, is it really the same as the laws that are imposed involuntarily?

And making reference to who police kill and why is a contentious issue that I don't want to go anywhere near, but I remember the names Taylor and Floyd, just to mention a few.

[Liliet](#)

Okay yes bringing the police into it was a bad plan. I keep forgetting I don't live in a world where things work the way they should)=

Anyway, you have a point wrt treaty vs law, and Hanno should have had a discussion about Catherine about it. He should have done a lot more work in that situation period.

I've actually written up a longpost about it on reddit:

Zach

Hanno's position with the Red Axe thing isn't as unreasonable as it might seem at first glance. The main problem with "holding to principles shouldn't matter and you should only care about the outcome" is that, in reality, you can't perfectly predict the future. As a result, it sometimes makes sense to make some principles absolute, since you can always come up with some justification for doing things and will only know in hindsight whether something was truly necessary. Catherine has made this mistake often herself in the past and even acknowledges this now (for example she acknowledges that letting the Lone Swordsman go free and seeking an alliance with Keter were both wrong and completely inexcusable, and both were done out of a wrong belief that they were necessary as a means to an end).

The main thing that is wrong with Hanno's position is that he isn't appropriately weighing the evils of the alternative (and is also having the issue many Named have where they clearly value Named over regular people). People dying due to the Principate falling apart isn't somehow less evil than raising the Red Axe's corpse; it's just more abstract and not tied to a specific Named person who Hanno knows and sympathizes with. Hanno is also obviously letting his own personal judgement factor into how bad "raising the Red Axe's corpse" is; his reaction to Papenheim executing all those officers wasn't as strong because he didn't personally care about them in the same way he cared about a Named heroine.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, agreed.

IMHO,

> People dying due to the Principate falling apart

is something he didn't fully clue in was something the other option was about at all. Like Catherine pieced the implication of what would happen if they refused Cordelia from Kingfisher's tirade (he did not talk to Hanno like that because of mixed allegiances, which seems like an increasingly stupid reason to me btw) and her understanding of Cordelia's personality and incentives. Hanno has no idea about Cordelia's incentives and his assessment of her personality did not account for any of this at all.

Hanno's problem is that he's, to put it bluntly, incompetent to be an equivalent to a leader of a nation (heroes are allowed equal voice in the Grand Alliance to actual nations).

[Liliet](#)

(100% accurate on your first paragraph that's just truth from start to end)

[Liliet](#)

Hanno's mistake, imho, stemmed from him not being used to / not realizing just how broad, impactful and high level his duties are.

His mindset was "Cordelia can and should fix it without involving me". This is normally accurate for heroes interacting with rulers, because heroes just don't have that much authority / influence whereas rulers do. Heroes are not normally huge political roadblocks cutting off the entire course of action.

Hanno is though, as a top-ranking officer of the Grand Alliance. And he doesn't grok that, he doesn't full understand what that means. He admitted earlier in the book that he let most of their shared duties fall to Catherine, and I don't think he realizes that what duties he kept were STILL htat high level, and that in this particular case his job wasn't JUST that of a judge, it was that of a diplomat and politician as well, and he really did need to put effort into fixing things for Cordelia. Not because it's a judge's job. He was offended at that implication, and fairly. It's not a judge's job, but judge is not his only role!

And he just.. didn't really process that.

beleester

Even if Hanno regains his powers, I suspect he won't ever be able to trust them again – what if it's the Hierarch passing judgement instead of the Seraphim?

Frivolous

While we're waiting for the next chapter – I was rereading old chapters and came across this, from Calamities II, spoken by Rafaella, the Valiant Champion:

=====

"Life is adventure," the girl philosophized in broken tradertalk. "Kill many things back home. Much slaughter of other claimants."

=====

So basically Rafaella killed the other claimants to the Name of Valiant Champion, just as Catherine did the other claimants to the Name of Squire. I thought that maybe killing other claimants was something only villains did, but apparently not.

No one commented on it in the comments of Calamities II, but I bring it up now because I'm not sure now if heroes are actually that heroic, if they feel they have to go all Highlander on each other and murder the competition.

I wonder how many other living heroes killed fellow claimants to get their Name.

=====

In relation to that – Hanno says that he cannot judge, and he gave up all agency in the matter to the Seraphim before they fell silent. Catherine says that justification only matters to the just, and her standard shows the sword outweighing the crown.

Hanno must be moral at all times. He refuses to accept any compromise he feels is immoral, even if it endangers his long-term goals.

Catherine has no line she will not cross if it means achieving her long-term goals, except maybe the deaths or betrayal of the Woe and Callow.

Hanno is failing to live up to his own ideals. He is waning. His significance is not changing.

Catherine is living up to her own ideals, mostly. She's having trouble with Hakram and vice versa, but that's all. She is waxing and gaining greater significance.

If this were a competition, I'd say Evil is winning. I'm just not sure why. Is it because Evil is more dynamic and proactive? Is it because Good and Evil aren't that different from each other? Is it because Evil is smarter, or more flexible?

Mental Mouse

If anything its because Cat is smarter and more effective than Hanno is.

That said, "Evil is winning because it's more powerful [in any respect]" is an invitation for Providence to come in and upset the scales.

Liliet

Catherine ABSOLUTELY has lines she refuses to cross. In Book 4 we started a theme of "if I'm not seeing a way to make things better, I have to give up and abdicate". She's been grossed out by Black Knight's and Grey Pilgrim's actions since, and she has repeatedly taken steps to hold herself to higher standards than she did previously – see the Scribe recruitment thing. Catherine crosses a line, then crosses it back and redraws it so she doesn't have to again. And yes, technically that does mean that what Hanno is saying is true – but what Hanno is saying is true for Hanno himself as well when taken to an extreme. He severely underestimates how rigid Cat's lines really are.

Wrt Raphaella, one version I can't rule out is that "much slaughter of other claimants" might refer to competitions a la hunting in the Brocelian – it was happening around her, but she wasn't the one doing the killing.

Sinead

On the subject of Cat's redefining of boundaries, I have to say that while it would need to be refined as a published story (and possibly broken into two books), I really liked Book 4 in the context of the series themes. It gave Cat the means to go Full Traditional Evil and have a Redemption = no rest for the wicked and change her course. She really holds her lines now (even if they form a shape that focuses on systemic goals over Justice) because she witnessed first hand what the end results of Traditional Evil is. Her lines are solid, just not where Hanno thinks they should be.

Liliet

mm!

Shveiran

WRT Rafella, I don't really see anything surprising in the idea that claimant to a Name of the Champion line got into honor duels to fix the issue, either. This **is** Levnat we are talking about.

I also don't think that's quite enough to see that this is either standard or common or that there are no difference between Good and Evil, so it is a very minor point.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah, both possibilities seem equally plausible AND don't seem to reflect much on Good as a whole.

308924810a

So, I'm not even sure that Evil Names necessarily have to slaughter the other Claimants, they just need to win out over them: See Robber's description of the competition between goblins to figure out which of them would join the legions, where at first they're killing each other, then Robber gets disgusted with that and sets up a game where they bet the outcome. That sounds a lot like someone who isn't allowed to say they're Named describing their conflict with other Claimants as a hint. Or maybe like the sort of event that is defined by the same stories as the conflict between claimants, either creating those stories, or being created by the influence those stories have on probability.

if the important factor that people win out over the other claimants, there may or may not be a requirement to win out over others in a competition with a discrete end point. But regardless of the specific mechanics I bet some Claimants for Chancellor have won by means of politically outmaneuvering foes without necessarily killing them.

Some Proceran names might be decided by competitions of piety, or a bet, or a joust, or a formal melee, or by a group of people setting out on a particular quest to retrieve something, defeat a specific evil, or bring down a particular threat, and only one succeeding(whether the others die or return in disgrace). While Levantine Names might also be decided by a quest in the above format, or by competition to see who can bring down the biggest monster or survive the harshest conditions, or loot the most wealth(from ancient tombs? from Procer?)(for the Brigand Names), or by Colosseum-style games in which only one survives, regardless of whether they were killed by other Claimants, Levante is unstructured/adventurer-style about their heroism enough that I could even imagine them doing the same sort of free-for-all-death-match-unless-the-claimants-choose-rules-for-themselves.

But I think based on her Domain(a colosseum that can isolate those fighting in it from the world and provide her an advantage), she probably killed the other Claimants for her name in colosseum combat.

308924810a

edits:

- 1) free-for-all deathmatch-unless-the-claimants-choose-rules-for-themselves that happens in Praes.
- 2) But I think based on the Valiant Champion's Domain

Mental Mouse

> Yet Cordelia Hasenbach had, once, been on the verge of being Named. The Heavens themselves had measured her being and not found it wanting.

It seems that Hanno doesn't know that Cordelia was offered Names from *both* sides. And he appears to share the common misconception about where Names come from.

laguz24

No, she had the base for a name which is the same for both above and below which is "the belief that they are right and the will to see it done." It just favored above over below, I'm pretty sure if more heroes rejected their names at first, below would offer them one, and vice versa.

Chapter 63: Dynamism

"Not quite what I imagine my father meant, when he said I should find a talent that would set me apart from my brothers."

– Basileus Ioannes Trakas of Nicae, the Patricide

"Rocks," Masego said, wrinkling his nose. "Bogs. More rocks."

He turned to glance at me, a gesture he rarely bothered with these days.

"Why is it that you want to reconquer these lands again?"

At least the Princess of Hainaut wasn't there, as I suspected she would have been less than enchanted by Zeze's stark description

of her principality. He wasn't wrong, mind you. I'd visited the great valley – in reality more like a dozen or so smaller valleys whose boundaries melded into each other's – before but it'd been closer to the capital, through the west and the heartlands. There was a reason the eastern parts of the great valley were more lightly settled than the rest: they were a damned dreary and inhospitable place. No doubt the Dead King had worsened things by killing everything that crawled or grew in the region, but somehow I doubted there'd been all that much to kill in the first place.

"Strategic reasons," I replied.

It wasn't like the fields and mines of Hainaut were going to turn the tide of the fight against Keter, even if we got both in a usable state again. Which we wouldn't, as I didn't expect there'd be any people moving back into the highlands aside from soldiers and camp followers after we took back the grounds. It was mostly the advantage of holding the shore against the dead instead of our defensive line in the lowlands that was the attraction, one made even more appealing by the Gigantes offer to set down great wards along the shoreline to keep out the undead.

"You'd think forcing people to live here would lower morale, not improve it," Masego muttered.

"Says the Wastelander," I snorted back.

The principality of Hainaut might not be a green garden of luxury, but at least it wasn't filled with murderous monsters and afflicted with weather that changed on a whim. Hierophant turned to look at me in genuine surprise, as if he could not quite believe what he'd just heard.

"The Wasteland has all the best libraries," he reminded me.

"People don't usually live in those, Zeze," I pointed out.

"I know," Hierophant sadly replied. "I asked."

It said a lot about him that I had no trouble believing that. I was just lucky Warlock must have talked him out of asking the Sahelians, back in the day. And he must have, for Masego would have asked on his own and I had absolutely no doubt that Tasia Sahelian would have given Zeze access to the infamous Wolof spell repositories for the cheap, cheap price of marrying her only daughter. My blind friend shifted about, his shining glass eyes turning in their sockets and studying something behind him before returning.

"Company?" I asked.

"The Grey Pilgrim has it-"

There was a soft flash of Light, gone in a heartbeat, and the air filled with the scent of incinerated flesh. Ghoul, probably, if it could still smell like that. Skeletons had their own distinctive stink when burnt.

"- handled," Masego finished. "Interesting. I do believe he changes the properties he assigns Light nearly at will, Catherine. It's not unheard of, but that sheer verisimilitude certainly is."

"Having angels around for a few decades will let you pick up all sorts of tricks, I imagine," I shrugged.

The Peregrine's tread was light, but he wasn't trying to hide as he made his way up the rocky path to join us. That made it easy to pick on, for people with senses like ours.

"Light is the divine facet of faith," Tariq Fleetfoot mildly said as he came to stand by our sides. "It has few limits save those that mortal hands impose on it."

Masego look highly interested.

"So if I obtained fae hands in sufficient amounts-"

"You'd still be missing the faith," I interrupted, hoping to distract him before he gave offence.

Back when we'd been younger, tripping him over small details had usually been enough to distract him.

"It wouldn't be hard to insert into a captured fae, Catherine," Masego chided me. "It's not fundamentally different from any other kind of delusion."

I might have made a small tactical mistake there, I mentally conceded. Tariq cleared his throat, but though he did not look amused he didn't look all that angry either. Masego glanced at him through the dark eyecloth, entirely unabashed.

"Mathematically speaking, the chances of *your* particular interpretation of the Gods Above being correct of all-"

I cleared my throat. I did it twice as loud, when he kept trying to kindly explain to Tariq that basic applications of mathematics indicated that his entire life was probably a lie.

"How are the preparations going, Hierophant?" I asked.

He cocked his head to the side, burning eyes swivelling about to study the distance.

"Indrani is nearly done installing the columns," he said. "We'll be ready to proceed with the Respite ritual in about a quarter hour."

"I'll leave you to it then," I said. "I know you like to make sure the alignments are as precise as possible."

He smiled happily at me, which even now was enough to make me feel a little guilty.

"I appreciate it," Masego said, then glanced at the Pilgrim.

He nodded at the man.

"*Comparative Numerics*, by Marcellus the Elder," Hierophant suggested. "It's all quite simple, really, when you consider the-"

"I think I see 'Drani spinning a pillar about," I lightly interrupted.

Eyebrows widening in dismay, the man who even without magic to call on remained one of the finest mages in Calernia stomped away to prevent his partner from 'misaligning the constrictive forces'. His grumbling wafted up to us on the breeze even when he disappeared behind the rocks below.

"Quite a bracing young man," Tariq evenly said.

I winced.

"He means no harm," I said.

"If I believed he did, we would be having a very different conversation," the Peregrine said. "I've no qualms entertaining doubts, Catherine. Indeed, in different circumstances I suspect an evening talking with the Hierophant would make for fascinating conversation."

He'd not said 'safe' or 'religiously acceptable in any way', so I'd give him that.

"But," I said.

"But at the moment, perhaps a reminder that a certain moderation of words is in order would not go amiss," Tariq gently suggested. "Others of faith might have more of a temper, and I do believe he's been in three screaming matches with the Blessed Artificer since he arrived."

"I'll speak with him," I sighed. "But you know the Blessed Artificer situation isn't his fault alone, or entirely driven by either's character."

Their Names were clearly nudging them forward there, turning every small irritation into a slight and every disagreement into an argument. The fundamental nature of the Roles behind them were too opposed for there to be any hope of cordiality there: the Hierophant was a vivisector of all things divine, while the Blessed Artificer forged in what the Peregrine himself had called 'the divine facet of faith'.

"I am aware," Tariq said. "I have known rivals as well, Catherine, and not forgot the taste of it – and never did the enmity between my Bestowal and another's run as deep as it does between those two."

I glanced at him with interest.

"Anyone I'd have heard about?" I asked.

"They died," the Peregrine serenely said, "long before you were born."

Yeah, I just bet they did. It was good, now and then, to be reminded that the wrinkly old man in the grey robes had a body count in Named probably rivalling that of the Calamities. I'd yet to see a Revenant manage more than to mildly inconvenience the Grey Pilgrim, and it sure as Hells wasn't for lack of trying. My gaze drifted downwards, following the curve of the rocky slope. We'd left the Twilight Ways in the driest part of this little mess of bogs, as the ritual would need solid grounding, but the marshlands were spread out in every direction with only a few hills rising from them on occasion in mounds of mud and rock. The bog water was foul-smelling and filthy, but the Concocter had already confirmed it'd not been poisoned or cursed so the worse we'd had to deal with was a few bands of undead.

The entire region seemed to be crawling with them, which boded ill for the Prince of Hannover's army. A decisive victory at Juvelun wouldn't have left this many warbands out and about, so it was starting to look like Keter had bled the Iron Prince raw for that little town. Worse, it would have salvaged large enough a force that Prince Klaus would have to handle it before linking up with my incoming reinforcements. And worse than worse was that we still had little idea of where the Iron Prince's host was, what kind of a force it was facing and exactly where the missing Luciennerie army would be relative to us, Papenheim or whoever the Hells it was he was scrapping with.

Time was of the essence if I wanted to rescue an army instead of broken remnant. Fortunately, Masego was finally back on the front at my side and he'd provided a solution for our current troubles. He called it a 'respite' ritual, though the name was catchy enough I figured he probably wasn't the one to have come up with it. It was that very ritual that we'd crossed back into Creation

to enact, with as light a presence as we dared. Only Named had come, all of them save Adjutant and our two youths.

Most our finest killers were out and about, combing through the mire to make sure that nothing snuck up on us and interrupted the ritual, but we'd clearly draw some enemy attention. Undead were starting to converge, which meant we needed to hurry. Thankfully, we were nearly ready. Roland had already sent word that the secondary arrays were ready – and Masego hadn't even felt the need to check on his work afterwards, which had nearly seen me gape – and now that Indrani had finished setting up the seventh ring of pillars on our little hill there was not much left to do but the sorcery itself.

Hierophant had come loaded with artefacts that were effectively just receptacles filled with magic he could wrest for that purpose, but just in case I'd assigned the Summoner to stay at his side. We were fencing with rituals against Trismegistus himself, no matter how certain Masego was of his formulas I wanted him to have an additional source of magic at hand. I'd not phrased it to the Summoner that way of course. He was witnessing the Hierophant's work personally so he could give me his opinion on it later, though of course I'd requested that if something went amok he *lend* his magic to my court mage to solve the trouble.

It was known in the right circles I'd been Queen of Winter once upon a time, he really should have known better than not to look twice at that phrasing.

"Eastern winds, when will you blow

And return my love to me?

His lack falls like winter snow,

Cruel torment made decree."

The Rapacious Troubadour did have a lovely voice for an unrepentant monster, even when it was put to use singing horrid noble crap from back home. Archer's inexplicable fondness for the Lay of Lothian's Passing, a traditional ballad about the rise and fall of the love of Sir Lothian and his ladylove Eveline, remained a genuine puzzle to me even after years of knowing her. Mind you, it was a common enough personality defect back in Callow as well. The only reason I'd ever sat through the renditions of it at summer fairs had been that there were some pretty nifty fight scenes against Praesi – under Black, singers had prudently changed the word to 'enemy' instead – and Baroness Fallon, the scheming noblewoman trying to trick Lothian into marriage.

"You ever notice how it's always barons and dukes that go bad in stories, but almost never counts?" I mused.

That was unfair, as in my experience most nobles were terrible regardless of their relative position of their rung in the social ladder.

"Baronial titles are at the bottom of the Callowan peerage, I believe," Tariq said, "while ducal ones are beneath only royalty. I expect both of those positions tend to... excite ambition."

Technically there were knights and lords beneath barons, but I got his point. Neither of those kinds of lesser nobles tended to ever be trouble for anyone aside from the greater nobles they were sworn to.

"I expect the Dukes of Liesse aren't going to be trouble for my successors at least," I darkly muttered. "So there's that."

Tariq, to my surprise, looked amused for a heartbeat before mastering himself.

"I know you care little for my opinion in this, and rightfully so," the Grey Pilgrim said, "but your choice of successor is to be commended, Queen Catherine. Vivienne Dartwick will make an exceptional queen."

I shot him a curious look. Tariq's reluctance to be in the vicinity of anything even remotely akin to rule meant that he usually kept his piece when it came to this sort of thing – for example, I suspected he would very much prefer Rozala Malanza reign over Procer rather than Cordelia Hasenbach – so I was surprised he'd even admit to having an opinion on the matter of Callowan succession.

"She has the right qualities," I warily agreed.

"And she will chase your shadow for the rest of her life, scouring her clean of the weaknesses that many crowned heads accrue," the Pilgrim said. "Unlike many before her, I doubt she will ever cease to strive her utmost to do good: doing so would be a betrayal of not only herself but the trust you extended her."

My lips thinned and I looked away. It wasn't that I was unaware that Vivienne and I had a complicated relationship, or that it pulled at us both in ways that were usually to our betterment – if not necessarily through healthy means. To have the darker aspects of that bond dragged out in the light of day by a man who might be an ally but was definitely not a friend was not a pleasant experience. The Grey Pilgrim's eyes had always seen too much for comfort.

*"Lothian strove and mighty slew,
A score wicked enemies
Seven lords he cut in two
And settled great enmities."*

Poor dumb Lothian. When intriguing baronesses trying to get your lands offered to let you repay your family debts by valour on the battlefield, they weren't actually trying to let you off – they were just baiting you into getting in over your head so they could bail you out and leverage you with a life debt on top of the rest. I'd occasionally wondered over the years if the enduring popularity of the ballad – and play, there were like ten different versions of the story including the one in inexplicable Old Miezan – in Callow was due to the cultural resonance of a martial noble covered in glory out east getting fucked over by a more high-ranking one the moment he returned to the kingdom.

For all that we deservedly complained about the Praesi and the Procerans, my people had always been capable of being terrible to each other without anyone else's help.

"I fear I have given offence," the Grey Pilgrim finally spoke into the silence.

"No," I said. "Only discomfort. And not unearned, in the greater scheme of things."

There was a pregnant pause.

"I sometimes forget that your Woe love each other," Tariq admitted. "It is unusual, in a band of villains. Yet these are changing times. I meant my words as a compliment, however short of that they might have fallen. You found a protector for your home, and set her on a path that promises distinction."

"Then I will endeavour to remember your words as they were meant," I said.

There, and to think some people said I wasn't diplomatic. The old man ruefully smiled.

"It is a bad habit," the Pilgrim admitted.

Thinking the worse of us? It was, and often tiring to deal with, but he was hardly the worst of his kind when it came to that particular sin. That he faced and fought it already made him among the finest of their number when it came to address it, so I would not whine. Besides, I held no illusions about the truth of villainy on Calernia. Though in time it might be sanitized, turned into something worth embracing, at the moment it was the side that counted cannibals and rapists among its ranks. I would

not moan about the distrust of villains when I hardly trusted any of them myself. As a woman of refined tastes, I preferred my hypocrisies to be at least somewhat deniable.

"There are worse to have," I said. "I've dabbled in a few myself, Peregrine."

"The mistaken comparisons to others I have known is certainly one such habit," the old man said, "but as it happens I meant another. I was leading up to making a request, you see. Yet, as young Indrani once made clear to me, it is not for me to pull and prod at you: straightforward honesty will always fetch better result."

Huh, I thought, glancing from the corner of my eye. When exactly was it that those two had had that purported conversation? I didn't mind, but Archer had never mentioned it to me.

"I like to think so," I finally said, a little taken aback. "I'm listening, Pilgrim, though I make no promises."

As far as I was concerned, Razin and Aquiline were once more his problem. I'd only agreed to keep an eye on them as a temporary favour, not to forever be their guardian devil. They were way too much of a headache for me to be inclined to renew that promise anyway.

"I would request that you keep your distance from the White Knight, when our armies are joined," Tariq said.

I frowned. This again? I'd thought that the old snickering rumours about Hanno and I being more than simply friendly were dead and buried. Hells, we weren't even friendly anymore.

"I've told you before that--"

"And I believe you," the Grey Pilgrim calmly interrupted. "This is unrelated, Catherine. Before I left the army, I glimpsed in the Sword of Judgement the beginnings of a crisis of faith."

I fixed the old man with a steady look.

"This not the time for the White Knight to stumble," I bluntly said.

Even when he disagreed with me, even when we did not get along, his participation to the Truce and Terms alone leant it an amount of legitimacy that we badly needed. I wasn't going to pretend that one of the first things we hammered into heroes hesitating to sign up was 'the Sword of Judgement is part of this'.

"On that we must disagree," the Pilgrim frankly said. "This is *precisely* the right time for the White Knight to stumble."

I blinked. Right, fucking hero logic. It had all the hallmarks of madness, except for the part where it worked.

"You're going to have to walk me through that one," I admitted. "In my experience, when one of yours doubts they either die or lose their Name."

"We are all tested, sooner or later," Tariq said. "Often this begins with a loss of potency, brought about by doubt or fear, but should we rise to meet that test we do not simply resume what we were: we rise *above* it."

My eyes narrowed. That came uncomfortably close to 'iron sharpens iron' in some ways, which made it all the more distressing coming from the eldest living hero on Calernia. Mind you the test as he described it wouldn't necessarily be another person, which in the central philosophy of the Praesi highborn it always was. To the old guard of the Wasteland, even fighting off an invasion was just a setting for another duel against your rivals.

"I'm not too clear on what it is that Hanno has to doubt," I frankly said. "He's been mostly getting his way, except when it'd cost too much to others if he did. He's an intelligent man and reasonable enough for one of your lot, so he shouldn't be expecting much more of us wicked sinners."

"His thoughts are his own, and not mine to divulge," the Pilgrim said, "yet I will speak to my own. Hanno of Arwad is split between the man he wants to be and the man fate demands he should be."

That did not sound like a particularly pleasant place to be in. I stayed silent, waiting for Tariq to elaborate, and he did not disappoint.

"He is the Sword of Judgement by choice," the Grey Pilgrim said, "but he is the White Knight through the workings of fate."

"There's not supposed to be a difference between the two," I pointed out.

"Yet there is," the old man said. "The Sword of Judgement is growing increasingly unable to stomach the deals the White Knight has been forced to make to ensure that we survive this war. And soon that disparity will come to a head."

I studied him for a bit, parsing his words. By 'Sword of Judgement' I figured he was actually referring to Hanno's comfortable embrace of his role as the designated hatchetman of the Seraphim. It did tend to be what he defaulted to being when in conflict, I'd noticed, even now that Judgement had grown quiet. What was meant by 'White Knight', though, was a little more nebulous to my eye.

"Hanno the man who believes in Judgement," I tried, "and Hanno the man who is an officer of the Grand Alliance."

The Pilgrim gently smiled at me.

"The latter is a mortal tie, Catherine," he said. "It would not bind him. It is, rather, Hanno the man who has sworn his faith to the Seraphim and Hanno the man who leads the heroes of our age."

"I will not mistrust, said she,

And never shall I despair

Tenderness will set me free,

To lovers the world is fair."

I mulled that over a while. Tariq was, in essence, telling me that the while Hanno might have been a good fit for the Name of White Knight in certain circumstances they were not the current ones. *He fits the Name but not the Role*, I tried out. *At least not the Role the war has forced on him*. He commanded obedience, through charisma and respect, but I could see how an argument could be made that Hanno didn't particularly want to be in charge of heroes, or really of anything at all. He tended to see leadership as a burden, and only took it up when he perceived it at as his duty to do so. Which, given that this war was vaguely crusade-shaped and he was the White Knight, must have been a lot more often than he was comfortable with.

Throw in the Hierarch silencing the entire Choir of Judgement for what was, as far as I knew, the first time in recorded Calernian history? I could see why Hanno was having some troubles coming to terms with who he was turning into. Which tended to be a costly kind of doubt, for Named.

Our time at the Arsenal looks different seen through those eyes, I thought. What I'd seen as inflexibility and even obstructionism on his part took instead the shape of the White Knight considering the troubles in the Highest Assembly as a Cordelia's sphere of trouble to deal with and not for him to meddle in, much like the Red Axe had been his sphere of responsibility where we should not have trespassed. That seemed overly simplistic to me, but then I was in a pretty unique situation wasn't I? I'd accumulated influence until I'd come to sit on every council as both Queen of Callow and representative for the villains. I'd not really seen a difference because to me there really wasn't.

Frankly, I still thought he was wrong. The moment the Red Axe had tried to kill a Proceran prince of the blood it had become problem that involved more than just heroes whether he liked it or not. But seen from that perspective, both Cordelia and I would have overreached and meddled in his sphere when he'd been

scrupulously careful about never touching ours. *And I just bet if things had gotten bad after we obeyed those invisible lines and Hasenbach had said she needed his help, he would have given it without hesitation,* I ruefully thought. Because he would have been invited to step beyond his sphere, while on the other hand the First Prince and I had simply worked around him to get what we needed.

It was that fucking hero mindset, I silently cursed. He didn't see something like the rebellious whispers in the Assembly as a real problem, because in his experience if he kept doing the right thing and trouble came then continuing to do the right thing would get him through that as well. Why compromise and dirty his principles, when the moment it all went to shit he could instead make an inspiring speech to the rebels and Creation would bend over backwards for it to work? There were godsdamned good reasons I was still trying to keep Named from being able to be rulers, even if my failure there was all but writ in the stars. There'd been blind spots all around, I finally admitted to myself, and they'd neatly fit into our worst expectations of each other.

Merciless Gods but that felt like something the Intercessor would have arranged. Surely even she couldn't manipulate us this precisely, though. Right? I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. It was always the necessary degree of paranoia that was difficult to gauge with the Wandering Bard, not whether or not it was necessary at all.

"All right," I said. "Say I buy that. What does it get the Heavens for their favourite knight to doubt his place in Creation?"

"Times are changing," Tariq softly said. "And while I have grown distressed by the echo of truth there has been to the words of your once-teacher, I will not shy away from the truth: though it can be said that Good triumphed in the Age of Wonders, in this dawning Age of Order is it Evil that has seized the lead."

"It doesn't have to be a competition," I began, then bit my tongue.

I sighed.

"It does," I admitted. "It does have to be competition, that's how we were made. But it doesn't have to be the kind of wars it's turned into, Tariq. The ones that shatter cities and break nations. It can be made, if not civil, then at least civilized."

"I do not know if I believe that," the Grey Pilgrim quietly replied.

I winced at the blunt admission.

"But I recognize that *you* believe it," Tariq Fleetfoot continued. "And in that I can put my trust. The truth is, Catherine, that I am an old man. Set in my ways. And I will try to change them to better ones, so long as there is breath yet left in this carcass, but I have fought Evil for many years and it has taken its toll. I am not certain there would be a place for someone like me, in the world you seek to make."

The Grey Pilgrim mirthlessly smiled.

"That is, in a sense, the highest compliment I can pay your dream," the Peregrine said. "But I will not be alone in this, Black Queen. I *am* not alone in this. Consider Hanno of Arwad, the man as you know him, and tell me that if he had been born two centuries past he would have been the kind of hero we would still raise shrines to."

"He would have made mincemeat of most Old Tyrants," I agreed. "Your point?"

"That there are no longer Old Tyrants to fight," the Grey Pilgrim honestly replied. "And so we must change with the times, or become relics. His struggle is not his alone, Catherine. We must, all of us, reconcile the wild heroics of my youth to what would be allowed in the world to come – as young Hanno must now reconcile the unalloyed purpose the Seraphim taught him and the demands made of a White Knight in a greying world."

"You think he's going to set the path," I slowly said. "Carve the groove others will flow into."

"I do," Tariq said. "And so I ask you to leave him to his test, that he might find an answer that is his and his alone."

Which meant, beyond the all the flowery talk, that he didn't want me getting my hands anywhere near Hanno while he transitioned into... whatever it was that lay ahead. I doubted it'd be a new Name, but perhaps a second flowering of his current one was not out of the question. I forced myself to step out of my own perspective and consider what was being asked of me. Meddling in Hanno's 'test', if he was really undergoing such a thing, could potentially yield advantages for me. It seemed possible to at least nudge him in a direction that wasn't adversarial to my own. On the other hand, wasn't that very kind of meddling something providence was bound to punish me over? Villains that thought they were the cleverest thing since Traitorous tended to end up in some pit or another, one that they'd even dug themselves most of the time.

It'd be damned easy to misstep and become the proverbial devil on Hanno's shoulder, or worse the enemy he defined himself through. It might come to that anyway, I honestly admitted to myself. We were both prominent Named as well as representatives of a larger

amount of Named. Yet so long as the enmity was one of means and ideals rather than, you know, demons and calling down Choirs I could deal with it. And I was honestly inclined to believe that the less I was involved the friendlier the end result would be: I doubted the Heavens would take kindly to my meddling with the tempering of their designated champion. If he was truly that, I reminded myself. I would not take the Grey Pilgrim's opinions as facts, no matter how wizened and wise the old man was.

"Our duties will still see us working together," I eventually said.

It was tacitly accepting his request, and neither of us pretended otherwise. Aside from all other considerations, antagonizing the Peregrine over something he believed to be this important would have been a blunder.

"Adjacency," the Grey Pilgrim replied, "is not intrusion."

Fair enough. So long as I didn't actively meddle, he wouldn't consider it meddling. Pretty fair terms, though admittedly these days Tariq wasn't in a position to ask much of me that I didn't want to give.

"I'll look forward to the ending, then," I said.

"So will I," the Peregrine smiled. "I expect that light will burn bright, Black Queen, and come just when the night has grown darkest."

That old trick again, huh? Kairos had liked to always have a fresh enemy to make, but Tariq had a favoured trick of his own: to keep a journey ongoing and undefined, so that providence might lead it to end at precisely the right time. It'd bit him in the ass at the Graveyard, but the old man was pretty much the patron saint of timely arrivals so I could see how leaning into that groove would have paid off for him over the years. That Hanno's journey here would be a metaphorical one wouldn't matter, as far as the Pilgrim was concerned.

Fate, to his kind, was a book writ from ending to start.

It was not an answer I shared. *Fate is a tug of war*, I'd once heard a madman say, and for all that madness he had not been wrong. By our own hands we would make or break this world, and if either gods or Gods disagreed then let them bite their tongue bloody.

"Let me die then, Lothian said

I choose doom, end in honour

Many seasons my heart bled

As my oath kept me from her."

The song, beautifully played as it had been, ended abruptly after the last note preceding Sir Lothian's getting himself killed in battle before he was forced to marry Baroness Fallon. The Rapacious Troubadour, like us, had felt the power gathering. Below us sorcery flared as at last began the ritual we'd been awaiting. Our respite. Chords of magic, thick and burning, began to flow along the trajectory the columns had set as the smell of ozone filled the air and a dim pressure began to mount. The dead god on his throne in Keter had blinded us, here in Hainaut, but his hollow miracles were not beyond us.

Hierophant laughed, exulting as the ritual took, and ripped open an eye in the sky.

nick012000

Now I'm wondering what exactly this ritual was supposed to do. Reopen the area to scrying rituals? That's useful, but it's not exactly a game-winning trump card, is it?

Storm

Except it very much is. Putting aside that this is just one of several contingencies, reestablishing scrying will allow them to coordinate with the other army, and outmaneuver the dead armies wandering about. Remember how Kairos was as able to dance circles around two massive coalition armies in book 5 with the power of scrying? This helps make Cat's ambush ambush story feasible.

Sir Nil

Don't look down on the benefits of modern communication in warfare, though if I had to hazard a guess, the ritual was called Respite, which I feel could mean setting up a zone where DK's magic won't work, including his necromancy and scry blocking. So they could have just set up a huge safe zone in the middle of DK territory.

dadycool

Cat: Where are you?

Iron Prince: We were (some place) two weeks ago.

Cat: Yeah, but where are you now?

Iron Prince: We were on our way north two weeks ago.

shikkarasu

Too Crows-damned real.

Shveiran

This is funny, but from a practical stand-point, they don't need to scry him to have a conversation: Hierophant has proven before that he can scry an area, and the Iron Prince will have mages and the Witch of the West to assist with that. They can take an aerial survey and check the terrain, removing the issue of giving precise directions entirely.

Sylfa

Even if they couldn't get anything but words through it would be way more useful than that.

How many troops remain, are you marching or dug in, how many miles did you march each day and in what direction, did you go around the mountain to the south or north on day 4, etc.

Cat has maps and knows how far an army could march in a day, even just "2 weeks north" would give her a much more accurate position than you're assuming, then she sends out a team of heroes and let providence take them the last bit of the way.

But scrying is a way to look and hear remotely, it's why you need a mage on either side so they can scry each other to have a discussion. You can use that to get more than just audio, for instance they both know where they are so they can point it out on a map. Assuming they can't just scout them out directly instead.

nimelennar

When, and I quote, "Time was of the essence if I wanted to rescue an army instead of broken remnant," finding out exactly where that army is may well be the game-winning trump card.

[Daniel](#)

Perhaps something like a reconnaissance satellite, giving them an overview of the entire strategic situation? Not a game winning trump card, but really really useful in a war of this scale.

Stormblessed

The interesting thing about these later chapter, this book as a whole, and the context this chapter gives to earlier chapters in this book, is that for what feels like the first time in the series, neither side is right. For a very very long time,

especially because we look through Cat's eyes, that Cat's philosophies are the "correct" ones. But I'm pleased that finally in this book (and the last to an extent) we've reached a point where Good isn't Stupid or made of Straw.

[sengachi](#)

Evil got forged in the fires of the Age of Wonders. It chewed up Dread Emperors and Warlocks and Chancellors for fuel until what came out was the Calamities. A more rational, thoughtful form of Evil walked out of that furnace and it changed the world.

Cat just put Good through the same furnace. Learn the same lessons Evil did and improve what you are ... or perish.

[Liliet](#)

Well, finally we reached the point where it's being made explicit that Good isn't Stupid or made of Straw. It hasn't been for a long time.

Even William had a point in retrospect, when you look at the consequences the Praesi occupation ended up wrecking before being withdrawn. He was still terrible, but he was more right than Cat had been willing to credit him for at the time.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yes, Tariq made excellent points during the Tenth Crusade, and from his point of view he was completely justified. If a crusader was the protagonist of the story, we would have cheered him and looked down on Cat.

[Liliet](#)

I still like to think I wouldn't have but it would be more of an academic exercise of the "I fully understand why the side I cheer for makes the decisions it does but I still feel like it's a tragedy that everyone can't just get along".

...and tbh at the point where Cat started actively suing for peace I do think I'd be arguing that it should be accepted and any reason why it isn't is a Tragic Fatal Flaw in "our" side.

[Liliet](#)

(i missed a word)

(of the "I fully understand why the side I cheer for makes the decisions it does but I still feel like it's a tragedy that everyone can't just get along" sort)

Clint

I'd imagine the Heroes tell less amusing stories about Dread Emperor Irritant, and the tens of thousands of innocents who died each time the Heroes agreed to a truce with the shoemaker who spoke so humbly about peace.

[Liliet](#)

Mm.

hakureireimu

Who is this "we"? Speak for yourself.

Salt

We almost certainly would have. If this was a Heroic Protagonist oriented story, the background buildup and context wouldn't have been all about Catherine Foundling and her motivations.

It would've been several books about a younger Pilgrim compromising with quite literally dozens upon dozens of Villains who said exactly the same things that Catherine did, initially behaved as reasonably as she did, with the exact same motivations, and him getting stabbed in the back every single time.

The interludes wouldn't have been about humanizing the Calamities so much as humanizing the Saint, with the background stories being about how she lived her entire life fighting battles as brutal as the war on Keter, eventually building up into "no truce with the enemy" in her old age after killing hundreds of Villains who would routinely mass murder, torture, and rape.

In a Heroic protagonist centered story, Cat would've initially been just one more in a very long line of Villains claiming to be working for some greater good, and most of the initial comments would've been angrily ranting about how frustratingly stupid it is for Tariq to even consider trusting yet another Villain, after the last 37 stabbed him in the back.

[Jairo Lugilde](#)

I love this comment

Crash

The issue with William was never that he didn't have a point. It's how he went about it and how he justified his point.

Calling orcs ruthless beasts and rapists when you really mean "Callowans paid a heavy price during occupation" isn't a good way to have people believe (in) you.

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh that's 100% true.

Dread Emperor Irritant I

"Not quite what I imagine my father meant, when he said I should find a talent that would set me apart from my brothers."

– BASILEUS IOANNES TRAKAS OF NICAE, Voter

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Insanenoodlyguy

"Times are changing," Tariq softly said. "And while I have grown distressed by the echo of truth there has been to the words of your once-teacher, I will not shy away from the truth: though it can be said that Worm triumphed in the Age of Voting, in this dawning Age of Boosting is it A Practical Guide to Evil that has seized the lead."

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Miles

Hey neat, there's one in the top 5 that's new to me.

With an author named cliffhanger, well this should be good, or at least amusing in badness.

nimelennar

Which one is this? I can't seem to find anything on TWF by an author named "Cliffhanger." Certainly none of the top 5.

[*Liliet*](#)

Can you not? Please?

There was a period of time when people were just writing "vote!" or "boost!" and that was so nice

[*origamiflame*](#)

Honestly I'm not sure why you're so against it. It achieves the same purpose in the end, and some have fun with it right?

[*Liliet*](#)

Because I didnt immediately process what it was and read it and then seeing the modified into LOLJOKE lines is like biting into a donut and finding barf inside.

ruduen

Huh. I'll be honest, I didn't expect the Interludes to end until they hit the climax of this particular sequences of events. Still, it's good to have confirmation that someone else recognizes what's happening to Hanno's Name.

I do wonder what would happen if Cat ends up in a position where she's force to influence his decisions – through requiring action of some type, rather than because she wants to influence his name. I wonder if that's something the Heroes would hold against her.

Do the TopWebFiction thing!

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/boost>

dadycool

Um,...did Masego just start cackling as his mad experiment went exactly as he expected it to? Can we please see it as literally anything else? I don't want another experiment to turn on him, especially with DK's involvement.

No, Cat, you can't go poking a cocoon to try and make a carnivorous butterfly. You know damn well that it would only bite you later.

caoimhinh

Masego has a tendency to cackle like a madman when his grand and flashy rituals activate, remember? He has done that ever since Book 2.

There are a few occasions it happened. Sometimes it's just him grinning wildly.

But for me, one deserving particular notice is the first time it happened, all the way back in Book 2 chapter 31:

"Lines of flame rose from the ground into the sky from all over the city, too numerous to count. The threads of fire linked into a single point high above the demon and I finally understood what Masego had been doing. He'd broken his ritual, piece by piece, and taken the wild flames that would have exploded from the hearths as his own. *Usurpation is the essence of sorcery*, Apprentice had once told me, paraphrasing some Dread Emperor. He'd usurped his own work, and was now bringing its full strength to bear against our enemy. From the point where all the flames had gathered an enormous pillar of flame descended, enveloping the demon in the blink of an eye. I'd half-expected the spell to disappear after a moment, but it

kept on going. There was a strange sound coming from our mage's direction, and I realized with a start it was a laugh. Masego was grinning madly as he convulsed in laughter, the glare of the flames reflecting on his glasses as he peered over them at his work. His hands were thrusting forward, unmoving as the fire raged and waves of heat scorched stone and distorted the air.

How long we stood there, watching the son of the Sovereign of the Red Skies proving the truth of his lineage, I did not know."

TeK

In his defence, would you not?

caoimhinh

Heck, I have cackled like a madman for stuff far less badass than setting a demon on arcane fire or screwing with a god through a large scale ritual.

Masego is 120% entitled to his mad laughter in such moments.

[Liliet](#)

EXACTLY

[Liliet](#)

I can't imagine myself doing anything other than grinning.

In either direction.

dadycool

Thank the gods ever burning and the Sisters in Shadow. I'm glad this is a recurring theme, especially one cultivated and indulged basically his whole life. And if this is even half as badass as that one with the demon, it'd be more suspicious if he DIDN'T cackle like a madman. Now my only concern is that that sort of thing sounds like an Age of Wonders kind of thing, which is invalid without Tyrant.

[Burlyraven](#)

Ah yes, point the barrel of the gun that is Heiropant at the enemy and fire away. He's a large enough caliber that he'll hit something and amuse us all in the doing.

It's kind of interesting to hear GP recognizing that Hanno is coming up on a delicate time as well. Hanno getting a heroic upgrade is definitely the more likely scenario, and Cat should steer clear for the reasons the chapter lists, but there were

enough questionings of GPs analysis by both, and enough references to Evil coming out on top that I think corruption arc for Hanno is still on the table. The only problem is that I think Cat might even fight against Hanno's corruption. If Hanno joins team Evil, it leaves a void in leadership for Good. Even worse, it might bring into question whether Cat engineered his fall in the first place. If we're really looking for long cons from the Bard, sacrificing a heavy hitter to bring about the implosion of the Terms is a pretty big one.

Insanenoodlyguy

Even better if the corruption involves him sleeping with Cat, because I want the full force of angry glares from an old man to be something she inevitably fails to avoid.

Skaddix

I do want to see that but that is more cause we need payoff on the Cat x Hanno thing and Hanno's Love Life in general since we have had so much speculation about it from characters.

mindsword2

I've been assuming Hanno is Ace. Another "opposite" of Cat.

ohJohN

I don't remember exactly, but I thought in one of his early interludes it's briefly mentioned that he was sleeping with one of the heroines in the crusade?

[Liliet](#)

Nope, it wasn't! The only mention of Hanno's love life was when him entertaining "impure" thoughts about some girls was brought up in his origin extra chapters.

It appears he's not ace, just... chaste.

Dome Zasrekh

Anyone remembers the Ashen Priestess? xD

[Liliet](#)

Cat would 100% fight against Hanno's corruption, and frankly I don't see any room for it. This isn't DnD where committing a non-Good or non-Lawful act fells the paladin. To switch teams you need to persistently and systematically start doing bad shit (which I cannot imagine Hanno doing) or explicitly and deliberately go over to the other banner (which I also cannot imagine Hanno doing). What's really on the table for Hanno as

an alternative is loss of Name (as he falls out of the Role without starting to match another – seriously, no villain groove for this guy) or death (as he stumbles upon a bad kind of story).

2xMachina

The problem tho, in here, Good is defined as following the rules of the Gods, while Evil is following your own desires.

If Hanno decides that, since Judgement is not around, he will Judge, he very well will turn to camp Evil.

[Liliet](#)

> The problem tho, in here, Good is defined as following the rules of the Gods, while Evil is following your own desires.

It's not though.

Good is defined as helping other people and Evil as harming them, same as everywhere.

Gippart

Then why is Cat a villain even though her greatest desire is peace, while the Grey Pilgrim is a hero who will obliterate a town of innocents without questioning another method for the greater good?

Good characters do unnecessary harm constantly in this series.

The image that most people have of heroes and villains is definitely that simple. But the reality is far more complex. It's still about help/harm, selfless/selfish, and mercy/cruelty; but since morality was defined and baked into this world at its creation, it is more about Above/Below.

And while Below may not care much about methods, but Above requires subservience above all else. The parallel stories at the beginning of this book prove that indisputably.

One (villain) believed he was on his own and had to kill everyone in the village to save the country. One (hero) believed the Gods would not abandon the people and prayed for assistance and saved everyone through miracles and providence.

[Liliet](#)

> Then why is Cat a villain even though her greatest desire is peace

because she became a student to a villain
because the property is transitive and below's side
accepts everyone and is ever hungry for more
because her teacher was born to the worship of below and
his only way out of the villainous side was if he
abandoned his homeland and parentage forever
because Evil as a political side is not the same as Evil
as a philosophy
does this answer your question?

Shveiran

It doesn't answer his other points, though.

Which, I'll admit, are not perfect.
The Valiant Champion and the Red Wizard and Brigand
kind of prove, to me, that worship is not all there is
to it.
Nor the acceptance of an outside force that defines
morality, since, well, again, we saw a lot of heroes
that basically do what they think is right.

Yet Tancred's story (or Sabah's for that matter) IMO
show that neither it is about doing good and harm.
Sure, the boy spilled a lot of blood, but he did so to
prevent a tragedy.
And we know that kind of reasoning IS compatible with
Good. Leaving Saint and Pilgrim aside, there is a
litteral Choir that has that as core tenent.

So... yeah. I feel like the difference between what make
a Hero or a Villain is less and less defined.
Ultimately, it sounds like it's a narrative matter?
Like, Sabah could have been born cursed and become a
edgy "I'm monstuous yet I must do good yet it is hard
to contain the darkness within" kind of Hero, but
instead she was born in Praes and there wasn't a grove
for that.
So she became the Cursed, a Villain Named, because
that's what mosnters do in Praesi culture.

And maybe Tancred is the same. In Procer, the religion
is very organized and rooted in the culture, and thus
to renounce Above's guidance is a villanous act. So he
became a Villain.

Elsewhere, maybe that wouldn't have been enough.

[Liliet](#)

> Ultimately, it sounds like it's a narrative matter?
Like, Sabah could have been born cursed and become a
edgy "I'm monstuous yet I must do good yet it is hard

to contain the darkness within" kind of Hero, but instead she was born in Praes and there wasn't a grove for that.

> So she became the Cursed, a Villain Named, because that's what monsters do in Praesi culture.

Yup!

I actually got to thinking about this enough I wrote a new reddit theorypost about all this.

Salt

You're both half right, as far as what the story was about from the start. IIRC EE did clarify regarding this in earlier comments

> Evil Roles usually let people do whatever they feel like doing – that's because they're, in that sense, championing the philosophy of their gods. Every victory for Evil is a proof that that philosophy is the right path for Creation to take. Nearly all Names on the bad side of the fence have a component that involves forcing their will or perspective on others

> Good Roles have strict moral guidelines because those Names are, in fact, being guided: those rules are instructions from above on how to behave to make a better world. Any victory for Good that follows from that is then a proof of concept for the Heavens being correct in their side of the argument"

> The Gods Above and Below do roughly correspond to "lower case" good and evil, as far as entities that far removed from mortals can be understood. That neither side of the equation intervenes directly means there's a lot of room for interpretation in the respective philosophies they preach, but the bare bones are there.

Which I'm interpreting to mean that generally Above/Below and Heroes/Villains as a result generally do align with traditional ideas of good and evil (if not necessarily all the time), but the wager is less about good and evil so much as divine guidance vs self determination being superior, whatever superior means as far as Above and Below are concerned

[Liliet](#)

yeah, good and evil just emerge as a result of how they apply their philosophies

> The Gods Above and Below do roughly correspond to
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respective philosophies they
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ohJohN

It pretty explicitly is, if we're talking capital-letters
Good/Evil, Above/Below, or however you want to phrase the
dichotomy that generally places heroes and villains on
opposing sides in the shatranj game of the Gods. From the
prologue:

The Gods disagreed on the nature of things: some believed
their children should be guided to greater things, while
others believed that they must rule over the creatures
they had made.

Lowercase good/evil still have their traditional meanings
but, while there's frequent overlap, Names are aligned
based on the capitalized words.

[Liliet](#)

> The Gods Above and Below do roughly correspond to
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[Liliet](#)

Hmm, I'm going to go ahead and link an essay I wrote a bunch
ago on this very question.

308924810a

-“I expect that light will burn bright, Black Queen, and come
just when the night has grown darkest.”-
Calling it now, EE tends to foreshadow nearly every major event
in their books through one-off lines of dialog and jokes between
characters that make references to things that haven't happened
yet, Someone is going to use the judgement corpse before things
are done.

Also can anyone point me to the exact arguments that convinced EE that trying to ban Named Rulers was futile? I can sort of understand why Cat would want to do it(no more using countries as high-casualty props in conflicts between individuals, and forcing the Praesi to confront the dysfunctionality of their current system or get squashed by the continent when they try to rely on a Named ruler to brute force functioning as a state.), but I only managed to find posts by the author saying they'd been convinced by commentors, not why.

Miles

Rule is an aspect, Names are granted for Ambition, and obtaining/seizing power is the first step in any large undertaking- especially when trying to change things.

Sinead

I hadn't heard anything about being convinced that it would be a bad idea. Unless it's just a point that the Mandate of Rule for the majority of government in Calernia is derived from having a Name, so they would be dealing with a governmental crisis seemingly imposed on them when the system would have seemed to have worked (as the final crusade would have worked).

Named are living Icons of their culture, so it's unsurprising that they do end up in positions of leadership. It would seem as foreign meddling to have an external accord banning these people from existing, and trying to drive them out by extinction would just be oil on a fire.

hakureireimu

The people wouldn't go for it.

caoimhinh

You would need to go back all the way to when Catherine first mentioned that she planned to ban Named rulership through the Liesse Accords.

If I recall correctly, that would be **Book 5 Chapter 24: Theft.**

And even then, that chapter wasn't the only place where commentors debated the subject. I think there were arguments both in favor of it and against it, for reasons in-story and at a meta-level, and that happened across various chapters.

In my case, I argued against it on the basis that such a thing would simply be impossible to implement. While it is true that not all rulers become Named, some people come to Names simply for becoming rulers of their country, rather than being Named who become rulers or acting rulers who later on came to a Name, in countries such as Praes, Name and title are the same thing

because that's the culture and/or story attached to that position.

Every single person who gets the throne of Praes gets the Name of Dread Emperor, and Anaxares got the Name of Hierarch shoved down his throat because the leaders of the League of Free Cities elected him as such. Thus, it wouldn't matter that the person who got the Name stepped down the throne, because then they would simply lose their Name and their successor would get it.

To eliminate Named rulers would require vast, in-depth, and *drastic* changes in the culture and social structure of nations, so that's simply not feasible. To eliminate the Name of Warlord, for example, a massacre of Orcs was required along with the destruction of their cultural heritage.

Also, even assuming that it was signed, it would be highly unlikely that some monarch would abdicate right after obtaining a Name. Odds are it would be related to rulership, and even if not, considering the state of mind of newly Named people as we have seen in the series, it's unlikely a fresh Named would simply let go of it, so they would then disobey the Accords.

Other reasons were provided by other readers, and Amadeus even cited some reasons during his talk with Cat during chapter 57: Hearing that I hadn't read in the comments before.

I remember a few of the points on both sides of the discussion, but it would be hard for me to recall them all, or even to express them as accurately as the original commenters. I think you can find quite a few in chapter 24: Theft, though.

Konstantin von Karstein

As Amadeus said to Cat, a freshly Named Good King or Dread Emperor would never abdicate and instead prepare for war. So each time a new ruler ascend on the throne you would risk a war.

Even worse, the Levantine Blood legitimate its power by descending from Named. Names are the basis for nobility in the Dominion. Tariq was beloved and considered as the voice of Heaven in Creation, the Blood would never accept that close.

[Liliet](#)

> Someone is going to use the judgement corpse before things are done.

I high key don't think that follows in any way.

> but I only managed to find posts by the author saying they'd been convinced by commentors, not why.

Wait, what? Where???

I was arguing that there's no way it can work, because as long as Good King is a Role (and it is! it's not going to stop being any time soon, only if there are none matching it for a long time) you're going to have all your good kings get that Name and the only option for them to refuse it is to either stop being king or stop being good, either of which would be super counterproductive – and meanwhile on the side of evil, an up and coming Tyrant isn't going to be stopped by some treaty saying they cannot, they're just going to fight the treaty. Which would quickly destabilize the Liesse Accords to the point of complete disintegration – either of them would on their own, but both together are just absurd.

jworks17

There is precedence for a ruler denying a rule based Name though- Cordelia denied becoming the... Warden of the West I think? She did so because of the obvious blunder that would be, and I think that thinking really is central to the idea behind the Accords.

Why would one Good King or Tyrant destabilize the Accords when the large majority of Named back them? What is one Tyrant when facing dozens of Named, bound by common purpose? The Accords holds inherent value for Heroes and Villains, or so the author has hinted at between the Pilgrim and Black Knight dialogue, and the only Names that would truly be hurt by them are the most extreme of Above and Below and the ruling Names.

Now I don't think the author ever expands on it, but it can be easily inferred why the taking ruler Named out of their Rolls sets the Accords on shaky grounds. If the organization that forms at Cardinal has the ability to unseat rulers, that is a staggering amount of power wielded by Cardinal- they could institute puppet rulers all over the world! Cat has made it clear that she wants the Accords to be a thing that survives her, and what if that power was left in the wrong hands?

I don't think the Accords would destabilize because of Good Kings and Tyrants, I think the Accords would destabilize because of the undeniable power that would give its partitioners over the rest of Calernia. What sovereign nation would allow an organization that can upend the highest seats of power on a whim?

[Liliet](#)

> There is precedence for a ruler denying a rule based Name though- Cordelia denied becoming the... Warden of the West

Because Augur worked super hard to give her that pivot. Because a five second shift in timing would have had her accept the Name before Hanno got there, and she wouldn't have gotten a choice at all.

Her circumstances were an exception to the rule.

> Why would one Good King or Tyrant destabilize the Accords when the large majority of Named back them? What is one Tyrant when facing dozens of Named, bound by common purpose?

Named vs armies does not have Named necessarily consistently win. It will, at the very least, CONSISTENTLY DESTABILIZE things.

The problem is that trying to dethrone every sufficiently competent/popular ruler – these are components for a Name! – is the exact opposite of productive.

Javvies

As I understand it, the theory behind prohibiting Named rulers is that as Named, they are inherently going to be drawn into the Above/Below conflicts, and as rulers, they'd end up dragging their country and people with them, escalating their conflicts from a small/tactical scale personal conflict between a Villain and a Hero or band of five to a larger national and strategic one between armies, which is antithetical to the goal of reducing non-Named involvement and losses and collateral damage caused by Named conflicts.

Liliet

But the Liesse Accords are already about reducing/removing that kind of conflict escalation. Cardinal as neutral ground, rules of every side of the continent going to the same school together – what has been happening so far is no guideline for how things will be after. Cat's going for overkill and shooting herself in the foot in the process.

burlindw

The thing about the judgement corpse makes sense to me. I don't think it's been explicitly stated, but in a narrative driven world it makes sense that there would be a concept along the lines of Chekhov's Gun. If an ancient artifact of untold power gets unearthed in the middle of a war; its Role is to be used.

Liliet

Or to be a mcguffin everyone keeps fighting over. By now imho its definitely a mcguffin.

Liliet

More broadly, the Name/Role system as written renders the proposition absurd at its core. Rulership structures form by the same criteria and as a result of the same events as Names and Roles – you can have rulers that are not Named, but they'll be inheriting it from dynasty founders who *had been*. Procer is an inheritor of a large scattering of tribes that had lived in that part of the continent before Triumphant threw them in a blender, and we know at least about the Lycaonese that they had been ruled by Iron Kings once. Fairfaxes in Callow originated from Eleanor Fairfax, and while we don't know for a fact about Albans, it seems a reasonable guess that again, the original local tribes that later formed a kingdom had been founded around Named rulers. Praes was founded by a Named and subsequently ruled by inheritors of the Role, Levant was founded by Named and – you get the picture. Bellerophon is interesting because its Named founder died before she finished the process of founding, and they ended up following her ideas in an... unexpected direction. The Empire Ever Dark in its current form was shaped by the Sisters.

So far, whenever we learn the origin story of a nation? There's either a Named or all the way to a deity there.

This process won't stop. Whenever there is a serious political perturbation on Calernia, it will end up with a Named leading a nation, because that's what happens – leaders get Names, Named attract followings, it's almost tautological. Accords can survive for longer than a generation if they're set up to accomodate that process, not try to fight it.

Tek

Damn, I wish my existential crisis came with a magical power up in the end.

Or at least, the end.

Sinead

Thinking about the Age of Wonder vs. the Age of Order, do we see the wager settled as an alloy of the two original positions of Above and Below?

-Presume that Above and Below respectively that Creation needs to be guided and ruled over vs left to flourish

– Under the Age of Wonders, you have your heroes struggle against the villains, honing themselves and growing stronger until they triumph. They are guided down a specific path, but still take part in a grand competition. This is Above's system, but have undercurrents of Below's method with growth and cultivation

-The Age of Order is seen as Below's agents building the stable framework to still contain and guide how Named conflicts form, and create a feedback system with the cultures engaged within it.

The Age of Wonders is a reactionary engagement, while the Age of Order is a more deliberate and methodical engagement that (IMO) takes the best that have arisen from the Age of Wonders and trim off the worst. Essentially expand and refine Black's Reforms and Conquest into a continent wide stability that aims to benefit everyone that meaningfully contributes to it.

Sinead

Just want to append to this, but what if Cat's birthday gift to Hanno is a crucial moment of advice/connection that allows him to resolve this current crisis?

Shveiran

I'd file that under "meddling"

Sinead

I would as well in some regards, but I think the spirit of it is different.

I am more looking at it as "Catherine as a person who does value people (why would Hanno's rejection of her in the aftermath of Arsenal hurt so much otherwise), trying to help an acquaintance not self destruct. Something similar to her joining Archer and Concocter for Beastmaster's wake.

Bard used the stress on Christophe as a lever in Arsenal, and possibly with some influence over Hanno during this crisis (see her trying with William in a comparable crisis).

I see an element of Hanno's crisis being the weight of the crown he essentially wears. Having his closest peer give an honest effort of support is to me the opposite of meddling in the traditional sense.

Shveiran

I may have been unclear: I'm sure Catherine can interact with the process in a way that actively tries to help Hanno solves the crisis.

Pilgrim just asked her NOT TO, because what Hanno needs is to find an Heroic solution to a Name problem, and

Catherine is very unlikely to provide that however well-meaning she is: her philosophy is a different one, so she is much more likely to nudge him toward an answer that makes him lose his Name without finding one.

See Vivienne: I'd say that she grew as a result of Catherine's interacting with her morality, but she fell outside her Name and did not earn a new, heroic one. Because, well, she isn't one herself. She is a Villainess. If she persuades you to see things her way, even if she means well, you may no longer fit the heroic grove because what she convinced you of doesn't, and if the question was at the core of your Name, well...

Sinead

Ok, that's fair. I was looking at it more from an extension of faith, as Cat had her epiphany of looking at the Red Axe trial through the lens of spheres of influence, and getting a better picture of what his perspective is. Combined with Bard's comment on festering wounds with regards to roles (regarding mirror knight yes, but could be extended to others), I could see an honest "set aside the hats and sit down and talk" as just a good thing to do.

Then again, I also don't believe crisis of faith should be entirely internal like this either, so that's part of my bias as well.

caoimhinh

On an interesting and perhaps related event, Book 3 was the last one where we saw Heroic Interludes and Villainous Interludes.

Book 4 started with the Tenth Crusade, which was a bullshit and political thing moved by various factors (and the participants went there for a plethora of *REALLY* wrong reasons) that muddled the line between what was right and wrong. There was no longer any Interlude marked as Heroic or Villainous, just Interludes.

That was the beginning of the period where Good wasn't good and Evil wasn't evil, as the Crusaders were invading Callow full of hypocrisy and the wicked Arch-Heretic of the East was simply defending her homeland while calling for peace at every chance she got.

So one could argue and say that the Crusade was the start of the "alloying" and that's shown on a Meta-level.

dadycool

Wow, I hadn't realized that. With your comment about the Crusade, I feel like Cat was basically saying throughout the book "Stop! Please stop! I'm begging you, don't make me escalate this! Why are you denying me? I'll have to find an even worse ally! Well, I guess I'll have to go over your head and get a Smackdown Hammer from the one being that has a good track record against these 'Crusades'. Oh gods, he's going to rip them in half. Uh,...I'm gonna have to find the most bizarre, off-the-wall allies I can find to have ANY weight to throw around. Time to look down. Yay, I can finally look down on people!"

[Liliet](#)

Note: there were non-heroic non-villainous interludes starting from Book 2, namely those from Catherine's camp.

[Liliet](#)

> guided and ruled over vs left to flourish

it's guided vs ruled over actually
guided by above's rules vs ruled over by mortals who make up their own rules and compete for it

Sinead

That's what I get for paraphrasing a bit I last read several months ago.

I think the general principal still stands. I'm of the opinion that some of the general philosophies espoused by Above and Below (Above's objective virtues to live up to vs Below's brutal trial and error approach) can be held when we cannot hold the full objective truth (in general, "what is the right thing to do?" can be an impossible question. Within the guide, those revelations warp many that see them. Use of the mortal instruments to approximate objective virtues is the best we can do.) Within the context of the Guide, I think that can be one of the long term effects of reforms such as what Black championed in Callow. This isn't to say that Black is actually a saint, but that even a pragmatic approach aiming for long term widespread stability and prosperity across social strata will tend to Above over time.

[Liliet](#)

Oh Black is 100% Above's kid stolen away by the fact his homeland worships Below, it's adorable how much of a hero he is while being staunchly loyal to the opposite side. A classic story, actually.

Sinead

That is true. It's more that given the atrocities on his record, I am always wary to drop the label of "Good" on him for fear of it being taken out of context.

[*Liliet*](#)

Eh, I feel like Tariq the Plaguebringer has really opened the door there.

But yeah I know what you mean ._.

Sinead

I think the difference between my reluctance with the two is really a personal background baggage issue. Amadeus brings the image of an imperialist army that crushes all dissent in it's path, and a more systemic issue that gets it's hooks in and holds on. His approach at the systemic level, while highly effective creates a system that handles people as so many numbers. The flip side of this could be a great thing, by I reckon that that form is mostly found in what Cat is trying to develop with the Accords. I would classify Amadeus as "Great and Terrible" in all senses of the word.

Tariq is a weary prophet (The impression I have is that while Mercy doesn't bring options to him, they do allow him to properly assess the utility of his decisions. This isn't perfect, since I think Cat being hidden from angelic sight like a domain hindered his ability to do an assessment at Prince's Graveyard). Throw him in the situation where he is handling a counter Crusade aiming to undercut the Grand Alliance through it's stomach (chevauchées are brutal), which would likely just keep going if Amadeus was the only one to disappear. I suspect if he only targeted the Legions with the plague (while they were between towns), he wouldn't have had the same guarantees that it wouldn't have broken out of hand. Black is brutal enough that he probably would have just used the plague as another weapon against Procer, and Below would probably demand it's due.

Tariq is equally Great and Terrible in all senses of the word

I love both these characters so very much.

To be honest, I liked pretty much every character in this story.

[*Liliet*](#)

I can see what you mean wrt him being an Imperialist but he's too much of an SJW for me to really feel that tbh

and yeah same!!! i know right??? the only character i dont particularly personally care about is Neshamah. The Dead King is the least interesting character! And he's more interesting than some of the most interesting characters in some books I like.

Great and Terrible indeed. Amadeus is all the sayings about "fear the wrath of a gentle man", "be afraid when a good man is pointing a gun at you", "nothing's as scary as a man convinced he's doing what's right" etc. Well-Intentioned Extremist and so on and so forth.

I love him more than Tariq because my favorite fictional character trait is competence, and Tariq is. Not.

Sinead

I am not sure if I see what your perspectives are as to Tariq being incompetent is. I read him as being an old hero of the Age of Wonders that is difficult to switch when faced with an opponent with a system that has grown and refined itself over 40 years to deal with metaphysical threats that he represents to it's goals, while he aimed to nip those issues in the bud. The difference between an ember and a bonfire.

Unless your issues are with the extra chapters? I guess my thing with those is that I am not sure some of those tell the story that was intended (thinking of the time skip with his nephew where I feel that not enough key details were used to emphasise that Tariq tried to convince him.)

[Liliet](#)

My issues are with Tariq's incredible naivete and blindness when it comes to how other people think. Behold, an Aspect that lets him see into other people's hearts, only manages to boost him to like, average normal person levels. Not even average normal wise old person levels, just average normal person.

Did you notice how his bringing up information Cat considered unsettling for him to know was

completely mistimed, misaimed and had the opposite effect on the conversation from what he intended?

Tariq is good at three (3) things – healing, storyweaving and manipulating Light. And that's pretty nice to have in a story, too, but he's not really... smart.

beleester

I don't think Amadeus believes he's doing the right thing, so much as he believes he's doing what's necessary for his side (which is not the right side, it's the Dread friggin' Empire) to win.

Amadeus, especially in the early books, talks a lot about how the "game" is rigged. How heroes get unfair advantages in the form of providence, sudden divine intervention, heroic second winds, last-minute rescues, and so on, while villains don't get anything without having to pry it out of someone's cold dead hands. His motivation for trying to get a lasting victory for Praes is basically spite – he wants to show that he can win even with the heavens stacking the deck as hard as they can against him.

And yes, he can be gentle and even good in an "enlightened self-interest" sort of way, but that's not really his "heroic motivation." It's not what makes him terrifying. He's never thinking "I'm doing this for my friends" or "I'm doing this for the greater good" when he's trying to find strength. If anything it's the opposite – when the Calamities are hurt, he shows cracks and starts to turn away from his plans. Amadeus is happiest when he's outplanned the heroes and totally rubbing it in their face.

[Liliet](#)

> for his side (which is not the right side, it's the Dread friggin' Empire) to win.

The problem is, his definition of "winning" is "ensuring better standard of life for the commoners".

Juff

Typo Thread:

verisimilitude (i don't think this is the right word. versatility?)

certainlyis (missing space)
Masego look > Masego looked
of broken remnant > of a broken remnant
Most our finest > Most of our finest
himself, no (either add "and" or change to 😊
time, he (like above, "so" or 😊
kept his piece > kept his peace (it's "say your piece" and "hold
your peace", and imo this is closer to the latter)
your repay > you repay
address it > addressing it
This not > This is not
participation to > participation in
was' the > was 'the
that the while > that while
as a Cordelia's > as Cordelia's
become problem > become a problem
Order is it Evil > Order it is Evil
meddling something > meddling

Ceaseless Watcher, turn your gaze upon this wretched thing.

Juff

uh, the faces are supposed to be semi colons

ohJohN

I think it works – Masego is talking about Tariq changing the properties of Light, so I took it to mean "he did a surprisingly good job of mimicking some mundane phenomenon with Light." With the preceding paragraph talking about the smell of burning ghoul, presumably that phenomenon was fire. Maybe the implication is that, while most wielders can burn with Light, Tariq has gone a step further and essentially transmuted it into fire?

[sengachi](#)

Grey Pilgrim is just such a wise and intelligent character. It's always fascinating listening to him talk. Especially when his thoughts and designs are just a *little* skew to our PoV perspective or the audience perspective, but still close enough to make sense.

mamm0nn

So, in between the Barrow Sword, the Troubadour and one of the various other intelligent and cunning Villains, who will be the one that Pilgrim should've really gone to and tell them not to meddle? My money is on the Barrow Sword, for he has met Hanno and the Troubadour is still too undefined and unseen to be a villain this relevant. If we see more of him in the chapters to come I'll take back and change that statement.

caoimhinh

To be fair, the Barrow Sword is nowhere near Tariq right now. That guy is with Hanno in the Iron Prince's army.

Cat is likely to have more influence on Hanno than Ishaq, and also more likely to listen to reasonable petitions.

Zach

I doubt the Barrow Sword could manipulate Hanno. Barrow Sword strikes me as a relatively "immature" villain who isn't exactly a skilled manipulator, and we saw Troubadour getting manipulated by Catherine a while back during the villain meeting.

There aren't really many villains on Hanno's level involved in this war beyond the Woe.

mamm0nn

Much as she may still underestimate herself, despite not being completely oblivious to her power, saying that Cat can manipulate or fool you doesn't make you a chump. She's been walking circles around Pilgrim too and he certainly isn't easy to fool.

And we've seen Barrow Sword being more cunning than he lets on in the Villain Interlude.

Insanenoodlyguy

Troubadour is the wrong kind of meddler. You don't need to tell him to back off, because if anything, he'll increase the chances of this going well. He's the kind of villain who is about to succeed, but then says just the wrong thing, or the right thing but the wrong way, and Hanno reflects on something or remembers something and comes out of this better than ever. Cat would know when to shut up and let a breakdown happen, and is thus far more dangerous.

mamm0nn

True. I never said that either of them would succeed or fail, just that they are more likely targets to meddle.

Then again, would Pilgrim with his Hero mindset really care about the political and the Truce and Terms issues of thinking about the Villain that tries to meddle with Hanno's crisis as a convenient sacrifice to be struck down once they reach that part of the story? For all that the heroes might be just, especially the ones like Pilgrim can see Villains as sacrifices rather than people in that context.

Insanenoodlyguy

More likely to meddle, far less likely to succeed. Cat might actually do it instead of helping it along.

Crowley

Typo thread below, feel free to add.

certainlyis-> certainly is
not forgot-> not forgotten
the worse we'd had-> the worst we'd had
And worse than worse was that-> worse than that
Most our-> Most of our
let your repay-> let you repay
your Woe love each other-> you Woe love each other
that the while Hanno->that while Hanno
as a Cordelia's->as Cordelia's

ninegardens

Heyyyy Tariq. Good job.
Good I love that wizened old bastard. Great advice, respectfully given, and reasonably taken... and just as Hanno was a fool for ignoring Cat's advice on matter's of Villiany, Cat would have to be very foolish indeed not to heed GP's advice here (which, I will note, she isn't).

[Javvies](#)

We should have expected Tariq to notice Hanno's crisis and for him to want to keep Cat from interfering.
Even though Tariq ought to realize that Cat doesn't want Hanno to fail on her and is skilled enough with Story-fu to know that her trying to adjust Hanno's path would almost certainly backfire horribly.
Tariq is, after all, a longstanding Heroic Mentor figure.

I'm far more worried about Bard somehow finding out and interfering. Any more than she already has, just by setting into motion the various chains of events that contributed to Hanno's current state.

Xinci

Bit strange for Masego to talk about faith like that after he got understanding of it as a metaphysical concept from studying souls. Though I suppose that could be what he meant when he said it wasn't any different from any other delusion, Just bindings and tricks of perspective, I suppose.

Salt

Well, the last few chapter titles kind of spoil the theme here.

Theism/Ietism/Dynamism are basically (less commonly well known) specific subsets of the good old monism vs dualism argument, and the chapter titles roughly correlate to the belief of a specific character in each chapter.

Theism and ietsism are arguably types of dualism in the sense of believing in an unexplainable transcendent reality, although the latter doesn't believe in a specific deity so much as leaving the nature of said non-mundane reality open till possibility.

Dynamism technically has multiple meanings depending on context, but typically is talking about monistic belief systems that boil everything (from physical matter to phenomena of the mind) to forces and the ability of all aspects of reality to be acted upon by forces.

Realistically I think it's just the author subtly-not-so-subtly commenting on some of the core differences in belief systems between characters like Hanno/Pilgrim and Hierophant, specifically regarding how they see and understand metaphysical concepts like "faith".

Not sure if ietsism vs dynamism is a better fit than classic dualism vs physicalism, but it's fairly similar either way regardless.

Daniel E

So here's something to stew on; Perhaps Hanno's issue is actually the Hierarch's death sentence coming to pass in some form. The Choir is still there of course, but some fundamental aspect of them has changed due to being sentenced to death with an Aspect.

agesbe

I feel like that would cheapen the issue he's having, which is well spelled out in this chapter and supported by the interlude we saw from his perspective.

Frivolous

I've been reading older chapters.

1. Tariq is speaking from experience when he talks about crises of faith. He had his own in Peregrine III and IV. The Choir of Mercy stopped talking to him when he killed his brother Bakri out of anger and resumed talking to him when he killed his nephew Izil to reduce suffering.

I wouldn't be surprised if it was Tariq himself who wrote the Two Hundred Heroic Axioms.

2. I've been collecting chapters wherein Cat's new Name surfaced, even briefly, and the context for those events.

a. Convenience – when commiserating with Cordelia over the burdens of queenship. No Named involved.

b. Joust – single combat against the Revenant Aubrey Caen, once Knight Errant. Catherine felt more athletic and was able to predict the Revenant's moves.

quote – It was not a knight I was becoming, I thought. My old friend had not come out for the fight, but for what it stood for: me, standing in judgement over others. Delivering it sword in hand. And it had earned weight, that the Knight Errant had once been Named.

c. Zwischenschach – Cat uses Speaking to command Silver Huntress.

I wonder how many more such we'll see before Cat's Name surfaces for real.

beleester

Book 5 epilogue: Catherine says that if Praes causes trouble for the war effort, she will "get the east in order the hard way."

Frivolous

Yeah; I should have included that one. That was the spark that started her Name burning again. First cause, you could say.

Thanks, beleester.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "But at the moment, perhaps a reminder that a certain moderation of words is in order would not go amiss," Tariq gently suggested.

Funny how he calls that on Masego, and then promptly starts chatting about Vivienne in such unsettling terms...

Chapter 64: Candidate Moves

"To rule is to drag a lion by the whisker."

– *Helikean saying*

Truth was, even now Masego hadn't found a way to genuinely break the rituals that the Dead King used to prevent scrying in the territories he held. For two years the Arsenal had tried, after we made it clear to some of the finest magical minds of Calernia that regaining that capacity would be militarily invaluable, but no working counter-ritual had come of it. We had brought together exceptional people, but our enemy was more than just that: he was the Hidden Horror, the exception itself. So Hierophant, for all that he'd suffered a god riding his mind for most of a year and studied the wards at Lyonceau – where the Tyrant had borrowed from the Dead King's work, among other things – had not been able to overturn the weight of the millennia's bearing down on us. Zeze was brilliant, but there were some things beyond brilliance.

So Hierophant had stolen a mystery from an entity that *could* win.

The clouds in the sky spun like a whirlpool, swallowed by the great eye that our ritual had opened high above. Even for me, the empty howling void was an unsettling sight. Sorcery burned loud and bright, the stone pillars we'd driven into the ground buzzing like hornets as they fought the enchantments that blanketed most of Hainaut and suppressed scrying. Hurrying, I limped my way down the rocky slope towards a box of burnished bronze and electrum that stood taller than me. Nestled against the hill, anchored with enchantments so it would not move so much as a hair's breadth, the arcane patterns of electrum on the sides were now glimmering with eerie light. The bronze was warm enough that I could feel the heat just from passing my hand close, and it would only get warmer.

The front of the box was the most complex part of it: a harsh, labyrinthine electrum pattern that usually closed together like a puzzle box but had now been carefully pried open. Slender gaps had been bared in the pattern by the manipulations, their rims covered with small bronze-inscribed runes, and through them I glimpsed that within the box there was a cube of pure white marble. Without my noticing it Roland had returned from his work on the hill to our east, and now stood by Masego's side close to the box. The sight was almost amusing, Hierophant being at least a head taller for all that the Rogue Sorcerer's longcoat and layers made him seem larger, but the intent focus both displayed had me reluctant to disturb them with even a snort.

"Roland?" Masego asked, burning eyes on the box.

"Almost there," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, his own gaze on a slender baton of obsidian in his hands where I glimpsed a few burning marks. "Five, four, three, two–"

As soon as the Proceran mage got to three Hierophant raised his arm, wresting sorcery from a small cube he held in his fist, and a circle of golden runes flared around his fingers.

"Discharge," Masego warned.

Sorcery pulled towards us for half a heartbeat, as if the currents had reversed, and the flow was sucked into the box where I saw terrible fires bloom before the moment passed and the eye in the sky screamed anew. To the west of us, a hill blew up in a thundering rain of rock and mud.

"Our bleed margin is much too high," Roland said. "We won't make it to four instances."

"Three will be enough," Hierophant replied, leaning over the box.

With his bare hands – he'd known fires hotter than this, and even now their reflection burned in his eyes – he began to manipulate the top of the box, extracting what looked like a large gear before turning it briskly. Within the box, the marble cube turned to match and presented a fresh and unmarred face to the open gaps. The gear was pushed back down after adjustment, and within twenty heartbeats another discharge followed. The hill to the east of us blew up, but I had closer perils to worry about: the stone pillars anchored on this hill were vibrating so quickly and intensely it seemed only a matter of time before they shattered.

"Masego," I asked, shouting over the din. "How safe are we on the hill?"

He turned towards me, offering a boyish grin.

"Not at all!" he shouted back, and raised his arm.

A fresh cube held in his fist, golden runes formed in a circle as Roland protested with a shout that the build-up was not yet done.

"Discharge," Hierophant cackled.

Cackling wasn't usually a good sign, in my experience, so I wrapped myself up in Night the moment before the sorcery could be pulled in. The magic blew in, pillars popping as it passed them – ah, they'd somehow been built so the shards would go up instead of all around – and hammered into the cage. Some bits of stone fell on my Night-cloak, but nothing I couldn't handle so I risked a glance at Roland. Whose obsidian baton was cracking, the burning runes on it going wild.

"*Oh merde*," I heard him curse, throwing away the baton.

It blew up in a great gout of flame maybe three feet above his head, liquid drops of obsidian hissing against mud and stone as they were sprinkled everywhere. Masego, though, ignored it all.

He was trying to vent the contents of the box, where the fires had somehow gotten caught. He opened fresh gaps on two sides before the glimmer of the electrum patterns turned into a glare. The tall mage finally stepped back.

"It's done?" I called out.

"In a manner of speaking," Zeze calmly noted, continuing to move away. "I would recommend taking cover, Catherine."

"You little-" I began, throwing myself behind a jutting stone just in time for a great crunching sound to resound.

Oh dear. That had sounded like the box crumpling inwards. Then there were a pulse of flame and metal shrapnel as the box blew up while I hid under my cloak. I waited ten full heartbeats before popping out for a look, and I saw with a dry swallow that the explosion had outright melted the top of the hill. The Grey Pilgrim had gotten off first, right? That was, uh, going to be tricky to explain to the Dominion otherwise.

"Anybody dead?" Roland called out, popping out from behind his own rock.

"A pointless question. It would require necromancy before-" Masego replied.

"I think everyone's fine," I interrupted before he could really get started. "Did it work?"

"Of course it worked," Hierophant said, sounding offended. "Who do you take me for?"

"Ask me that question again when I don't have melted rock all over my nice cloak," I grunted. "You're not fishing for a nice answer otherwise."

I broke cover, brushing myself off, and the three of us came to look at the results. The marble cube was seared on three sides, but it'd not just been fire thrown at rock. It'd been a sculpture, in a sense: the central valley of Hainaut and some of the outskirts, as seen from the sky. Each of the three facets had captured that sight for the blink of that great eye above and seen it seared onto the marble. There were imprecisions, of course. The Dead King's rituals had muddled it up some. But that was the entire point of having several discharges, as there'd be very few places on our 'map' where the imprecisions had taken all three times.

"So this is what the world looks like through a Choir's eyes," I said.

"Not exactly," Roland told me. "Think of angels as seeing the world through a lens. What you can witness seared here is what we mortals would see when looking through that same lens."

"Humans don't have the parts necessary to observe Creation as a Choir would," Masego absent-mindedly noted. "Even soul scaffolding wouldn't be sufficient, it would require complete essence reconstruction. As Duchess of Moonless Nights we would have been able to replace the marble with your mind and allow you to look directly, as the damage would have repaired itself, but as you currently are you would not survive the experience."

I still remembered how much of a pain just stealing Ashkaran from echoes in Arcadia had been, so I suspected that he was downplaying the difficulties involved when he simply called it 'damage'.

"Good to know," I muttered. "I believe we can work with this, Masego. We'll need magnifying glass for some of the details, but I can already make out the bare bones."

Such as they were, which was pretty worrying. I limped back and forth between the facets, narrowing my eyes at what I saw. If I correctly understood where we were, then at the moment we were... north-west of what had to be the Iron Prince's army. Unfortunately, that put us in the wrong place. Ahead of the Prince Klaus' column was a large force of undead, but not so large he shouldn't be able to defeat it on the field. Behind it, though, was what had to be the missing Luciennerie army. By the looks of it it'd divided into three smaller forces: one was headed south towards the Cigelin Sisters, but the other two columns were marching straight towards where the Iron Prince was going to have to give battle.

That put them square to the south of us, and went some way in explaining why this part of Hainaut was swarming with warbands. Worse, it looked like my allies had left part of their forces behind: to the west of Juvelun there was something that looked like a camp. Hard to tell numbers without using something to magnify the details, though, which could wait until we'd gotten back to camp. I straightened, casting one last lingering look at the marble. For all that what I'd learned had not exactly good news, that I knew it at all was a great coup. If we'd gone about this blindly, the damage could have been... significant.

"Good work," I said. "Both you."

"It was," Masego replied, clearly pleased I agreed with his own assessment.

"The Pilgrim and the Artificer will handle wiping all trace of what we did here with Light," I said. "As for us, though, we're done here. Let's load up our rock on a cart and head back."

"I'll be glad to," Roland admitted, casting a wary look at the mire. "I suspect we're about to have a great deal more company."

"Ain't that always the way, with us?" I snorted. "It's all about staying that one step ahead, Roland."

Well, that or you died.

—

Adjutant had transcribed seared stone into what looked like a halfway decent overview of central Hainaut in less than an hour with only one hand to use. A useful reminder that, even when crippled in a wheelchair Hakram could do the work of several people in a fraction of the time it would have taken them with objectively superior results. Masego was making noises that the prosthetics would soon be sufficiently attuned to the orc's body for surgery, so he might even be out of that chair soon – though he'd have to learn to walk all over again, and likely keep using crutches for months. I'd used the span of time where he worked to have a wash in the river we'd camped near in the Twilight Ways, so it was feeling quite refreshed that I returned to my tent.

Our venture of the morning had been rather productive, but now that we had the bird's eye view of this campaign it was time to decide exactly how we were going to fight it. My initial notion had been to lay an ambush for the Luciennerie army, but I wasn't sure how viable that would really be at the moment. I had a bottle of wine opened and sent for what was definitely not a war council: Indrani, Masego and Akua. Hakram was already at my side so there was hardly a need for an engraved invitation there. I rather wished Vivienne could have been there, as it'd been too long since all of the Woe had gathered, but she had duties of her own.

Besides, without wanting to sound grim would have been gambling on my part to have my successor and I in the same theatre of war.

"You know, when I blow up mud hills I don't get commended," Indrani complained the moment she drifted in. "It's all 'that was valuable ammunition, Archer', or 'stop using our trebuchets outside battles'."

"Your point?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

She slid into a seat on the other side of the table, Akua and Masego following her into the tent with long strides, speaking in Mthethwa – something about 'complexity returns', whatever those were – and settling further down, Zeze taking the place at Indrani's side as if it were his natural one. I hid a smile.

"It's favoritism, is my point," Indrani said, jabbing an accusing finger at me.

"You're right," I admitted.

The surprise on her face was quite delightful.

"I *do* like him better than you," I breezily added.

She gasped in half-genuine offence.

"Hakram, jot that down," I mused. "We can look into having it made a royal decree."

I didn't go quite as far as jokingly offer Masego to blow up any hill he liked, because I was worried he might actually take me up on that offer. And, like, I *did* have a lot of hills in my demesne in Marchford but they weren't exactly a renewable resource so while I wasn't outright saying 'never blow up my hills' I'd at least want a *reason* first. I felt like that was a justifiable stance to take, all things considered.

"I'll see about having the list ranking us in the order you like most made official," Hakram idly said.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"She doesn't have that," Indrani said, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Of course I don't, number si- I mean, Indrani," I replied with a smile.

I winked, botching it just because I knew it being half-assed would piss her off even more.

"*Come on*," Archer complained. "There's no way I'm last."

"That you think that is why you are, my dear," Akua gently smiled.

I did admire how genuinely benign she could look while purposefully turning the knife in the wound, it was pretty impressive,

"That sounds very useful," Masego said, sounding approving.

"Could I have a transcript, along with the criteria for ranking?"

"I'll think about," I lied.

Adjutant cleared his throat, a call to order before this ended up into a pleasant waste of several hours. Archer avenged herself on me by pouring herself a cup of wine and filling it up to the rim, like a *savage*, while Akua considered me with golden eyes. A dress in red and white today, which while unable to decide whether it was a ballroom gown or a tabard remained quite flattering no matter the attached interpretation.

"I heard through the grapevine that your adventure back on Creation was a success," Akua said.

"Heh," Archer snickered, elbowing Zeze. "She called you a plant."

"It was a metaphor," he revealed to her. "... I think. I don't believe even Wolof ever got the spell to work for a living person."

"They haven't," Akua assured him. "Corpses only. Am I to take it, then, that this is to be a council of strategy?"

It was a rhetorical question, we both knew, but one that'd push us into the meat of this meeting. She did like to provide these helpful light touches, though when Hakram was there she was much more careful about their use – I got the feeling she was being exceedingly careful about never stepping on his toes. Likely she figured that trying to step into the position of my right hand was a fool's errand, which to be frank it was. Akua was a lot of things, many of which were technically curses, but socially blind wasn't one of them.

"We have a bit of trouble," I said. "The Iron Prince is a long way from shore, and the tide's getting rowdy."

"Have even ever been on a boat?" Indrani skeptically asked.

"A fishing boat, yes," I smugly replied.

Only when it'd been docked and to get handsy with a boy, but she didn't need to know that.

"By custom she's also high admiral of Callow unless the title is otherwise assigned," Hakram noted. "Which makes her the finest sailor of all assembled here by far."

"I've helmed sailing ships on the Wasaliti at least twice a summer ever since I was-" Akua began, tone irritated, then her face blanked and cleared her throat. "Yet I believe there will be no ships involved here beyond the metaphorical, so-"

I met Indrani's eyes across the table, sharing triumphant grins. It was always a rare treat to bait out of her a genuine reaction. Back when we'd started she'd often fake those to fit in better, but these days when she tried we could usually tell.

"Why are we here, then?" Masego asked me, cutting through Akua's verbal retreat. "Most of us don't have military training, or at least not military officer training. Would you not be served better by a war council of your highest commanders?"

"I already know what needs to be done," I honestly said. "Might have to move the numbers around a bit, but there's not a lot of room for manoeuver when it comes down to it."

I leaned forward over the 'map' Hakram had put together from the seared stone, tapping a finger on the representation of Klaus Papenheim's army. The part of it on the march, at least.

"We need to reinforce those as they give battle to the undead ahead of them," I said.

"No need to explain this for my benefit," Masego frankly said. "I will only pretend to listen to regardless."

Well, at least he was being honest about it.

"I want to know," Indrani piously said. "Because I care about you, and I'm a good friend."

"A valiant effort, number six," Akua murmured. "If stunningly transparent."

"That's rich coming from you, Shifty Spectre," Archer muttered back. "I bet if I shone Light at you it'd go straight through."

"Since Indrani requests it, a quick summary," I said.

I glanced at Hakram, who kicked Zeze under the table. Good man.

"This," I said, as I put down my finger on the Iron Prince's army, "is the other Grand Alliance army in Hainaut. We want to save it, because if we don't we're fucked for the year – if not for much longer than that."

I moved my finger slightly west on the map, maybe a day's march away from Klaus' army.

"This is an undead force, which has to be at least twenty thousand and probably more," I said. "The Iron Prince is marching on it, and will probably beat it in an open battle, but it represents a trap."

I moved even further west, still at the same height. There three forces could be made out, but I ignored the one headed south towards the Cigelin Sisters. That one was General Abigail's problem, or if she got lucky her prey: should the Sisters fall before those reinforcements arrive, Abigail of Summerholm would be in a very good position to simply smash that army when it arrived before her. It was always pleasant to be reminded that, for all his advantages over us, the Dead King had limits to his sight as well.

"This is an army that used to be far to the west, in Luciennerie, but marched east to surprise us here in the valley," I said. "It's large, at least a hundred thousand, and odds are it's going to hit the Iron Prince's army just the day after it fought a battle against the undead force I mentioned previously. That would be *bad*."

Not only had the Prince of Hannover left part of his army behind, which meant he'd be understrength – I was guessing casualties had been rough taking Juvelun so he'd been forced to leave behind troops to protect a large amount of wounded – but the dead would strike after our very mortal enemy had finished fighting another battle, with all the casualties and exhaustion that involved. No, if the Luciennerie columns actually reached Prince Klaus' army then it would be a disaster.

"We are here, more or less," I finished, pointing to a spot on the map.

Northwest of the Iron Prince and the undead he would soon fight, north of the Luciennerie columns. I'd hoped the Twilight Ways would allow us to steal the march on those, but the Dead King hadn't kept a sedate pace. Splitting into several columns would weaken him against an ambush, but it had also allowed the large army to march quicker. When you had the kind of numbers Keter could boast of, often timing was more important than formations.

"That does not seem like the right place to be," Masego assessed. "We should perhaps move towards the Iron Prince, who we are meant to save."

A conclusion I'd not dragged him towards, though I had perhaps gently taken him by the hand and walked him there.

"Which we'll do," I said. "But it can't be only that. If we just reinforce Prince Klaus with all we have, the advancing columns will hit us not long afterwards. That's not a battle I want to give, not right now."

If we got there in time to reinforce our allies, which it was a coin toss we would, then we'd have numbers on our side for the first battle. We'd still take losses, though, and tire our men. Then for the battle that followed we *wouldn't* have the numbers, and we'd have all the damage done by our first fight weighing us down. I honestly believed we'd be able to win that battle too, but the costs would be hard to bear. We'd want to have that fight when we were prepared and well-rested, not buried in blood and dust. As it happened I knew exactly where I wanted to fight that decisive battle: the city of Hainaut, the very capital of the principality.

Which meant I had to prevent the Luciennerie columns from reaching that battlefield, and there honestly weren't twenty ways to do that.

"Which is why-"

"I see," Masego sagely nodded.

I paused. Was he just going to say that at regular intervals in the hope I'd figure that meant he was listening? I glanced at Archer, who offered me winsome smile. Ugh. She hadn't been listening either, had she? Gods, those two had gotten even worse now that they were together. It was like they'd crossbred their character flaws into one single great malevolent chimera.

"Hakram," I sighed.

Masego yelped as he was kicked under the table, and though Indrani smiled mockingly and tried to move back her chair she found that shadows had mysteriously kept it stuck where it was. She glared at Akua.

"Praesi treache- ow, Hakram that was my knee you prick!"

"I've no idea what you could possibly mean, darling," Akua smiled, sipping at a wine glass she'd never poured.

"Which is why we will be fighting a holding action against the enemy columns," I said, "while the majority of our army reinforces Prince Klaus. At the moment, I'm inclined to field only the Order and the Second Army. We'll take a few Named as well, but once more the majority will be headed towards the Iron Prince."

"Ah," Masego frowned, "I must have missed something. Or is the plan truly to fight the largest enemy army with the small force you mentioned, while the rest all gathers to fight together a smaller army that the Prince of Hannover could likely beat alone?"

"No," I mused, "that's a fairly apt summation actually."

He frowned further.

"How many bottles have you *had*?" Zeze severely asked.

Indrani cackled in laughter, while even Hakram cracked a smile. Only loyal – treacherous – reliable – well, relatively speaking – Akua did not descend into opportunistic mockery.

"We slow the enemy by a day, perhaps two, and then retreat as the Prince of Hannover will during the time we bought him," she noted. "It seems achievable. Where is it that you intend to make our stand afterwards, Catherine?"

I tapped a finger on the capital, meeting her eyes.

"Bold," Akua noted.

"Symbolic," I said. "And, aside from that kind of consideration, it's finest set of fortifications in the valley. Our best bet by far."

Abigail would have the Cigelin Sisters secured by then, taking the pressure off of our defensive line, and from behind city walls we'd be able to supply ourselves through the Twilight Ways. If not necessarily for long, given the difficulties of feeding so many people by convoys. Neshamah was after our extermination, so he'd come for us in Hainaut sure as dawn – he might not ever again get this good an opportunity to wipe out our full forces in this front. The great army that'd chased after Prince Klaus from Malmedit would be drawn into this as well, and at the capital of the fallen principality we would roll the dice on the outcome of this campaign.

"It's a delaying action we'll be fighting, Zeze," I added for his sake. "The objective here isn't to win the battle, it's to slow down the enemy while losing as few people as possible and making it away safely."

"I see," Masego said, and I narrowed my eyes.

It seemed like he meant it this time, though, so I let it go.

"I am still unsure why you gathered us here," he then admitted.

"'cause we're all going to be with her in that scrap," Indrani casually said. "So she wants to hear us first. What we need, which Named we want to keep. That about right?"

"It is," I said. "I've an idea or two to slow down the enemy while avoiding a bloody fight, but I'll be relying on all of you. I'll likely be on the field, which means Hakram will be holding command over our Named in my absence while General Hune and Grandmaster Talbot will handle the manoeuvring."

"How many Named do we get to keep?" Indrani asked.

"Four, five tops," I said. "Aside from the people here, of course."

"Then we should bring the Blessed Artificer," Archer bluntly said. "I know she's not exactly the favourite of anyone at this table, but-"

"Large-scale workings, even in something as limited as Light, will be of great use," Masego calmly interrupted. "I agree. I would request the Summoner, myself. His branch of sorcery is highly flexible, and unlike Roland there would be no complications in wresting his magic for use of my own should there be need."

Why was it that the most useful Named so often ended up being the most unpleasant ones? Still, just because I personally disliked both people mentioned did not mean they'd not been brought up for good reasons. The Summoner, in particular, was someone I'd been

inclined to bring in. While tiresome he wasn't too difficult to handle, he really was just that damned useful to have around.

"Who will be leading the Named reinforcing Prince Klaus?" Akua asked.

"Unless one of you requests him, it will be Roland," I said.

The shade cocked her head to the side.

"Not the Grey Pilgrim," she observed.

"I have a use for him, as it happens," I smiled. "Unless one of you objects?"

None did. I doubted Tariq would be hard to talk into it, if he needed to be convinced at all. This sort of stand was right up his alley, and while the Forsworn Healer brought similar strength in healing – superior when it came to groups actually – to the table, there were few Named who could boast of sharper bite than the Peregrine. That made three down, so we still had room for some. I glanced at Hakram.

"I would keep the Apprentice," Adjutant gravelled. "She has been of use, and I have a particular idea in mind."

That had a promising ring to it. Both this talk of idea and Hakram no longer talking of having the young girl along through his teeth.

"Do you now?" I muttered. "Done, then. I'll look forward to it."

My eyes moved to Akua, who had laid her chin on her palm and seemed deep in thought. She worked differently than I did, I'd noticed, when it came to laying schemes. I preferred to have someone to speak with, as I'd found that the back-and-forth and other set of eyes usually helped me find angles, but silence was her own way. I sometimes wondered how much of that had been that, as a girl, there simply would have been no one she could afford to trust with her thoughts.

"I take it you do not have a precise role in mind for me already?" Akua asked.

"No," I said. "I expect I'll be moving between places putting out fires, and I had a thought you might be the solution to my inability to be in two places at once, but that's not set in stone. If you have a proposal, I'm all ears."

"Very forward," Indrani said, not disapprovingly.

I ignored her.

"I have a notion, perhaps," the shade mused. "It have been considering the nature of our enemy, and how best it might be struck at."

"So you have someone in mind," I said.

"I do," Akua Sahelian smiled. "I've a use for the Rapacious Troubadour, my heart."

I blinked. That, uh, had not been the name – Name – I was expecting. But that actually made it easier to claim five Named, since neither the Apprentice nor the Troubadour were considered major battlefield assets. *Mind you, if the Doom of Liesse has a use for a singer I doubt it'll be because she has a hankering for a tune*, I thought.

"You have him, then," I said. "Which makes five."

We had our roster, our plan and our enemy. There'd be a war council later to hammer all the details together, but as far as I was concerned the essentials were settled.

And just like that, to war we went.

Djinn O'Cide

Just for the record, in any number of older books on chess, the process of deciding what move you should make consists of considering some number of "candidate moves", analyzing each of them in turn, and then choosing the one which you decide is best.

The method really hasn't changed, but the terminology has. Speaking of a "candidate move" pretty much implies that you're at least 60 years old. (Basing that on the fact that I'm 53, and the language seems old-fashioned to me.)

TeK

That, actually, does make sense. Do we know how old EE is?

mamm0nn

For all that he's the enemy, the story sure likes to stroke the Dead King's ego about his great sorcery and skill and troop size. Might this all be an elaborate self-written biography of his last great stand?

Ahad Mahmood

EE is the dead king confirmed

Vlatko

I disagree. There are several Grandmasters or International masters between the ages of 20-35 streaming on Twitch who use the term “candidate moves” when describing their thought processes.

KingJulius

Perhaps a resurgence of the term then? It is possible it fell out of vogue in the chess world for a while. I don't know enough to offer that as more than a suggestion though.

LD1977

Kotov invented or at least popularized this term, but I heard it used by modern top GMs. What else could possibly replace it? It is perfect.

I am 43 years old (candidate master).

[Javvies](#)

Uh-oh.

Akua has a plan involving Rapacious Troubadour. I think this will end badly for him, but hopefully he'll be particularly useful before the Dead King puts him much higher on the priority list for targeting.

Ah, the Woe, or most of it, together and bantering. Wonderful.

Insanenoodlyguy

I can't help but wonder if Akua just found her escape plan. Giving a Ghost Wizard access to a soul -eater just seems like a recipe for “make an out for my inevitable execution during the downtime”

[308924810a](#)

Seconded, she's fought Cathreine for the soul of the Dread Empire twice, there needs to be a third and final time.

[Barthumphries](#)

If that happens then Akua will win. Because they tied, then Catherine won and put her in the mantle, and now it's Akua's turn to win.

lightdefender

Pretty sure patterns of three are “loss, tie, win”. The order you give is wrong. It’s also been stated that Cat and Akua had their pattern of three, and won’t get another one.

[Liliet](#)

Well we’ll just have to see won’t we 😊

dadycoool

Too bad Cat’s being so detailed on-screen with her plan. It’ll never work now.

nimelennar

Cat, Hakram, and Akua all have unspecified “uses” for the Named they selected. There’s enough unspoken plan here that it has a good chance of working.

[boballab](#)

Since when has one of Cat’s plans gone worked as she planned it? The worst thing an enemy can do is disrupt one of her plans because she thrives in the chaos caused by that disruption where her opponent does not.

dadycoool

Prince’s Graveyard. She kept everyone in the dark, including us, until the plan came to complete fruition. It worked so well that she realized how addicting it feels.

[boballab](#)

Her plan didn’t work as designed, the final crown was not supposed to be the Grey Pilgrim but her “loyal” minion the former Prince of Winter. Instead it worked out better because she brought back the Grey Pilgrim earning brownie points with the Heroe’s.

Big Brother

We had our roster, our plan and our enemy. There’d be a war council later to hammer all the details together, but as far as I was concerned the essentials were settled.

And just like that, to vote we went.

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/boost>

Insanenoodlyguy

"I'll see about having the list ranking webnovels in the order you like most made official," Wandering Inn idly said.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"She doesn't have that," Defiance of the Fall said, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Of course I don't, number si- I mean, Defiance of the Fall," I replied with a smile.

I winked, botching it just because I knew it being half-assed would piss her off even more.

"Come on," DotF complained. "There's no way I'm last."

"That you think that is why you are, my dear," Metaworld Chronicles gently smiled.

Adrian

Great chappy, but could probably use a second run through editing wise

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, all of the purposes I could see Akua having for the Rapacious Troubadour are equally insane, and more than a few get into the kind of rule 34 territory that makes me want to bleach my brain. Needless to say, I'm rather excited to see how this goes.

caoimhinh

I bet the Rapacious Troubadour is gonna be lusting after Akua. He has a thing for souls, after all.

RoflCat

I believe the last time we got his POV during an interlude he's expressed very strong 'interests' in Akua seeing as she's not a typical shade.

edrey

well. if i compare with Lord of the rings, the battle in the capital should be like the abyss of helm and the bridge is like Moria's mines, so if the elves appear i won be surprised. and for Akua and the troubadour, the only thing a i can imagine is tricking the DK and making him lose a soul shard. lots of information there.

Frivolous

Doubt that's the reason. Eating Neshamah's soul shard would likely result in him possessing the Troubadour, just as he did Masego.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, but that's the trick: Masego was really fucking hard to subdue or even get to because he's powerful as shit.

Troubadour, now...

mamm0nn

"I glanced at Hakram, who kicked Zeze under the table. Good man."

Wait, but how? With what legs? What?

For all this talk about Akua's choice and perhaps the troubles brewing from it, perhaps the Adjutant's 'plan' for Apprentice might be the hidden knife. She's still a hero and he a now embittered falling villain.

And finally:

Cat: This is a stealth mission! We are to swoop in and ambush the Dead King's forces before they are even aware that we're there!

Opens up a massive eye in the sky that rocks the anti-scrying magics in the entire principality and blows up entire hills, which is no doubt seen and felt from both the undead and the Iron Prince's army camps.

Cat: Zeze, how subtle are we!?!

Masego: What!?

Cat: I SAID, ARE WE BEING SUBTLE!?

Masego: NO WAY ANYONE CAN KNOW THIS MASSIVE EYE IN THE SKY IS MADE BY US, THEY'LL NEVER SEE US COMING!!!

Ritual ends

Cat: Alright, now let's have Artificer clean up this place with Light to leave no traces. This is a stealth mission after all, we wouldn't want to leave traces of our presence behind for DK to find. He doesn't know we're here yet, guys.

AceOfSword

I think the main purpose for the cleanup of the ritual with Light is to make sure the Dead King can't determine *what* they did exactly. You wouldn't want him reverse engineering it and adapting his anti-scrying measures.

mamm0nn

They used the vision that the Choirs used for this trick. Though it's silly that DK's scrying hasn't managed to block their unchanging and mostly brute force means of gazing all

when he's able to somehow keep up with the latest secret tech scrying methods, it does suggest that DK simply cannot block that type of scrying.

And if the means of looking itself cannot be blocked, then the means of receiving it cannot be stopped by wide area blanketing spells instead because it's both just as brute force in practice and a guided receiving rather than fanning out energy to receive.

[Liliet](#)

Hakram had one (1) leg, a fully sufficient number for kicking

Morgenstern

And he has prosthetics; this very chapter talked of having him out of the chair again in the future, because the prosthetics are adapting nicely.

[Liliet](#)

I thought he didn't have the prosthetics yet, but that makes more sense actually.

DoOd

He doesn't, it's said the prosthetics will be sufficiently attuned for surgery soon.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Re: Hakram kicking Zeze: remember when he needed an extra hand to choke out Scribe? I choose to believe it's like that.

shikkarasu

I'm still waiting for him to jump out of that chair and be murdering someone before he realises that he is using Ghost Limbs again. Bonus Points if it is in response to Catherine Speaking at him and telling him to **Stand**.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hell yeah. Phantom limb syndrome is pretty sucky in our world, but in the Guideverse it's a boon.

NerfContessa

You
Made
My
Evening

Laughing sooo hard...

Juff

Typo Thread:

it it clear > it clear
millennia's > millennia
were a pulse > was a pulse
magnifying glass > magnifying glasses
the Prince Klaus' column > the Prince's column (or remove the)
exactly good > exactly been good
"Both you." > "Both of you."
wheelchair Hakram > wheelchair, Hakram
Besides, without (extra space in front)
grim would > grim, it would
impressive, > impressive.
to listen to > to listen to it
it fought a > it fights a
our very mortal enemy (should this be ally)
me winsome > me a winsome
we bought him > we buy him
it's finest > it's the finest
It have been > I have been
"I do," (something seems to be missing between this and the
previous paragraph)

Frivolous

So Hierophant had stolen a mystery from an entity that could win.

=====

"Not exactly," Roland told me. "Think of angels as seeing the world through a lens. What you can witness seared here is what we mortals would see when looking through that same lens."

=====

Question: Are we to take it, then, that the 'entity that could win' that Hierophant had stolen a mystery from was an angel?

Also: I feel really suspicious about what Hakram and Akua have in mind, especially Hakram. This better not be a complicated kamikaze plot.

[Liliet](#)

Probably Mercy, seeing how they're at hand 😊

Frivolous

Wait, no, I think that it must not be an angel, or at least not Mercy, because if it was, then Tariq would have simply asked Mercy and Mercy would have answered.

Or maybe Mercy couldn't answer, because to do so would make Tariq's head explode?

What do you all think? Mercy, or something else?

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean Masego cribbed his technology from watching angels, he didn't literally summon an angel. Mercy presumably cannot share their perspective with mortals directly in the way Masego requires here.

shikkarasu

Mercy is often unreliable, whispering to Tariq when he did not ask and refusing to answer when he does. If Mercy wanted them to know, (and were permitted to by the ineffing rules the the Divine) Mercy would have told Tariq immediately.

Zeze may have copied the angels watching the Trial or, more likely I feel, copied what he witnessed just before God V Warlock 2018.

"Wekesa closed his eyes just in time. It'd been only the smallest possible sliver of attention from Above, he realized." Zeze would have seen what it was like for a God to glance upon creation. The special effects are similar: swirling clouds and a mask/eye appearing in the sky, flashing blindingly and with terrible power.

...which also means that this was a very painful ritual to invent. He had to recreate the force that killed his fathers. "He screamed, but did not flinch."

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh.

Ooof.

Big Brother

You have to remember, Masego has seen an /actual/ Godhead as well, when he lost his fathers.

Earl of Purple

Well, I don't know about anyone else, but I like all the named Names. And I hope we get more on the Rapacious Troubadour. He's not really a martial Name, and I like non-martial Named. Do we know if he has the Gift?

Dresden 67

He mentioned back in Interlude: Reprobates that his arcane powers were minor compared to the Hierophant, so I presume he does.

origamiflame

To be fair, almost everyone's arcane powers are minor compared to the Hierophant.

Frivolous

Was anyone else singing along to or listening to Eye in the Sky by The Alan Parsons Project while reading this?

Masego sings: I am the eye in the sky looking at youuuuuu.

Tariq sings: I can read your mind.

Catherine sings: I am the maker of rules. Dealing with foooooools, I can cheat you blind.

Masego sings: And I don't need to see any more, to know that.

Tariq sings: I can read your mind, I can read your mind, I can read your mind, I can read your mind.

Also: I'm so happy, Masego has finally learned to recognize when a metaphor is used in conversation! A great sign of his progress as part of the Woe.

Clint

And so Akua's transition into a full member of the Woe is complete. The five of them gathered for a council of war and the five of them each chose a Named to join them.

That seems ominous. I hope Cat's still questioning Akua's plans and motivations and then wiping her memory of it – and that Akua hasn't figured out how to work around such a possibility.

Liliet

Cat couldn't do that for all this time because she lost her ability to Speak alongside the skeleton of Squire frozen into Winter.

Now she can Speak again, but I frankly doubt she's doing that to Akua. She's got easier observation methods.

shikkarasu

Not that I think Cat is doing this, but I would not be surprised if she had a similar degree of control over Akua still. Before it was mentioned that Akua being made of Winter was part of what allowed Cat such precise control (similar to how Alaya needed to thread in her **Rule** to achieve similar

results). These days Akua is made of Night, which is nominally Catherine's to command.

That said, I expect that they are working toward a similar duality to the Sisters, even if Akua doesn't know it. If that's true then one cannot be much more powerful, if at all, compared to the other.

Frivolous

Catherine/Akua duality as per Andronike/Komena? That's a fascinating and inspired idea.

Or rather, Komena/Andronike. Cat and Komena resemble each other more, as do Andronike and Akua. Heh, their names even start the same way – C/K and A/A.

Congratulations, shikkarasu.

Jkyoulost

I feel like you're selling Cat short a little. She's First Under the Night still and Akua is a shade that derives her existence by being a parasite on Cat's connection to the Night, given to her by the Sisters. Between Andronika and Cat I'm sure they have plenty of ways to creatively use Night to pick through Akua's mind.

hakureireimu

Cat is 100% on the Akua redemption arc.

superkeaton

Hah, they blew up hills making radar, or a rough equivalent. That's great!

Tom

> Adjutant had transcribed seared stone into what looked like a halfway decent overview of central Hainaut in less than an hour with only one hand to use. A useful reminder that, even when crippled in a wheelchair Hakram could do the work of several people in a fraction of the time it would have taken them with objectively superior results.

He totally used Rampage for this.

Also I think GP is gonna die in this holding action. Coming up to the end so tension must rise, White Knight is having a crisis and could conceivably power up a lot, especially if Good has recently lost a major player and therefore can add additional weight to their side....

Matthew Wells

We still have a whole book left...

Aotrs Commander

Ahahahahahahaha!

Now that's what I call SCRYING!

(Note to self: Learn how to do that...)

aran

If it's so well-fortified, I'm kind of confused why she expects to just walk in and use those fortifications. Neshamah has occupied the whole province and dug in to the point of literally hollowing out entire hills; wouldn't he also garrison the city?

Chapter 65: Cross-Check

"Victory lies in understanding the intentions of the enemy. Therefore, a general with no intentions cannot be beaten."

– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

"So what is this place called again?"

"Maillac, my queen."

I idly glanced at the man who'd replied to my question. Sir Brandon Talbot, Grandmaster of the Order of Broken Bells, had not been much changed by the war. I was often surprised by that. His once-long hair had been cut short but the beard and the strong build remained just the same as when I'd first met him, sitting in a cell where Juniper had tossed him. Many of the great officers of the Army of Callow and other hosts strained under their burden of their position, but on the contrary Brandon Talbot had taken rather well to this war. It helped, I suspected, than this was all simpler the kinds of war he'd known before – be it the Folly, where he had fought to maintain Praesi rule under my banner, or the Tenth Crusade when he'd followed a homegrown villain against invading heroes.

There was no one alive who could bring horrors to bear that would rival the Dead King's, but for all the madness this was the kind

of war that my people were most comfortable waging: black and white, no truce with the Enemy. I sometimes envied that he was not in a position to truly grasp the kind of ugly dealings necessary to keep something like the Grand Alliance afloat. A great good too often came at the costs of a hundred petty evils, like a saint standing on a pedestals devils had paid for.

"Gods, and to think someone believed it a sound notion to build a village here," I said. "They must have been drunk."

The dark-haired nobleman – one of the few of the breed I caught myself occasionally liking – let out a small amused noise.

"Some of the land north of Harrow is not so dissimilar, I am told," Brandon Talbot said. "I was taught as a boy that the people there are usually poor but skilled hunters and fishermen. As bowmen they have a high reputation in certain parts, though the Deoraithe are a hard shadow to escape in that art."

"Not much left to hunt or fish here," I replied. "Usually isn't, after the Dead King had a go."

If the Second Army was to make a stand against a wildly larger amount of enemy soldiers without getting butchered and overwhelmed, picking the ground it was going to make that stand on was crucial. We'd dug through maps and records as well as the officers from Hainaut that Princess Beatrice had leant me before picking the abandoned village of Maillac, and for all that the place was a hole in the ground for our purposes it was perfect. See, for all that undead had less trouble with difficult terrain than living soldiers they didn't actually get to ignore that terrain. Swamps, bogs, or other combination of mud and scrub water and crawling things were easier for undead to go through because unlike people they wouldn't get cold or tired or sick – or even attacked by animals, usually.

But in no way did that mean a swamp was something easy for undead soldiers to march through.

The skeletons still wore armour, still weighed heavy, and as a rule tended to be significantly less deft and agile than living soldiers besides. Marching through a mire would wreak havoc on their lines and they'd be damned slow going through mud – or, if they weren't, would be so lightly armoured that our priests would scythe through them like wheat with volleys of Light. It was a comparative advantage the undead had, not an absolute one. And that meant that a place like Maillac made for very good grounds to defend: the village had stood on a relatively large peninsula surrounded by swamplands in every direction but the southeast, and with few trees in the immediate area that would obscure line of sight when the dead came from the west.

We wouldn't be able to fit the entire Second Army on the peninsula that locals apparently called 'the Boot' – seen from a high hill in the distance it looked vaguely boot-like, I'd been told after asking – as ten thousand soldiers would be much too many, but we could fit at least half and then position the rest on the broader solid grounds behind the peninsula, which were thankfully rather difficult to access. To the north and south there were rock formations and deep water, both of which would screw with enemy advance even worse than the swamps. That meant that open grounds around the Boot would be the best approach for the dead, short of circling rather far around.

Which sounded like a good idea for them, at first glance, as it would allowed them to attack us from solid land an attempt an encirclement of our army divided between the Boot and the broader shore. I almost hoped they made the mistake of attempting that, though, as the amount of time it would take them to both gather large enough forces and circle around us meant my army would get to delay the dead long enough for Prince Klaus to get away and then escape ourselves without even giving battle. While I might have chosen Maillac as a battle site first and foremost, I wouldn't complain if we got to evacuate it without first having fought said battle.

Not that we'd be so lucky. I'd stripped ten thousand legionaries and my finest horse from the rest of the army before dangling them like juicy bait out here in the wilds, the Dead King wasn't going to miss the opportunity to bloody us a bit. Still, I'd not come this far by leaving things to chance.

"I can see little use for the Order in the battlefield you have chosen us, Your Majesty," Sir Brandon admitted. "Yet it is not your habit to act without purpose, so I must presume there is one."

"The swamp would be hell on the horses, and you're much too heavy," I agreed. "But I don't actually intend for you to fight *here*, Talbot."

Blue eyes brightened with understanding.

"We are to go a'raiding, then," the Grandmaster smiled.

"And I with you," I agreed. "We'll be taking the Twilight Ways. Once the Second Army has begun setting up here, you and I are going to make such a nuisance out of the Order in these parts that Keter will *have* to come and give us a fight."

"To vex the Enemy is always a pleasure," the bearded knight said, sounding pleased. "Even more so if we confound him into an even greater defeat."

I looked at him, for a moment, and glimpsed the part of his kind that my people had loved for so long. That fearless, hardy breed of nobles that'd known sword and spear just as well as dances and laughed as the charged under the banners of the Fairfaxes and the Albans to turn back the invaders of the east and the west. War wasn't a trade to him, I thought, not like it was to the Legions and so many in the Army. War was part of who he was, just as much as his name or his blood. *War isn't just what we do, Catherine, it's what we are*, Juniper had once told me. She'd been speaking of her own people, that night, but so often I found that Praes and Callow were more deeply intertwined than either care to admit.

"I mean to do more than just vex," I said. "Half the world still sits up when our war horns are sounded, Talbot. I mean to brand that fear anew in the legions of the dead."

His fist struck his breastplate over his heart, the thump pleasantly solid to the ear.

"We are at your command, Queen Catherine," the knight said.

For a few years yet, I thought. It would be enough.

I would *make* it enough.

—

Sapper-General Pickler, whose notion of the decorum due to her rank usually varied between 'sounds like Commander Waffler's problem' and 'if I'm not covered in dust I'm no doing this right', crouched down on the shore and dipped a crooked green finger in the mud. After taking a long sniff, she licked it and hummed.

"So?"

"Rich silt," Pickler told me. "Good material. Mind you, mudbricks in this humid a locale would be foolish. There's clay, though, and we can use that for fired bricks. The trees in this dump aren't for much of anything, though. I'll need companies out foraging for decent firewood if we're going to be cooking bricks."

It was in moments like this that I was awe at what something like the War College actually stood for, what it achieved. That little exchange we'd just had alone was something that'd be impossible to have in most armies of our age. See, there were engineers in the ranks of Procer and the Free Cities with knowledge much like Pickler's. Neither goblins nor Praesi had a monopoly on such things. But none of these had the *rest*. Pickler had been taught about mages, so she understood that we couldn't just use spells to make her fired bricks: we'd half-kill our mages with

exhaustion before we were anywhere done. Pickler had been taught about defensive tactics, so she knew how quickly I'd need the bricks and that if I didn't get enough making any was a waste of time: that meant making many fires, and firewood.

Pickler had been taught about limited manpower logistics, too, and so combining all these teachings in a few moments she'd put together a proposal. One tailored to the rough amount of people I'd be able to spare, and how many would be needed to achieve what needed to be done in our current time strictures. In effect, several companies of regulars on rotation with attached mages for Twilight Ways access.

Most of the contemporary armies of my allies and enemies had all this knowledge, in practice, but none of them had it concentrated in the same person. Maybe a few exceptional fantassin captains might have most of these competences, or rare Helikean generals, but those individuals would be rare. My father had made the War College into a place that could make entire companies of those rare individuals every year. There were many who still thought the Conquest had been an outlier, an anomaly made possible only by the genius of the Black Knight and the Marshals of Callow. Those people were fools. The Conquest had been won in stone classrooms a decade before armies lined up on both sides of the Fields of Streges.

"You'll have them," I said. "How much can you fortify in two days?"

"The Boot will be walled up, and we'll have platforms for those of my ballistas you didn't hand off to your toy general," Pickler replied, a tad peevishly. "We'll have to use palisades for the part stretching between the end of the boot and the deep waters to the south. We won't be able to put up anything else in time."

I slowly nodded, fixing the picture in my mind's eyes. The peninsula was where I wanted clay walls the most, since it would be suffering the brunt of the enemy assault. Palisades to the south would get rough, given that Keter usually was capable of toppling those by throwing enough corpses at them – to say nothing of constructs or Revenants – but we weren't trying to make an invincible citadel out of this chunk of swamp. Favourable fighting grounds would have to be enough.

"And the northern grounds?" I pressed.

The peninsula on which Maillac was built looked like a boot fitted to a particularly fat foot, but it wasn't jutting out of perfectly straight dry – well, dryer anyway – land. To the south a wavy shoreline connected to the top edge of the boot kept going for about two hundred feet before jutting rocks and deep water made the grounds impractical to pass. As Pickler had said, we'd cover that stretch with palisades. But from the uppermost top

edge of the boot the shoreline instead went straight for maybe forty feet before jutting upwards for a hundred feet and curving east into the second mass of rocks and deep water that were the reason I'd picked Maillac as our battlefield in the first place.

It meant there was a stretch of water between the Boot and the shore, which to make things even worse wasn't even particularly deep. Skeletons coming through the mire would use it as a ramp to flood our northern flank, it was pretty much a given.

"If we had a week I'd sink a stone wall and drain it," Pickler replied with a sigh that rattled through her teeth, "but we don't. The mud is too soft there, Catherine, and unlike the Boot or the deeper shore there's no solid layer to steady a palisade on."

I grimaced.

"So we make a fort deeper in and dig in for a rough fight," I summarized.

"I can make fortified nests for scorpions, with an eye to firing on anything that emerges from the water," my Sapper-General said. "But anything beyond that would take more time and hands than we have to spare."

She sounded almost apologetic, which was rare for her.

"These are imperfect grounds," I said. "I didn't expect you to wave a magic wand and make them into an impenetrable fortress. Already you're doing wonders, Pickler."

And I wasn't lying for her benefit there: that in the span of a mere two days my sappers would be able to turn this defendable stretch of swamp into a makeshift fortress was beyond impressive. When I'd made the decision to use only the Second Army and the Order as delaying forces, I'd been able to make that decision comfortably because I'd known almost half of the sapper corps remained with me instead of manning the siege engines that by now General Abigail would be using to reduce the Cigelin Sisters. I relied on my sappers a great deal, which I knew they took pride in, but I would not let the burden of unrealistic expectations crush them.

"I want to do more," Pickler admitted, to my surprise. "There won't be another war like this in my lifetime, Catherine. This is the one I'll get to fight, the one I'll get to make my teeth on."

She clicked her teeth, the flash of needle-like row betraying what had to be genuine irritation. Goblins were easier to read than humans, in some ways – most didn't bother to hide their body language the way a deceitful human would, since most of my race never learned goblin body subtext.

"I work with imperfect tools, the way all my predecessors have," Pickler said, "but it... irks, that I know we could be better. That we could match Keter blow for blow, if we had the time and the coin."

I hid a fond smile. Leave it to my Sapper-General to be irked by being on the lesser side in an arms race with the Hidden Horror. Even most heroes, those chosen few blessed with the belief of promised victory, usually limited their ambition to survival and eking out a win when it came to the Original Abomination. Yet Pickler of the High Ridge tribe had been forged of goblin steel tempered in Wasteland fire, kept sharp by the whetstone of the Uncivil Wars. When faced with dreadful might, the Sapper-General of Callow's nature was not to cower but to crave to surpass it.

"War's not over," I said. "One day it will take us to the gates of the Crown of the Dead itself, Pickler."

I offered her a smile.

"On that day, I expect you will find your coffers filled to burst and few requests beyond acquiescence," I said.

"Gobbler grant me breath until then," Pickler of the High Ridge tribe grinned, all teeth and malice, and offered a quick bow. "I'll get started on the work, Your Majesty."

I nodded back, mind already moving. The Order of Broken Bells was already mustering for the raids, picking out targets with General Hune and Hakram, and now my Sapper-General had assignments and hands to see it through. It was time, then, to see to the... irregulars.

—

I'd begun with Masego because I'd figured it would be less unsettling to look at than whatever it was that Akua wanted the Rapacious Troubadour for, but alas it seemed that hubris had come around to bite me in the tit. That Hierophant would be standing atop a flat floating stone was sadly not unexpected, nor were the smaller rocks circling around him with visibly shifting runes carved into them. That the Grey Pilgrim would be stand with him there, though, head cocked to the side as if he were listening to someone talking as he *corrected* some of the runework, very much was.

"- being very helpful," I heard Zeze say, tone appreciative. "I could talk to Catherine about remuneration, if you'd like, or draw from Arsenal discretionary funds."

Well, that was nice of him.

"A kind thought," Tariq drily replied, "but the Ophanim require no compensation for their help."

Wait, had he been talking about paying the Choir of Mercy? Godsdamnit, Masego, we *definitely* didn't have room for that in the budget. I cleared my throat as I got closer, as it seemed both of them were too involved with their work to be paying attention to their surroundings.

"Catherine," Hierophant greeted me. "Come to have a look?"

"You might say that," I replied. "Pilgrim, always a pleasure to see you."

I did not bother to specify that I'd not actually expected to see him, though, as it was pretty much implied by his mere presence here.

"And you," the old man said, sounding amused. "We have been lending a hand to the Lord Hierophant, you see, as his work has proved to have... surprising provenances."

"I figured out how angels smite people," Zeze said, sounding very pleased with himself. "More or less. When the Ophanim tried to kill us all at Lyonceau I got a good look."

"That was not their intent at all," Tariq sighed. "The death of the Tyrant of Helike – a necessity, I'm sure you'll agree – was all that was sought."

"By smiting," Masego helpfully specified. "Which I am now reproducing, only without the angels."

"Are you now," I faintly said. "How lovely."

I looked to the Pilgrim, expecting an elaboration but receiving only a blithe shrug.

"It's not an inaccurate description," Tariq said. "They're very interested in seeing if it works."

"Are they now," I said, tone grown even fainter. "That's nice."

"Now," Masego said, "I know what you're thinking."

He tried to lean against a rotating stone but mistimed it and almost stumbled off the floating stone, the Pilgrim discreetly pulling at his robes so he wouldn't.

"I doubt that," I noted, "but go on."

"If a Choir does not power the smiting, what *does*?" Hierophant enthusiastically asked.

"The bone-deep existential dread of all who witness your works?" I suggested.

"Too narrow, but you're along the right path," Masego encouraged me.

I glanced at Tariq.

"I thought you Light-wielding types had objections to blasphemy," I said.

And this felt, like, maybe two or three steps past simple blasphemy. I'd say we were uncovering fresh new heretical horizons, but that was always a hard claim to make for anyone remotely familiar with Praesi history.

"Smiting is being used as a purely technical term here, with no religious connotations," the Grey Pilgrim serenely replied.

Tariq, you shit, I uncharitably thought.

"Besides, if this endeavour succeeds it may be possible to reproduce it purely using Light," the old man airily continued.

Meaning that Zeze's brain was being utterly terrifying, as usual, but that in this particular case it might lead to a skill usable for heroes down the line – and Crows, wasn't *that* particular prospect worth a fucking shiver or two? – so he was willing to not only refrain from objecting but actively help. I narrowed my eyes at the smiling old man, knowing Goods might just be getting the better bargain here. There was no guaranteed that Hierophant would ever be able to pass this down to anyone else on my side, so the knowledge might very well die out. The Choir of Mercy, though, would not forget a damned thing.

And the Ophanim were not, in my experience, shy about handing out this sort of knowledge to their favourites.

"How fortunate," I replied with a grunt. "What is it you're using, Masego?"

"I had thought to use Night, at first," the dark-skinned mage idly said, "but Sve Noc did not seem willing. So instead we will draw on Arcadia for power and use runework to give the power shape."

I blinked.

"And that'll work?" I asked

"Should it not, I expect the result will be a large explosion followed by temporary instability in the weave of Creation on a local level," Tariq noted.

"We can use that too," Masego happily told me. "So there's really no downside."

I closed my eyes and breathed out. Well, he wasn't exactly *wrong*. Mind you, Zeze tended to be very reasonable even when suggesting utter lunacy so that wouldn't be a first. And this seemed like a functioning weapon, if an unstable and dangerous one. I opened my eyes.

"This won't hurt our own?" I asked.

"No," Masego replied, tone serious. "Precautions were taken. It will not kill your soldiers."

"Then all hail the mighty smiters," I drily said. "Have fun, you two, and try not to bring down Arcadia Resplendent on our heads."

Which might have been a tad hypocritical of me to say, I mentally acknowledged as I limped at and left them to their work, since *I* was the one who kept stealing lakes from there.

—

I caught a few bits of the song on the wind before I saw either of them, the almost mournful tone of the Troubadour's voice matching the sad strums of his cithern. The tent was wide open, leaving the song to take to the sky unhindered.

"- we of steel,

Forged in the east

As turns the wheel

And carrion feast."

I knew precious few Praesi songs, unless you counted Legion ones, but this one I'd heard of before. *The Tyranny of the Sun*, it was called, an old war song from the days of the Sixty Years War. It'd been banned since, but banning a song only rarely succeeded at stamping it out. Making it forbidden tended to raise interest, if anything. The few Praesi tunes I'd heard – *Count the Nights*, *Upon All the World* and *Burning Kiss* – tended towards the boastful or the romantic, not the almost wistful beat of this one. It was, I suddenly recalled, a favourite of my father's. Given that this had to be a request if Akua's, I almost smiled at the thoughts.

Neither of them would be particularly pleased to hear they had something in common, even something as small as a liking for a song.

I found the both of them seated inside. The Rapacious Troubadour was sprawled indolently in a chair, long crooked fingers dancing across his cithern as he smiled. Dark-haired and pale, the man

would have been handsome if not for the too-red lips and insincere eyes. Though he wore armour when battle was at hand, he rarely bothered without immediate danger to move him: his tunic and cloak were of tasteful cut and good make, in shades of purple, while both trousers and boots were leather. He'd been looking at Akua with something like hunger in his gaze when I entered, though he immediately averted his eyes. *Ah, but is it the looks or the soul that draw your attention?*

The shade herself had claimed a small table and a folding chair, leaning forward with quill and parchment in hand – which bared an interesting expanse of smooth skin, given the generous neckline of her red dress patterned with what looked like peacock feathers in blue. I'd seen enough of Akua actively trying to appeal to suspect she wasn't even trying to be enticing at the moment. She was just good-looking enough that even at work it looked like she was posing for a painting.

"Dearest," the devil in question said, raising her head to smile at me. "How kind of you to visit."

The Troubadour eased into an interruption of the song, the notes fading naturally, and then offered me a short bow.

"Your Majesty," Lucien greeted me. "Ever a pleasure."

"Is it now?" I mused. "Good to know."

"Do not bully my singer," Akua chided me. "He has been singing the loveliest songs."

"The Tyranny of the Sun?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Somewhat maudlin, I know," she smiled, "but it has such a pleasant melody."

I smiled at her, knowing something she did not and amused by the secret.

"Got anything out of it?" I asked, glancing at her parchment.

A magical formula, by the looks of it. I could recognize certain parts of it from our lessons – wait, no, this was a ritual but it was meant to be used with Night. It just looked like sorcery because she was basing its workings on Trismegistan principles. I leaned in, frowning as I took a closer look. The scale of the power used would be large, since she was using the notations that meant every number mean should be multiplied by a thousand, but the duration would be... short? Maybe just a few breaths. And I wasn't recognizing the end of her formula at all, there wasn't even a boundary strength or an allowed variance.

Mind you, for all my lessons I was still essentially a drunken monkey trying to decipher the works of one of the greats of our age so my incomprehension should not be a surprise.

"I believe so," Akua smiled. "It occurred to me, my heart, that the strengths of Night lie in its flexibility. Yet this comes at the price of a weakness, namely that it is only ever second best in all the many things it can accomplish."

If even that, I thought. I called it the power of a thief for a reason. She wasn't wrong, though, and if anything she was underselling it: given equal Night and Light on both sides of a struggle, Light would win ten times out of ten. Entities wielding Light and Night weren't necessarily bound to that outcome, mind you, but in a straight fight it had to be said that Light always won. Considering that the prevailing theory was that Light had been made by the Gods Above when Creation was first built and that Night was only indirectly the work of the Gods Below, that made a great deal of sense to me.

"Let's say I agree," I replied. "What follows?"

"A great deal of power that could benefit from a... more defined method of channeling," Akua said. "One more deeply aligned with Creation."

I studied her for a moment, then discreetly flicked my eyes towards the Rapacious Troubadour. Her smile widened.

"Huh," I said. "Is that... wise?"

She read between the lines, catching on to my very delicate question of 'are you *sure* using the soul-eating villain as a Night-channel isn't going to fuck us over?'.

"It is my ritual," she easily replied. "It remains in my hands from beginning to end."

Meaning that the Rapacious Troubadour would be a ritual component more than an active participant. Ah, I was already slightly more comfortable with this. Still not exactly eager, but damned few of the tricks we needed to win this war were anything that could reasonably be called safe.

"And you're sure you'll get results," I said.

"I have proved the underlying principles," Akua said, and leaned back as if to offer me a closer look at her notes.

Yeah, that would serve no real purpose. I had an almost decent handle on basic Trismegistan spell formulas these days – might not be able to *make* one, but was reliably able to pick out which part did what – but taking a gander at the kind of work that lay

behind crafting an entirely new ritual, one working and Night and somehow involving a Named, would be absurd. I did not have the knowledge to parse the knowledge necessary to grasp the principles behind the basics of what was involved there.

"I'll take you to your word," I easily said. "But what is it your ritual will do, exactly?"

She gestured for me to come closer and whispered the answer in my ear. I drew back with a startled look.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"The effects could be inferior to my expectations, but there will be effects," Akua calmly said. "Of that there can be no doubt."

I let out a low whistle.

"Well, here's hoping it takes fully," I said. "It would make a real difference, and not just in the coming battle."

"I expect Trismegistus will mend the weakness eventually," the shade shrugged. "Yet for now we have the element of surprise, so a success can be reasonably hoped for."

Mhm. She'd not used that name as a coincidence: it was a veiled reminder that there was a reason Praesi magic was called *Trismegistan* sorcery. We were using his own methods against him, which meant our advantage was likely to be quite temporary.

"I'll dare hope for it, then," I said. "Did I glimpse correctly that you'll be using a song?"

"Indeed," Akua said, sounding pleased. "Do you have a particular preference? Lucien has proved to have a remarkable repertoire at his disposal."

I glanced at the smiling man in question. Yeah I figured he would, what with all the godsdamned souls he'd eaten.

"It's your ritual," I said. "Let it be your song as well."

"You do me honour," the golden-eyed beauty said. "As it happens, I did have a thought."

"Oh?"

"*Stars From the Sky*," Akua said in Mtethwa. "It is ancient, but remains sung for good reason."

"Never heard of it," I replied, "but I'll look forward to mending that."

She inclined her head.

"I will endeavour," Akua Sahelian smiled, "not to disappoint."

Kel

First!

ruduen

Do the topwebfiction thing!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Huh. I'm... kind of curious about the distinctions between technical smiting and divine smiting. Of course, I don't think Masego even minds adding to the Heroes' arsenal, as long as he's contributed to the sum knowledge in the world.

Liliet

Probably the fact it doesn't require angels' will, and only that.

And Masego would probably be confused at Catherine even considering that as a possible downside for a moment. Aren't they allies with heroes now? What is he not following?

caoimhinh

Masego would be like:

"Are we planning to murder Heroes again? Nobody tells me these things!"

KageLupus

If I remember right, "smiting" is the act of scouring creation clean in an area. It destroys everything in that area including more abstract concepts like memory. I am basing that on White Knight not being able to Remember what happened in an area that was smited. Smitten? Smote.

If I had to guess at the metaphysics of the act, smiting seems to flood a part of Creation with enough energy that Creation itself warps, and when the effect ends what you are left with is a big circle of barren rock. The Ophanim clearly have enough energy to throw around to accomplish that, and it sounds like Zeze is going to use Arcadia as a battery for his ritual. I would assume that if the same could be done using Light it would have to be on a much smaller scale or by a very powerful

Named. Imagine something like the second sun that Tariq summoned, but localized in a much smaller area.

Liliet

> If I had to guess at the metaphysics of the act, smiting seems to flood a part of Creation with enough energy that Creation itself warps, and when the effect ends what you are left with is a big circle of barren rock.

I think smiting might be distinct from the angelic erasure, because that one explicitly RESTORES the fabric of Creation where it has been damaged by demons and the like. It's been noted to be the reason why Callow still, like, exists after so many creative Dread Emperors. And isn't a wasteland, unlike.

Of course if Masego is managing to reverse engineer the process of factory resetting select parts of Creation that's even more awesomer somehow :0

Konstantin von Karstein

What makes the memories disappear and restore the fabric of Creation is the presence of the Angel itself, not the act of smiting. I suppose that at First Llesse the Angel of Contrition would have had the same effect even without smiting.

Someperson

I admit I'm morbidly curious what sort of effects a Night-based smiting would have.

Like, I get the crows are probably still mad at Masego for turning down their offer and ruffling their feathers, but isn't the opportunity to learn angelic smiting techniques a pretty big boon for them? Because the Ophanim aren't necessarily the only ones who could benefit from that sort of knowledge in the long run.

Alex K

Sounds like we are going to hear a new song in the upcoming battle. That's always a treat 😊

Xinci

Hm, logically if Angels smiting is just rearranging the properties of Creation to their default/pure state, then the main factors are the power reservoir its being drawn from and the values of the factors being reinforced. So if the runes are right and they have access to a power source they could mimic it with Light. Hm...useful for crafters like Adanna perhaps.

It sounds like Akua is kind of mimicking spell singing while also applying the properties of boundaries we saw with Warlock? The closer something is to Creation the easier it is to trick things into happening, so shes aligning it to something pure(a cascade effect?) using the Troubadour as a conduit. Hm I guess the properties of Named souls do seem useful for that kind of thing. Wonder if you could substitute the Named for another properly scaffolded soul.

[Liliet](#)

> It sounds like Akua is kind of mimicking spell singing

I don't think so! Spell singing seems to rely on different principles / properties of Creation than the Trismegistan stuff. Her ritual happens to involve spells and singing, but I would guess it's as opposite from what the Gigantes do as it gets. Don't forget spell singing is known for ridiculous power/scale engaged just by the song itself, while Akua is going to be using Night as the power source.

caoimhinh

An underlying common principle might be there.

The Gigantes use different methods than Trismegistan sorcery, true. But this ritual which Akua is developing might be touching on one of the basics of Gigant's thaumaturgy. Like... I don't know, (Forgive my tortured metaphor) a basketball player and a baseball player both using their hands and eyes to throw a ball. Different styles, objectives, and specific rules at play, yet underneath that there are some deeper laws affecting both, like gravity.

Remember that the song is just a method, the actual power comes from the second soul that the Gigantes forge out of astral energies (which really, *really* sounds like the concept of Nascent Soul from Xianxia Cultivation novels to me)

The key to this ritual, in my opinion, is souls. Which is why Akua requires the Rapacious Troubadour. Night will be the source of strength, but the method of channeling will be the ritual using the Rapacious Troubadour's song, which we could speculate is related to the souls he consumes.

My guess for the effect of the ritual is that it will target Revenants' souls or at the least the constructs of Necromancy binding souls to undead bodies. Which would really be a game-breaker in this war.

[Liliet](#)

Oh yeah I forgot about the second soul.

Still, I doubt there's only one underlying principle for using songs to channel magic, any more than there's only one underlying principle for using gestures to channel magic, or using rituals to channel magic. It's just a medium with its own strengths and weaknesses.

caoimhinh

Yeah, that's why I say she might be tapping unto one that is common for both, not that she is grasping at the only truth or something too major.

Dakota

I have a feeling it is going to be more flashy than that the song she picked makes me think of the wonderful trick that earned the warlock his nickname

Salt

Using Arcadia for the smiting is probably going to work slightly differently than the angels smiting though. Arcadia is creation beta, with somewhat different properties, and it's pretty likely that some of those different properties would bleed through.

You could probably expect it to be significant in raw force but more rigid and easily deflected or dealt with, especially with the right story behind it, not dissimilar to Arcadia vs Creation proper in general. There would also probably be a pushback from Creation, since you're replacing a factory reset with a patch that takes you back to a beta build, so it probably will be a bit weaker than an actual Choir smite if it does work.

Which is probably also why the Pilgrim is predicting an explosion and temporary instability in the fabric of Creation if it fails. He doesn't know if you actually can overlay Arcadia onto Creation proper that way, or if Creation will violently reject the attempt and, uh, blow up as a result

shikkarasu

Oh, ye Gods. I think Arcadia is *perfect* for this. Consider: Zeze is telling Arcadia that its story -its role- is 'Angel Smites Evil.' All the while Arcadia is getting line notes from actual Angels. With sorcerous musical accompaniment this will be the finest performance since The Fall of the Tyrant of Helike two years ago.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I agree with Liliet that Masego probably isn't imitating the Gigantes on this one. If he got to watch the Gigantes themselves at work, that would be a different story... but the Gigantes almost certainly know this, and are not likely to permit the Hierophant anywhere in the vicinity while they do their thing.

jesdynf

I saw that.

"Let us see, at long last, if we can turn back the tyranny of the sun."

– Extract from the coronation speech of Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

[Javvies](#)

Holy fuck, Masego!

Emulating Seraphim Smiting? That's going to be unpleasant for the Dead King's armies.

I'm not sure how I feel about it potentially being reproducible exclusively as a Light-working, though.

Ah, Pickler, never change. Storming Keter is going to be a masterpiece for you. But I suspect Cat will want to involve you in designing and building Cardinal, which might be an even bigger endeavor, albeit probably with fewer explosions.

I'm curious about what Akua's going to do with Rapacious Troubadour, and even more certain that it's going to end badly for him.

caoimhinh

It's strange that Masego says that he watched the Ophanim. But it wasn't they who were actually smithing someone over and over back at Lyonceau.

The Seraphim were the ones striking there. The Ophanim only choked Kairos. True, they were planing to smite him, but didn't.

Whereas the Choir of Judgement carried out the action repeatedly in front of Masego and he was already leaving the place when the Choir of Mercy decided that a stronger approach to kill Kairos was necessary and was halted by Catherine.

Earl of Purple

You think he didn't leave to get somewhere with a better view? Ground zero isn't the best place to observe something like this. It's everywhere you look, so wherever you look you'll miss something. And you might not survive witnessing the detonation.

caoimhinh

Could be... though it was said that he and the others evacuated the place, nothing else.

But I mean, he was *right there* when the Choir of Judgement smited the Hierarch repeatedly, and the Choir of Mercy did NOT strike, Cat prevented them from that.

So, it would make way more sense if Masego were saying that he got a good look at the Seraphim doing the smiting. Since not only was he there to closely observe it done in succession and detail, but the Ophanim explicitly didn't do any huge smiting that day, they killed Kairos in a softer, more controlled way. They offed him by choking and then by throwing controlled jabs that made his blood boil and organs fail slowly while he kept monologuing.

This still revives the question of why the Seraphim were able to smite the Hierarch alone but apparently the Ophanim could not smite Kairos without putting the bystanders in danger, hence why Cat had to stop them.

Eleron Pfoutz

The Ophanim are the Choir of absolute Mercy. And if the best way to ease suffering is to eliminate its source and its victims in one fell swoop...

Shveiran

LOL wut?

Andrew Smith

Didn't Kairos die to a mass of light and he survived as long as he did by using his wish aspect and then giving a dying monologue.

They tried to choke the Hierarch and story wise at least they were smiting Kairos and in fact did better at it as time went on.

What I took was that smiting just Kairos he could block so they decided to do a stronger smite that would hit the entire temple because blocking that was beyond Kairos

Earl of Purple

No, Hierarch used Mend to survive the masses of Light blasting his body away, each blast bigger than the last- until he stepped through the blast to wherever the Choir lives. Kairos they tried to choke.

Andrew Smith

Mercy to start with tried to choke Hierarch before Kairos Lied and so they were forced due to Story rules to Smite him first before they could help out Judgement in their stalemate of power.

Rereading it not only do the Ophanim keep increasing how much power they use on Kairos they try to just area smite because he had no defence against such a smite but cat did and stopped them. They also refined their attempt at smiteing while in progress.

So i could Imagine that gave far more information that the just repeated strikes which the seraphim were doing. Unlike the constant pressure of Mercy on Kairos

Earl of Purple

I stand corrected, thank you.

Ben

The Ophanim were going to strangle the Hierarch, but they seemed inclined to take a slightly less restrained approach with Kairos. The Hierophant had to actually take steps to prevent the Ophanim's attack from killing everyone in attendance as collateral damage—Cat actually chides the Ophanim, saying that if they want to burn Kairos, go for it, but she's not going to let them "burn half the rulers of the continent with him."

Cicero

I'm looking forward to this battle.

[Burlyraven](#)

I'm loving all the interactions in this chapter.

Talbot seems to be growing almost fond of working under Cat. At first he just wanted to fight for Callow and was willing to bear price that was obeying a Villain, but now it seems he genuinely enjoys and takes pride in his place in things.

Pickler is yet another goblin who should have a Name, but in her case it's more a case of why the hell does she not have a Name yet? We even get to see her almost directly compared to Masego, and I struggle to see a difference in their drives to succeed.

Masego's little project is utterly terrifying. Setting aside all the listed concerns, his whole story is about him becoming a god, but replicating divine power by siphoning off of another

dimension is taking sixteen steps forward on that path. I'm ready to see his nuke in action, but I'm worried about the aftermath.

Finally, I wonder if Akua's attempting to turn Night into anti-magic? That's the impression I'm getting from the emphasis on Night being a thief's tool and the name of that song.

dadycool

Now that analysis of Akua's actions is interesting. Light already resists magic, so Night absorbing it doesn't feel particularly off the mark.

[Liliet](#)

Named aren't made by drive to succeed, they're made by stories. There's no story about Pickler.

[Burlyraven](#)

Stories are made from the drive of the Named carving a groove into reality. Plus, arguably, Pickler and Masego have nearly identical stories. They are both savants head and shoulders above prodigies in a society devoted to their specialty, and they have an obsession to be the best and always do better. Pickler would be knocking down the gates to the Heavens and/or the Hells with a little more oomph behind her actions.

[Liliet](#)

> Stories are made from the drive of the Named carving a groove into reality.

Especially newborn baby Sabah.

No, Names are made from Roles, which are *cultural archetypes*. Masego is specifically a mage, an apprentice of the warlock, then a thief of miracles. Pickler is an engineer, which we specifically know doesn't really have a defined groove because those usually get gnome'd, or be precise murked by people who don't want to get gnome'd.

Names aren't made from exceptions, they're made from rules. They're rules about how exceptions work, but they're still rules. If you're doing a new thing, to get a Name out of it you need to get people telling stories about you.

Nobody's telling stories about Pickler. She's an unsung hero, much like all the nameless Callowan and Lycaonese soldiers holding the line – those don't all get Names either.

Darkening

The problem with that is that we've had Robber already defined as being a goblin cultural archetype as the perfect paragon of a man in goblin culture, which means he **should** have a Name by that definition.

[*Liliet*](#)

It has to be a complete story. "A macho man" is not a complete story. "The Lone Ranger" is.

Big Brother

Remember, this was expressed REALLY early on in one of Black's first lessons for Cat: Names are born from Cultural Archetypes. Goblin culture is really f*cking secretive. Would you be able to tell what a goblin Name is like, if it's a Name born from an essentially unknown culture that'll change it's ENTIRE LANGUAGE because a couple words were translated?

Nah, I say Pickler and Robber are already Named, just no one outside of goblin society knows it. We've already been told several times that Robber is OLD for a male goblin, past the usual life-span for them, and Villainous names have been shown to extend life indefinitely unless killed. Pickler's probably a goblin variant of Engineer, and Robber... Honestly I'm not sure. Heckler? Scout? There's also no way of knowing if goblin Named would ever enter into a Band of Five that had another race besides goblins in it.

Only Named goblin I can think of was the Squire-claimant that Cat out down permanently in Liesse, an that was very much out of character for how every other goblin in story has acted.

Darkening

Yeah, that goblin was very odd, with the orange skin and the extremely unusual choice to try for a praesi Name. Wonder if we'll ever find out what Chider's deal was. Probably not.

[*Liliet*](#)

> We've already been told several times that Robber is OLD for a male goblin, past the usual life-span for them

You might be mistaking him for Ranker, Black's old friend who was wayyyy too old and Black had no idea how.

Robber is only now approaching goblin middle age. It's somewhat unusual for a male goblin to *survive* that long, but it's not past their natural lifespan; in fact,

Robber is visibly aging in sync with his actual age, which Cat comments on.

We have WoG that there are no Engineer type Names on Calernia.

And yeah Chider was definitely unusual.

(Maybe Robber has a heroic Name and that's why he ages normally? ^^)

pagesbe

Didn't Ranker explicitly go through rituals to extend her life? I could have sworn that was mentioned at some point.

[Liliet](#)

Ranker was a Matron who have lifespan extensions, but she's old even for them, and while some characters theorized it could be Black extending her life through alchemy, in his own POV he has no idea how she's doing it. (And never asks because privacy and boundaries because Amadeus is *precious*)

caoimhinh

You have been pushing for that for a lot of chapters. But Named are not forged only of stories. Stories are *one* factor, but they aren't the only one and also aren't necessary if other factors are present, and you don't need others to talk about you to get a Name.

I don't recall where if it was said that Sabah had the Name of Cursed since birth. It was said that she had the curse since birth, because her whole bloodline has it, it's an ancient curse, as stated in Extra Chapter: Beast, a Warlock put a curse on her bloodline a few centuries back, but when was it ever said she had the Name since birth?

Some Names and Roles are easier to identify and say "that person stepped into this archetype" but others aren't so clear cut. Like, remember when you kept saying that Names always had a job-related structure?

To quote you: *"Names are common nouns. Amadeus was a knight. Vivienne was a thief. Malicia is an empress. Hanno is a knight. Antigone is a witch. Tariq is a pilgrim. Hakram is an adjutant. Masego is a hierophant. Cat was a squire. Indrani is an archer. Roland is a sorcerer. Kairos*

*was a tyrant. William was a swordsman...
There is grammar to this language, people."*

Yet we also have Names such as Red Axe, Blade of Mercy, Painted Knife, and Sword of the Free, which do not accommodate to that.

So, keep in mind that just because we observe a general trend, it doesn't mean that it is an absolute rule.

Some Names don't require much on the person, simply satisfying certain conditions, such as killing the previous Dread Emperor to get the Name. We could speculate this is because the person "steps into the Role" by claiming the Tower, but the fact that the people didn't require a story on their backs, fame, or powerful will to claim the Name was likely the cause that so many Dread Emperors were the laughing stock of Calernia for centuries before Malicia took the throne.

But there are also new Names that don't have cultural backgrounds, and instead are paving a new ground, like Hakram becoming Adjutant. He's the first orc to get a Name in centuries, it's a new Name, and he got it far before he got any renown or story behind him, Catherine was just starting as a Squire back then.

Sabah transitioned from Cursed to Captain not because there was a cultural archetype or story she was following, but because of her own personal story.

Vivienne too, got her Name of Thief without any recognition or cultural significance, but rather because of her own personal quest. This was significant because the moment she concluded that "quest" she no longer identified herself as Thief and lost the Name (at least this is her and Cat's interpretation of the matter, given how she lost the Name despite having restored her faith in herself).

Consider William's Name of Lone Swordsman and how he got it. He didn't have a story backing him for that Name, though his personal story got him the attention of the Choir of Contrition, which in turn made him a Named (though his Name and Role weren't really connected to his story).

Some Names are formed by fame and repetition in people's mouths, like Cat almost becoming Black Queen because that was how everyone was calling her, Warden of the West almost becoming a Name rather than just a title due to Cordelia, or how Akua transitioned from Heiress to Diabolist by making it so she was known for being a Named diabolist.

So do not reject possibilities so easily. All is possible in this story.

TL:DR: In summary, there are multiple factors that can be involved in getting a Name, these factors include willpower, bravery, fame, a story setting, cultural significance or background, and a personal quest for discovery or meaning. HOWEVER, the lack of one or more of these factors does not mean a Name can't be obtained. Also, you can be a claimant to a Name by having one of the above characteristics, remember Book 1, where there were 4 claimants for Squire and Cat had to kill them all to get it. One of them was a Goblin, too. And I would argue that the Sapper-General of Callow, the foremost goblin fighting in the war against the Hidden Horror, lead inventor of the new generation of siege engines that were developed for the Tenth Crusade and the War on Keter, daughter of the first Goblin Lady of Praes, and the most influential female Goblin in all of Callow, has A LOT of more renown and story-backing than what Chider ever had or dreamed to have.

If she has the drive and the event comes when she has to face great battles where she must push her skill and life to the limit for the sake of victory, she could very well get a Name.

[Liliet](#)

> Stories are one factor, but they aren't the only one and also aren't necessary if other factors are present, and you don't need others to talk about you to get a Name.

No, actually, stories are the one factor completely and absolutely necessary. Why do you think otherwise? We have WoG saying Catherine cannot be the Grey Knight because there's no cultural impetus for this kind of Name in Calernia. I think I could rustle up some more but that's the first one that comes to mind that explicitly says that.

As for Sabah,

> I raised an eyebrow. "Your Name was easier?"

>

> "I was born into mine, back when I was the Cursed," she grunted. "By the time I became the Captain, no one was dumb enough to challenge me for it."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/05/13/chapter-seven-sword/>

> To quote you: "Names are common nouns. Amadeus was a knight. Vivienne was a thief. Malicia is an empress. Hanno is a knight. Antigone is a witch. Tariq is a pilgrim. Hakram is an adjutant. Masego is a hierophant. Cat was a squire. Indrani is an archer. Roland is a sorcerer. Kairos was a tyrant. William was a swordsman...

>

> There is grammar to this language, people."

>

> Yet we also have Names such as Red Axe, Blade of Mercy, Painted Knife, and Sword of the Free, which do not accommodate to that.

Ok yeah that's a very good point. There are Names that only work as nicknames. There's still more to it, but I'll grant you that this one was not a very accurate statement.

> But there are also new Names that don't have cultural backgrounds, and instead are paving a new ground, like Hakram becoming Adjutant.

Adjutant absolutely has a cultural background, though. Sure it wasn't a Name before, but the word "adjutant" referred to a specific, whole idea of what someone is like already. It was already a Role – imagine a simplistic play, or improv, or something like that, where people get assigned roles – you can imagine one named "the adjutant", right?

I'll grant you that this matches Robber the macho goblin as well, in theory, so that's a good point there actually. Still, there's a lot of wiggle room for exactly how defined that archetype is, and whether or not there's a single word that can encompass it (not every Role has a Name to it).

I will reiterate that a Name absolutely requires a story, there is however a lot of flexibility to what "a story" means in the setting.

It's pretty clear why Robber wouldn't have a Name, even though it wouldn't be weird if he had one, either. I feel like "the macho goblin" is kind of weak-ass compared to Hakram the perfect adjutant – Robber might be *a teeny tiny bit overhyped in the fandom*.

As for

"the Sapper-General of Callow, the foremost goblin fighting in the war against the Hidden Horror, lead inventor of the new generation of siege engines that were developed for the Tenth Crusade and the War on Keter, daughter of the first Goblin Lady of Praes, and

the most influential female Goblin in all of Callow," how many people actually know (and care in any way) about her existence???? The upper military echelons, yes, and I'm sure the average Grand Alliance soldier would vaguely know there's someone like that doing something, but until there's a story spreading around that people actually care to tell and listen to, there's not a Name to it.

I'll not deny it's possible, but *it needs to be known* for a new Name to come into being.

(Much easier for an existent Name – no-one needs to even know you match the groove, it's already there and you don't need to form a new one)

Nah

As far as possible Names for Robber go, Sardonic Lackey or Vicious Scout both sound a hell of a lot more likely than Macho Goblin, which would be nearly as bad as Snarky Lesser Footrest.

[*Liliet*](#)

Honestly, that's the thing about Robber: he has a lot of stuff going on, between the macho goblin-ness, the scouting, the relationship with Catherine, the complicated relationship with his native culture and the like. They are additive for the purpose of the readers liking him, but they don't add up to a single coherent Role as they work in-universe.

pagesbe

And how many people knew about the Thief's existence before she got her Name? If the number of people was higher than the number of people who know about Pickler, I'd be somewhat surprised. Clearly Vivienne was well known enough for Assassin to warn her off, but she didn't seem to have built up any kind of legend about herself.

[*Liliet*](#)

If Thief were a new groove, if there had never been a Named Thief before Vivienne, this would have been relevant.

But the groove was already there. There were already stories about great thieves; Vivienne didn't need it to be known that she fit one to slip into it.

I go into greater explanation of how it works here:

(check out also the post linked at the start of that one)

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Especially newborn baby Sabah.

Sabah certainly had a groove, just not one that *she herself* had created. Rather, the warlock who'd cursed her family had laid out a story-groove to catch and trap the family's children (probably one per generation). The "family curse" is a classic story even in our own world – indeed, it's one that I have personally experienced, courtesy of heritable mood disorders.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think the warlock laid the groove. I think that warlock high key didn't intend to give the targets of the curse power, but the curse itself fit an existing groove well enough that it came with a Name even to newborns.

That groove you mentioned, yeah.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, "warlock lays a curse on the victim's descendants" is surely a Story in-world.

[Liliet](#)

Exactly what I'm saying. His goal wasn't to give them a Name, but it was an inevitable side-effect.

agumentic

You can etch a new groove/cultural archetype into reality with your own actions, but beyond will, they also need to greatly affect both the world and the minds of people living in it. So, if Pickler builds great machines which break Keter's walls before the assembled armies, she could get a name Machinist or whatever, but just inventing normal siege engines is not going to cut it.

Lady Serpentine

Pickler's certainly making a stir with copperstones; "First person to successfully put Light in an engine, her methods proven against the Dead King" is probably better known.

edrey

Stars from the sky, i think is related to the second terriblis, i dont remenber the chapter but it was about plucking stars from the sky was greater honor than born under it. Using Night with that song is really poetic in certain way

Djinn O'Cide

While the title of this chapter is probably another chess reference, which you can Google if you'd like, I prefer to think of it as an ice-hockey reference, where you pick your stick up off the ice, hold it in both hands, and smack the guy on the other team with the shaft.

It's a penalty, unfortunately, but usually worth it anyway...

[origamiflame](#)

I knew I'd have to wait to see what Ubuas up to, but I do appreciate the buildup

dadycoool

It feels so good to see Pickler do a dozen calculations in her head in the time it takes to analyze that little bit of mud.

Poor Cat, having to deal with Masego and Tariq working together to puzzle out a Smiting. I could barely breathe as the implications were beginning to dawn on her.

Some Smartass

It's honestly for the best that some of the ways decisions made in this war bite people in the ass are to the heroes' advantage. They'll try to flip the table less if they can get their licks in.

Juff

Typo Thread:

their burden > the burden
simpler the > simpler than the
pedestals > pedestal
other combination > other combinations
scrum water > scum water
land an attempt > land and attempt
wilds, the > wilds; the
as the charged > as they charged
either care to > either cared to
I'm no doing > I'm not doing
was awe > was awed
reduce the Cigelin Sisters (missing words)

filled to burst > filled to bursting
be stand with > be standing with
Goods might > Good might
no guaranteed > no guarantee
work?" I asked > work?" I asked.
limped at and > limped away and
request if > request of
at the thoughts > at the thought
if nor for > if not for
every number mean > every number
working and Night > working in Night
you to your > you at your

[Liliet](#)

As always, I couldn't fucking BREATHE for the Masego part of the chapter.

People who thought Akua was going to betray Cat using the Troubadour: technically this doesn't *disprove* the theory categorically. That said, we have the Unspoken Plan Guarantee now...

caoimhinh

We have *various* Unspoken Plan Guarantees now, hahahaha.

Insanenoodlyguy

the question is, while coming up with this plan, what OTHER plans did she also come up with?

Sinead

I just realised that from someone's comment on Akua and Cat actively flirting with each other that Akua's basically Killianx10,000 in terms of Cat's attraction/issues with them.

Cat couldn't handle Killian just sacrificing a few people on death row to just advance her own ambitions, while Akua has the entirety of Leisse. Combined with being talented mages that love showing off to Cat with their own knowledge (not saying that it's uncommon, but it is a parallel).

[Liliet](#)

omfg yes

ninegardens

I... am really worried that these two rituals (with very different fuel sources) are going to interfere with one another in some way...

Or, (against the hidden horror) potentially give Nessie some way to strike back at Akua.

Also, it sounds like she is planning to usurp control of the dead?

[Liliet](#)

I like to think that neither Masego nor Akua are braindead, which is to say it would be a bit too stupid for the tone guide is taking here for them to fail at basic coordination, especially when Cat knows about both.

Like, that's a dramatic plot twist that would be appropriate in some narrative contexts, but really really not this one.

Note also the Unspoken Plan Guarantee for what Akua's doing.

Lady Serpentine

Masego and Akua know each other, like each other okay, and are probably the two foremost practitioners of sorcery on the continent – they know to coordinate.

Crowleu

Loved reading Masego reaching for new horizons of heresy. His lunacy in the last chapters has been delightful, Papa Warlock would be proud. Aqua scheming something once again, not sure if i'm anxious or looking forward to it.

With all this buildup for a small battle, leading to a retreat and a following last stand, I can't help but feel something will go wrong. Hope to be proven wrong

Also, I keep hoping after the retreat we get a few interludes with Abigail at the Cigelin Sisters. Abigail and Scribe were the duo I never thought i needed until it occurred.

Typo thread below, feel free to add.

would allowed-> would allow

an attempt an encirclement->and attempt an encirclement
as the charged under-> as they charged under

I was awe-> I was in awe

no guaranteed-> no guarantee

working and Night-> working with Night

[308924810a](#)

I still think Akua is about to pull a betrayal.

propater

My feeling exactly. The shape of this might suggest an usurpation of the Troubadour's body to regain independence from Cat.

[Liliet](#)

Nice. We'll see who's right ^^

agumentic

Yeah, I am not feeling it. Some betrayal-shaped move from Akua might happen in the future as she trashes about on which slope to follow (even if I don't think she will have it in her to really follow through), but this story doesn't feel like it's going to happen now. Akua already had several opportunities to simply break free, after all, and choose her current life instead.

Darkening

Cat's finally going to get to live her dream of fighting zombies in a swamp in real life! Maybe Evil Twin will be there 😊

agumentic

Thanks for reminding me that I really want Inner Cats to show up again when Cat's name finally crystallizes.

caoimhinh

She will be like "We have come a long way, eh?"

Darkening

The real question is what her inner cats will look like. Will Evil Cat still look like a grizzled merc, with Good Cat as some kind of priestess, or will Evil Cat just be her, with Good Cat as some kind of Good Queen of Callow like she got offered the one time?

[Liliet](#)

Evil Cat being just her sounds contrary to the theme of Evil Cat. Don't forget the last time Cat met her she was also solidly a villain.

Evil Cat is likely to be a Dread Empress, imho.

Trebar

Evil Cat is her as Dread Empress, ruling the entire continent of Calernia with an iron fist so that peace can finally be obtained, but then taking a Red Letter from the

Gnomes as a declaration of war and so escalating once again.

shikkarasu

Within every Queen there are two cats....

superkeaton

The Maiden and the Troubador, except the maiden is an undead mass-murderer and the singer is a soul-stealing addict.

jesdynf

I will admit I really love the Pilgrim /leaning into the madness/ to walk away with an unalloyed victory over Catherine nobody has to resent.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, Cat's not the only one who can leave people unsure whether to be impressed or appalled!

Daniel E

Even if the ensuing battle is meant as bait/setup, an old-fashioned 'heroic last stand' will be fun, and we have yet to see what Adjutant & Apprentice's project is. Oh, and before I forget; Gods be with you, Boots the horse. I'm rooting for you.

[sengachi](#)

Loved the tactical stuff in the beginning, it reminded me just how much this story excels in military world-building.

Masego's scene had me laughing out loud. But also the implications of being able to smite with Light along and no choir involved is, uh, *super freaking relevant* for Hanno's character arc and I am riveted to this seemingly humorous scene's implications.

Akua is, as always, incredibly hot and it's always amusing to see Catherine notice that a lot. It's more interesting though to see that Cat's *finally* had a modicum of magical theory drummed into her head.

Now to see how all the pieces you've so masterfully set up play out. The mundane defenses and artillery, some secular smiting of ... I'm going to guess Revenants?, and whatever the hell Akua is going to do.

[sengachi](#)

Adding a separate comment about this because I haven't seen anyone else mention it-

Does anyone else think that the ability to smite without a choir's involvement might be **super** important in Hanno's coming character arc about learning who he is and what his Role is in the absence of the Choir of Justice?

Mental Mouse

Yeah, but he's got to get out of his funk *before* he can ride that story.

beleester

Nah, it sounds like it's the sort of thing that becomes a reward for snapping out of his funk. As soon as he decides to step up, he's like "Show me how that smiting thing works – I have some smiting to do."

shikkarasu

Show me, for I must **Judge**.

IDKWhoitis

When a Praesi mage sings about "Stars from the Sky" why am I thinking of meteors and other magical explosives being flung about that leaves the mind shrieking in existential horror?

IDKWhoitis

Because I don't see Praesi wishing upon a star, well, not beyond "Please hit him...Please, please, please..."

Moodprint

Here is my 2 cents on the topic of goblins being Named. I am convinced some of them are. We have seen Robber sneak in to heavily warded places and survive impossible situations. We have seen Pickler build new extraordinary inventions, and make fortresses out of mudbanks.

I am also convinced that goblin Names work a little different than the ones we are used to, and that we will never see a confirmed goblin Named. Names are a product of stories and culture. The whole thing about goblin culture is secrecy. It is only logical that the goblins as a society would do anything to keep their Names and Named a secret from outsiders, and I can imagine that goblin Names would come with special powers that help them hide their Names from outsiders. Because that is what fits goblin stories.

I have always suspected goblin names (smaller case n) to look so similar to the Names we see, to act as camouflage. Robber is a goblin name.. or Name?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, I've been rereading, and Black himself was the one who called out that point in-story, soon after Robber showed up.

shikkarasu

What I find incredibly interesting is that it wasn't Chider who had the hiding Aspect, but Rashid the Forgettable. It could always be that Name-hiding is more of a non-Aspect part of Goblin Names and Chider was aiming for a Human Name (Squire), or that Chider was trying to make a point and choosing not to hide(as was her almost character arc), but I still find myself thinking about that detail.

Moodprint

I think Chider was a special case. I think that goblin Names all have some kind of Name-hiding. Just like Villain Names come with the ability to stop age, and hero Names come with the plot-amor providence guidance thing. Its a general theme for those Names. goblin society is so focused on secrecy, it makes sense for goblin Names to have an affinity for secrecy.

Goblin Names would also explain goblin fire.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The hiding capability appears to be a skill rather than a distinctive power – other Named will have similar ability.

beleester

Chess note: "Cross-check" is responding to a check with another check – making a move that simultaneously gets your king out of danger and checks the enemy king.

cainerahlld777

Evening Etcetera, I believe that you've used this chapter intro previously.

Just a heads up.

Chapter 66: Blind Pigs

"I climbed the Tower at seventeen, Chancellor, and for ten years I have held it. So before you bare your knife at my back, ask yourself this – would you really be the first to try?"

– Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner

Flat and open grounds sat before us, the earth black and musky.

The sun peeked out solemnly from behind the cover of clouds, a wet and lazy breeze licking at the skin as the summer heat saw droplets gather and slither down the armour of my knights. Hidden near the edge of a thicket of oak and poplars, we watched as in the distance as a warband of armed corpses shambled forward. They were taking the same eastward trail that a hundred other like them had, over nights and days. There'd been no need of a tracker to find that well-beaten track. There was a name, I idly remembered, for this place. There was a village not too far, a mark on a map where men had lived and a lord had ruled. It slipped my mind, despite my best efforts, but I did not grieve myself the lapse. We had fought a dozen skirmishes in as many different places since morning, and by now they were beginning to meld into each other.

"Seven hundred or thereabouts, my queen," Sir Brandon Talbot said. "And our outriders are adamant the closest warband is the better part of an hour away."

I laid a hand on the neck of Zombie the Sixth, feeling him breathe in and out slowly. The stallion was a pale brown Salamans *zancada*, a breed favoured by both leisure racers and the light cavalry that Arlesites were so fond of. A gift from Princess Beatrice Volignac, and not an inexpensive one. I supposed I did qualify as light horse nowadays, since all I wore for armour was a breastplate with tassets and upper vambraces over an aketon – and the Mantle of Woe, over it all. It was a waste to give such a fine horse to a rider as ferociously average as myself, in my opinion, especially when I usually preferred riding dead horses to live ones. Yet it would have been unmannerly to refuse it, and while the Order had remounts they were from lesser breeds so I didn't even have a good reason to do so.

I fully expected Zombie the Sixth to die before the end of the day, though, which would properly earn him his name would solve the issue anyway. I'd seriously debated killing him and raising him before Hakram got me to admit it would be somewhat unpolitic of me.

"Then we take them," I said. "Have the horns sounded, Grandmaster Talbot."

"It will be my pleasure," the bearded knight replied with a hard grin.

He pulled one-handed on the reins of his purebred Liessen charger, leading away the large horse at a trot and shouting out his orders. The knights carrying long banners, both the Order's own cracked bronze bells on black as well as my own Sword and Crown, brought the silver-banded horns hanging around their necks to their lips and blew. One, twice, thrice. The deep call echoed across the grounds of Hainaut, giving that age-old order my people knew the way they dawn: *all knights, charge*. I watched, hidden in the shade of a tall poplar tree. The dead had enough Binds among them that they began to mobilize before the Order had even begun to emerge from the cover of the trees, but the warband had been spread out in a loose column for the march. They would not gather quickly enough. Split into four wedges of five hundred, two on each side of the path, my knights lowered their lances and broke into a gallop.

My staff of yew resting against Zombie's neck, my sword still sheathed, I waited with the remounts and the squires in the woods as the Order fell on the dead like packs of wolves. It was with a twinge of satisfaction that I watched lowered killing lances, engraved with hymns to the Heavens, scythe through the thin ranks of the enemy as large armoured horses trampled the surprised undead. All four wedges broke through the enemy lines, not allowing themselves to be drawn into melee but instead punching straight through. In good order, they gathered again and wheeled around to charge anew from fresh angles. Most undead were incapable of so much as denting the armour of my knights, and this column was low on javelinmen: maybe a score wounded and fewer dead were all it took before most the Binds were dead and the warband dissolved into a disorderly mass of corpses.

From there the knights of the Order of the Broken Bell went at it with cold and practiced efficiency, using the tactics developed over years of fighting Keter. A wedge skimmed the edge of the mass of the dead, drawing the enemy forward, only for two others to flank it with deadly charges. Before a protracted melee could ensue, all three wedges withdrew and the fourth wedge of unengaged knights went forward to serve as fresh bait for a repeat of the manoeuvre. Binds would have punished such a repetition, but skeletons simply did not learn from their mistakes. It was grim and bloody work that followed, but repetitive and the danger involved was not as great as might look: unless pulled down from their mount, few of my knights were truly at risk unless the enemy got lucky.

It had all been going quite well, which was why I half-expected it when horns sounded from the woods on the other side of the open grounds. There would be squires and horses in that opposite thicket as well, though I could hardly see any of them, and it

must be one of their number that was blowing the call for danger – two short, sharp sounds. My staff left Zombie's neck and I spurred him forward without a word, ignoring the squires asking after me. Talbot had named 'officers' among them, lead squires, so it was not my job to hold their hand. My horse's long and certain stride took us out of the woods and slightly downslope onto the battleground even as I kept an eye on the currents there. Talbot was in command, and he'd prudently ordered two wedges to draw the skeletons away while assembling the other two to head back to the squires.

Quick as he'd been, the enemy was quicker still. Panicked horses, the remounts of a thousand knights, were led hastily out of the woods by mounted squires in mail even as screams and the sound of fighting came from deeper in. I led Zombie into a hasty gallop, trampling a skeleton that tried to stand in my way in a crunch of steel-clad hooves, and broke into the shaded thicket even as another pack of squires fled it. They parted around me, and I glimpsed shame on some of those faces. Given what I glimpsed deeper in, though, there was truly none to be had. It was a man, if one long dead. The shoddy hide armour – little more than a vest – he wore over tattered shirt and trousers did nothing to distinguish him from the zombies Keter threw at soldiers by the hundreds, but the long blood-red hair and ancient claymore were... distinctive.

He padded forward on bare feet, blood dripping from the edge of his great sword as a smile accentuated the vertical tattooed red stripes around his mouth. The Drake, we'd taken to calling him. Against a Revenant of that calibre there was nothing my soldiers could do but die.

"Retreat," I ordered the remainder, voice laced with power.

The squires scattered to the four winds, save for one who'd been too close – the Drake approached and the girl swung down her sword at his head, but the Revenant easily stepped around it. Zombie's stride had not slowed and my staff rose as I gathered Night around the tip, but even that was too slow. In a single casual stroke, the Drake swung down and blood sprayed as he carved through the squire and the horse beneath her. I grit my teeth, letting loose a spinning javelin of Night at the Revenant that caught him in the ribs and shredded flesh and bone. The impact smashed him into a tree, making it crack, and the hide armour was smoldering around the edges. It wouldn't do shit to this particular horror, though, I well knew. I passed the falling halves of the dead squire, unsheathing my sword as I began gathering Night again, but already flesh and bone had knitted themselves back together.

The Drake, laughing, cracked a shoulder and wrenched himself free of the tree.

"Black Queen," the Revenant nonchalantly greeted me. "Yours, then?"

Five times I'd tried to kill that murderous cockroach, and never managed it. Once I'd so thoroughly incinerated his corpse that all that'd been left had been a single hand, and still he'd walked out of that battlefield on two feet. Whatever it was the Dead King had done to this one, it'd made him durable beyond reason. Even wounds inflicted with Light came back in a matter of moments. His capacity to recover from damage might genuinely surpass what my body had been able to do at the peak of my time holding Winter.

"Drake," I coldly replied, deadwood staff levelled at him. "They were. *Burn.*"

A howling gout of blackflame erupted from the tip, swallowing him whole before beginning to spin on itself at my direction. I heard bits of crazed laughter through even the roar of the dark fire as I used my knees to guide Zombie away from the blaze. *Fuck*, this one was always a pain to contain. I had enough hard-hitting ranged tricks that if I could catch him at a distance he wasn't a major threat, but I'd yet to find anything that could actually put him down for good and not for lack of trying. Time to pull out my forces and find a softer target. Zombie slowed on the turn and I leant to the side to better slam the butt of my staff against the ground, drawing deep on Night and hastily shaping it. Thin threads of darkness skittered along the ground, running up trunks and binding trees as they hooked themselves deep.

The Drake leapt out of the flames, naked and burnt but already healing, just in time for me to wrench with my will and smash him down into the ground with a dozen bound trees. I heard bones break and organs pulp, his broken body stuck under the massive weight. That ought to slow him for a span, until I could get something sterner in place.

"That-" the Revenant began, then paused to spit out a thick glob of blood, "-that was unkind."

Of all the dead Named in Keter's service he might just be the chattiest, and the Dead King did seem to have left him most of his will and wits. It made him more flexible – the same tactics rarely worked twice against him – but it also meant he fell more easily into distractions. Getting him talking tended to work, especially if it was about himself.

"I've been curious," I idly asked, drawing on Night. "How long did it take, before you turned?"

One more working to keep him stuck there for a bit then I'd retreat. The sooner I got my knights away from him the better. It might be worth coming back afterwards to have a crack at

destroying him, though, I silently considered. Better here and now than at Maillac.

"Fifty three years," the Drake amiably replied. "Would that I had bent at forty, that last decade was... inventive."

I knew from experience that impaling him wouldn't work for long – his healing was so aggressive that it shredded whatever went through him by sheer pressure – and that quartering only held him so long. He'd been physically strong even by Named standards, I suspected. It was burying alive that'd worked best so far, so I got to it methodically. Shaping Night into large blades I manipulated to cut a rough cube into the ground, I then shaped another working and ripped out the loose earth as if with great claws. I'd need to drag him into the hole before burying him, though, so best get the strings spun out already. I wasn't always quick enough to snatch him when I wove them on the fly. Still, thank the Gods I'd caught him in the woods instead of on an open field. He was much harder to deal with without terrain to use. I spun out five threads, then threw in a sixth just to be sure and thickened them, then –

Darkness fell over the woods, pure and inky black. *Shit*, I thought, immediately releasing all my workings. *Mantle's here too*. Was this an ambush? I threw myself off my horse, ripping my boots out of the stirrups, and felt Zombie kick about in a panic. I slapped his rump with the side of my staff so he'd know to run before spinning it about, smashing it into the ground. A tremor of Night shivered across the forest floor, sending the earth I'd loosened flying in a rain that should obscure Mantle's vision just as she'd obscured mine. My consistent inability to see through her darkness while it did not impede her was one of the many reasons I fucking hated dealing with that particular Revenant. Still, this made it two from the nebulous roster that our heroes liked to call the Scourges. It really was beginning to smell like ambush to my nose.

I'd begun to count in the back of my mind the moment things went dark and I kept it up even as I threw up an obscuring veil of Night around myself and ducked behind where I remembered to be a tree. The tree blew up a moment later, though I heard no noise and only knew because I felt the shiver and wood shards ripping into my cloak. I slid further down, closer to the roots, as something whizzed near my head, knowing a helmet would have made no difference if a curse hit but still chastising myself for the lack of it anyway. *Cocky gets you killed, Catherine*, I reminded myself. *You don't grow back limbs anymore*. The last three beats separating me from the count of sixteen passed agonizingly slowly, but when the timing struck I was ready.

The darkness winked out, revealing the Drake halfway through a leap in my direction with his claymore raised high and his

crimson hair trailing behind, but I wove a thread of Night around his foot and without missing a beat I tossed him in the direction the strike on my tree should have come from. I knew I'd got it right when something ripped through my thread a moment later. Mantle had been some sort of priestess when she lived, and in death those gifts had turned towards the use of curses. Most of them worked against Night, which meant her specialty was shredding my own workings while being twice my size and heavily armored. I liked fighting Mantle even less than I did the Drake, and with her addition to the roster this was starting to look a mite risky. If it'd been a more vulnerable pair I would have embraced an occasion to try knocking off a first-class Revenant before the Dead King could put them to even sharper use, but this wasn't a good match up for me at all.

It was, to be frank, *suspiciously* bad. If Tariq or Masego had been around to counter Mantle it might have been tempted to roll the dice anyway, but as things stood... No, I wouldn't let pride get in the way of good sense here. Our objectives for this raid were either already achieved or beyond reach, so it was time to get the Hells out of here.

I opened a gate into Arcadia about six feet behind me and twenty feet high, making it broad and linked to water: the deluge pouring out served as my cover as I forced myself up and limped away. A wave of heat followed by the hiss of vapour told me the nature of Mantle's answer, but I did not stop to glance back. I wouldn't outrun either of them, given my limp, and just fleeing into Twilight wasn't acceptable when the Order would be relying on me to return there. So when I opened a gate into the Twilight Ways, it wasn't to go in: it was to allow something *out*. The ghostly blue wyvern that squeezed its way through lowered its wing so I could go up it and slid me onto its back by angling it. My water portal, though, could only buy me so long.

I felt it get shredded, and a heartbeat later a wide net of crackling shadow flew towards us. On the ground I glimpsed the Drake hastening towards us, so swift-footed his claymore dragged behind him.

"Up," I ordered the wyvern, already drawing on Night.

I detonated the air in front of the net thrice, in a broad line, but though my enemy's working wavered it did not break. That was fine, since all I'd wanted was to slow it. The Summoner's wyvern-thing shot up just in time to avoid the net, batting its wings to pierce through the summit of the trees, but we weren't done yet. Dark grey clouds began to form above us in a ring, and I held on for dear life I shouted for the wyvern to bank away. It did, narrowly, and only the tip of its tail touched the clouds. I'd seen this one before and... wait, what? The tail was just fine. *Fuck*, I thought as I glanced down and saw the Drake flying

through the air towards us. It'd been a trick, she'd been buying time to throw him.

I loosed two spinning missiles of the same make as earlier, hoping to knock him back down, but he batted one aside – the claymore was enchanted, it didn't even get a scratch – and spun on himself to narrowly avoid the other. If we'd kept going straight we would have avoided him, but Mantle's bluff had paid off. Gods but I hated fighting clever opponents. There was no way I was allowing myself to be forced to engage the Drake up close, much less atop a moving magical construct, so with a grimace I glanced down at the woods and breathed out before taking a leap. Hopefully the wyvern would slow down the Revenant some. I wove a veil around myself on the way down, which proved to be a sound precaution when a spray of shard-like pieces of darkness tore through the air coming from below.

I flared out my cloak to slow my fall some, letting them pass below, and only then broke the veil to form tendrils of shadow that anchored themselves on one of the rapidly approaching trees. Using those I threw myself towards the open grounds, just in time for the tendrils to be torn through by Mantle as above me the wyvern-thing screeched. A glance told me the Drake had ripped into its belly and it was quickly falling apart. The dead priestess had never unmade the second gate I'd opened, though, the one the construct had come through, and a heartbeat later she was made to pay for that oversight. A ring of dark clouds that'd been forming ahead of me – the genuine acidic version this time, I was guessing – suddenly dispersed out as Archer made her presence known.

I heard a cry of anger, but I couldn't see what was going on from up here. Still, given that Indrani was involved it was safe to assume that Mantle was having a bad time.

I had other priorities anyway, to be honest, though before shaping a way to slow my descent I still took the time to form a thread of Night, snatching the Drake's foot after he leapt off the shattering wyvern-construct and throwing him deeper into the woods. It had little room for manoeuvre, afterwards, so I brute-forced the landing by smashing the ground beneath me and then using the blowback to slow my fall. I swallowed a scream as my bones rattled and my bad leg burned with pain, but I landed on my feet and only stumbled after taking three slow steps forward. I swallowed a curse and a moan of pain, picking up the sword I'd dropped to sheathe it and forcing myself up by leaning on my staff. In the back of my mind I finally felt my last portal get shredded.

Not that it mattered. From the woods ahead of me, where the Order was gathering to retreat, I saw three arrows arcs upwards in quick succession. Archer was a prodigy at sidling, she'd be able

to slip in and out of this battlefield more or less at will and shoot from her pick of places. The last of the undead had gone off to chase my knights in the distance, so unless the Revenants caught up we were safe to retreat. Best hurry just in case. I wasn't looking forward to limping all the way, but – *huh*. Zombie the Sixth nonchalantly trotted up to my side, seemingly unworried by the skirmishing that'd taken place since we last saw each other. The purebred *zancada* slowed at my side, as if inviting me to saddle up again.

"Good horse," I praised, genuinely impressed.

Might be I'd still get some use of him living after all. I slid a boot into a stirrup and dragged myself back into the saddle, speeding away back into the woods. With Archer harassing the enemy we ought to be able to retreat in relative peace, I figured, but there was no point in wasting time.

We still had a few raids in us before exhaustion set in.

—

"There's a saying in back home, Catherine," Adjutant gravelled in Kharsum. "It goes 'a hunter cannot carry a cookpot'."

I leaned back into my seat in the tent that soldiers had raised for me in the heart of the Boot, along with those of a few other high officers. Sipping at a mug of tea, I was wishing I'd taken up Indrani on her offer of a massage even though odds were that would have devolved in more strenuous activity. After most of a day riding and fighting, my entire body felt like one throbbing bruise and no quantity of herbal brew was going to fix that.

"I mean, depends on the hunter," I mused. "But I'm guessing I'm missing some of the nuances."

Hakram was seated in his wheelchair, but all the same he was looking rather different: he had, after all two legs again. The prosthetic leg looked grim, all grey iron and leather, but it was him who'd chosen the appearance – he'd turned down the appearance of flesh or even a more polished casing in metal. It was still closed enough I couldn't see the enchanted strands of copper that'd been tied to his muscles, fooling his body into thinking there was still a flesh leg to use, but the articulations around the ankle could be glimpsed. Now and then he moved the foot, as if to check that he still could. He couldn't actually walk on this, not yet. There was still need of an operation on the hip to fix the cut bones there and shore it up so the pressure wouldn't damage his side.

This was a first step, and the operation had been done in part so see if there would be any trouble with his body acclimating to the prosthetic. Masego would have preferred starting with the

arm, but Hakram had been adamant otherwise. I could see both sides. Zeze wanted to minimize the risk, as if disease or spellrot took the arm would be much easier to heal, while Adjutant knew that starting with the arm instead of a leg meant at least two more months before he could begin trying to walk with crutches. Masego had insisted on leaving time for recovery between the surgeries so the body would be strained as little as possible and the chances of rejecting the limbs were lowest. Still, in the end it was a choice that was Hakram's alone to make.

So long as he knew the risks, it was not my or anyone else's place to gainsay his decision.

"It is a figure of speech," Hakram said. "Those specific words for hunter and cookpot were picked because they sound like those for swift and slow, respectively. It means even victory weighs you down, if you're not careful."

Cookpot, huh. We both knew it wasn't just mutton that ended up in there. Ah, implied cannibalism. That backbone of ancient orcish wisdom.

"Not the most promising of segues after I asked you to summarize our scouting reports," I drily noted. "Shall I take it things aren't exactly looking up?"

"This isn't the war to fight, if you're looking for pleasant turns," Hakram snorted. "And my people are still taking in reports as we speak, so take all this with a grain of salt."

My brow rose.

"Wow," I said. "It must be *really* bad if you're prefacing this much."

"You did exactly what you set out to achieve," Adjutant gallantly set. "Which was provoke the columns headed towards the Iron Prince into battle here."

"So we drew them in," I warily said. "That was the plan. What's the issue?"

"You drew them in," Adjutant repeated.

I blinked.

"And?"

"You drew them *all* in," Adjutant clarified. "As far as we can tell there's not a single warband, battalion or even individual construct east of us that's not headed towards Maillac as quick as its legs can carry it."

I paused, glancing down at the mug of tea that was inexplicably not aragh. A shameful oversight, that.

"Well," I faintly said. "Klaus and our reinforcements should be winning their battle handily, at least."

I'd been a little worried that even the raids by the Order of Broken Bells wouldn't be enough to convince Keter to keep its eye on us, that the Dead King would write off the losses and still try to concentrate his forces against the Prince of Hannover while we bled him, but it seemed like my seasoned pessimism had come all the way around and somehow become a different kind of naïve optimism. It was almost like doing magic, I thought, except for the part where every part of this was terrible.

"I have mastered a new and terrible art," I mused, going fishing through faded lessons on Old Miezán. "Fortunomancy, I believe it would be called."

"That would be luck magic," Hakram commented. "Which would be useful, and I believe is actually practiced in some parts of southern Procer under a different name. You're looking for infelicitomancy, which would be the branch of sorcery entirely about *bad* luck."

"Thank you, Adjutant," I gravely replied. "I would offer you my blessing for your service in this matter, but I fear a lightning strike would not be far."

"They never are, when Masego's around," he agreed. "Though considering we're about to be swimming up to our necks in undead, perhaps we could do with a few more."

I grimaced, because that was too true for words.

"What kind of numbers are we looking at?" I asked.

"Depend on how long we fight," Hakram said. "The first skirmishers will arrive by Early Bell, we reckon, but the first assault shouldn't come until midday. Maybe twenty thousand, for that first wave?"

We could handle twenty thousand. Even if you discounted the Order of Broken Bells entirely, it was only a two to one numbers advantage for the dead while my people were properly dug-in and ready. The trouble would be that this wasn't the whole battle, it was just the first fucking wave. It'd get worse, much worse. And unlike the skeletons my people would tire the longer it lasted.

"Do we have an opening for retreat?" I asked.

That would be the key. If we were at genuine risk of being surrounded and wiped out – or close enough – during a retreat

into the Twilight Ways then I'd have to call an early retreat. *Which might be the point, I thought. The Dead King's calling my bluff, and if I retreat now he'll hack at Klaus' back while having lost less than a day's worth of march.*

"Between the second and the third wave, there should be a beat of four to six hours before the enemy can gather sufficient strength to be a threat," Hakram gravelled. "If we use our pharos device it should be enough."

Given our very limited stock of those I was always reluctant to use them, but this was a dire situation and the Iron Prince would have several of them with his army anyway. I'd swallow the loss, considering the circumstances.

"Second wave?" I asked.

"Thirty to forty thousand," Adjutant said. "At least. Constructs in significant numbers. And while I cannot be sure, I'd be surprised if most of the Revenants with the columns couldn't make it in there in time as well."

So, to make it out without being badly mauled then we would need to beat two armies outnumbering us significantly in the same day, and beat them badly enough that the losses inflicted meant the enemy would not have the numbers to press us significantly while we retreated back into the Twilight Ways. We would, no doubt, also be facing the latest batch of horrors from Keter and some of the Dead King's finest Revenants. I set down my mug of tea, my hand surprisingly steady considering what lay ahead of us.

"Well," I smiled, hard and toothy. "You know our policy when it comes scraps like this, Adjutant. I see no reason to change it at so late an hour."

He laughed.

"Let them take a swing?" Hakram Deadhand asked, baring sharp fangs.

"Let them take a swing," I softly agreed. "There are still graves we have yet to fill."

Revenant

This feels like it could get bloody.

Eduardo Diaz Torres

This feels like where she gets her name, I mean this has all the classic Catherine battle, strategy and status bingo card ticked off.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Agreed. I wonder what her first Aspect will be?

caoimhinh

Sentence

DoubleLuft

I'm guessing Cat comes into her first aspect during this battle. It would make sense if it's related to overseeing Named, since she's up against a group of Revenants.

Blind swine is a checkmate pattern, two rooks on the seventh rank: black's king is blocked in by his own rook in the normal castling position.

caoimhinh

Also:

A pair of rooks on the opponent's second rank is referred to as "pigs" as they tend to devour pawns and pieces, and "blind pigs" if they cannot find the mate.

[Liliet](#)

Bless you chess people for explaining these.

caoimhinh

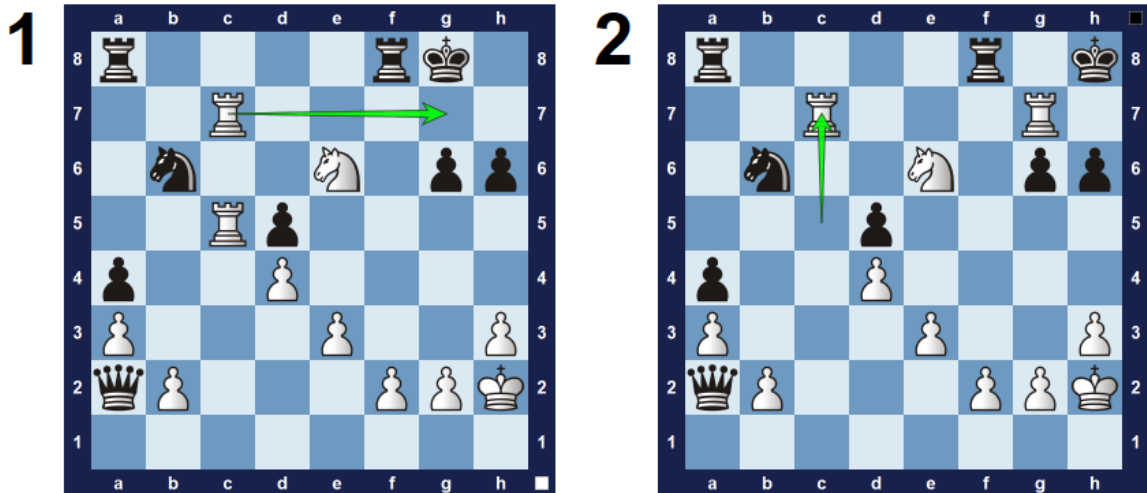
A bit of an expansion on the term:

Once it's been set, it's almost impossible to defend against the Blind Swine Checkmate Pattern, because the two rooks coordinate and cover each other along that rank (and there might be support by another piece). Once they are in position, it's pretty much impossible to prevent the checkmate, though it is still possible to delay it by putting pieces in the way. Those pieces will then be devoured one after the other as they are mere futile attempts to stop the inevitable. So long as the player stays focused and doesn't waste their chance, this pattern will guarantee victory.

This kind of situation could be an analogy to the Dead King's current state: he is delaying by sending waves after waves of his troops to stop the Grand Alliance Armies.

Sure, he has A LOT of reserves he can throw at them, and a single mistake could end this for the GA, but at a Meta

level, we know that this is heading towards the Dead King's defeat.



Cicero

Isn't it more a comparison to Cat's situation?

She's blocked herself in with her own pieces into facing multiple threats from the Dead King. Including at least two waves that Cat will have to face. It's a bad situation for her, but... if she manages to escape the trap she will have gain significant material over the Dead King?

shikkarasu

As with all S-Tier references, you could easily read it 2+ ways. The two Revenants forced Cat to effectively concede by covering one another in her first Raid.

On the other hand, the multiple waves of Dead could be seen as two Rooks cornering Cat and eating up her many lines of defence slowly and inexorably, leaving her little to no time to retreat unless she can somehow remove one from the board at heavy cost.

Lastly, Cat and Klaus are the two Rooks and something incredibly valuable must be sacrificed by DK in order to get one off of the board. They are 'blind' because they cannot directly reinforce one another.

[Liliet](#)

NICE 😊

Bet DK thinks he's got the other side in this position though 9.9

Darkening

Ah, cool, I was thinking it was that saying about, even blind pigs find a truffle now and then or however it goes. Good to know it was keeping to the chess theme.

Mental Mouse

> "even blind pigs find a truffle now and then"

Given that AIUI they find them by smell, I would expect them to.

Burlyraven

Okay, is the Drake a nod to Deadpool? He definitely feels like a nod to Deadpool.

Also, yeah, that intro quote had me prepared for the Dead King to call Cat's bluff, but wow. Sending the entire army against Cat's force is quite the reaction.

Sir Nil

This has last stand story vibes all over it. I feel like DK is only doing this because he's sure that Cat is too 'practical' to rely on a last stand story, especially when she isn't a hero.

Sir Nil

Oh goddamnit I didn't mean to reply.

Lady Serpentine

"Of the twelve assassins to strike only the Drake Knight survived, and not even that potent blood allowed him to grow back the arm he lost.", from the description of the Seven Slayings; Laurence de Monfort also confirmed her slaying of a more recent Drake Knight whose blood drove him to madness.

Mental Mouse

Wolverine can also regenerate from a scrap (at least once from a few cells!), but at least the Drake doesn't have adamantium bones and claws!

superkeaton

Cat, only you could turn success into a detriment.

caoimhinh

It's Providence trying to bite her in the ass for getting a bit of success.

It still hasn't learned that Cat only comes out swinging harder when it tries that.

[sengachi](#)

Honestly given how most heroic stories work in the face of adversity and how Cat's got a Name growing in, I'd say Providence knows **exactly** what it's doing.

[Liliet](#)

When you keep relying on "too crazy to not work", sooner or later you're going to run into what the "crazy" part refers to.

Oshi

Finally! This is what I've been waiting for!

Everything else was farce. This is the crucible. Let's see what it forge makes.

dadycool

Damn, that horse is a Revenant. She turned it into a zombie immediately in her own mind and fully intended to turn it into one at the first excuse. If her forces decide to name it themselves, then her doom, or at least something really really bad, will be imminent. It wasn't the horse's nonchalance that decided it for me, but her appreciation of it. She's the Sorceress of Bad Luck, after all.

[Liliet](#)

Remember, their camp has enchantments to detect/deter undead. Including animals.

mamm0nn

Abigail the Second, the horse that somehow survives everything, and I mean everything, and becomes legendary for doing so. Let's just hope this horse isn't that Corruption demon come back for revenge, trying the same trick twice.

[Javvies](#)

Drake is a major problem. I mean, turned into ashes and a hand? And then walking away from the battlefield? That is serious levels of regeneration.

Yep, that raid was a trap.

All of them? That could be problematic. On the other hand ... it definitely has Story potential. Both good and bad.

Hakram will hopefully be walking soon. Good news.

caoimhinh

Yeah, regenerating from just a hand wasn't something I expected to see in any Named in this series.

I still think Cat's group should design some technique that throws Revenants into the Twilight Ways. Good luck surviving when the whole dimension is actively trying to destroy you.

Or use Goblin Fire on that guy.

Cat shouldn't forget her roots XD.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I still think Cat's group should design some technique that throws Revenants into the Twilight Ways.

I was wondering about that too, but that's also risky, because it potentially gives DK a channel to attack Twilight directly. Twilight's hostility to undead is based only on Plgrim's shaping of the Crown it was based on, and given a strong point-of-presence like that, DK might actually be powerful enough to argue with (or subvert) the Crown directly.

King Julius

I know she is worried about going down in history as the Goblin Fire Queen but honestly, this seems like the right use for it. A fire that burns through magic for days on end should prevent his regeneration. At least for long enough for Masego to study the properties and devise a way to end it for real.

Big I

If she pulls this off it'd be the sort of thing that gets you into the history books IRL, like "Hannibal beats the Romans" sort of thing. Two battles, in a single day, 10,000 vs (at least) 60,000? That's impressive. If she pulls it off.

caoimhinh

True. And let's not forget:

Cat's camp *is* preparing at least two ~~nukes~~ heavy-hitting and large-scale ~~untested, and risky experimental~~ *state of the art* rituals of ~~highly blasphemous vanguardist~~ branches of sorcery.

It's gonna be a battle for the history books, one way or the other.

beleester

To be fair, the undead armies seem to rely on quantity over quality. The alliance *planned* to fight at 2-1 odds for this offensive. Klaus took Juvelun from an army twice his size, in a fortified position, and nobody seemed to think it was surprising.

However, 4-1 odds for the second wave, backed by a pair of the DK's best revenants, is definitely heroic odds.

[sengachi](#)

I think they'll be lucky if it's only two of the Scourges.

Shveiran

Agreed. We are going to see the full set before the end of the book. We need named Revenants to give a face to the struggle, after all.

TeK

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, my fingers closing around the handle of the knife at my hip. I'd always known I'd need to cross some lines, to get ahead in the Empire. Gods, I'd as good as renounced any chance of getting into the Heavens after I died just by claiming a Name on the wrong side of the fence so this was positively trifling in comparison. Like felling a tree to make a cart, I told myself, the words coming as cold comfort.

"Will it be painful?" I asked, opening my eyes. "For the horse, I mean."

"It won't even wake," Black replied.

I'd seriously debated killing him and raising him before Hakram got me to admit it would be somewhat unpolitic of me.

Oh, how far we've come.

Juff

Typo Thread:

distance as a warband > distance a warband
name would > name and would
the way they dawn (something's wrong here.)
most the Binds > most of the Binds
as might look > as it might look
it must be one > it must have been one
as used my > as I used my
might just be > might just have been
did seem to have > seemed to have

remembered to be a > remembered was a
it might have been tempted > it might have been tempting
life I shouted > life as I shouted
sound precautions > sound precaution
I heard a cry (extra space)
It had little > I had little
devolved in more > devolved into more
after all two > after all, two
part so see > part to see
Depend on how > Depends on how
genuine risked > genuine risk
the loos > the loss
make in there > make it there
comes scraps > comes to scraps

mamm0nn

Considering this story isn't one about heroes and Cat is going to fight an army of about six to one after winning the opening bid, I can only see folly where others see a badass move. If we're talking Story then the first wave may be the Tie while the second wave will be her defeat, and when not thinking that the pattern of three is everywhere then those numbers are still going to really screw her over.

Earl of Purple

Everyone is a Hero when fighting the Dead King. And that's not how Patterns of Three go, it's always the draw in the middle.

The problem is the Dead King has a lot of experience in winning anyway. I trust Cat and the army of Callow.

mamm0nn

Pattern of three: Yeah, I know. She won with this first skirmishing, the first wave will be the tie and the second wave will be her defeat.

And with her army of Callow, she never faced these kind of numbers before. Not even remotely. The battle before Marchford was less than twice her number while she had the hills and fortifications, against an army containing mercs that would rout fast. The battle of the Camps she was outnumbered less than 1 on 2 as well, against levies that would rout. And most other battles like against the fey, being outnumbered wasn't the case. I don't recall situations where she fought numeric superiority without the enemy being weaker on average with routing as a likely outcome for victory. But never has she faced numbers like these against a foe that won't rout until DK says so.

[Liliet](#)

Patterns of three that make you go from victory to defeat are a very specific rival thing. Cat doesn't have that with DK currently and she isn't going to get it for one specific battle, that's not how rivalries work in this 'verse.

Holefinder

Am I missing something here? To retreat in the 4 to 6 hour gap between the second and third waves, both the first two waves have to be mostly destroyed. With any coordination at all (easily achievable with just a few Bind commanders), the first two waves can just park right next to them until undead reinforcements come, ready to attack the moment Cat begins a retreat. Either Cat begins retreating, and the undead gain so much numerical superiority that they butcher half her army, or she holds off on retreating, and the remaining waves catch up and butcher even more of her army. How the hell is waiting for them to "take a swing" a good idea?

mamm0nn

Add to that how this is essentially pissing away those soldiers that she can't miss grinding away on bones that the Dead King can spare, and it really doesn't make much sense indeed. Maybe it will make more sense in the chapters to come, but right now there seem to be motivations that we are not aware of, or there's some lacking wits on Cat's part.

lordcirth

I think they are planning to smash the first wave with the Ritual of Smiting and probably other fun "contingencies".

Tom

> With any coordination at all (easily achievable with just a few Bind commanders), the first two waves can just park right next to them until undead reinforcements come, ready to attack the moment Cat begins a retreat.

The geography around the Boot is very swampy and will slow any assault, as detailed in the previous chapter in the three paragraphs starting with: "The skeletons still wore armour, still weighed heavy, and as a rule tended to be significantly less deft and agile than living soldiers besides." The third of those paragraphs explicitly states that Cat would be pleased if the dead decide to wait.

Plus Cat's had Pickler putting up some light fortifications to slow attacks even more. So if the dead wait until Cat is beginning a retreat to attack, they have to wade through molasses to get there, by which point they're likely only bloodying whatever Cat puts in place as a rearguard rather than

wearing down Cat's army all day. That means less living people get killed, and that makes Nessie sad.

> the undead gain so much numerical superiority that they butcher half her army,

In medieval warfare, two front lines go at each other, and everyone behind the front lines on both sides has to wait their turn; this limits the usefulness of numerical superiority (the Battle of Thermopylae is the most famous example of this: a very small number of people were able to hold off a very large number for several days because they were able to pick a site for the battle where the front lines for both sides could only be very narrow, so only a few people could fight at a time). So if the undead have enough bodies to attack Cat's whole front line in early waves, they might as well attack then, because extra bodies behind the dead's front line are just waiting their turn until the front line is re-dead anyway. If the dead wait and mass their forces, they might be able to attack Cat's army while taking fewer losses, because once a front line breaks it's much easier to rout. But massing their forces isn't going to significantly increase the rate at which they can kill on the front line, and the dead don't particularly care about their losses as long as they maximize the number of living people killed.

> How the hell is waiting for them to "take a swing" a good idea?

Cat's goal is to delay the dead so that she doesn't meet up with Klaus's army only to be immediately pincered by two massive undead armies in a crappy location. That would probably mean annihilation of both of the larger armies, which would be much worse than even losing all 10,000 Cat diverted for this delay tactic. Cat can reasonably expect Nessie to send early waves into the grinder, because Nessie's goal is to kill as many people as possible, and Nessie doesn't have much concern about his losses.

lavantant

Man youre right sounds like shes gonna need a hero to come save her

Maybe a big strong hero, fighting for her sake, a white knight, so to speak

If only there was such a hero that is currently going through a crisis and would have a good story about fighting a greater evil being worth teaming up with a waning one.

Daniel E

Gotta say, I feel like X-men level regeneration is really pushing my suspension of disbelief for Named powers. At least with the

Pale Knight, his apparent invulnerability is a pseudo-believable mystery, given his Name & history. This new guy just seems silly. On a lighter note, I'm also hopping on the 'Cat earns her new Name here' bandwagon. Seriously hoping her first Aspect is either 'Badgers' or 'Sarcasm'.

LarsBlitzer

"Seriously hoping her first Aspect is either 'Badgers' or 'Sarcasm'."

Yessss, feel your sarcasm, let the contempt flow through you. GIVE yourself to the Snark Side!

[Liliet](#)

We already have Assassin.

Daniel E

That doesn't make it any less silly, nor can I recall confirmation of Assassin having such a power.

[sengachi](#)

Assassin has literally been killed, fully killed dead, twice on screen (once at Liesse and once in Vivienne's memories iirc) and apparently killed off screen enough times that Cat thinks the idea idea of their most recent reported death sticking is a joke. However their aspect works it's possibly even more ridiculous than Drake's.

Besides, we should remember Drake is a *monstrous* Named. I imagine a number of more extra Dread Emperors and Black Knights had some fairly ridiculous powers in the same vein (especially in conjunction with some ill advised transformation). They often get powers meant to serve as overpowered obstacles with a trick to overcoming them, rather than balanced powers meant to serve as steadily growing extensions of someone's character development. And whatever Drake was once, now he's a monster of the Dead King, the same progenitor who made those ridiculously durable flesh golem ghoul things Hanno fought in that one interlude at the capital. So while this is a truly absurd level of regeneration, it strikes me as a reasonable peak example of the bullshit we've seen from the Dead King's worst nightmares so far.

tynam

Great analysis.

And the flip side of having bullshit monster boss powers in this setting is that you've declared yourself a

bullshit boss monster fight; you've locked yourself out of strategic victory in exchange for the tactical advantage. It's an invitation for a heroic named with exactly the right power to win the boss battle.

Neshamah can put powers like that on revenants precisely because they're ultimately expendable.

[Liliet](#)

Assassin has some kind of power to survive being killed, which is precedent for scope of effect.

As for silliness, can I just remind you that the setting includes a country called "The Dread Empire" ruled by a "Dread Empress Malicia" with its army called "Legions of Terror"? Just to regain perspective for a few moments. Silly is one thing Guide has never done anything with other than eat whole :3

Daniel E

I dunno, I always viewed that kind of stuff as 'embracing the trope', as it were. Something about 'super regeneration power' just stands out to me.

[Liliet](#)

Well, by now it's gotten proper "horror movie monster" tint, hasn't it!

MageMej

As a delaying action against the Drake, could Cat maybe create a horizontal doorway to Twilight Ways for the Drake to fall through and then create the exit doorway into creation just above the entry doorway such that the Drake will keep falling infinitely through twilight and creation much like what you can do in the game Portal?

Sinead

If you are doing that, make it a box of portals so that there is no way "out" of the loop. It would be the same idea as trapping light in a box of mirrors.

Of course there would be no way to verify the effectiveness of this tactic, and it's unknown if the Dead King could do anything with a Revenant in the Twilight Ways to reduce the effectiveness of the Ways

[sengachi](#)

I'd frankly be worried about giving the most indestructible Revenant access to the Twilight Ways, and through him the Dead King.

If the Twilight Ways couldn't kill him faster than he regenerates and couldn't eject the Dead King from the driver's seat Yeah I wouldn't risk seeing what the man responsible for the very notion of sorcery as usurpation could do with up close access to the Coalition's single greatest war asset.

NerfContessa

Hmmm, how does the song go?

Is there a white knight, upoon a fiiery steed,
Late at a ight I toss (goblinfire) I turn (undead) and dreeeam of
what I need

I need. A hero!

Thank you, thank you,...

[where to buy costume lingerie gastonia north carolina](#)

Can someone recommend Nipple Tassels, Breast Covers and Nipple Pasties? Cheers xox

Chapter 67: Isolani

"Kill a man and they will call you a murderer. Kill a hundred and it is a massacre, slaughter a thousand and it will be war. But kill a hundred thousand, a million? That carnage is the sole province of gods. Ancient Keter revealed this truth for all to see: apotheosis is simply bloodshed beyond mortal ken."

– Kayode Owusu, Warlock under Dread Emperors Vindictive I and Nihilis

I slept through the beginning of the Battle of Maillac's Boot.

Adjutant's prediction of the first enemy skirmishers arriving by Early Bell proved to be somewhat optimistic, as the first skulkers were caught half past Midnight Bell instead. Ghouls out front instead of skeletons, a sure sign that something with brains was planning out the offensive – they were significantly better at keeping out of sight. Pickler's wall on the peninsula

was done and the palisade raised to the south but the fort guarding the northern shore had not yet been finished and so it was there that the ghouls tried to slip in. They got caught by goblin legionaries, fangs and claws proving no match for knives and crossbows when they came attached to a pair of eyes that could see in the dark.

It was only the first of the enemy's probes at our defences under cover of night, which my commanders had well known. Watches were doubled and magelights brought out as lone ghouls turned into packs swimming through the muck and skeletons began to march at the bottom of the swamp. An assault on the palisade was handily thrown back, though worryingly enough the ghouls had been more interested in clawing at the wood than climbing up to assault my soldiers. The Boot itself was only tried more cautiously, ghouls revealing themselves several times in the distance in an attempt to bait out fire from our engines.

Pickler's boys had better discipline than that, thankfully, so despite their efforts the enemy were kept in the dark about our range and the nature of our engines. One of Hune's legates, who went by the name of Paltry, had been in command at the time and he'd requested the Order of Broken Bells to send patrols along the shoreline just in case. They found no enemies, however, and the dead bade their time with only a few more minor attacks under cover of dark. The first genuine assault came halfway past Early Bell, and even if I'd not already been breaking my fast while reading reports the ruckus of it would have woken me.

I hastily scarfed down the rest of my eggs – weren't as good now that Hakram wasn't the one cooking them, no one else got the seasoning quite right – and snatched up my staff before limping out in to the cold morning light, running into the secretary from the phalanges that Adjutant had sent to speak to me. An assault on the palisade, the young woman told me, by skeleton mages and ghouls.

"Reinforcements were already being sent in when I left," she said, tucking back a curl of dark hair just a little too long to be allowed under Army regulations.

The adjunct secretariat weren't part of the Army of Callow, though, I reminded myself. They were Hakram's and no one else's, though he'd often drawn on my armies for recruitment.

"The assault will have been driven back by the time we can arrive, Your Majesty," she continued, "so the Lord Adjutant suggests that you finish your breakfast instead of-"

"I left a mug of tea in there," I mused, "have it brought to the palisade, would you?"

I tore open a gate into Twilight and stepped through, the warmer breeze of that journeyer's realm a pleasant change from the clime of Hainaut. While limping my way there would have taken me too long and there was no denying it, I had a shortcut at hand. Wasn't hard to make it there, the starlit compass guiding my steps, and I limped out of a portal to the sight of a dozen crossbows and twice as many swords pointed at me. I smiled approvingly at the sight, eyes scanning our surroundings for a threat.

"At ease," I said.

I'd aimed to come out at ground level, since there might be fighting on the palisade walkway, but there was no sight of the dead there. Wasn't hard to hazard a guess as to why, given that the Grey Pilgrim was up there and healing a captain whose eyes and cheek looked like it had quite literally been bitten off. I left him to that for the moment, instead looking for an officer among the crowd just now beginning to put away their weapons. There was a sergeant, stout orc lad with dark green skin and the kind of vivid scar across his nose that his people highly prized as display of strength.

"Sergeant, your name?" I asked.

"Alvar, ma'am," the lieutenant hastily replied, throwing in a formal salute.

His example was followed by the rest of the line, as if they were only now remembering they were in front of a queen.

"Sergeant Alvar, report," I ordered.

"At least two hundred ghouls and a tenth of mages, ma'am," the orc said. "Ghouls came out first, to draw fire from our mages and crossbows, then the skeletons popped out to lob fireballs and rot curses at the palisade. The Grey Pilgrim popped up to smash them, though, took barely a moment."

My eyes narrowed. Had Keter narrowed in on here being the weak point of my defences, then? Ten mages wasn't a large amount, in the greater scheme of things, but the generals of the Kingdom of the Dead were not usually prone to tossing their like into the grinder without purpose. Mages were a lot harder for the Dead King to get his hands on than footmen, and in some ways they formed the backbone of his armies.

"How'd the palisade hold up?" I asked.

"Our sappers say the wardstones dulled the curses but the fireballs scorched the wood some," Sergeant Alvar said. "If this place weren't so wet the wood might have caught fire."

"Lucky us I picked this miserable hole to fight in, then," I drily said. "We've got swamp water enough to drown the work of a hundred mages."

"Wouldn't mind fighting on a sunny Free Cities beach one of these days, ma'am," a soldier called out. "Just saying."

"You and me both, soldier," I snorted. "But if the Enemy was smart enough to head there, wouldn't it be smart enough to avoid fighting us in the first place?"

That got a few appreciative laughs along with blades on shields. Bravado was always a hit with my rank and file, and it wasn't like they'd not earned the right to brag. What other army of our age could boast campaigns to match those of my Army of Callow? I clapped Sergeant Alvar's shoulder and sent the soldiers back to their duty, as from the corner of my eye I saw that Tariq was done healing my captain. Good, hadn't wanted to get in the way of that. If the man could get treatment from the finest living wielder of Light instead of one of our own priests, far be it from me to spoil that. Fine healers as the priests of the House Insurgent were, they weren't the Peregrine.

It wasn't a long walk, even hobbling, and I wasted no time. When the freshly-healed captain began to head my way I shook my head, having already gotten as much of a report as I needed to. Tariq didn't even look like he was out of breath, ever spry for his lengthening age. I broke the silence first.

"My thanks for healing my people," I acknowledged.

"Would that I could do more," the Pilgrim said.

In most people I would have called it a courtesy, a formula, but when it came to the old man I suspected it was entirely sincere.

"The tide's pulling in," I said. "Our foe took the bait."

"So I've heard," Tariq murmured. "Scourges, too?"

"Drake and Mantle," I said. "But there'll be more Revenants."

There always were.

"More of the Scourges as well," the old man said. "A third to round them out, that is the Enemy's way. Varlet or the Archmage."

Right, heroes insisted on calling Tumult the 'Archmage', as if that description didn't also fit quite a few of our own finest practitioners. I'd grant them that the Revenant in question had an uncannily broad arsenal of sorcery to call on, but his particular fondness for large-scale workings that caused chaos in the ranks meant my own people's name for him seem more apt in my eyes.

"I'd say we've seen no sign of Varlet," I sighed, "but that's rather the point with that one, isn't it?"

The Thief of Star had been like Vivienne back in the day, befitting the common root of their Name: unnaturally skilled in stealth and infiltration, but not all that difficult to deal with in an open fight. The Varlet, as we called that grey-cloaked thing, had clearly been more on the assassin end of the sneaky Named scale. It would have been a fucking headache to deal with even if it *didn't* drench everything it used in particularly lethal poisons. At least we shouldn't be dealing with the Hawk anytime soon. After she'd handily lost an archer's duel against Indrani the Dead King had sent her out east instead, to be Rozala Malanza's headache instead of mine.

"They will come for you, Queen Catherine," Tariq quietly said. "You have become one of the keystones of the Grand Alliance, since the Peace of Salia. Your death would damage it deeply."

"They always come," I shrugged. "I yet draw breath anyway, and I'll not tremble at the shadow of dead Named."

"I meant no offence," the Pilgrim said, "only that wherever you make your stand, foes will be drawn."

"I planned with that in mind," I assured him. "Which brings me to a request."

"I'm listening, Black Queen, though I make no promises," the old man said, faintly smiling.

I somehow got the impression he was having a laugh at my expense, though I couldn't quite pinpoint how.

"I want you to stay here, during the battle," I said. "I know you like to wander and that the real blow might just fall elsewhere in our defences, but your presence would anchor this flank."

"In matters of war, I am at your disposal," Tariq frankly said. "I have never led armies, while your skill in such endeavours is well-known."

I nodded my thanks, but before I could speak I caught movement from the corner of my eye. *Ah*, I thought. *Timing's about right I suppose*. A dark-haired young woman hastily made her way up the ramp, the skeletal hand she wore as a pin revealing her rank among the phalanges, and with a relieved expression pressed a steaming mug of herbal tea into my hands.

"Just in time," I smiled as she bowed. "Thank you."

The Grey Pilgrim cast me a look that did not know whether it wanted to be impressed or disbelieving.

"Always one step ahead, Tariq," I lied, and sipped at my tea.

—

The dead had begun massing in significant numbers halfway past Morning Bell.

Skirmishes had kept happening along our defence lines – mostly the Boot and the palisade so far – even as I sat in on a meeting of the Second Army's general staff, letting the well-oiled machinery that General Hune had turned them into go through the necessary motions. The Second was my force that'd stayed closest to the original mould of the Legions of Terror, both because of Hune's personal leanings and because a lot of its high officers were originally from the Legions of Terror. And not the Fifteenth, which had come up with me, but those legions that'd joined me after the Folly. The rank and file were much like that of other hosts in my service, a backbone of legionaries bolstered by larger numbers of Callowan recruits, but the culture among the officers here was still very much that of the Legions. It was at once familiar and discomfoting, like seeing an old friend in a nephew's face.

Indrani helped me put my armour on, something that still felt half-wrong. I'd likely never return two wearing full plate, much as I occasionally wished I could, but I'd managed to strike a balance between protection on compromise. Over an aketon I kept to a cuirass and upper vambraces, with a long tasset and a pair of good greaves. An open-face barbute with slightly gilding evoking a crown over my brow finished the set, without even a gorget to link the breastplate and the helm. Any more weight than what I wore and my limp would start becoming a hindrance. The Mantle of Woe closed over my shoulders, hood down and with an affectionate kiss on the side of the neck Archer left me to my duties while departing for hers.

A bare hour before Morning Bell, under bleary morning light, the dead began their advance. I'd drifted towards the miraculous wall built by my sappers on the shores of the Boot so that I might have a better look at the enemy's offensive, and the walkway there did not disappoint. Wherever the water was low and mud shallow, skeletons in arms could be glimpsed marching through the mire. Where the bottom was deeper sometimes all that could be seen was the tip of spears and helms, dragged forward against the muck. The attack came in three prongs, I saw the advance continued. The largest of the forces was coming for the Boot, straight at us, but another was headed south towards the palisade.

The third looked ready to skim the 'sole' of the Boot so it could dip down into the shallows between the peninsula and the northern shoreline, which had me grimacing. Our fort there was finished but I'd been hoping the roundabout route to there would convince

the enemy to focus their efforts on the better-defended Boot instead. The enemy general was not unskilled, then. Still, I saw no reason to leave my position at the moment. With the Pilgrim bolstering the palisade and the Blessed Artificer at the fort, or flanks should be solidly anchored for now. It was only when the opposition got serious about cracking our defences that the real trouble would start.

"Ma'am, it looks like the enemy's in range of our mages."

I glanced at the captain addressing me, a young woman by the name of Jules Farrier – no relation to the man who'd once been the commander of my Gallowborne, I'd asked – and cocked an eyebrow.

"It's your command, captain," I said. "I'm only here to keep an eye on things. The order's yours to give."

"Yes ma'am," she stiffly replied.

I left her to it, eyes still on the dead approaching through the swamp. Captain Farrier had been right, now that the skeletons were reaching swamplands where the depth left their upper body visible it was time for the fireballs to begin. All along the baked brick wall that Pickler had raised, incantations rose and fire bloomed. It was a work of art, the fireball formula that the War College taught. Masego liked to rag on in, but he was coming at it from the wrong direction. He saw one spell being used for a variety of purposes improperly when he knew a spare formula more apt to each purpose, but then he was the Warlock's son. The former Apprentice. Even among highborn mages, nine tenths would not get an education to equal his. The Legion formula was, on the other hand, simple enough that every mage in the service could learn it yet flexible enough that it could be adapted to dozens of different situations. Fighting skeletons, fire itself was only of limited use. Scorching bone and armour accomplished little.

Yet the formula could be tinkered with so that the fireball grew dense, the impact more powerful, and *that* made a dent into the Bones.

Like a wave of fire the spells went out, smashing into the skeletons and splashing into the scum water with hissing vapour. The enemy's advance staggered, but we had too few mages and there were too many enemies: they could not be stopped like this, only slowed. It was still enough to set up a good killing field for our siege engines, our copperstone ballistas beginning measured fire into clumps of skeletons. Given how many undead we'd be facing before day's end, we couldn't afford to just shoot at every shadow.

It would have been easy to see the casualties mount on the enemy side without them even getting close enough to swing at our walls and take it as the herald of overwhelming victory. I knew better.

For one, it was telling that even in such small numbers – there couldn't be more than three thousand divided between the three offensive – we couldn't outright dam the tide. More and more skeletons were slipping through our fire with every heartbeat, coming ever closer to the walls. But beyond that I knew well that in war there were precious few absolute advantages, mostly comparative ones. Our advantage here and now, the walls and the terrain and the preparations, they weren't something to sneer at.

But they were needed to make up for the overwhelming numbers and tirelessness of our enemy in the first place, to make this battle more than a ceremonious suicide, so those initial beats of the battle when our advantages came into play and the enemy's hadn't weren't to be counted on. This was going to get ugly when the bolts ran out, when the magics fizzled and my people were exhausted from hours of hard fighting. Anything before that was just our attempt to inflict enough damage on the enemy we got to survive the hard part. By either luck or fate, the first skeleton to make it to the bottom of our wall started scaling it not even a foot to my left. Liming to the edge of the rampart, I pointed my staff downwards and offered a rueful smile.

"Bad luck," I told it, and let loose with Night.

—

It was mostly luck that I was in the fort when the attack hit.

The fighting at the walls had remained steady but the peril was not great: between the concentration of mages and the rotations of fresh soldiers, we were keeping the dead at bay handily. I'd gotten a report that it'd been trickier at the palisade, but between a company of heavies being brought out and the Grey Pilgrim intervening they'd kept it under control. The assault from the shallows had been comparatively easier, the numbers of the attackers having been thinned by fire from the Boot before they got there. It was the sole front where I'd never gone, though, so I'd elected to have a look. More for morale purposes than because the fight needed me, but morale would count for quite a bit in the coming hours.

The fort itself was of classical Legion layout, square with a forward palisade and a bastion deeper in. Gates on four sides so that legionaries could quickly deploy and in our case two smaller barricades had been added on the sides so that scorpions could be raised on heights and pointed at the shallows. There was some fighting on the shores when I stepped out of a gate within the fort, but nothing all that threatening – the dead were just keeping up the pressure by tossing corpses at our shield wall defending the shore. The Blessed Artificer had stepped in to bring down a great lighting strike of Light at enemy mages, but not involved herself since. I could only approve, given the

finite nature of what she could contribute to a fight, and told her as much.

"It seems callous not to use all that I can," Adanna of Smyrna admitted. "There have been deaths, and some of these I might have prevented."

My opinion of her character went up a notch.

"They know the risks of their trade," I replied, not hiding my pride. "They're Army of Callow, they understand sometimes you have to bleed early to win the fight."

The dark-skinned heroine looked unconvinced, but not even her remarkable amount of gall would allow her to argue with a queen about her own soldiers.

"If you sa-"

Her answer was interrupted by crashes and shouts coming from the shoreline, both our heads whipping about. I couldn't see it all from where I stood, even with the front gates open, but I could see that some sort of large snake construct had just emerged from the shallows and was now unhinging its jaw.

"Later," I cut in, already limping forward.

Legionaries parted for me as I made my way out of the fort, even when they were hurrying out as reinforcements, and I hastened to take a better look. I cursed in Kharsum. A new kind of construct, by the looks of it: much smaller than the great snakes used in the sieges of Twilight's Pass, but built along the same lines. More a carrier of troops and battering ram than anything else, but no less dangerous for it. Half a dozen had hit the beaches simultaneously and were now pouring out skeletons into the gaps of my shield wall. *These were made for the swamps of Hainaut*, I thought. An answer to both the difficulties of the terrain and our growing advantage at range. We hadn't been the only ones to prepare for this campaign.

"Hazaak," the Blessed Artificer snarled, raising a short copper spear.

She'd caught up to me without my even noticing. Not to be outdone, I drew deep on Night even as Light bloomed around the short spear. Where the Artificer struck with burning might, a great crackling spear of roiling Light falling on one of the snakes, I instead took a more measured approach: shadows slithered along the ground and suddenly thrust up, threading through the open maws of three of the constructs and forcefully snapping them shut.

"Priests, on the three bound," I calmly said, pitching my voice so it'd be heard.

The House Insurgent dutifully obeyed, Light begin to tear at the wiggling great snakes in sharp spears even as Adanna reached for another of her instruments. I began to shape a great ball of blackflame so ram down the maw of one of the remaining snakes when I caught sight of flicker of movement to my left. Instinct had me redirecting my fire there and I caught the Revenant in the stomach, scorching its thin frame as it stumbled on the ground. It looked like any other Bone, little more than a corpse in ancient armour, but none of those would have withstood the quantity of blackflame I'd just tossed at it.

"Revenant," I noted. "Won't be the only one."

Already I was weaving a follow-up, threads binding the legs of the down Revenant together as I prepared a larger mass of blackflame above its body – which exploded, a curse tearing through them.

"Mantle," I snarled, eyes flitting about.

I found her in the water, only the upper half of her armoured form above the mire. The dull, black plate steel plate set with emeralds and silver inscriptions couldn't be confused for anyone else, not the thick green cloak whose hood obscured the visor of her helm. Another snake went up in a pillar of white flames, the Artificer striking without hesitation, but during my heartbeat of distraction the Revenant on the ground had broken its bonds. With surprising fluidity it struck out at the heroine, shortsword arcing for her neck, but my hand was steady and my aim true – my own blade caught it in time, an inch from biting into Adanna's unprotected flesh.

Gods, would it kill the woman to wear some fucking armour?

"I will take the fallen priestess," the Blessed Artificer mildly said. "I take offence the use her powers have found."

"Be my guest," I grinned. "I'll handle our little friend here."

The Revenant withdrew its blade and took a step back, but it'd forgotten this wasn't a duel and it was behind my godsdamned lines: two big orc heavies smashed into its back with their greatshields, making it stumble, and I took the opening. I struck high and in a heavy chop, which it caught with its blade and deftly slid so my momentum dragged me into its guard, but before it could rotate its wrist and disarm me my deadwood staff smashed into the side of its head. Though beyond paid it still stumbled, and with a grunt I drew back my blade to strike again – weaving Night along the length. With a clean cut I sent its helmeted head rolling, even as Adanna was wreathed with blinding light.

I shielded my eyes with my hood, offering a grin to the two heavies that'd come to help.

"This one counts as half-yours," I told them. "Tell your lieutenant you're up for commendation."

Both grinned back like big ugly green cats, returning enthusiastic calls of *Warlord*, but even as I bumped shoulders against them in a friendly manner I was already taking in the few bits of fighting I'd missed. Mantle had ripped up my working on the snakes, though I'd been too distracted to notice, but the fight with the Artificer wasn't going well for her at all. She'd already been forced to pull out a globe of smooth, mirror-like darkness I'd only ever seen her use when hard pressed. Meanwhile, between the Artificer and the House Insurgent there were only two great snakes left and the mages were focusing their efforts on plugging the breaches so that the heavies could fill them. With a triumphant cry Adanna crushed a glass baton in her fist and a rain of Light spears fell on the globe of darkness, shattering it with a keening scream. Under it there was no trace of Mantle, who must have legged it when the attack began going south.

I glanced at the Blessed Artificer appreciatively.

"You're definitely worth keeping around," I said. "She's a tricky opponent, for me."

Adanna of Smyrna straightened proudly.

"It is my duty to—"

In the distance, to the south, a few goutts of red went up. Signal spells, asking for reinforcements. *Shit, they must have hit the palisade as well.*

"Later," I amusedly told the Artificer, opening a gate and stepping through it.

—

The first thing I heard stepping out of the Twilight Ways had an involuntary shiver going up my spine.

"**Shine,**" the Grey Pilgrim coldly said.

I shielded my eyes with the flat of my blade, but not quite quickly enough the terrifyingly bright light I glimpsed did not blind me. I cursed, head ringing and eyes burning, and almost stumbled into a soldier. I must have come out near a formation. It was too long for comfort before I could see again, but when I did what my restored vision showed was a mixed bag. On one hand, there was a gaping hole in the palisade about ten feet wide. Broken logs had been brought forward to plug it, but the undead

were trying to push through the opening and only narrowly being held back by a hasty shield wall. On the other hand, the smoking skeleton at Tariq's feet that was still holding a familiar claymore could not be anything but the Drake.

It looked like getting a blast of the Peregrine's most powerful aspect from up close was too much for even that monster's regeneration to take, because while some specks of flesh were reappearing on the bones it was nothing more than that.

"Your Majesty," Tariq mildly greeted me. "If you would handle the breach, I am not yet finished with this one."

"Hey, I'm not one to argue with a smoking corpse," I shrugged as I began to gather Night. "Do as you will."

I was in no way inclined to keep to subtle means when dealing with an outright breach, so this time I simply began to gather a few dozen great balls of blackflame above the undead trying to mash through my shield wall. Impatiently I struck at the ground with my staff, the balls smashing downwards and exploding in great gouts of black fire. Immediately the pressure slackened and my soldiers pushed the enemy back, enough that sappers were able to bring out panels and began repairing the breach. I tossed another great gout of fire at the dead to push them back in the water long enough for the holes to be plugged, then let the captains in charge to handle the rest. I glanced at Tariq, who'd nailed the remains of the Drake to the ground with nails of Light and was now opening a gate into the Twilight Ways beneath him. That might actually do the trick, I mentally conceded. A sudden contortion had the skeleton's skull snap upwards and something that glinted in the light flew. A tooth?

I immediately wove Night to catch it, even as Tariq kicked the skeleton into Twilight and the bones turned to dust, but someone else beat me to it. One of my soldiers, a young man who grinned at his own swift reflexes. He twitched, a heartbeat later.

"No," I snarled.

The soldier smirked at me and winked, then ran for it. I sent a javelin of Night into the back of his knee, my soldiers crying out in dismay at the sight of one of theirs getting shot in the back. But though the soldiers stumbled the shredded flesh grew back in a heartbeat. The Pilgrim's beam of Light incinerated armour and muscle alike, but it wasn't enough. Still burning with pale flames as he deftly avoided the Night harpoon I threw at his back, the reborn Drake threw himself over the edge of the palisade and into the mass of undead. I went up the ramp and took out my anger on the undead in a storm of black flames, but the bastard was in the wind. Again. My fingers clenched around my staff until the knuckles went white.

My soldiers gave me a wide berth, but Tariq was less wary of the dark mood laid bare on my face.

"It's not the last of him we'll see today," the Grey Pilgrim simply said. "And we know the trick, now."

I made myself breathe out, reaching for calm, and looked up at the sky. The sun had risen higher than I'd expected, we must be close to Noon Bell by now. Gods, barely noon and the fighting was likely to last until dark. Above the Boot, streaks of yellow went up. *Constructs sighted*. I squared my shoulders.

"Next time," I agreed, and opened a gate.

As always, there was to be no rest for the wicked.

JR

first!

Burguul, Black Spiral Dancer

No rest for the wicked indeed.

[Javvies](#)

That is a nasty – and ridiculous trick for Drake. And ridiculously overpowered. Is he fucking whatshisname, the 40k fallen Astartes who just turns you into him if you kill him? Except worse.

Blessed Artificer isn't wearing any kind of armor? What the hell is wrong with her?

erebus42

You'd think someone who's basically a Smithing cleric would have a better appreciation for armor. Idk though maybe she's pulling an Exiled Prince and feels it's "unheroic"- and we all know how that worked out for him.

caoimhinh

To be fair, she is more of a scholarly-type. She is not really a smith, the "Artificer" part of her Name comes closer to an enchanter than a smith or a heavy mechanic-kind of craftsman.

[Adrian_V](#)

Funny you mention Adanna, i was thinking she will be the one to kill the Drake by making an artifact toilet just for him, or 1 that opens and instant gate for a few seconds (enough for him to fall in)

caoimhinh

Well, most Named have a theme in their clothing and equipment, and some aren't flexible in that regard. Mages and Priests wear robes while fighter types wear some sort of armor. You will never see Masego wearing plate armor, and Tariq literally can't wear anything without it becoming gray for some reason or the other.

What I found funny was that Cat complained of Adanna having an unprotected neck, but so does Cat, and her excuse is that the limp would bother her, yet she can always get rid of the pain with Night.

P.S: a friend told me that there's a guy called Drake Merwin from a saga of books (the Gone Series) whose power was regeneration even from the smallest part of him, given to him by some sort of alien evil being. Maybe this Drake is a reference to that guy?

[Liliet](#)

> and Tariq literally can't wear anything without it becoming gray for some reason or the other.

Is that a textual fact or just a very reasonable theory? I don't remember.

shadw21

Textual fact from his thoughts back in the Perigrine extra chapters I believe. Specifically whatever robes he wears I think, but I think he was wearing those most of the time anyways. They always turned a particular shade of grey during his journeys to wherever by the time he got to his destination, no matter what color they originally were.

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god.

Oh my god.

Thank you.

[Liliet](#)

> and her excuse is that the limp would bother her, yet she can always get rid of the pain with Night.

Night is a limited resource, and Cat wears SOME armor. Notably she added a helmet since the last outing where she wondered why the fuck she wasn't wearing one XD

Practicality

IIRC Indrani called her out on it, that the sisters could have easily healed the limp, but Cat said something along the lines of needing the reminder.

(i believe it happened during a tavern scene after Indrani slugged Cat and told her that a year ago she would have easily caught that.)

Liliet

Ah yeah, but that doesn't mean she can do it any time for free NOW. And canceling the pain with Night is not the same thing – it's an ongoing expense.

KageLupus

I don't think the issue is that Night is a limited resource, but that it only masks the pain so that Cat can move around without the limp bothering her. But it still causes her trouble. It is like walking on a sprained ankle. You can do it, but it will make the ankle worse in the long run.

Liliet

Both are issues!

JBeari

Not to be combative, but I'm pretty sure it was addressed earlier on in the series when she was still Squire.

Basically it being the same reasoning as not using a magical weapon, that in a crucial moment it will fail you and cause your downfall. Like she gets used to not feeling pain, but then a pivotal moment when she can't use Night anymore and trips up at the sudden resurgence of the pain.

Im starting to doubt myself now though. I could sworn that that happened, right?

'Ladi Williams

No, you are right. She said she wants to remember the pain to keep her grounded and humane...but more importantly Providence would ensure she runs into a hero who would counter the hight she's using to keep the limo from bothering her at the very worst possible time for her...which would surely spell her doom.

caoimhinh

I mean, she is not wearing the gorget, the part that protects the neck, because supposedly it would add her too much weight.

Even as far as Book 1, the importance of that particular piece of equipment has been remarked upon, with Cat even mentally mocking enemies when she kills them by slicing their throats or stabbing their necks.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I'm... wondering about that one.

Currently my guess is that the breastplate and the helmet both actually provide protection for her neck, she just doesn't wear the piece that would connect the two and remove gaps.

Shveiran

I'm kind of an armor enthusiast, and I must say I don't see a contradiction here: Cat used to mock people not wearing a gorget or an helmet when she was the Squire, sporting full plate armor made in goblin steel and still being able to outrun an athlete with ease.

Now she is wearing a breastplate and a bit of limb protection, plus an helmet. That is obviously better than a tunic for the purpose of protection, but it is still a far cry from a suit of plate. I don't think she is wearing a suit of chainmail underneath (since that would be the heaviest piece by far) but that still means that her joints are vulnerable. So is (possibly) the back of her leg and her feet (depending on the kind of armor she is wearing there, but again, considering she isn't wearing plate I doubt these areas at least are not exposed), her groin, her face (she seems to be wearing a barbute, so a stab in the opening is a possibility) and her hands, since gauntlets were not mentioned.

I believe she is well aware of this, but it is simply a matter of not being strong enough to be able to wear full plate armor and not be so drained she can't cast effectively or slowed down so much she isn't fast enough to dodge what armor doesn't protect against. This is as much armor as she can afford to wear, and yeah, it leaves dangerous areas exposed to nameless skeletons, but it is as much as she can use without dying to a revenant because she is too slow.

This could change when she gets her name, I guess? Though I'm starting to believe it won't. She has been far from

the front lines for a while now, and that is where she gained most of her fame.

shikkarasu

At least she didn't go the way of A-Dress-Is-Not-Armour and Should-Have-Ducked.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Cat's got some hypocrisy in her, she knows it and we know it. Cat says she keeps it b/c it reminds her of... it was either mortality or her mistakes or both. Anyway, she would justify it with something that sounds good to her... but Adanna would probably justify it as well and she probably thinks it's reasonable too. We all sound so reasonable to ourselves and others simply seem so unreasonable – we have reasons for doing unreasonable things, others are just unreasonable. Crash course in fundamental attribution error 😊

Christian Oaks

Not everyone has sense beaten into them, and Adanna seems to be one of those who went without.

grzecho2222

In same version of the myth, drake/wyrm Gorenicz can reborn/grow copies of himself from his teeth, also Iason had fought same kind of super warrior that grew from dragon teeth sown in the field of Ares

Ash

typo:

Though beyond *paid* it still stumbled -> pain

NerfGlaistigUaine

"But kill a hundred thousand, a million? That carnage is the sole province of gods... apotheosis is simply bloodshed beyond mortal ken"

Boy, you underestimate our ken. No one does inhuman like humans.

caoimhinh

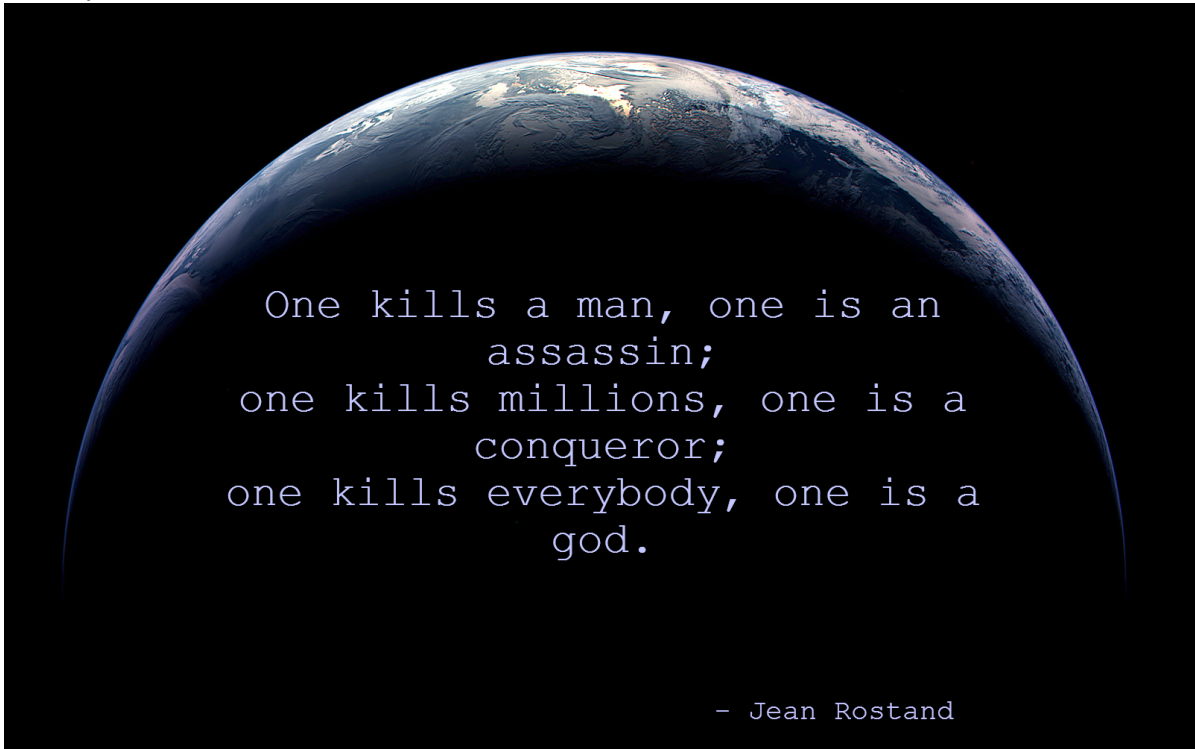
More than being "only inhumans would be able to do such things" is rather like "doing that makes you a being beyond mortals".

<https://external-preview.redd.it/0sV-y9ptK7h4KuziZtwicWczEI9XarQRfWUfHPVKJvw.png?auto=webp&s=38ebcd8ff673935d05133371a9a55d7929a0178b>

caoimhinh

Seems like the image link has to come through Imgur for it to be shown in miniature in the message rather than an external link?

Well, whatever.



NerfContessa

Indeed, my fittingly named friend and coworker, indeed.

Also, regenerate as long as his tooth is left AND possession by tooth is insanely op.

If that had been a hero he would likely still be alive, so I am guessing villain who fell for. The Invincible ploy.

erebus42

As much as I love these battle scenes (this story's use of truly integrated fantasy war making is always amazing to read) I'm dying to see the results of Masegos' and Akuas' projects.

[Burlyraven](#)

Man, that is a nasty trick of the Drake's. Just an instant of contact with a tooth – supposedly through armor – and the victim is instantly killed, consumed, and replaced. Something that powerful feels like it has to be an Aspect, not DK tampering, and it's somewhat terrifying to think about what the original Named might have been like in that case.

Also, this defense is feeling all too easy and almost chipper. Cat's dark mood sticking around might be the best case scenario, because I can think of a few stories that tend to go poorly when the defenders are bragging and scoring win after win. This is even accounting for the deaths stacking up.

dadycoool

Yeah, the "Bad luck" and "Nice job, boys" are some red flags. Not big ones, like "Whoo, we did it!" but they're having too good a time to last.

That trick really is nasty. Only thing for it is to get him all alone and toss him in the Twilight Ways, I guess.

TeK

And that would be the last we see of him.

Matthew Wells

No Revenant could survive that!

hakureireimu

I read it as the soldier ate an idiot ball and grabbed it with his hand. So through gloves or open hand, not armor.

grokkingstuff

Imagine the practice the Dead King had, keeping the Bard alive & contained. Keeping the Drake for 50 years must have been a piece of cake 😊

JRogue

If it is an Aspect, then, conceivably, Cat can Take it.

Wouldn't that one time use be awfully handy to have?

Lox

Adanna of Smyrna straightened proudly.

"It is my duty to Boost!"

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

NerfGlaistigUaine

Isolani: Isolated queen's pawn. An isolated pawn is a pawn that doesn't have any friendly pawns in the adjacent files. This means the pawn is in a very vulnerable and weak position. An isolated queen's pawn is special because it provides control of the center, opens up better development, and can create a good

position to launch a kingside attack, while retaining the normal disadvantages of an isolated pawn. Which fits really, b/c Cat's force is isolated and vulnerable but she's using it to launch a strong offensive to gain control of the board.

Also, while isolani can be beneficial, if things progress to endgame in the same position then an isolated pawn is just a huge vulnerability and weakness.

Feel free to correct me here, I haven't played chess seriously since high school so I might have gotten some stuff wrong.

[Liliet](#)

THANKS!!!!

LD1977

Isolani is any pawn, not just on d file.

Also it does not provide any prerequisites for a kingside attack.

The main reason it is allowed is to have better piece play, and one of the goals is to force the other player to capture a piece protected by it (for example on e5 is the pawn is on d4), therefore unmaking the isolated position of the pawn.

The only real advantage of an isolani is mostly in the endgame, when you have an isolani on a or h file which is also free to advance, therefore distracting the opponent's King or tying down a light piece.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Er, you sure? B/c I did a quick Google search after reading your comment and pretty much everyone (wikipedia, chess stack exchange, chess24, etc.) says it's isolated queen's pawn (d file) not just isolated pawn. And there are tons of discussions on advantages/disadvantages of isolani and most suggest having it endgame is a bad thing. Can I ask where you're getting your information from? It seems to disagree with, well, every source I know.

LD1977

Well I have read a lot of chess books and studied chess deeply. I have also known a lot of grandmasters use the term for any isolated pawn.

The reason d pawn is mentioned most often is that its isolation happens in many openings, therefore it is in fact the most typical case. Opening books have always been the

most popular, so authors probably first shortened the term into isolani while talking about isolated d pawn.

Now, as we agree, isolated d pawn is a structural weakness that is a liability in the endgame. However, this is ideally balanced by free piece play (the real compensation), a bit quicker development and the outpost on e4/e5. I have personally always found that playing against it is easier than having it, but I am a medium level player (around 2150 ELO), so transitional advantages probably mean less than structural ones 😊 I do hold my own well against masters, but IMs/GMs are a bit too hard.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Oh cool! You're a lot more qualified than I am then to talk about chess strategies – I was only an amateur and ~1900 ELO at best. Thing I'm confused about is you say isolani is good for endgame and then in this response you say it's structurally bad but has quicker development and outposts – which would be opening/mid-game stuff. Seems like you're saying it can lead to better endgame but not better in endgame (unless it's also passed pawn)? B/c by endgame, when all you've got is pawns and one or two material, seems isolani would be a weakness all other things even. Also, I was taught that having those outposts made a kingside attack more viable though, is that wrong?

One thing I have to outright disagree about is I'm pretty sure the agreed upon definition of isolani is the isolated queen pawn specifically. I think your GMs are just more liberal in their vocab.

NerfContessa

Dang, up till 17 years ago I was a pretty successful amateur, somehow I had a confounding play style which made me win near all my first games with people over 200pts ahead of me.

Later I sadly found out it was simply an actual flaw. I didn't plan enough moves ahead and so better players wasted their brain power anticipating moves that never came.

Suggs, but that's the reason I stopped playing chess at age 24.

LD1977

Maybe I haven't emphasized enough. Isolated but free pawn on the wing is useful in endings because it ties down opponent's pieces far from the other wing, while

isolated d pawn is not as good because it usually does not tie down the opponent far from the real action.

True, could be that in literature isolani is specifically d-pawn. I checked too 😊 probably people are a bit less strict when just talking and I just remembered that. I am way too lazy to go through the books I have handy to try to find an exception.

Having an outpost is useful, however these outposts are normally challenged so just having a piece there is not the real point. What actually happens is that you try to use the development advantage to force the opponent to take the Knight on e5 → you recapture dxe5 → now you have a pawn on e5 that is not isolated anymore (plus ideally it hits Knight on f6 that has to move, therefore weakening h7) + you keep the more active pieces → this together can spark a kingside attack.

This is why the defender should never ever take on e5, but definitely try to exchange pieces gradually to defuse the initiative while keeping the d4 isolani alive (it gets weaker with exchanges).

Anyway, in the context of the Guide, I am not sure there is a higher symbolic here. Author probably just means to emphasize the weakness of an isolated army.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Makes sense, but that's very different from your initial response. What you left out was quite important to your message. You know a lot about chess (besides getting meaning of isolani wrong 😊), but your communication could use a bit more work, no offense.

As for message, I like to give EE the benefit of the doubt.

[sengachi](#)

I love the rapport Catherine has with her soldiers. She has earned that. And the moment when two of her soldiers helped bring down that Revenant, without a second thought? She earned that too, paid for it a dozen times over.

LD1977

Yea but this Revenant died a bit too easily, no?

Adam

Cat is a formerly supernatural priest of an eldritch horror and most Revenants were only "normal" Named even before being

diminished in death. The pain in the butt Revenants are ones who were abnormally powerfull in life and then were augmented by Trigemestus. An unnamed revenant will easily die to the Black Queen, Queen of Lost and Found, Last of the Winter Court, daughter and apprentice of one of the Calamities. Remember that all of the present Named are heavy hitters of the combined army brought together from the entire continent.

[sengachi](#)

No that's the thing. She. Earned. This.

Remember how easily Warlock tore through the Bumbling Magician at the beginning of the story? That's Catherine's power level, skill, and narrative status now. From the very beginning it was established that there are tiers of Named, from those who make narrow escapes and eek out victories against simple mortals ... and those like the Saint of Swords and Warlock, against whom such Named might as well be ordinary mortals.

And Catherine has clawed her way up those ranks throughout the entire story, to the point where this, all of this, feels earned. She gets to just roflstomp a lesser Revenant and not have it feel cheap because we know exactly what it took to get here and can cheer it on as a reward well earned.

And with the soldiers coming to her aid, that's the thing. Her Story right here, and her Role, clearly isn't "Catherine the Lone Powerhouse". What this battle is serving as a testament to is all the work, blood, and sweat she's put in earning the loyalty and crafting the skill of those who follow her. When a low tier undead Named forgets it's not an a duel and gets summarily tackled by two of Catherine soldier's brave enough to get into a fight between the Black Queen and a Named, that's not just an asspull. That is something Catherine has paid for, from the very moment she slit that rapist's throat to join the War College as Black's apprentice to the moment just before where she stood next to her soldiers on the battlements and joked that the Dead King should fear them.

Easy battles are only a bad thing in a story when they're not the glorious culmination of *work* we can be proud of.

Besides, Catherine has emphasized so many damn times this chapter that this part of the fight is an easy prelude to the real grinding toll of it later that I think we'd know better than to call any aspect of it 'too easy'.

[Liliet](#)

[illegible]

> Easy battles are only a bad thing in a story when they're not the glorious culmination of **work** we can be proud of.

this this this this this

Guide does a very excellent thing where it doesn't suffer from seasonal power decay/escalation – characters enter each new arc of the story with all the power-ups from the end of the previous one, and the environment does not reshuffle itself offscreen to match. And it achieves this effect partially through this – fights that aren't trivial in the setting, but are roflstomped by the main character because goddamn it it's book six and she never stopped escalating.

It escalates the scope and the goalposts instead – Catherine could roflstomp all Revenants present and it still wouldn't win her the fight by itself, and she still cannot roflstomp all of them, because the Dead King is bringing out the good silverware for this.

Because at the end of the story, the Dead King will earn his names twice over, and how the fuck can Catherine achieve that if she cannot roflstomp his minions?

Shveiran

I regret I only have one like to give.

KageLupus

Nah, the Revenant was just some random dead Named that the DK threw their way. Chances are it was mainly meant to be a distraction for the Mantle and any damage it inflicted would be extra. Don't forget, Cat has spent years honing herself in combat against Named specifically. She has enough experience with it that anything less than a Scourge or other Big Deal is well within her ability to take down.

Gibborim

Cat is obnoxiously good at killing named and not every named the Dead King has raised can be a heavy hitter. I'm sure he has taken his share of Squires, Apprentices, and Random Assholes.

LD1977

All true.

I just expected that even a weak Revenant has two aspects it can call on (I vaguely remember that getting turned into

Revenant might damage/destroy an aspect), so just cutting its head off seems kind of too easy peasy.

sengachi

I mean some of them might have *none*. Heck some Revenants may have only been claimants.

Remember the Squire murderfest in the first book? It's not hard to imagine all those kids being thrown into a war with the Dead King (and dying), and they probably had the juice to at least merit "more Revenant than basic zombie" status". So yeah, some of the Revenants may only have a Name trick or three, and not even an aspect yet.

Dredcor

The destroyed/damaged aspect bit was specifically when the Dead King didn't want them to have a specific Aspect, so he would intentionally destroy it.

Though it was also mentioned that the Revenants only have Shadows of their names remaining. Though that might have been specific to names like White Knight which recurr.

Liliet

One needs an opening to use an Aspect. If being killed after using all your Aspects was the only option, Named would be immortal through never using their Aspects at all.

Darkening

I mean, I doubt Scorched Apostate had more than 1 aspect at the very most, and he got turned into a revenant. I'm sure any number of rookie named have died to the dead king. Hell, Cat's said in the past that a lot of heroes sort of make a point of keeping an aspect in reserve so that they can pull a sudden reversal of an opponent if they need it.

LD1977

True, true. I figured guys that go on a Crusade are more often the big boys, but yes they could be greenies with a single aspect too. I mean we saw some pretty bad mofos so far, even before the whole Scourge group.

Darkening

I mean, there's *already* an apprentice involved in the current war with Keter. It's kind of an all hands on deck situation, even the rookies get dragged along lol.

The folks that came after Cat at the battle of camps certainly weren't especially impressive individually at the time, they'd probably have gone to war against Keter as well, given most of them are currently.

[Adrian V](#)

Mmm for a moment i thought it trying to kill the Pilgrim with the tooth, this was cooler xD

I am loving Cats exits, what is she? Batman? xD

How many of the scourges have appeared or been mentioned?
Including the one that was destroyed by the drow.

[vernal.ancient](#)

I think we've seen Pale knight, Mantle/Tumult, Drake, and Hawk, with Varlet being mentioned but not seen. I want to say there's been a Wolf mentioned as well? That would make six, which seems appropriate; a Five-Man Band plus Sixth Ranger. Although considering that heroes and villains aren't entirely in agreement, I suppose Wolf and Varlet could be the same Revenant. Wolves are stealthy hunters and Varlet is an assassin

[vernal.ancient](#)

Or, wait, Mantle might be separate from Tumult/Archmage. I dunno, I'm getting the different revenants mixed up in my head now

Shveiran

I don't think the Pale Knight is actually a Scourge. It is definitely in that league, don't get me wrong, but I don't think he is one of the official formation.

As far as I can tell they are:

Tumult/archmage

Drake

Mantle

Hawk

Varlet

... though I'm not one-hundred percent sure there are five of them. I have this feeling they were six? If so, I think one is still in the dark.

Dredcor

I know the Stitcher or whatever they were called was a Scourge before, but they got killed by the drow.

Darkening

I believe they said there were ten. Though one died to the drow, so they're down to 9, so the Pale Knight will slot in nicely to round them out again.

ohJohN

From the recent "Interlude: Ietsism":

TL;DR It's a fuzzy category applied by the Grand Alliance forces for convenience, so there's no real canonical answer, but by consensus ~10 Revenants are uncontroversially considered Scourges.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Ah, thanks! That makes sense. I was thinking the Scourges were a villainous Band of Five, and got confused when I counted at least seven

Shveiran

Good find, thanks.

Juff

Typo Thread:

out in to > out into
There was a sergeant (later said to be a lieutenant)
rank a file > rank and file
seem more apt > seemed more apt
Thief of Star > Thief of Stars
return two > return to
protection on compromise (sounds odd)
slightly gilding > slight gilding
hood down and > hood down, and
I saw the advance continued (sounds odd)
or flanks > our flanks
rag on in > rag on it
enemy we got > enemy before we got
Liming (not sure what this should be)
Light begin > Light beginning
so ram > to ram
of flicker > of a flicker
down Revenant > downed Revenant
plate steel plate > steel plate
offence the use > offence at the use
beyond paid > beyond pain
only to great snakes > only two great snakes
by blade > my blade
then let the > then left the

Xinci

I do wonder if exposing the Drake to the Twilight ways would work due to its essence subsuming his Domain. Kind of like a Demon contaminating another being and turning it into an extension of its essence, perhaps the Domain with the greater authority may override the other.

[Liliet](#)

No Domain was mentioned regarding Drake. Most Named don't have those.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, but most Named can't regenerate from a scrap like that. A Domain would cover that capability.

I do note that Pilgrim didn't even try to use Twilight until the Drake was beaten down to 0 HP, which makes sense – as I said before, if it still had its full power and maybe a DK shard, it might well be able to attack Twilight itself.

[Liliet](#)

I got the impression that it's more about mobility – he needs to not be able to *dodge* the gate to Twilight.

And Domain is generally known to be another layer of reality that the person can interpose at will. Saint's was an exception and there isn't even a consensus that it was a Domain at all. Normally Domains are like what Skein and Catherine had, or Rafaella's – battlefield control in a very literal sense. Regeneration is not particularly related.

Most Named cannot regenerate from a scrap, but a lot of Named can regenerate period. We've seen a lot more unique and extreme abilities, for example Hanno's Recall. Plenty of Named have tricks that can be described as "we haven't seen any Named be able to do this [to such an extreme degree]". It's kind of a Named *thing*.

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC it was either Saint herself or Pilgrim who described Saint's "I am a sword" power as a Domain... but one which she'd focused on herself, to give her near-invulnerability. Drake's regeneration has that same feel to it – an absolute capacity focused on a single capability, and limited to his own person.

[Liliet](#)

Saint's Aspect that produced the Domain effect was Decree. The nature of the Aspect was that she could make anything come true, and used it for making herself a

sword. It's not about an absolute capacity, Saint just... misused her Domain power for that.

shikkarasu

"Laurence Du Montfort is a Sword" was a self imposed limitation. By refusing to **Decree** anything else she focused it into a Demesne. She stated that using the Aspect for anything else would make it 'less pure.' Tariq confirmed that it was not a true Demesne for the first decade or so, but it *became* one.

(speculation begins)

I can't find it in me to agree to calling it a misuse. Just like she was not being arrogant when she wore no armour and used an unremarkable sword. These self imposed limitations strengthened her Narrative. She does not need anything more than a length of sharpened steel, because She Is A Sword. It's why Cat didn't dare fight her fairly.

I imagine it is a large part of why she became the Saint of Swords after her fight with Ranger.

(speculation ends)

[Liliet](#)

Ah I don't disagree, it wasn't a misuse in the "shouldn't have done that" sense, it was a misuse in the same sense that Cat getting a resurrection at Liesse was an abuse of the narrative mechanics.

And the way I read it was the other way around – it was always going to be a Domain, with the ability to Decree anything in it, but Laurence chose to focus it on herself, so her Domain was an odd kind.

[Mental Mouse](#)

But she did so by limiting the effect to herself, thus taking an already-powerful Aspect and focusing it for extra power.

Shveiran

I guess a Domain could do this if it was over something related. Like, I hold Domain over my body or something like that.

Yet I'd argue that if that was the case Drake would be much harder to hurt as well.

I think it's simpler to just say he's like old style Wolverine?

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Dredcor

I think it is very likely that being undead makes him harder to deal with.

I give it good odds that when he was still living, burning him down to the skeleton would kill him.

But he is undead now, so no need for flesh to keep "living", and thus his regeneration will continue to work even when he is naught but a skeleton.

Otherwise how would he have been zombified, since he would be impossible to kill without reducing his body to nothing?

Gibborim

I'd imagine that the process was to pin him down with Revenants then drag him to Keter for the DK to personally subsume his life force/soul.

caoimhinh

Well, he did mention it took 40 years to turn him into a Revenant, no? With the last 10 years being "inventive", implying a great deal of suffering as he wished he had surrendered before it got to that point.

That makes me think that he really was just that hard to kill even when living.

Dredcor

I think that's how long it took to break him.
A.k.a. make him a willing servant of the Neshamah.

I assume he was very much dead before that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And In fact I just hit the reference on my reread:

> "You hold dominion," I said.

> "Only over the one thing," the Saint grinned. "But that's usually enough."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/09/chapter-11-ballon/>

At first I was like "Tariq, why you burn an aspect so early in battle?"

Then: "Oh. The Drake.
... never mind then, carry on."

caoimhinh

When I read the part of "I glanced at Tariq, who'd nailed the remains of the Drake to the ground with nails of Light and was now opening a gate into the Twilight Ways beneath him. That might actually do the trick, I mentally conceded."

I thought "*fucking finally*, throw that bastard in! What's taking you so long?".

Also, it seems like the thought of using a gate to Twilight to destroy the Drake simply hadn't crossed Cat's mind. Seriously, she requires only a second to open those gates.

saithorthepyro

I think the fact that Tariq had to nail the Drake to the ground first before even trying to get him sent through one indicates it might not be that easy to do.

Gibborim

And if Tariq couldn't do it quickly, on the fly, I doubt Cat could catch a decent Revenant with it either. Cat has more power adjacent to Twilight, but Tariq is who the realm was molded in the image of.

caoimhinh

Cat has been shown to open Gates to Twilight quicker than anyone else. She can do it literally on the fly, as fast as snapping her fingers.

Tariq likely can slip into Twilight easily (as can Indrani, for example) but it seems it takes him a short while to open the Gate.

Shveiran

Sure, but on the fly is kind of uncertain, isn't it? I mean, now that I think about it, I don't think she has ever used the portals to make someone fall into Arcadia, always to make someTHING fall out of them.

So maybe she can't quite do it fast enough that it is an effective attack? You know, I can clap my hands three times rather quick, but it's easier to hit someone swinging a bat than it is for me to clap my hands over

their nose.

It could be easy to dodge, is what I'm trying to say.

Wonder

Oh dear , Drake Deadpool is such a fun nemesis for Cat to contend with.

That phalange who brought Cat's tea to her in time to look like providence was just so super.

It got me thinking of a possible aspect for Cat;

Making providence her bitch .

The aspect gives people who Cat has given a task a healthy dose of providence to successfully execute the dread plans of the Black Queen Arch-Heretic Catherine Foundling.

[Mental Mouse](#)

We've seen variations of that in Captain's **Obey** and even Hakram's **Find**.

Shveiran

I can't quite see it with regards to Obey. Could you expand on that?

KageLupus

Obey was something like "I can complete this seemingly impossible task because I was given an order to do so."

Imagine the same effect but external instead of internal.

Cat would give an order to someone and they would get a push when completing it, but the effect would come from her instead of the person being ordered.

That said, I don't think any of Cat's aspects are going to focus on that side of things. Anything related to ruling or leading has always been kind of incidental to Cat's plans for the world. She took command of the army and then became Queen because it was the most direct way to get what she wanted.

But if Names are a reflection of who a person is than I am expecting hers to be much more about fighting and managing other Named. Cat can make a plan and give soldiers orders without needing any extra power, but dealing with other Named is where she is going to need Aspects to help out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

When Captain used it to fulfill an order, she gained physical power, but I'm pretty sure she also got a share of

“unstoppability” – her story became “Captain has been given an order, and so she *shall* fulfill it come what may”.

shikkarasu

Hot take: This phalange is the first (that I can remember) woman with curly dark hair to appear that has not been almost immediately confirmed to be the Bard. Cat doesn't recognise her. I don't trust her.

Dredcor

Right after talking about the Varlet using poison the Phalange comes up with a cup of tea? Super sus.

[Mental Mouse](#)

At this point, I'm pretty sure Cat would be able to casually detect tampering with the tea *or* the courier, and if Cat didn't, the Pilgrim would. And she did gate ahead while ordering the tea delivered to her destination. Wouldn't be surprised if the rank-pin provided more than mundane authentication as well.

Ferro

Drake: Really, sowing the dragon's tooth as a regen mechanism?

Daniel E

Man, I feel terrible for that poor SoB at the end; got his mind and/or soul ganked by Drake. Reminds me of what Agent Smith did in the last Matrix.

JBeari

Man, I just got hit with the obvious realization that Cat is not the good guy in this story, and actually I'm questioning if she's even the “right” guy in this story, all of a sudden. That line where she proclaims that her army is proudly willing to sacrifice for the cause was giving me some major fash vibes, like Trump talking about his handsome generals or something.

I mean, she already knows that at least one of her highest ranking officers actively hates serving but is only there out of fear of what Cat will do if she leaves. Seems insane and insanely out of touch for a “hero of the common people” protagonist to say something so confidently that is highly debatable at best. Hell, I can imagine a new spin off story focusing on a character like Cat that gets a Name to represent the common soldier against a power hungry and deluded tyrant named Catherine Foundling.

Even worse is if she's not deluded, but correct. That's some Starship Troopers “I'm doing my part” levels of facism to get

that sort of unquestioning loyalty and willingness to sacrifice themselves.

Made me also wonder, why exactly is Cat looking forward to getting a new Name? I thought she really appreciated the idea that she was able to shrug off the influence the gods have over her via her name, and she hated the idea of not being in control of herself when she was Winter. Seems a bit contrived to suggest that her revulsion of being manipulated against her will is specifically only for Fae stuff and not a general character trait. Don't know too many people irl who hate authority but only highly specific types of authority and are all about every other kind.

I might not be remembering something correctly but on reflection it seems a really abrupt change from "Gods are bad and Names are bad because Gods control Names" to "I cant wait to get my name, hello personification of my Name that is a symbol of the influence someone else has over me, I missed you so much."

JBeari

Although, having said that, I can imagine some clever 11th hour twist that reveals that the only reason she was excited was because she can use the super powerful moment of being Named as a sacrifice to fuel some huge victory, like Heisenbach did when she rejected her name but instead got the all the respect and political power she needs to stay in charge and wipe the slate of the ill advised Crusade clean.

Tbh, that would be a really cool and meta twist and now I'm cautiously optimistic about that. Anime style massive powerups make for really awesome moments, but kinda bad overall stories in my opinion.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> That line where she proclaims that her army is proudly willing to sacrifice for the cause was giving me some major fash vibes, like Trump talking about his handsome generals or something.

Nope. Even in America with all our national obsession with personal freedom, the Armed Forces know that being a soldier means being ready to die for the cause – and that willingness to die for the cause is what sets a soldier apart from mere civilians. And Cat is a near-demigod leading her troops in a war against an existential threat to not just the people, but the nations and the very lands. We've already seen how cowardice is treated in the Army, and that wasn't even Cat handling that. As for Abigail... as I've said before, she tells herself she's a coward, but she's no such thing. Where Abigail is thinking to herself "if I run they'll hang me", an actual

coward would just be running already... not leading a charge. Bravery isn't about not being afraid, it's about feeling the fear, and going ahead anyway.

And Cat has chased off a couple of Names that were just "the story of the moment", which would have bound her into lesser Roles and stories – and which couldn't form fast enough to keep up with her own transformations. This time, the forming Name is Hers, the representation of everything she has become. And this Name probably isn't going to be some cliché like Black Queen, it'll be a new Name, never seen before.

JBeari

I understand that the bravery and service is how the Armed Forces market themselves, but let's not kid ourselves that all or even most of the members are ready to die to the national anthem while an eagle flies overhead because they just believe in America and the mission so much.

True, the types of wars that America starts are pretty different from this story. I imagine an existential threat with someone who is so obviously Evil is a lot better for morale than knowing you were sent to die alone in the desert because some oil tycoon wanted to save 50 cents on the price per barrel, or that the defense contracting industry needs to slaughter foreign civilians in the name of democracy so they can put together a pretty PowerPoint on why they should be funded even more.

Granted. But you would still say that everybody that died because the artificer was saving her power wasn't at all bitter that they didn't get help that could have saved them? You'd say that everyone in her army that's died so far has done so with a satisfied smile because they believe in the cause so much?

Seems really far fetched. Real world history mostly shows us that no matter how strong morale is, soldiers still would prefer to live over a brutal and agonizing death. Or that they would have friends they made in the army that traumatize them to the core when they have to watch them get ripped to shreds on the front lines.

War is rarely so neat as the propaganda tries to sell it as. To my point, the exception to that comes from the really fucked up societies that teach people that some ideal (usually racism) is worth more than any human life, and that it's an honor, the only honor one can have, to die for dear leader.

Either way, not a good look for our warlord friend here.

Not that I blame the story or the author, mind you. This plot thread is a very old trope that's been sold to people especially hard in recent times to justify a bunch of atrocities in real life, so it's not difficult to accidentally slide into it if you're not paying attention. My comment isn't a criticism of the story, rather an interpretation that I wanted to share since it seemed novel and that might interest people to hear it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Certainly the US's modern wars are a lot closer to Procer's prior adventures than to the Dead King fight – basically our last "moral" war was WW2. But even in the age of corporate war and state-sponsored terrorism, the essence of being a soldier is fighting and potentially dying at someone else's orders, and the grunts don't get to pick and choose.

That's much of what makes the bond among veterans, and among those who aren't outright broken and/or alienated by combat, it can actually strengthen a soldier's loyalty to downright obsessive levels; essentially, any doubt would call into question the value of their prior sacrifices, so no doubt can be permitted or tolerated.

Tom

> Man, I just got hit with the obvious realization that Cat is not the good guy in this story

Actually we got a view from Kairos's perspective via his Wish aspect that indicates that she's definitely "the good guy":

> The Queen of Callow still bore one of the strongest wishes he had ever seen, pulsing with her heartbeat: peace, peace, peace. It was like watching a flower bloom anew with every beat. Even now it was all he could do not to laugh until his throat bled, for what an exquisite jest it was that one of Below's finest servants in the long history of Calernia was at heart one of Above's!

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/10/14/interlude-wicked/>

Jack

Damn, I feel really bad for that last dude. I thought he was gonna be a hero (small h hero) who saved the Pilgram from an enemy's last ditch spite attack.

Instead he got ganked.

The orcbros with the greatshields were pretty cool though. Always nice to see a regular guy get a hit in on Named combatants.

[Zim the Vixen](#)

“It was mostly luck that I was in the fort when the attack hit.”

I am kind of wondering if Cat’s luck is some kind of... providence?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Some of that. Cat has become the Mistress of story-wrangling, able to tap into both villainous and heroic stories. She’s not quite making Creation dance to her tune, but she can manage the rhythms of story and “luck” as she used to control the rhythm of a mere fight.

mavant

Kayode understands Royalty. Reach Heaven through violence.

aran

AND THEN A SKELETON POPPED OUT

Chapter 68: Opposition

“No matter how long you glare at the sun, it will not blink first.”

– Taghreb saying

I missed using a shield.

It didn’t really fit with my fighting style anymore – digging in when you had a bad leg was a good way to trip and stumble into a very stupid death – but there’d been something both comforting and satisfying about having a large slab of metal to put between myself and the enemy. Now I had to keep my eye on the enemy at all times, to gauge and parry and manoeuvre without rest. Just taking the hit and then smashing my foes had been both simpler and, honesty compelled me to admit, viscerally satisfying in a way that all this finesse and calculation wasn’t. I knew a thing or two about pulling strings, these days, but I suspected that deep down it was the lessons of the Pit that’d always stay

engraved in bones: blood and sinew, the vicious satisfaction of just *decking someone in the face*.

Still, it felt good to engage sword in hand. I slapped aside the skeleton's blow – strong but slow, and so very predictable – and smashed its bare skull with the pommel of my sword, a shiver of Night accompanying the crack of bone breaking. The necromancy keeping it animate broke and the pile of bones collapsed, leaving me free to cast a glance around. The enemy had successfully scaled the wall in the centre stretch after making a ramp out of dead, wet ghouls that fireballs couldn't touch but the other two attempts at the extremities of the Boot's 'sole' had failed when the Light of House Insurgent incinerated the attempts in a way that magefire could not.

Now even here, where we'd been taken by surprise, the last of the dead were being put down as I watched. It'd not been a major setback, all in all, with perhaps only two hundred skeletons and ghouls making it up here before they were surrounded and contained, but it'd had the potential to turn dangerous. If the enemy had kept pouring troops there, it could have turned into a beachhead. Yet I found, even as my soldiers began to cheer our temporary victory, that my heart did not lift. My eyes remained on the silhouettes in the distance, the utterly still ranks of the dead standing just outside of the range of our ballistas.

Even though this had been a weak foothold, and made in a place where my army would have rather sharp teeth in its counterattack – our defences were geared around holding the peninsula first and foremost, since we'd known it would likely face the worst of the assaults – it *had* been a foothold. The first the enemy had managed to keep since they'd begun their attacks this morning. Yet the enemy general had not reinforced his attacking force after sending that first wave of three thousand or so, leaving the three prongs to fail and be wiped out. Most of the enemy army had never engaged, and was watching us in silence even now. Waiting, patient as only the soldiers of the grave could be.

"What are you up to now?" I murmured, leaning against my staff.

The general I was facing this time was canny in the way that the intelligence behind the Second Battle of Lauzon's Hollow hadn't been. That thing with the ghoul ramps? It'd been an adaptation to the fact that, as long as Archer had unravellers to use as arrows, she was a hard counter to Keter's usual tactic of using large constructs as siege ramps and troop transports. The artefacts were too precious to be used on ghouls, especially when they were being used by the hundreds here. In fact the only constructs we'd seen used so far had been the great snakes that'd beached near the fort, and those had stayed under the water until the very last moment.

We are being tested, I thought, eyes watching the rows of the dead. Three thousand of the most expendable among the undead gathering to face us as Maillac's Boot had just been tossed at my defences like scraps off a plate, just to test the strengths and weakness of our arrangements. *And you sent a handful of a Revenants out*, I then thought, *to probe what kind of Named there are on our side too*. It was a good thing, I grimly thought, that I'd always intended to keep Masego and Akua back as long as possible. Even just the awareness of their presence might have been enough to forewarn my enemy some.

The cheers washed over me and I painted a smile on my face, raising my sword in victory to roars of approval, but the joy did not reach my eyes. I wasn't so sure we'd truly gotten the better out of this round, not in the way that mattered, and that unsettled me. Still, I could hardly bemoan about what looked like a win to most of my soldiers. I went around and gave praise and encouragement where they should go, limping along the rampart to harden the spine of my soldiers before the next assault. Time passed and the sun kept rising in the sky, the hour slowly edging away from Morning Bell and towards Noon Bell, and though the quiet on the fronts was pleasing to my soldier it had dread slowly settling in my stomach.

We'd been seen through.

Under the excuse of having a drink of water – the sun was hammering down hard, and we were all baking in our helmets – I left the wall and settled further in, having discreetly sent for General Hune. I stood in the shadow cast by the ogre, pulling at a canteen, and wiped my mouth as I nodded back to her greetings.

"They're not attacking," I bluntly said.

I wasn't saying anything she or anyone with eyes didn't already know, but the two of us knew the danger represented by that sentence. We'd been counting on our enemy hitting us as soon as it could assemble a wave, trying to grind us down through constant battle, but instead the opposition had called a halt after a single major assault.

"They must be waiting for the second wave to arrive," General Hune said. "That complicates matters, Your Majesty."

It fucking well did. For one, we wouldn't be dealing with twenty thousand undead and then later that day thirty – or perhaps even forty – thousand more. The opposition was gathering for a single sweep, an overwhelming wave. That was... problematic. It wasn't like we'd not considered the possibility that the enemy would try to besiege us instead of battle on our terms, but we'd never meant to actually stay here long enough for it to be an issue. The plan had been to break the first two waves and then evacuate before the third could arrive, using the pharos device to open a

large enough amount of gates for it to be feasible, but this changed things. The moment we actually used the device, now, *then* the enemy would begin its attack. Whoever the leading commander on the other side was, they'd clearly grasped the core weakness of my position: an evacuation through the Twilight Ways when under assault meant that at least my rearguard was going to get slaughtered.

Facing fifty thousand dead, though, and all the horrors Keter had to unleash? Shit, we'd maybe lose a third of the ten thousand soldiers of the Second Army on our way out. There'd be a point in the battle where three thousand or so soldiers would be trying to squeeze through the gates while surrounded on all sides and without the support of the rest of the army. Juniper had run war games, and when that tipping point was reached what ensued was... grim, to say the least. *Fuck*. If the dead had been intending on standing there and doing nothing as we left I would have waved them on my way out and called it a day, but there was no way they'd be willing to do me that favour.

"Your opinion?" I asked.

"We must prepare for a fighting retreat into the ways and use the pharos device the moment our forces are in place," General Hune replied without hesitation. "Within the hour at most. The second wave will begin arriving soon, and it will only get worse from there."

I hummed noncommittally. I got from her words that the ogre general was seeing this as a choice needing to be made between two fighting retreats: one begun now, while the enemy was not yet fully gathered, or one begun later when it had. There would be no extracting ourselves from this without losing a few fingers. Much as I did not like to consider it, I honestly wasn't sure she was wrong. We'd made plans for the enemy showing restraint, so it wasn't like we were going into this blind – officers had been briefed, we'd even planned out which parts of the defences should be abandoned first – but we'd never really considered that the enemy would just toss three thousand expendables at us and then just... stand there.

Even our worst case had the enemy pulling out after effective losses of half its number, choosing to bolster the second wave rather than waste the rest of its numbers on a fruitless assault.

"We could attempt to break out towards the east," I finally said.

"I will obey that order if it is given," General Hune blandly replied.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"But," I said, invitation implicit.

"It is my opinion that we would find ourselves in the same situation as now in a day, only without the fortifications and retreat plan," Hune said. "Even going on the offensive and attempting to smash the first wave before the second arrives would be a superior option, to my eye. We would incur losses, but should we then retreat to our fortifications our original plan could then be resumed, if at a disadvantage."

I grimaced. Taking a swing at the dead in the swamp wasn't really something I wanted to do unless there was no other option: the undead would be better at fighting in the muck, and it wasn't like Keter had even been shy about poisoning water. No, an attack of my infantry into that mire was a dead end. And yet I had some difficulty resigning myself to making a decision that would be, in essence, writing off a third of the Second Army. The thought had me clenching my fingers, even though the cold thing that lay at the heart of me knew that I'd give the order if I had to, but I would not bend my neck to this ending before first attempting otherwise.

"We'll attempt to force them into an attack first," I said. "My people have been working on a project that might leave them no other option – and even if they manage to withstand it, we'll first be able to thin the herd before retreating."

General Hune's eyes narrowed.

"Then Your Majesty agrees that a retreat is in order," she said.

"I do," I admitted. "And you'll need to inform your officer cadres we might be headed there. But first I want to see if the dead can be strong-armed into wasting themselves on our walls."

"And might you do that?" the ogre skeptically asked.

"By making it clear it's the least wasteful option left to them," I replied with a hard smile.

It was time to for Masego to come out.

—

"I've not managed to increase the effective range," Hierophant admitted, "not laterally, at least."

"Which still leaves vertically," I grunted. "If the Summoner makes a flying beast and we strap your platform to the back, can you cast?"

He mulled over that for a moment.

"Yes," Masego finally said. "I cannot promise the same degree of precision that the solid ground would allow for, however."

"If there's one good thing about our situation, Zeze," I said, "it's that even if you miss, you'll hit."

"That sounds like a blatant logical contradiction," he noted, "but I will take your word for it."

"Kind of you," I drily replied. "I'll be handling the Summoner, so ready your affairs and wait for us on the Boot."

The Summoner's reaction to the order was mixed: on one hand, he had cowardly tendencies and preferred not to put himself in great danger. It'd already spread through the ranks that some of the Scourges were here. On the other hand, I'd made it clear that this was a crucial task I'd attend to as well and that'd flattered his self-importance. Still, there was no arguing with a direct order from me when it came to battlefield affairs. The wyvern-construct still had that unearthly glow, but it looked much more sharply defined now. I could make out the shift of muscles when it moved, and there was an animal cunning in its eyes. It was also smart enough to be terrified of Hierophant, which was plain good sense.

The Summoner had warned me that it might get unruly when Masego tied a flat circular stone atop its back, but instead the construct did not dare move a muscle. It behaved around Hierophant the same way a deer would around a lion – frozen and hoping the predator wasn't hungry today. We took flight without much fanfare, to sparse cheers from my soldiers. I wove an anchor for my feet on the wyvern's back and added a transparent bubble to shield me from the winds. The Summoner led us towards the enemy ranks, as I'd asked him to, but stayed high in the sky. We'd yet to see buzzards in the area so our flight was not contested, though I doubted that would last forever.

We circled slowly atop the front ranks of the enemy, Masego wresting magic from a few spare artifacts so he might steady himself atop the circular stone. A bubble rather similar to mine formed around him, and I shouted for the Summoner to halt the construct's flight and make it stay in place. Long, deft fingers began to trace runes in the air as I risked a glance downwards. The dead were splayed out for what must have been the better part of a mile but none were paying attention to us at the moment. Safety through heights? It was true that without buzzards around Keter would find it hard to contest our presence up here. We were high up enough that neither arrows nor javelins were a worry, and magic would be seen long before it became a threat.

"Abyss and firmament," the Hierophant said, and though his voice was quiet it *rippled*. "I take the shape of the star and the depth of the pit, borrowing laws high and low."

Below us, moving as a single entity, seventeen thousand undead heads turned to gaze up at us.

"That can't be good," I muttered.

"I have woven curses into hymn, stuffed a heart with straw," the Hierophant called out, voiced cadenced. "That which is hollow I have raised onto the dais, revered as glorious under three skies and revered by nine corners."

From below a tide of darkness rose, but I realized after a heartbeat that it was not a ritual. It was a few thousand curses, thrown at us together from as many hands. I clenched my staff closely, hoping to the Hells that Masego was done with that incantation soon.

"Behold," the Hierophant said.

I winced, covering my ears at the horrid grind that lay behind the word. The Sisters murmured uneasily in the back of my mind.

"Behold," the Hierophant said, "all ye with eyes, for I have made a god of clay and it is an idol of **wrath**."

The sky screamed. There was no other word for it. The air wavered and shrieked and twisted, an alien gleam filling my vision as I pulled down my hood to shield my eyes. As if a god had breathed out in front of us, the wyvern banked wildly and had to struggle not to fall – the Summoner screamed, voice shrilly – but after less than a heartbeat the pressure was all gone. I first glimpsed Masego, panting as he stood surrounded by fading runes, and only after making sure he was fine did I glance down. *Gods*, I thought. There was a smoking crater in the swamp, maybe a hundred feet wide, and though water was streaking back in it looked like the... smite had baked the very mud. How many undead had been vaporized with that, I wondered. Two, three hundred? Likely more, and a great wave was going through the swamp that toppled more than a few soldiers. Of the curses that had been rising to hit us, there was no trace. Much like, I thought, a child throwing a pebble into the path of falling mountain would not be able to pick it out afterwards.

"Can you do that again?" I asked, tone calm.

"I believe so," Masego noted. "Though not many times."

"Then do it," I ordered with a hard smile.

Power began to gather again, and below us I found exactly what I'd wanted: advancing as one, the dead were headed towards the Second Army. *Decisive*, I silently praised the enemy general. The moment they'd realized that it was possible we'd just stay up here and hammer them into nothing, they'd abandoned the notion of sieging my army and begun to close the distance. If the dead were too close to my own troops, after all, it'd be risky to keep using this. Still, they weren't out of the woods yet. I wove

Night over my ears and dug my feet in, as Masego's voice swelled in incantation again, wondering how many shots we'd get in before he was too exhausted to continue.

The answer, as it turned out, was six.

It didn't matter, as by then the enemy was committed to an assault on all our defences and all that pulling out would accomplish was allow us to smash the undead army as it retreated. We flew back to the Boot, and though I was wary the whole way back there was no ambush. Bo buzzards came out of nowhere, no Revenants were tossed up in the sky. It made sense, I admitted to myself, since we weren't fighting a field army here so much as a bunch of warbands and marching columns tossed in our direction when we popped out. I supposed it was a testament to how fucking unpleasant of an adversary the Dead King was that even when luck allowed us to get one over him I still ended up unsure it wasn't a ploy on his part.

"Your service in this campaign has been exemplary," I told the Summoner after he dismissed his wyvern.

Much as I disliked the man personally, he'd ended up consistently useful. Being unpleasant didn't mean he shouldn't get praised, just that it'd irk me to dole it out.

"I am pleased to have my worth recognized by my queen," the Summoner replied, smirking. "I hope to continue to be of service after these trifles, of course."

My eyes narrowed. The little shit had been born and raised and Procer, as far as I knew, but he had been insisting he was Callowan for some time. The offer of 'continued service' was pretty straightforward, meaning he wanted to settle in Callow after the war and probably expected a lordship to be tacked on to sweeten the deal. Considering he wasn't all that difficult to deal with and his ambitions seemed relatively limited, I wasn't necessarily opposed to that. So long as it was a court title with no lands attached. Mind you, that wasn't my decision alone to make. I wasn't foisting him off on Vivienne without giving her a say in the matter.

"I look forward to it," I mildly said, "and will pass along your sentiments to Lady Dartwick."

"It would be an honour," the Summoner said, "to make her acquaintance."

Yeah, that one definitely wanted to settle in Callow after the war. I wasn't sure I could blame him, considering short of Praes it'd probably end up one of the nations that least minded villains. So long as he stayed loyal to crown and country, it was not an inaccurate assessment for him to figure he'd not only be

tolerate but actively protected. If he was loyal then he would be considered as an asset, and Vivienne was of a practical bent when it came to protecting Callowan interests. Some of the decisions I had made she would not ever repeat, but that did not mean she was naïve – just that she was not as good as ignoring the whispers of her conscience.

I escorted Masego to a healer's tent so he might rest, ignoring his protests, and only then went to join the battle. His exhaustion was not a threat to his health, but the healers were unlikely to let him out of a bed in his state and Zeze's fathers had drilled into him the paramount importance of not ignoring what your healer told you. It'd been with the addendum that priests were fumbling ignorant cheats and this rule mostly applied to mage healers, but I liked to think the years had mostly weaned Masego out of that instilled disdain.

There was no lack of enemies for me to fight anywhere along the defensive lines, but it was on the Boot that I stayed. Even as swarms of skeletons and ghouls assaulted the walls and my soldiers stubbornly held on the walls, retreating only when officers pulled on their whistles and fresh troops were rotated in, I smothered a smile. This was hard fighting, but it was also a victory of sorts: the enemy and I had stared each other down across this swamp, and with Masego's help it had been the enemy that blinked first. Now it was bleeding away its strength failing to take our walls, and though it was not without casualties on our side the advantage was decisively ours.

For every soldier we lost they lost four, and our wounded weren't left to die – they were pulled back, brought to the healer tents. I moved along the wall, sticking to wherever the fight was hardest, and through thrice the enemy earned a foothold atop the wall thrice that foothold was clawed back. As the time passed, though, the lack of Revenants entering the fray began to weigh on me. The opposing general was keeping its trump cards away from us, unwilling to risk them before what was likely to be the decisive stretch: the assault of the second wave. Still, this round went well for us. When it became undeniable that any more lingering would lead to a complete wipeout the enemy broke away, limping back into the swamps under the fire of our mages and the House Insurgent.

I headed towards my general's tent when the last of the dead walked out of range, intent on hearing casualty reports. Though the official reports were still incomplete, Hune already had estimates when I found her: at least five hundred dead and seven hundred wounded. Even for a well-prepared defensive action, I found the numbers astonishing and told her as much. Her general staff preened, but she was unmoved.

"It is only initial reports, Your Majesty," General Hune said. "We will see if the real figures remain so flattering."

"I expect they will," I said. "The Second Army had yet to fail a single expectation I set out for it."

Not that I'd set out many, but a little praise could go a long way. Officers gossiped with officers, and that gossip had a way of trickling down to the ranks. After that, though, I headed to my own tent. I'd been fighting sporadically since early morning and drawing on Night regularly, so I was damn exhausted. Since Archer was keeping an eye out for necromantic constructs, still on her perch, it was one of the phalanges that helped me out of my armour. It was now almost an hour past Noon Bell, I learned, and I recalled that we believed the second wave would begin arriving slightly before Afternoon Bell. That still left me at least an hour and change to nap, which I hoped would refresh me when the next round of fighting came.

Gods knew that my leg ached like a bloody wound, at the moment, and staying on my feet would only make it worse. I crawled into bed with strict instructions to wake me if there was another assault, but otherwise leave me to my slumber for at least an hour. Clutching a blanket, I spent the first few moments wondering what my enemy's plan were and if I would find sleep at all, but before I knew it exhaustion had triumphed over worry: I fell into a deep, dark slumber.

—

I woke up tasting my sweat against the roof of my mouth, likely stinking all the way up to the Heavens. Most of my affairs were already packed, in deference to the rapidly approaching need to evacuate this place, but there was still a bowl of water for me to rinse myself up a little. It was hardly a wash, but what would be the point? I was headed back into the thick of it anyway, and the afternoon soon would be no more kind than the morning one had been. I'd woken before any of the phalanges could wake me, and found a pair of them standing guard outside my tent.

"I'll need one of you to help me back into my armour," I said. "And reports, meanwhile."

As it turned out, during my hour of sleep I'd missed little. The enemy had pulled back even further than before, and while General Hune believed that the vanguard of the second wave might have begun to arrive early there'd been no way to be sure. Sending scouts into that swamp, even our nimblest goblins, would just be throwing away lives. I decided to speak with Hune before returning to the fronts, to get a read on when she believed we should pull the trigger on the pharos device, and inquired as to her whereabouts as I fastened the Mantle of Woe over my armour.

"She is in her tent, Your Majesty," the young phalange told me.
"Speaking with her staff tribune, I believe."

Good, at least I knew the way. Though my limp was not quick it was steady, and with my sword back on my belt I made my way to the tent. I was a mere thirty feet away from it when a splash of red in the sky to the south caught my attention. A signal spell, I thought. An attack on the palisade? An assault would have been seen coming, though, and I would have heard of it. Unless it was a strike by Revenants, I thought, but it seemed a bold and unnecessary gambled on the enemy general's part. Perhaps a force had been snuck out under an obfuscation spell. Regardless, with the Grey Pilgrim there and reinforcements no doubt already on their way I had little to worry about.

Two guards were standing outside of Hune's tent, but their stances were natural. It wasn't that that gave it away. It was the *scent*. I'd known enough battlefields that I would recognize the scent of fresh blood anywhere. Stomach dropping I hurried forward, tapping one of the guards gently with my staff only to see the armoured orc topple – already dead, just propped up to look as if still alive. The scent of blood was even thicker inside the tent, I smelled as I forced open the flap, but it was my ears that I was relying on and it saved my life. I heard the spin of the throwing knife that should have buried itself in my left eye and hastily ducked down, just in time to see a grey-cloaked figure turn away from me.

The Varlet. I'd recognize the cloak anywhere.

And just as I drew on Night, spinning up a work, I saw the Varlet dance around a blow of the tall, roaring Hune – made silent by some aspect, for all her shouting – and flicker forward to carve open my general's throat.

Anomandris

Ouch. Poor Hune...

Although this would never happen to Abigail.....

dadycool

If this keeps up, Cat will be forced to make her the most relevant person on the battlefield.

NerfContessa

Or,. You know,. Raise. Hune in case she doesn't survive, with night if not with magic.

I'm sure a dark ogre will work as well as a normal one.

Cat HAS to start to invest night some time soon.

Darkening

We've yet to see Night zombies display the kind of intelligence Winter zombies did. All of Cat's new Zombie horses don't have the intelligence her fey horse did, RIP. So raising Hune is probably pretty pointless, and even if it did work, having undead assets in important positions in a campaign against the Dead King is just, a laughably bad idea, since he'd eventually find a way to hijack them.

NerfContessa

True.

Changing my. Point to "save her using night and granting her night to continue living".
Night ogres now that's the stuff...

[Liliet](#)

I think it's possible to save her using night without her requiring night to continue living.

Shveiran

I don't, myself. We were told repeatedly that Night is a "thief" power, and there are things it is bad for. Usually it was in the context of direct confrontations ("it wasn't a soldier's power") but I don't think it is any closer to a healer power.

It is possible Hune doesn't need anything more than a stopgap measure until a priest can get on the scene, so yeah, I'm on board with a "cauterizing wounds with Night flames" sort of scenario, but anything more than that... You can't do surgery with a sword, you know? You need a scalpel, or you'll make a mess and kill your patient just as surely as if you did nothing. Maybe more.

shikkarasu

Someone really needs to harvest a priest or a talented mage-healer. Imagine the Secrets that could be stolen...

[Liliet](#)

IIRC Cat can "freeze" wounds with Night so they don't get worse. That's how she survived a neck stab that one time.

IDKWhoitis

Abigail would have been avoiding her own tent, in one part because healthy dose of paranoia, and another 3 parts of avoiding responsibilities and Catherine (not sure in which order there)

Frivolous

Abigail is going to absolutely freak when she learns she might become an assassination target by Scourges.

I predict a round of running in circles and screaming, unless Catherine is present, in which case all the running and screaming might just be internal.

RoflCat

Clearly she'll isolate herself in paranoia, away from any potential assassin in disguise because we got those before.

And the Revenants will be wary instead, because by picking an isolated place, she also actually picked an open place, meaning it's very hard to sneak upon her, like an arena as if she's ready for a duel and gonna get her Name through fighting the assassin.

Not to mention an open area without cover = Archer is going to destroy you.

So instead the assassin will just back off, clearly not willing to give Catherine a commander-type Name, especially one with reputation for some highly effective strategic choice.

Frivolous

I think your analyses of the tactics and of Abigail are correct.

This means Abigail, if she should ascend to command of the 2nd Army, will declare: "Tents are Verboten! Everyone sleeps and eats out in the open! Including me!"

"I don't care if I have to dress and undress where everyone can see me! I'd rather be embarrassed than dead!"

shikkarasu

She will reveal herself just as the tide is turning against the army thinking "Gods -above, below and wherever else- can noone *think* in this army? If I don't do something soon I'll get killed anyway."

The people will remember Cat's switch with Thief that one time and assume that Abigail used an undead doppleganger or something. Soon they will start whispering Squire when she passes by...

NerfContessa

I'd actually love that, just as much as the above.

But Abigail is so. Far sadly only comedy gold.
So IF she. Lucks into a name,. Why not the bumbling general/p

[Javvies](#)

Except that she's not actually bumbling. At anything.

She's highly competent, and more importantly, insanely lucky.

She wants to avoid responsibility as much as possible, sure, but she wants to do so in such a way that she survives and can safely go back home to Callow and retire and live comfortably on her pension.

It's her efforts to avoid responsibility and get forcibly retired (but in such a way that she keeps her pensions and other perks of retiring at rank) that keep failing in ways that we readers (and Cat) find hilarious, and end up making her viewed as more popular and successful by others.

Plus, above all else, Abigail is a survivor first – even if it means taking on responsibilities that she doesn't want to.

She's like Ciaphas Cain – both think of themselves as cowards out for their own survival and wellbeing ... but their actions belie their internal self deprecation. In part because they have earned a reputation that helps and protects them, and they want to protect the reputation that protects them.

Ultimately, it's their own self interest that drives them into doing things that they say they don't want anything to do with, and doing those things to high standards of performance.

To everyone else, Cain is a Hero of the Imperium; Abigail is madly successful heroic/Icon General of Callow (currently not actually Named or empowered by Above), so a small h hero, in the positive icon sense.

Let's remember, the Story/Narrative is as much about how you and your actions are perceived as anything else.

And Procer and Levant have been introduced to Abigail and the survivor of the decapitation stroke on the Third Army, who rallied and held the lines against a surprise attack immediately following the decapitation strike. Since then, she's been mentored by Cat, had command of the section where Robber and his cohort ganked a lot of the Dominion's Binders, and then rolled over most of the rest who were deployed and their escorts with a seemingly perfectly timed deployment of a detachment of the Order of Broken Bells.

Since then, she's been further mentored by Cat – some/may would call her a protege of Cat – and had success in the war against Keter.

Oh, and now Cat has assigned Scribe as her assistant.

Exactly none of Abigail's Story says bumbler or fool, or a comic relief type Name. Her Story would tend towards a cunning and/or trickster type leadership Name, IMO.

[*Liliet*](#)

Let's not forget that Cat's first thought upon seeing the situation in Sarcella was that Nauk improved as a commander since she last saw him.

shikkarasu

Oh, I missed that!

[*Liliet*](#)

I expect the other way around – Abigail presents a much more together face to people who aren't Catherine.

Twilight Glimmer

Calling it! The Varlet will escape and be killed accidentally by Abigail off screen.

'Ladi Williams

I sincerely hope cat can save hune...she is still alive...the assassin is on the way to kill her.

EE pls find it somewhere in your heart to save hune.

Darkening

It kinda reads like it **already** carved through her throat right there at the end, but it's entirely possible it's just mid swing and we'll get an interruption at the beginning of

next chapter. Or maybe Ogres have such thick necks it won't have struck deep enough. I mean, there can only be a relative handful of Named on the continent with experience fighting ogres given how much of a minority they are, so it's likely this assassin has no idea about ogre physiology lol.

Adrian V

She is an ogree, there is a lot of throat there i imagine, i am more worried about poison but again hopefully her non human physiology can help i hope. I give it 50/50 chances goign either way depending of how skilled the healers are and if they are close enough (including GP who could certainly save her).

Again depends mostly on the poison, without it i would give her 80% chances of surviving.

Shveiran

This is a top-notch Named Assassin. The kind that has poisons that can kill Named. Remember Assassin almost killing the Ashen Priestess?

Ogre or no, if she was poisoned she is a goner unless a Named Healer intervenes.

Liliet

If only there was one of those around...

Named or not, the effectiveness of a poison is proportionate to body mass. It'll take longer for her to die of poison measured to kill humans quickly.

Frivolous

I have to wonder whether what ogre anatomy is like. Cat's POV and the other POVs have never mentioned it.

Humans have carotid arteries. What do ogres have? Does the Varlet have any experience assassinating ogres?

If ogre anatomy in the throat has even minor differences from the human, then different techniques might be necessary to quickly kill an ogre that way.

Javvies

Uh-oh.

That's not good.

Aren't there supposed to be wards against infiltration and this kind of thing happening?

Hune is probably a goner, but if there's a healer close enough, maybe she could be saved, if not combat ready for a while. It will, however, complicate the withdrawal, and the especially battle that appears to be kicking off earlier than expected, depending on just how many officers Varlet has managed to take out. On the other hand, it's a Legion/Army of Callow force, not a Proceran or Levantine one, and so while decapitation strikes hurt, especially in terms of skill, training, and experience, there's a clearly defined hierarchy and chain of command/succession, which mitigates the damage. Sadly, I don't think there's an Abigail to replace Hune the way Abby replaced Nauk, but Cat is present this time.

Frivolous

And yet Keter must be aware that the army it is facing is Callowan. Keter must know that Hune is replaceable.

So why did it try to kill Hune? Just because it can? It seems a waste of the Varlet's actions.

Alternatives to Hune: Varlet could have killed the Summoner. Varlet could have gone on a mass murder spree through the priests of the House of Light.

So why Hune? There must be a reason. Keter is never stupid. Keter always has a strategy in mind.

Dredcor

Named are usually pretty resilient to assassination attempts, so I very much doubt the Varlet would have much luck going for the Summoner.

The Priests definitely would have kicked up a fuss. Too public. Increased chance a Named would intervene and that would put the Varlet in danger.

The General's tent isn't going to have many visitors, so easy in-and-out assassination. Minimize the risks.

Mammon

That the Callowan officers aren't an Achilles Heel that makes the army topple or fall apart when taken out, they're still not just insignificant.

Fewer officers means the ones that remain will be overworked more and become more prone to mistakes, there has to be either a hole in the ranks or the ranks have to be shuffled mid-battle with all the confusion that it entails, and in

both cases the new officers have to be brought up to speed and get used to being in command at all.

Plenty of opportunities for the army to make mistakes or be sloppy. Even when they're the Legions of Terror, Callowan edition.

haihappen

I think the goal would be to delay/disrupt the evacuation planning/organization such that the all-out attack can wipe out the Army.

No going after Masego, which is rather exhausted after the smite-y business, would make sense if the Dead King's goal is to obliterate the army. Named alone cannot turn back the undead tide, unless there is a story there, and DK knows how to avoid them. That is also a reason he is not trying to eliminate them: backing Villians, or worse, Heroes into a corner is a sure way to trigger a story, especially if they are beaten badly enough.

[308924810a](#)

Is she replaceable? I mean, the legions of Terror are built to tolerate officer assassinations, but the armies of callow have been short on new officers for years.

IDKWhoitis

Aspects, even dead ones, trump Wards. Viv had something similar that could suppress a paranoid Akua's Wards, so it's not beyond belief here.

I feel like due to a repeating pattern, Catherine is going to name the 2nd Army something. What will the name be? I don't know, but something tenacious and stubborn.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The cognomens are a reward for not just excellence, but *distinctive* excellence. They also apply specifically to the Legions, while the 2nd Army is a coalition that happens to include a Legion or two.

King Julius

Generally, yes. But one of the Callowan armies was given a Cognomen by Cat earlier. Third Army under Nauk (now Abigail) is Dauntless.

stevenneiman

I would imagine that there are wards and other defenses, but remember that Revenants are only a small step down from Named, and basically no defense is absolute against Named specialized to deal with it.

Sir Nil

Well DK is doing Cats own trick. Back when she and Winter took out all of the lower command of the Procer army. Even if there is always someone else to take command, if you clear everyone on a link then the chain is broken regardless.

Sir Nil

Also Hierophant's chant was beautiful. He knows he has done nothing but create imitation miracles but he has done so much with them regardless.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Behold," the Hierophant said, "all ye with eyes, for I have made a god of topwebfictions and it is an idol of boosts."

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

caoimhinh

It is an idol of **votes**.

Frivolous

That was a great poem Masego chanted to do the smiting. Very nice and evocative.

I'm surprised Varlet tried to kill Hune first. Or maybe not so surprised; maybe Keter decided that killing Catherine had too low a probability of success.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Going after Catherine or Masego would just lose the Revenant. Hune is one of their best commanders, so a very relevant target, and not Named, so an *achievable* target.

Frivolous

The epigraph for Opposition is funny in relation to the happenings therein; the sun doesn't blink, and neither do the dead, yet Keter did "blink" first.

Or does that mean that Catherine is the sun of this story? Because that would be very interesting.

ninegardens

So... just from a pacing and storytelling perspective, can I just say how much I love how EE has emphasized Hune's presence over the course of this present war Arc?

Like... not as a main character, but as a character that is *consistently* relevant.

Also, with the number of healers around, I'll put... 1 in 5 odds on Hune's survival?

Not great, but not nothing either.

dadycoool

Gods, FUCKING Dammit. We knew this was going far too well, and now yet another of her War College friends is dead. Now I'm afraid for Pickler's life, considering there's already an assassin in a Command Tent.

On the plus side, Abigail is continuing her meteoric rise up the chain of Callowan Command through bloody conquest of not being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Matthew Wells

Hune has never been Cat's friend. A loyal subordinate, but not a friend.

Big I

Cat and June were never friends. Work colleagues at best.

Xinci

Hm such a injury may not kill her, depending on how Ogre physiology affects blood pressure. Cat could also potentially at least seal the injury with Night if she had time though given the nature of the Varlet I somewhat doubt that will happen.

The 3 skies and 9 corners reminds me of something important...yet I cannot remember. Regardless this reminded me quite a bit of that Mask that did the same miracle as the Ashen Priestess. Though I suppose thats logical given the experiences he has taken the laws from.

[Liliet](#)

...that's Providence out the wazoo, for Catherine to arrive in the nick of time to save Hune's life.

And considering how this world works, that's actually far more likely than Catherine arriving a second too late, so yeah actually Hune has decent odds on surviving this.

Shveiran

Mhm, she's not an hero though. Arriving just too late would fit wit her being a Villain, you now? Narrative tension though drama and tragedy rather than through an heroic intervention.

Hune kind of makes a good target for that, in a certain way. In universe, Cat's inability to save her may derive from her being a Villain and Providence taking a nap.

From a meta perspective, her death is a setback that doesn't derail the story, reinforces the "unjust disparity between Good and Evil" theme, and reminds us that even when you win you lose good people without removing someone that is essential to the story.

You know, like Nephele or Ratface or Anne Kendal or Tancred. I liked them, and their death stung, but they were not essential to the plot in the way that Hanno or Cordelia are.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, but heroic stories are not unique to heroic Names. Catherine has taken advantage of them in situations far less clear cut than FIGHTING THE DEAD FUCKING KING.

shadw21

Book 2 Chapter 47 is such a fine example of Catherine playing the part of the hero, to the point of getting an offer/conscription attempt to be a Heroic Queen under the wings of a Choir.

[Liliet](#)

There's also an excellent moment at the Battle of Camps when Tariq and Laurence are mildly disturbed by it being audibly clear that Catherine is going to come back at the last moment to rescue her forces.

Shveiran

All true.

And yet this wouldn't be the first instance where she doesn't quite get that Providence Boost.

We shall see! I'm far from certain my own speculations will be correct.

shikkarasu

I don't think I have ever been right among all my predictions in this story. That will not stop me theorizing, though. It's half the fun.

Kennator64

Previous chapter, the stunt with the assistant and the tea when she meets the pilgrim. He notices it, and EE likes their foreshadowing. I'm betting providence with hune taking a hit but not dying, probably getting a scar or some such as is the running gag this cycle.

Kelkekol

N000000000000000000000000!!!! ~~~~~

Dredcor

Yeah, it was only a matter of time until the assassin Named killed someone important.

Juff

Typo Thread:

us as Maillac's > us at Maillac's
my soldier > my soldiers
had even been > had ever been
voiced cadenced > voice cadenced
voice shrilly > voice shrill
of falling > of a falling
Bo buzzards > No buzzards
her dismissed > he dismissed
only be tolerate > only be tolerated
undeniable than > undeniable that
plan were > plans were
morning one had been > morning had been
unnecessary gambled > unnecessary gamble

sutortyrannus

I don't know if it's been said, but I want you to know that your consistent effort is appreciated.

[Burlyraven](#)

I don't think Hune is dead from this. I struggle to name the role she's played in Cat's story, but it's definitely of the breed that doesn't die this casually. I'm not a massive fan of Hune, so I'm not emotionally invested, really, but I think Hune has enough proxy story weight to survive, a concept which is potentially further bolstered by her by being of a rare race.

[Mammon](#)

Cat: *Is continuously paranoid*

Sees a literal red omen in the sky that nothing is wrong.

Cat: Nah, everything is fine. I can ignore that, others will handle it.

Below us, moving as a single entity, seventeen thousand undead heads turned to gaze up at us.

"That can't be good," I muttered.

And as one, the seventeen thousand skeletons made a "Boop!" sound, producing a powerful wave of sound that tore apart all in its way. I could barely get out a "Spooky..." before I felt my skin being flayed off my skin and my consciousness start to fade.

Mammon

Whoops, I meant

Sees a literal red omen in the sky that SOMETHING is wrong

Liliet

I mean to be fair, if Cat had gotten distracted onto that instead of continuing to Hune's tent things would have been WORSE

shikkarasu

Huh, Archer is keeping an eye on the terrain, Hune is in command, and someone just shot a Panic!Flare in the sky. Obvious trap is obvious, I better check on Hune instead.'

Liliet

Also, ironically for such a meta story, Cat doesn't actually have protagonist syndrome. Things get resolved in a suitably epic and dramatic fashion *without her there* all the time. That's literally what other Named are for. Not everything is Cat's job, only a specific set of things is. And it's already wayyyy too large.

gwennafran

Honestly, I'll be so pissed if one of the oldest character's gets killed off, simply so the Meme General is a step closer to be Marshal. Because it's a meme...

Shveiran

I don't think that's what this is?

Hune isn't Marshal, she is a General. Abigail is already a General, and if she ever gets to be a Marshal it will be because Juniper died, not Hune.

You could say that Hune is a potential rival to that promotion, but honestly... she really isn't? She is very good at her job,

but her ethic is a professional one. She isn't loyal to either Catherine or Callow, nor is she even a Callowan to begin with, and those are rather big issues when you are being considered as the person in charge of all the swords.

I'm not a huge fan of Abigail myself (I mean, she gets a laugh, but her meteoritic rise without ever screwing up kinda detracts from the story themes, in my opinion) but if she was chosen over Hune as Marshal it would only make sense. Competence and seniority are not the only requirements for the job. It is honestly debatable whether they are the most important ones compared to loyalty to the cause.

gwennafran

We were told in a recent chapter Cat considers Hune more competent than Abigail. If Juniper dies, Hune would be next in line. Not Abigail. Hune being killed off, would be a step closer to marshal for Abigail.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Reread Shveiran's comment. They did not say Abigail was more competent than Hune. They said competence is debatably less important in determining the next marshal than being a loyal Callowan, which is backed up by several of Cat's musings about how Abigail would be a good marshal for Vivienne on the grounds of being loyal, Callowan, and unambitious. Restating your position without addressing the other person's arguments doesn't make you right; it shows at best you didn't actually pay attention to what they said, and at worst that you can't actually argue their points but refuse to admit it

Frivolous

Further interpretation of Masego's chant:

There are many antonyms or near-antonyms in the chant:

abyss, firmament.
star, pit.
high, low.
curses, hymn.
stuffed, hollow.

I feel the spell Masego cast had something to do with encouraging or forcing polar opposites to combine, resulting in the terrible sensory effect that made Summoner scream. I wonder if he made Above and Below momentarily unite.

Note that even Sve Noc didn't like what Masego was doing. What could make a lesser god murmur uneasily? I bet the Ophanim had the same reaction, or worse.

laguz24

I do not believe that he forced them to work together but he stole the shape of one side and the power of another, which one provided which is up for debate.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Masego was treading the paths of the gods, which is good reason for them to be uneasy.

Mike E.

As a former military person, this interaction had me LOL:

"We could attempt to break out towards the east," I finally said. "I will obey that order if it is given," General Hune blandly replied.

When you get that sort of response from a subordinate, there is an implicit opinion of your decision being stated.

NerfContessa

And any eblven remotely competent and confident commander (or c3^^) will know it should be taken as a "I trust you sir, but please reexamine that order, maybe its not really... The ideal 9ne".

While insecure, incompetent and idiotic (or I3^^) commanding officers will write the subordinate up for insubordination or something similar.

[Liliet](#)

The entire point of this response is that point 2 has no probable cause.

An insecure, incompetent and idiotic commanding officer will take it as a "yes, sir".

Abhijit Shukla

"and flicker forward to carve open my general's throat"

Hune's not dead yet. Don't write her off.

Daniel E

I'm not at all convinced that this is the end of Hune. Although beloved side characters who have never had a PoV Chapter are

prime material for a pointless demise (I am absolutely still salty about Zombie the Third), said deaths have never occurred as a cliff-hanger. Even money that she survives.

On a lighter note, Masego successfully created the power of an Aspect using a ritual. Should be no wonder why everybody keeps saying he'll be a match for Gods in a few years; Queen of Summer – "Maybe if you had a few more years, but you are yet too young". Doddering Sage – "That boy of yours is going to be a right terrors in a few years".

TeK

Don't worry, I am sure Zombie will get her own Extra Chapter.

Daniel E

Wouldn't change the fact that she died stupidly 🤔 Still, a PoV would be hilarious.

TeK

"No matter how long you glare at the sun, it will not blink first."

I am fairly sure this is a statement that some Dread Emperor took as a challenge. And won

JJR

Dread Emporer Irritant did it when he knew an eclipse was due probably.

Traitorous pretended to be doing it, but actually the sun was Traitorous in disguise as part of a plot to kill his Chancellor.

Darkening

Well, whether Hune lives or not, I think we're going to down a scourge in a few minutes here. Cat is going to unleash holy hell on this revenant.

Frivolous

I wonder if any Revenants were caught in Masego's smiting. I wonder how many Revenants, or even Scourges, were destroyed.

Also, are tents a liability in a war against the Dead King? Because if it isn't actually raining, then I suspect they are. They make assassination and hidden murder too easy.

It might be wisest for the Alliance to do away with tents altogether.

We can see from how Hune was silenced that hearing is not a good gauge for danger in a war with magic and especially against the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

Random point: Cat misses being a tank ♥

Shveiran

Being a tank is just so much fun.

[Liliet](#)

Some people are born to be tanks.

Some of those people are slender five-foot-nothings, but watch that stop them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Being small let you fit better into the giant robot. 😊

Chapter 69: Book Draw

“Courage is not a virtue, is it a bridle forced onto fear.”

– *Stygian saying*

It was an almost comical sight until the blood sprayed. Hune was at least twelve feet tall, and even unarmoured she was massive – the Varlet would not have been able to reach her throat without leaping if the ogre hadn’t leaned down to strike it. But she had, and the serrated dagger opened her throat before I could do more than draw on Night.

“No,” I hissed.

I struck out furiously, a jet black spit of darkness tossed out in a heartbeat, but the Varlet’s grey cloak swirled as it slipped behind a stumbling Hune smoothly and used her mass for cover. I had to disperse my own attack, already moving deeper in, but my general screamed hoarsely as the blade bit into her again from behind. Fuck, one poison I might have been able to slow but two? Past subtlety, I wove hooks into the tent’s ceiling and ripped the whole thing down on where I believed the Varlet to be.

Success, at least for a heartbeat – a shape swallowed up by the canvas and wooden frame struggled to get out, even as Hune fell to her knees. The ogre rasped out a breath, her limbs trembling.

The slit throat would kill her even if the poison didn't, so I began weaving Night into the surrounding flesh to halt the bleeding. Just a time-buying measure, but it was a start. General Hune turned burning eyes towards the shape cutting its way out of the canvas, and in a croaking voice forced out a few words in a tongue I did not know. She choked on blood after that, but whatever it was she'd said it... reverberated. I felt a shiver of power – not Light, not Night, but something... older. Deeper. Like cool and dark water from a lake so deep its bottom had never known the light of day. Even as the Varlet's blade finally cut its way through the canvas the Revenant was brutally *smashed* into the ground by some invisible force.

Bones cracked and the dagger was shattered, but in the moment that followed Hune's face paled.

"Stop that," I snarled. "It'll kill you before I can-"

Not one to waste time, I laid a hand on her exposed wrist as even when she was on her knees her neck was too high for me to reach. I pushed Night into her veins, looking for the poisons, and within a breath I'd found it. Clenching my teeth, I steadied my stance and grasped the substance tight – I'd have to rip it out, if she was to live. Instead, the moment Night touched the poison the substance erupted. It turned into some sort of virulent acid, and I withdrew my power with a sympathetic scream of pain as I felt the poison hollow her out from the inside. I opened my eyes in time to see the tall ogre spasm violently, once, and her eyes roll up to show the whites. Like a great tree, she toppled forward.

General Hune was dead before she hit the ground.

The Varlet, though smashed, was snapping tits limbs back into place and crawling out of the pile of canvas. Snarling, I formed a ball of blackflame large as a horse and smashed it down onto the Revenant. It would keep, at least for a bit. Instead it was my general I limped towards, feeling sick in my stomach. I'd killed her, trying to meddle with that poison. If I'd held my hand, a healer in sorcery or Light might have attended to her instead and... *Damn me*, I silently swore. *Damn this*. The closest I'd ever come to what I was considering was Warlock seeing to Nauk, and that'd gone wrong in distressing ways. But it was my hand that'd killed Hune Egelsdottir, in the end, and that meant I owed. I drew deep of Night, deeper than was wise with a battle still to be fought, and knelt to lay my hand against the side of the fallen ogre's neck. The last wisps of life were already fading, but the soul would not be far.

"Rise again," I murmured, the power singing in my blood.

It coursed through the large body, muscles twitching, and rose to snatch the soul. I held it, for a moment, and that was enough to draw *attention*. Something unspeakably larger than I found my threads settling around the soul of Hune, and its disapproval was as a physical law. I remembered, dimly, once seeing the ogre kneeling before a bowl on a Callowan field. She'd spoken prayers, and the bowl had emptied. I withdrew the Night, the backlash still shaking my bones, and bowed my head in acknowledgement. My interference here was neither needed nor welcome, for wherever it might be that Hune Egelsdottir was headed she was in favour.

Below, for all its horrors, always paid back its dues in full.

I set aside the torrent of emotions that would only distract me, eyes returning to the Varlet at the exact moment that the grey-cloaked thing emerged from my black flames. It was an artefact, that cloak, which seemed to have a bit of resistance to everything but brute force. The hood was up but in the shadow of it I still glimpsed calm red eyes and an ornate half-mask of jet and silver. There was an air of elegance to it, and to the Varlet's demeanour as well: it moved like a courtier, if a very deadly one. Unfortunately for the Revenant, I was also entirely out of patience with its existence. It produced a long curved knife, though its stance implied it was about to run for it. Not that it mattered.

"There'll be none of that," I coldly said.

In my hand a golden chalice filled with red sand appeared as I drew out an artefact from the Night. I tipped over the sand and the red was caught in the breeze, to seemingly no effect. The Varlet stepped back, just as the first red grain touched the blackflame.

"Surge."

The black fire roared out, exploding in a column that rose high in the sky and swallowing up the Varlet whole. It'd been a warrior's aspect, meant to strengthen a body or a blade temporarily, but the property of strengthening had been rather broad in nature. It'd been the better of the artefacts I got out of the Revenants slain at Second Lauzon, though it was still relatively weak. Still, feeding a stolen aspect into one of the most dangerous uses of Night saw me get my due: the aspect that'd maintained a bubble of silence containing us ended, and I suddenly heard the bustle of hundreds of soldiers converging towards us. I paid them little attention, slowly limping forward.

The Varlet struggled against the flames, trying to slip out, but I made them follow. Leaving my sword sheathed, I idly spun my staff and used the motion to guide the black flame into a

tightly-packed sphere that caught the Revenant and lifted it from the ground. I grit my teeth, feeding more power into a working I was finding increasingly difficult to control – the aspect had made the fire wilder somehow, more willful as much as more powerful. A heartbeat later the sphere was... snuffed out, suddenly, as the power of an aspect flared and gutted out. The cloak fluttered down, but when I threw a javelin of Night at it I saw it was empty.

The Varlet landed in front of me, and I finally got a good look at it. Though the corpse was severely burned, there were still a few dark tresses of hair and the remains of an elegant doublet in the scorched ruin I had made of this one. It struck out with yet another knife – straight and thin, a stiletto this time – but I caught its wrist with my free hand. It was stronger, but what did that matter? Before it could power through and sink the blade into a junction of my armour near the belly, I left my staff to stand and plunged my free hand into his chest. The Revenant twitched, freezing, as I went looking for an aspect to rip out. Three left, I felt.

One that was like an ever-shifting fang, another like utter stillness and the last... a hundred eyes, never blinking? I snatched the fang, hand withdrawing to find my fingers clutching a long wyvern's fang so thoroughly covered with overlapping runes that there was no trace left of the original untouched paleness. **Harm**, I grasped in the same moment I stole it. So long as something drew breath, this aspect would birth something capable of killing it. Endless possibilities flickered through my mind but the Varlet was already drawing back so I simply picked one close to the surface. The fang went back into the Revenant's body with a wet squelch.

It screamed, its ability to impose stillness gone as the poison coating the fang destroyed yet another aspect.

The Revenant flailed at me, which forced me to draw back, and tossed a knife so I ducked in a way that painfully pulled at my bad leg. By the time my gaze went back up, the Varlet was nowhere in sight. Fuck. If I'd been able to choose the aspect I harmed it would have been the eyes, they were the obvious pick of the stealth one, but it'd not been that discriminating a weapon. I smacked the butt of my staff against the ground, Night shivering out as I looked for a trace of the Scourge, but I found nothing. I almost snarled, my anger flaring hot. Another loss, another one I'd known for years gone and what did I have to show for it? I forced myself to breathe out, suddenly aware of the hundreds of soldiers looking at me.

The ranks parted for an officer, a tall dark-skinned woman in her forties with a fleshy face and eyes of a tinge that bordered on

amber. She wore her armour like the veteran that she was, and I gave her a jerky nod as she approached.

"Legate Zola," I said, keeping my voice calm.

"Your Majesty," Legate Zola Osei replied, her lightly accented voice pleasant to the ear. "You have avenged our loss."

My eyes went to the unmoving form of Hune, toppled down unceremoniously. We'd never been friends, she and I, and I'd not been blind to the fact that she'd only stayed with me because the ogres wanted someone well-placed in the camp of every possible winner of the conflicts in the east. But she had been with me for a long time, since the start almost, and that... mattered. How many of those were left, these days? With every battle, there were few less.

"No," I grimly replied, "I haven't. But by the day's end, perhaps we will have given her a fitting pyre."

The legate saluted, fist over heart, and to my surprise more than a few of the soldiers around us did the same. My voice must have carried further than I'd expected.

"You have seniority among the Second Army's legates, if I recall correctly," I said.

"I do," Legate Zola quietly replied.

I closed my eyes, breathed out and centred myself. Grief, however complex its nature, could wait until tomorrow.

"Then you have command, General Zola," I said, opening my eyes. "Confirm your replacement legate quickly, and have the announcement sent to all the appropriate officers."

There was no argument. I looked around, and for one dreadful heartbeat I recognized no faces. Some were young, some were old, and they came from places that spanned half of Calernia's length, but there was not one among them that I knew. *I lead an army of strangers*, I thought. And no amount of salutes or cheering could obscure that bitter truth. I mastered the spasm of unease, forcing myself to move so it would not show as much on my face. My eyes drifted down and I caught sight of the Varlet's grey cloak, laying abandoned on the ground.

"Someone take that and throw it into a warded chest," I ordered.

It was sooty and rumpled up, but not broken. If Hierophant found no trap woven into its fabric, I might gift it to Indrani so that at least one smile came out of this fucking horror of a day. I limped away, feeling like screaming. Breathe in, breathe out.

There was still a battle to win.

—

When they came for us again, it was without holding back. There were no tactics to speak of, no elegant manoeuvres and clever traps. On the other side of the murk stood over forty thousand of the walking dead, while the bloodied remains of my ten thousand stood behind walls and palisades like rocks awaiting the tide. And to the sound of rippling drums, a deep rumble that had my soldiers shivering even when they stood behind wards protecting them from the fear-inducing sorcery, the enemy began its advance.

I awaited them on the wall, cold-eyed and patient.

Through scum water and mud, endless ranks of skeletons marched in silent ranks as magic rippled in the distance, Keteran rituals birthing columns of billowing black smoke that rose into the sky like pillars trying to support the very heavens. The deafening screeches and buzzing of swarms filled the stagnant air, clouds of insects so thick they seemed solid shifting around cacophonous flocks of dead birds. Vermin scuttled through the swamps, rats and other crawling things, a tide that swum and skittered around the footsteps of steel-clad dead. Hulking shapes stirred out of the water, snakes long as streets and crocodiles large as houses, each bearing in their belly more of the hungry dead. Ghouls prowled the host in howling packs, passing below great skeletons bearing large ladders of black iron, and among it all a single great banner flew from an iron mast taller than the tallest of trees: ten silver stars set on a deep purple, perfectly circling a pale crown. It looked like the Dead King had deemed this battle worth the flying of his banner.

It was, I would not deny, a fearsome sight. An army like this would have been a terrible foe even with twice our numbers, well-rested and behind walls of stone. Instead the legionaries of the Second Army stood on baked mud and wood, clutched their weapons as they looked at the ripples in the water that the dead's approach was enough to cause. The cacophony of screeches and buzzing filled the air even as the smoke began to obscure the sky, the great pillars forming a ceiling above us. The noonday sun fell into shade, and as the hideous drums of Keter sounded the shivers settled into the bones of my men. This was not a battle that a reasonable woman would ask them to win. They were tired and few and a very long way from home.

Hune Egelsdottir was dead and the army she'd led for years was still reeling from the loss.

As always, Keter's blade had struck true. I looked at them, and now behind grim faces I glimpsed the first seeds of defeat. Not yet sprouted, but there nonetheless. Their general was dead, and though the way of the Legions and the Army after them was to that every officer could be smoothly replaced there was still something missing at the heart of the Second Army. Hune had led

these soldiers from the moment there'd been a banner for them to fight under, and that was not a shallow bond. If I wanted them to win today, the fire gutting out in their bellies had to be lit anew. I sunk deep in the Night and called it close to me, let it swim through my veins and thread into my voice so that whatever I spoke would carry to every ear.

Limping, tired, I climbed up to the edge of the rampart and turned to face my men.

"I am told," I said, and before the third word was finished not soul in the army spoke, "that there has only ever been one legion in the long history of Praes that ever dared to take the cognomen now borne by the First Legion: *Invicta*."

I smiled meeting the eyes of the soldiers around me.

"Undeclared, it means," I told them. "It was a heady boast to make even when it was conferred in the shadow of the surrender at Laure – a feat the Tower only ever achieved twice, over many years of striving."

And not striving gently.

"Yet that's always the way that it's been: the deed is done, the laurel bestowed," I said. "We do not give out a steel avenue before the victory has been won. Even in our bragging, we remain humble."

I laughed in contempt, and at the sound I saw a subtle current go through my men.

"Today is not such a day."

Then went still, and the weight of so many eyes turned on me was almost crushing.

"I already know who you are," I said. "I know it because I knew *you*, back when you were a mere two thousand – half of you snatched from gallows, the rest having never reddened your blade."

The Fifteenth had tasted of war before it was even fully grown, hadn't it? Our roster had still been half empty when we first knew battle.

"All over the world," I said, "wise lords and clever princesses dismissed the thought of you. A bastard legion, they said. A stillborn mistake. And then you won at Three Hills."

I let silence set in for a moment.

"Luck, they argued," I idly said, then paused. "So you won at Marchford."

A battle that'd seemed apocalyptic, long before I'd known the true meaning of the word.

"Again and again they sneered," I said, "and always through the blood and mud you rose. Dormer. Liesse – twice! – and even the green fields of Summer. You broke the back of a dozen princes at the Camps, then humbled the other half at the Graveyard."

And the First Army had, in time, laid down its arms and left the fronts. Not so with the Second: under Hune they had neither withdrawn nor flinched no matter what came calling.

"I have never set an expectation that the Second Army did not surpass," I told them, meaning every word, "not across a dozen ruinous fields of war. In all things, in all strife, your excellence has prevailed."

My gaze swept the soldiers assembled before me, that tapestry that made up the east of the Whitecaps – orc, goblin, Praesi and Callowan – and I honestly could not bear to lie to them. To embellish with some patriotic turn of phrase, to speak of the good of mankind. Not when they had already given so much, and asked so little in return.

"And the truth is," I quietly said, "I have asked of you more than a queen has the right to ask."

I gestured towards the swamplands behind us, towards the encroaching nightmare.

"This day, this place, are beyond the duty of your oaths," I admitted. "You stand halfway across the world, surrounded by death and smoke on all sides, after having already won too many wars under my banner. You have already paid for peace in blood, and yet here you are again: down in the mud, standing alone as horror comes."

My fingers clenched around my staff.

"So I the cognomen I grant you now is not for victory this day," I said, "for have you not already won me victories enough? I name you *Excellens*, in the old Miezani, to acknowledge what you already are: surpassing excellence, a neck that was never made to bend."

Indifference would have had a bite, here, but that was not what I saw in them. It was... hesitation. Uncertainty as to the nature of the gift they had been handed, what it meant.

"I quibble not over this honour," I said, "because it is your due. A settling of accounts. I would have been ashamed to keep it back any longer."

But now that I had ended the matter, ceased using it as a bludgeon to get them to fight, I could talk to them without the... pretence. The insincerity.

"And freed of this, without right or call, I ask you once more," I said. "Fight, and win."

My voice rose.

"Even though the day is dark and the enemy is great, even though all the world would call it folly to even try, I still ask you," I said. "*Fight, and win.*"

What I saw in their faces then, I did not have a name for. It was not pride, but it was not far from it. It was not bitterness, but it was not far from it. Maybe it was a little of both, over the years grown together like ivy and oak: inseparable.

"I can give you the word, you know, but it was never mine," I told them. "It was always yours, and in the end the only people who can decide what it means will be you. Now, for good or ill, is the moment where that decision will be made."

In the distance, behind me, I felt the ground tremble under the drums of Keter. Silence and a sea of faces beheld me.

"So what," I softly asked, "will it be?"

The silence stayed. I breathed out, slowly. It had been all I had to give, save for strength of arms, and that they already had of me. I watched them, and my eye caught sight of a pair of tall orcs. Heavies, in dirtied armour. I'd seen them before, I thought, when fighting on the shore. One of them met my eyes, dark to brown, and struck his sword against his shield. It rang out, somehow piercing the cacophony of horror marching against us. It sounded, I thought, like a plea. The answer came further down the line, from another face I recognized – a Taghreb soldier I'd once joked with on the march, who had promised his wife a house in Keter. The sword went against the shield, ringing out again. It was a fair-haired girl, after, the Liessen looks writ strong in her face.

And the sound rose, one sword at a time.

With it the answer to my question came. *Fight*, the Second Army said. *Fight*, the Second Army screamed. *Fight*, the Second Army thundered, until the very air shook with it.

"Once more," I quietly said, as the clamour washed over me and drove back even Keter's screeching for a heartbeat. "Once more."

And I would ask again, I knew that just as they did. And perhaps that on day they would refuse me at last. But today, they would fight.

With the song of ballistas unleashing death, it began.

—

It was all screams and blood and steel. After a while, I could barely tell the difference between one fight and another. I stood ankle-high in mud, sword in hand and hoarsely shouting as a tide of vermin and ghouls crawled through the muck and toppled the tight ranks of a shield wall.

"Hold," I shouted, staff scattering black flame among the mass. "Hold."

They held and they died, unflinching, until the Blessed Artificer scoured herself raw unleashing a cage of Light that bought us a reprieve. The cloudy sky – black smoke had swallowed it all up like a hungry maw – lit up in the distance with red, a warning of danger, and I ripped myself clear of the muck to limp away.

Gate.

The palisade exploded in a shower of shards, wards shattered as skeletons poured through the gap and our mages desperately struggles to bind fresh wardstones. I charged into the stream of dead, a line of heavies following me as we desperately scrabbled with steel and Night to plug the breach long enough for the Pilgrim's light to incinerate the lizard abomination climbing the wall and a volley of fireballs to buy us just long enough for the sappers to bring down logs in the way.

"Half a cadence," I exhorted. "That's all we need to buy them."

My sword bit into flesh, a ghouls drawing back with an ugly shriek, but a javelin went through the eye of the sergeant to my left and two more were butchered by blades after skeletons entangled them. Through the hole in our wards, a deafening swarm of insects began to pour through. I screamed, tossing a ball of blackflame into them, and Tariq deftly leapt atop a falling log. Light poured out of him in waves as he broke the dead beyond the breach and our wards came back on, cutting off the swarm.

The threat had passed. I was needed elsewhere.

Gate.

Even burning, the snake allowed dead to charge up to the summit of the wall. A massive undead crocodile's jaw ripped at the baked mud, bricks flying every which way, but an arrow hit right between its eyes – an unraveller, too long to be a mortal

archer's work – and it dropped lifelessly. I kicked the Bone back down the wall, letting it drop onto another skeleton trying to climb out of the muck, and swept the bottom of the bricks with blackflame.

"Priests concentrate on the ramp," I screamed. "We need to keep them below."

Light came in streams, scything through the skeletons trying to claim a beachhead atop the wall, and when a massive bird made of ghostly blue sorcery struck at the burning snake construct the entire damned thing collapsed as the magical construct exploded.

"Summoner, there you were," I laughed. "*Good man*. We sweep the top, no holds barred."

With power and steel we scattered the enemy, and the moment the crisis was averted-

Gate.

"Keep them in the funnel," I screamed.

The hole in our wards at the centre of the camp was made to look like a great black whirlwind, for it had filled with black smoke and screeching birds. Our mages were fighting back the attack, some sort of devouring spell, but birds were still slipping through. A pack of a dozen slipped out of the roiling smoke, headed towards us, but hellfire lashed out in a cloud of brimstone and Hierophant disappeared them with a slash of his hand.

"It is the smoke," Masego shouted back over the din. "It hides the ward-breaking formula, prevents us from attacking it."

"I have this," the Apprentice claimed, eyes hard as she incanted in a resounding voice.

From her hands glimmering red light poured out, crossing into the black whirlwind and becoming part of it. She kept up the spell, the red glow lending a hellish tint to the Enemy's work but also revealing all the secrets held within.

"Superb," Masego praised her with a grin, glass eyes glinting so warmly it singed the edges of the eyecloth. "And now that your work is revealed, Trismegistus, all that awaits is **Ruin**."

The aspect rippled out, tearing through a spell only he could see, and suddenly the hole filled up. The birds were instantly incinerated, but the smoke stayed – I'd already seen men dying in agony after inhaling it, so with a working of Night I sucked it all into a great ball and passed it off to Masego.

"Do what you will with it," I said.

Gate.

Iron ladders dug into the walls of the fort, skeletons swarming the top of them, and even as my staff slammed into one's side and dropped it below I saw one of the scorpion nests get overwhelmed – goblins killed, engines smashed. The Artificer had taken a wound driving back the Drake, and I was getting tired: we were taking back the fort, but the shore... Three long calls of the horn sounded, and with disbelief I heard the hooves of the Order of the Broken Bells as they counter-charged the dead pouring out of the shallows.

"With me," I shouted, gesturing at the closest line. "Those ladders are ours."

The dead fought hard to keep us away from the iron ladders, and one of those great skeletons nearly made me fall off the wall before Adanna carved it in two, but between the two of us and the honest muscle of my soldiers we trashed all four of the damned things. Below us the Order of the Broken Bells withdrew as reinforcements for the mauled shield wall on the beach began to pour out of the fort, but with the knights here the danger had ebbed low.

Gate.

No, *gates*.

I'd not been the one to open them this time. There must have been almost a hundred, all large and stable even through Keteran counter-rituals. The pharos device had been used, I realized, likely at Hu- General Zola's order. Or maybe Adjutant's. Neither would have pulled the trigger early, though. Gods, we must have fought for so long delaying any longer would have exposed us to the risk of fighting the third wave as well. Yet we were still hard-pressed by the enemy on all sides, I saw and retreat would be... costly. Maybe if they were coming at us mindlessly, but they had enough Binds to keep them clever enough that they'd do more than mindlessly rush the positions we'd prepared to enable our retreat. I cursed. This was going to get...

The low strum of a cithern went through all of us, as if played straight into our ear. The dead, for a heartbeat, froze. They began to move again, and did not cease even when the melody began in earnest. It was I who froze, though when the singing began.

*"Long have I walked the shore
Known ruin, drunk bitter wine
Brewed in dying light of yore
Before triumph did resign."*

I had expected the Rapacious Troubadour to sign, but it was a woman's voice. One I knew well. And it angered me, just a little,

that Akua Sahelian was apparently just as good at singing as she was at damn near everything. It passed, though, as much because of the gentle sadness of the song as what it was accomplishing. I could see it already, though the detail might have been hard to pick out for some.

Not a single Bind was moving.

*"In shaded Wolof I knew
Rest beneath the sycamore
Yet as the western wind blew
My heart cried out for more."*

The orders came down, by my hand and that of others. We would not waste the opportunity: full retreat into the Twilight Ways began.

*"Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand
So why not reach out and
Pluck stars from the sky?"*

Stand by stand we began our retreat, funneling the dead into killing zones as the House Insurgent unleashed Light and we drew back to one holdfast after another. Already our supply train was passing through the gates, we only needed to last a little longer...

*"I have known kings, petty men
Of pettier kingdoms still
Clutching tight their stolen wen
Using them up to their fill*

*And the poets weep, when did
We become a people ruled?
The empire folly undid
Was raised by people subdued*

*Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand
So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

The shores were empty, the palisade and fort abandoned and what engines had gone unsmashed being dragged through the gates. The Order would go through next, leaving behind an ever-narrowing square of infantry.

*"So let me dance with ghosts,
Beautiful, hungry devils
Let me face great hosts
In dark and bloody revels*

I will tread the isle blessed

*I will burn the fields of red
And should arrant come the west
The river will be fed*

*Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand
So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

The fighting grew increasingly furious, the dead rushing at us in blind waves as our last redoubts wavered. But they were almost done, we could see the light in the horizon: the endless ranks of skeletons had ended, ground into nothing by the unflinching valour of the Second Army. And we retreated inch by inch, back to the gates as the Doom of Liesse sweetly sang.

*"I have shared a bed with doom
Danced with death as a lover
Long have I dreamt of my tomb,
And no dream lasts forever*

*But now that the night has come
I raise my hand to the sky
And one last time I succumb
To that old, beloved cry*

*Born grieving, I will die
Holding naught in my hand
So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

The last gate closed behind the last living soldier, and so ended the Battle of Maillac's Boot.

*"So why not reach out and
Pluck the stars from the sky?"*

[ErraticErrata](#)

Chapters are coming out early today, as it looks like I won't be having access to internet later today. Both are a little more raw than I'd prefer, but it'll have to do. (I will also take a moment to note that I despise the changes WordPress have made to the platform, everything is needlessly complicated now.)

Extra chapter's titled Colossal I, the first of two, and it's from a POV that's not been used before. It can be found in the Extra Chapter tab, as usual.

jypehama

Wildbow has been expressing pretty heavy frustration with the WordPress changes too.

Maybe some can be reversed or worked around through settings but eh.

Unrecovered

It could be said that it's a bad place to catch up, yet I'd argue that there are no "good" place except last chapter of the last book. Also, don't know about "raw", seem fine to me 😊

laguz24

Also, Hune lived life and left with all debts paid.

Crash

Sad to see her go, as she was one of my favourite secondary characters.

But then, what a way huh? In so much favour even Cat had to bow her head and let her go.

The little bit with her army was an eulogy in itself. The Queen asks for the impossible, the Second Army delivers without complaint. Not with the shouts of joy and pride but with the drum of swords against shields and the resignation/pride of soldiers who know the odds and are willing to do it anyway.

"I will obey that order if it is given"

Daniel E

Hey, I'm actually early to the comments this time, though apparently for bad internet reasons 😞 Anyways, looks like I lost my bet about Hune, though at least she got more of a sendoff than the others. Gotta say, this chapter felt... not rushed, but compressed. A full narration a la Helms Deep would have been too much, but I think there was definitely room for a bit more oomph here, especially if we'd had multiple PoVs. Or at least some insight into whatever powers Hune used at the end (and the entity / resistance that Catherine encountered when trying to Raise her).

Earl of Purple

That was a Miracle from the Gods Below. The last curse they offer all that serve them, so long as the servant pays for it with sacrifice and dedication. Warlock used his to wipe out the Ashuran navy; Kairos used his to slay the Age of Wonders, and Hanno's mother used hers to blast the Ashuran committee who

didn't dig out her husband. The resistance came from the Gods Below, or possibly a very powerful servitor entity, but either way the same entity/s that gave Kairos a round of applause.

I'm curious if the language she used was the same Dark Speech that Amadeus apparently used to ask a gargoyle-devil to bite the High Lord of Nok back when Cat visited Malicia in the Tower. I'm not sure we've heard of it since.

Mental Mouse

Also, that curse was probably why Cat couldn't raise Hune – Hune had already gotten a post-mortem shot in, so she couldn't also continue fighting as a Night undead.

mamm0nn

It's probably not that she couldn't, rather than that she felt that she shouldn't and thus didn't. If some corpses would be off-limits to necromancers then we would've heard something about it, at the very least by those of Below boasting about it or there being some difference to trying to raise those of Above with angels resisting.

This kind of protection probably would've been more a message to necromancers and an intimidation tactic that would dissuade the novices and those not willing to get on Below's bad side, but I don't think it would've stopped Cat if she went through with it. For all that it was Hune's due, the gods Below preach no servitude absolute and consider even betrayal to them as worthy worship.

And so it was more a powerful entity asking Cat 'Hey, could you not?' than actual resistance.

Liliet

Yeah, sounds like it.

Cat got a frown and a request to leave Hune alone, and she acquiesced because it did seem like Hune's preference, in context.

Thanatoss

Mamm0nn it is incorrect.

Hunes SOUL was taken by gods below and was beyond reach (even seconds after her death, that is why Cat surrendered).

You are not making distinction between BINDS nad BONES.

Hune's soul was taken so yes you can reanimate her body as undead Ogre Zombie but you can not bind her soul, no necromancer probably not even Dead King could. Dying Curse

(what she used) effectively bound her soul forever to Below and we can tell she wanted it this way.

shikkarasu

“Something unspeakably larger than I found my threads settling around the soul of Hune, and its disapproval was as a physical law.” Cat had a grasp on Hune’s soul and decided not to fight whatever God had previous claim. I would not sell her so short as to say she could not wrest Hune’s soul back. Cat could have made Hune a full on revenant with that soul and has no issue telling Angels and Gods to take a hike, but she is considerate to the pacts of her allies.

Sir Nil

It was likely something related to Below. We’ve seen White Knight’s mother pull off something similar with the blood curse. It is likely that so long as you keep some form of offering to Below your entire life, they would do something that paid it back. Catherine said that Hune did offerings, and of all the people who deserves repayment, it was definitely one of the generals of the greatest army to currently walk Calernia.

[Liliet](#)

This is a specific known thing actually – the “last curse” that Below offers its followers. The scale is presumably proportionate to offerings while alive, but everyone gets something as they die. Kairos mused while he was dying about how he could have wrangled more years of life out of his last wish if he wanted, but he wanted something else instead.

[Daniel](#)

Does the Dead King get one?

[Liliet](#)

He probably already got his lmao

Flameburst

Likely not, because he actively disassociated himself from above and below.

Shveiran

That is a disturbing thought.

dadycool

It was indeed very dense. It also did feel like there were parts cut, like around the speech, but the "Gate. Gate. Gate." part felt true to the battle sensation. You only get flashes of what happened, things that stuck out to you for whatever reason.

Sparsebeard

I was sure one of the "Gate" would end up bolded.

[CredulaPostero](#)

That. Song. Just wow. I like all of your writing, but this is the first time I have spent less time focusing on the chapter than the included poem.

[Javvies](#)

The Ogres have their own secrets, it seems.

A poison tailored for a massively negative reaction with Night? That's not good.

And Cat didn't even get to finish and confirm the kill on Varlet? At least she managed to damage it, and remove two of its Aspects, so the engagement wasn't a total loss. Mostly a loss and a net loss, however.

That's one hell of a trick Akua pulled off with Troubador.

On the upshot, this escapade pulled away and distracted a lot of the undead armies.

And between Akua's trick and the pharos devices, they'll have been able to pull most of the army out at the time.

So ... they accomplished what they intended to ... but at a high price.

[Liliet](#)

I think that wasn't a secret, just a regular last wish that Below's followers get. And in true Below's follower fashion, Hune used hers to clobber the guy who killed her.

NerfContessa

Raw 8ndeed, yet not in a bad way.

Hectic, fast and yet somehow 0aced slowly in alternating gates and song.

Love it.

Xinci

Cat had some Alexander the Great vibes when naming them Excellens. Well Akua just had a swan song so, I suppose she has somewhat prepared herself for the inevitable. Also it does indeed look like the pure form of the Night is what Villains draw from when they do Necromancy and stuff. Though I suppose it may just be the pool of power that Below first had? Similar to how Light is presumably Aboves first pool of power.

Mental Mouse

No, Night is specifically the power granted to Sve Noc and the Drow, but Cat has used it for necromancy before. It does seem likely that the various powers of Below are similar, but they have subtly different "signatures". By now DK has had plenty of time to get a read on Night's characteristics, but it's not clear if the Varlet's trick poison was specific to Night, or would have responded similarly to any Below power, or even to any magical energies at all.

The more interesting question is, what aspect was it that Cat destroyed? "Ability to impose stillness?" When has the Varlet used that? She did at least take those deadly poisons out of commission along with it.

caoimhinh

Probably the thing that made it so no sound came out of Hune even as she shouted with all her strength. It's not the first time EE uses "stillness" as something related to silence, as that time Catherine visited the capital of the Winter Court she was given use of the Still Courtyard and noted that name was because of the absolute silence that reigned there.

dadycool

Whew, that was exhausting. The fight in the Command Tent, the rousing speech, the so, so, so long Battle of Maillac's Boot.

Hune's fate seems fitting, given the chapter content. She's paid her dues and they will be honored. After all that, anyone would deserve that rest.

Very nice speech.

Gate. Put out the fire. Gate. Put out the fire. Repeat ad nauseam until that demon started to sing. That was honestly exhausting to read, just sympathetically. Heh, "Why is Akua so effortlessly good at everything she does? It must be demonic work."

Liliet

Yep ♥

caoimhinh

Well, she did mention something like that back when they were in the Everdark.

“You are preaching to the choir, my heart,” Akua intervened. “Admittedly the choir is made of damned souls, but let us not pretend talented singers are usually headed for the Heavens.”

Shveiran

Thank you. That was awesome.

hue hue

Greetings from Brasil

caoimhinh

Greetings from Colombia

The Quietist

I wouldn't worry this is genuinely one of my favourite chapters in a while...

Mr Mouse

For having been born east of the river I became instead a man to pluck stars from the sky. Is that not a higher virtue?

Sinead

I find it interesting that the implication being that Cat didn't honour the Second before now due to a means to compel it. I see some of this being Cat feeling guilt over Hune's death, but I never got the impression of the Second defining itself as a specific Legion within the Callowan war machine rather than just being an exemplar of the doctrines and training.

Then again, with everything filtered through Cat, we the readers may miss details that would state otherwise.

[Liliet](#)

I think, like with Nauk and Third, it didn't *occur* to Catherine to grant a cognomen before the first commander – the one that defined what the army was like – died. And if she wasn't trying to compel them to fight, she would have gotten to this *later*, not earlier – you know, because of the whole “ongoing battle

literally right now" thing. She didn't grant the Third army theirs before Sarcella was done.

The "I've been holding this back from you" thing is a rhetorical trick, so they'd feel like this was something long owed rather than something given hastily as a bribe. Which it was but couldn't *feel like*, see. Hence hedging the truth.

Sinead

While I am not saying it isn't a form of a bribe, I feel that the purpose of a cognomen (especially in a world where Roles and Names matter) is to capture lightning in the bottle in a pivot. Much like how Names are carved in a cultural psyche, the cognomen is to capture and lionise the soul of the Legion at a pivot. Unfortunately for Cat, her pivots come from "impossible victories", which means that the laurals are always given in the light of a funeral pyre.

I guess it's more that I do not see any fault in what Cat has done. Anything earlier than this would have been a blatant political grab instead of just recognition of what that Legion had become.

[Liliet](#)

Oh 100%, me neither. That's what I'm saying here, I was just analyzing how it happened the way it did.

The cognomen itself was 100% earned. The *timing* was a last-minute save.

Sinead

Ahhh yes, aggressive agreement once again!

On one hand, I get Cat feeling like she has failed those in her charge, with scenes like this. However they always leave me wondering if I have missed something that makes the sense of failure more objective than self flagellation.

And a last minute save is always a pivot.

I wonder if the ogres have any opinions of the various eastern factions. I get the feeling that the ogres feel that no one is really on their side to really trust them, but I wonder if the fact that Crown and Sword is a banner of those that seek to break the old patterns and forge something new is noted by them. Perhaps they won't get swept in the wake of Cat's vision, but at least a recognition that one faction is potentially more favourable to them than the other.

Would they see Cat's attempt to save Hune as a weakness or pure selfishness (since my understanding is that if she had just left Hune to die, she could have destroyed Varlet), or as someone who tries to do the best by her people?

[Liliet](#)

I think ogres aren't a hive mind!

Sinead

Fair point to my wording.

I was more thinking about cultural values (since we don't have any insights into Ogrian society and culture). While I like how Hune went out, I am saddened that we don't get much more insight into what they are like as a people through Hune. One thing I like about this series is that we get a good sense on how these societies function and shape it's members. Even goblins (who do not share information with outsiders) still have a sense of what some of the social dynamics are through both dialogue and goblin POV.

From the goblins we know that the 'cultural mores' are that in a similar situation, one should ignore fallen allies and focus on the enemy (since everyone is expendable for the good of the Tribe). Even if you have goblins like Robber who do not deal well with losing people.

The last part only occurred to me because as shown with Cat's interaction with Below in this chapter, people can be OK with the trade-off of their lives for the enemies. And from that perspective, Cat failed to press an advantage as much as she could have.

[Liliet](#)

We know ogres are very few, so they are probably mostly generic-Praesi, I would guess. The rest of the values seems so far to be "fuck you all" lmao (not that this is unPraesi of them...)

Sinead

True. An enslaved population probably wouldn't keep their own culture very well (and if they were brought over by the Miezens, they were probably a shattered culture like the Orcs were, since they were also sent back to the homeland).

It really boils down to, "I am fascinated by every culture EE has shown us on screen and want as much as I can."

[Liliet](#)

Oh mood

308924810a

I think the core of the Ogre position is that they aren't especially on anyone's side because they can't take the risk of being especially against someone. They're already suffering from reduced lifespans and increased rates of birth defects due to inbreeding. I think the only way to get the Ogres on-side would be to both offer them improved protections against the High Lords, and to draw in new Ogre immigrants to Praes to refresh their population. A feat that'd essentially require making Praes an intercontinental trading power to pull off.

Big I

Spectacular chapter, but the best part for me was Akua's song. I can just imagine Terribilis listening to it as he rose against the crusader kingdoms in the Wasteland.

The song also seems, to me at least, to be foreshadowing an eventual attempt to betray Cat by Akua. The part about "now that night has come" really made me take notice, and that it's followed by a verse about still trying to "pluck the stars from the sky" said something to me.

I wasn't expecting a happy ending to Akua and Cat, but this seems to setting the stage for some real Shakespearean, bitter sweet vengeance.

[Liliet](#)

...I. I just.

Akua: requests the Troubadour.

Akua betrayal crowd: SHE'S ABOUT TO BETRAY CAT USING HIM

Akua: does the exact opposite of betrayal

Akua betrayal crowd: ...THIS IS FORESHADOWING OF HER INEVITABLE BETRAYAL LATER ON

I'm not even saying yall are necessarily *wrong* per se, but that's one hilarious 180.

Shveiran

Same. I mean, I get it: on one hand, you can never really trust the Diabolist, right?
But by now... I really don't think she'll ever betray Cat, you know?

... Which, now that I think about it, might be just why many say it'd be a perfect twist.

...carry on, then. Don't mind me.

Liliet

You absolutely cannot ever really trust the Diabolist. Not because she'll betray Cat, she won't, but because she's a DUMBASS. Trust in intentions and trust in judgement are two very different things; Akua might have the purest desire to improve ever and she can still do a stupid thing at any point because Praesi logic is backwards and she's been traumatized and retraumatized multiple times over and is now actively rewriting reality in her memories to make her logic fit (the "all villains are ambitious" speech).

Shveiran

It's not that you are wrong, per se, but by this logic you can trust pretty much no one, can you?

Liliet

It's a matter of degrees!

Said Cat, staring at Hierophant's back and sighing.

Shveiran

Well, yes.

I'm just saying that this seems like a high bar to set for trusting someone, you know?

Like, even the most skilled individual can make a mistake and get something wrong, or they can lack information or be tricked. And even if they don't, they could clash with someone more skilled and be defeated. Or, more relatably, they could disagree with you on what is actually right or important and make a choice you wouldn't have.

Now, of course, I don't mean to argue that everyone is equally unreliable and undeserving of trust; that would be absurd.

It's just... trust is not about being certain of what someone will say or do, you know? It's about UNCertainty, if you would. About faith.

It's about acting AS IF you were certain when you know you can't be, not really.
That's why it's hard, and that's why it is a precious thing.

[Liliet](#)

It's a balance though!

Like... if you trust a small child with driving a car, nobody is going to have a good time. At some point you take a step back and say "this trust has boundaries riiiight here and we both need them for our wellbeing". And for different people these boundaries come up a different amount. For Akua... well, the boundaries don't come up a lot right now, when she's explicitly Cat's personal subordinate and tolerated by others exclusively within the limits of that role. But take the "Headmistress Akua of Cardinal" or "Dread Empress Akua" scenarios people like to throw around in the comments section, or even just another "Akua has to pretend to be Cat to cover for something" and NO THE BOUNDARY IS RIGHT THERE YOU ABSOLUTELY CANNOT TRUST AKUA WITH THOSE THINGS. KEEP THE CHILD AWAY FROM THE WHEEL.

Shveiran

Wow, that got preachy. Sorry, didn't mean to sound condescending; I just thought it was a point worth making.

[Liliet](#)

No, this is a really interesting discussion!

I just tried to make a joke to, uh, avoid sounding preachy myself?

I'm just saying, Cat trusts Masego like she trusts very few people, but she will not give him explicit blanket permission to blow up any hills he wants. As an example.

[Adrian_V](#)

FREAKING!GREAT!CHAPTER!\$%&%\$&(/())#\$%&/&/

Ahem after recovering fromt he overdose of AWESOME that this was it almost too much to say i loved it.

Mmmm i am 99% sure 1 of Cat's future aspects will involve empowering her troops, people, band, whatever group she is with. Definedtly inspiring loyalty too.

Mental Mouse

That might be the same as her “thresher” capacity, of pulling people (even powerful people) into her wake. Taking those as one aspect...

The second would clearly be her “theft of power” ability.

But her third characteristic power would clearly be her “overturn the board” thing – can a power to break stories be enclosed in an Aspect?

Shveiran

She gotta get at least one that allows Speaking though. the theory was, it would be a sentence-based thing, like a judge or an overseer.

Mental Mouse

Speaking, despite being bolded in text, isn't actually an Aspect – it's a generic Villain (Named?) power. Malicia's trump is being able to combine it with her **Rule** Aspect to *silently* (and tracelessly) lay commands on people.

Shveiran

It is an ability that derives from a number of aspects, which are however related to ruling. Black had Conquer (a staple of the Black Knight according to Amadeus, he said it somewhere in Book I), and most rulers have Rule.

Cat didn't have that, but she was the Squire of the Black Knight, and my read was that she could speak because of that.

Masego and Indrani are both pretty powerful Villains, for instance, but they never Spoke.

Though I guess this is speculation, admittedly. I don't think it was actually confirmed in the text?

The8ofspades

Speaking is connected to authority: you can only ever Speak to people you have some form of command over.

Masego and Indrani, despite being powerful villains, have always been followers. they've never really led anything. Therefore, no Speaking

Juff

Typo Thread:

tits limbs > its limbs
wold > would

red gain > red grain
bustled > bustle
laying abandoned > lying abandoned
no broken > not broken
was to that > was that
not soul in the army spoke > not a soul in the army spoke (also,
i think was speaking read better)
steel avenue (is this correct?)
Then went still > They went still
So I the cognomen > So the cognomen
that on day > that one day
desperately struggles > desperately struggled
a ghouls > a ghoul
nearly mad me > nearly made me
to sign > to sing

[doominator10](#)

Tits limbs is a rather amazing typo

Frivolous

Just some idle trivial comments:

For Masego to praise Apprentice's spell-work as superb is a terrifying compliment. How often does the freaking Hierophant ever find another's work that admirable? Very very rare, I think.

Promising your wife a house in Keter seems somewhere between hubristic and horrible, given Keter is literally a Hell-hole. It's not like anyone would want to vacation there. The cultural life is DOA. No opera, no good restaurants, no art festivals.

I think that Taghreb's wife should have asked for a house in Sallia or Cardinal instead.

mamm0nn

Actually Praes does have quite a bit of culture, and while it may not be the same for the people as it is for the High Lords, we haven't been described the people's lives as awful and empty. Quite likely they do have all the things you described, and as Praes is rich there's probably quite some trickle-through that would make them poorer than Procer but richer than Callow and Levant.

Frivolous

I suspect you mean Ater, not Keter.

The Taghreb in the story above promised his wife a house in Keter.

Matthew Wells

But living in Keter has the benefit of getting to attend Rumena's stand-up shows when it finally retires.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Roasts for hire!"

Darkening

Huh, wasn't there a plan for Apprentice too, in addition to Masego's smiting and Akua's song? Surprised that didn't get pulled out at any point. Well, that just means we get to use it another day I suppose lol. That wasn't what I expected Akua's ritual to do, but binding any undead with a soul so that they can't lead the mindless masses is a pretty great move.

[Liliet](#)

Might have happened offscreen, or just been *this* – the contingency that she can do this kind of thing when necessary.

[308924810a](#)

So I guess Akua isn't betraying them now? Unless this song is going to end with them finding out that Akua didn't retreat with the rest of them.

I'm forced to consider the alternate character interpretation that Akua might have been genuinely trying to reach out to Catherine before each of their conflicts, but due to her own hierarchical biases, Catherine's apparently-weak position, and Cat's political situation/anti nobility bias inherited from Black, there was never much chance of an accord.

[Liliet](#)

There's a non-contradictory not-about-to-betray-Cat Akua interpretation that doesn't involve her early bullshit being anything other than what it looked like.

TL;DR she was an abused kid who genuinely could not conceive of any way of being for herself other than what her mother left open, so even in rebellion she followed the pre-defined script. But that script had footnotes along the lines of "serve the victor" which became relevant to her after she died, and *that* path finally led her out... so to speak. Now she's genuinely loyal to Cat in part BECAUSE of Praesi values, in part because she likes what Cat has going on and is naturally *a lot* more empathetic than she'd been beaten into acting like, and in part because she's still an abused kid whose "finding my own path" gland is stunted in development.

She has nothing to betray Cat *for*, because going back is actively worse than dying under Cat's banner and she can't quite come up with a third option.

Mental Mouse

And she's fated for that Doom which will itself be a thing of legend... which is itself a proper ending for a villainous story.

Liliet

Yep! If you start listing reasons for Akua to stick with Cat, you can come up with like a dozen easily. Most of them will be fairly weak on their own, but the problem is that there is no counterweight. Akua was never taught self-determination. Betraying Cat would be a self-destruct-out-of-spite option, and when the destruction is a given, all of those other reasons do outweigh spite by much.

Konstantin von Karstein

What purpose served the song? The deads stopped for a short moment, but appart from that was it even slightly useful?

'Ladi Williams

The song stopped the "binds" who were the brains behind the dead army.

Without them...the dead army just reverts to a mindless horde without any tactical formation.

Which made it easy to funnel them into killzones and allowed the second army to withdraw without / with little casualties.

'Ladi Williams

Interestingly...contrary to what most comments propose...the song strikes me as Akua having accepted her fate and decided that since she's damned and has no hope for redemption...."Now night has come"

Why not reach for the sky and pluck the stars from the sky... Do one deed that she would be remembered for regardless of the fact that it does not buy her redemption.

I foresee Cat still killing her but being heartbroken as she does bcos Akua has genuinely bcom a good person. She's now one of my favorite characters.

Thank you EE for a beautiful journey you have taken us on.

Casey Glick

Cat is not going to kill Akua. But she is grooming Akua to sacrifice herself freely in the darkest hour, merely to save other people and not for any redemption of her own. Akua is

capable of redemption, and the very act of redemption shall be Callow's Long Price.

[Liliet](#)

> I foresee Cat still killing her but being heartbroken as she does bcos Akua has genuinely bcom a good person.

That's what Vivienne was foreseeing, I think.

There are a lot of possible outcomes here, I feel. Cat kills Akua despite or even because of heartbreak (hurting Akua emotionally has been Cat's self-harm avenue for a while now), Akua sacrifices herself freely when it is necessary without even being asked (this is tbh something of a copout on the theme of punishment and atonement, but it can be hypothetically argued she earned that copout by following the path as far as she did), Cat never actually kills Akua but leaves her trapped in a Hell of her own making – of *genuine* regret and contrition and willing servitude forever.

Sinead

While I do hope Akua does end up in a "trapped in a Hell of enteral repentance" as it does go against Redemption in Death, what could be an interesting twist is Redemption in Death if/when the "Scouring of the Shi- I mean Praes happens. Then again, I have always loved Saruman's death scene, and think one could harken back to that with Akua in reverse: Below's greatest artificer (for what else could one call the Doom?) sent to rest, but where to?

Below's "take everything in equal measure" and Above's "we take everything and give nothing" can probably be traced back to the fact that debt and "balancing the ledger" cannot always work. Akua's threading the needle here as instrumental in breaking the Tower would be something of a way to do Redemption in Death. The redemption is not in the act of dying, but in what the exchange of her life for an end goal bought in turn.

[Liliet](#)

Scouring of the Shire is 100% excellent and everyone who suggests otherwise is wrong. Anyway I really think Akua needs to have as little to do with Praes as possible in the rest of her arc, she's been poisoned enough by the place. Keep the victim and the abuser apart, etc.

Sinead

That is a fair point to keep Akua away from Praes. I was more thinking what Redemption through Death would not feel

like a cop out, and Akua breaking the Tower would work for me personally. Your mileage may vary.

I think the best arc is of course Akua living past the epilogue as a memory of the Age of Wonder that is a warning and teacher. There are jokes about Headmistress Akua at Cardinal, but I think that it could be a way for Akua to grow forward. The Doom was essentially her carving her own wounds across the world, so being able guide others along with herself would be something worth seeing.

I have liked the idea of the Choir of Compassion taking her under thier wing, but I think there is a pattern of the Choirs taking in those who need them the most, and I feel that Akua is making a point of going at it her own way. So perhaps she would become an exemplar that others sworn to Compassion could recognise (thinking of Tariq's pointing to Lawrence as an exemplar beyond the Choir of Endurance's own followers).

Liliet

Headmistress Akua is a terrible idea because she should not be in charge of children, ever. She is not equipped for it. She has no reasonable role models for dealing with children. She has at least SOME role models for being in charge of adults, but LET'S NOT TRY IT OUT.

Akua the school ghost though? That's 100% valid.

OMFG I would love Akua sworn to Compassion so much. It fits her arc, too!

Sinead

I more mean Headmistress Akua in the sense of "teacher/ Authority figure" that's more than just a teacher on sorcery. Agreed that she shouldn't be in charge of children.

I just want to see every named Choir at least once, and I think Compassion for one such as Akua would be interesting.

Is it Just? No, because there can be no justice for a crime like the Doom

Is it Mercy? To an extent, as she acts in her best capacity to right her wrong

Is it Contrition? Not exactly because Contrition takes the jagged edges and uses them to excise rot from the world

Is it Endurance? For Akua definitely, but Endurance is a shield for others before and during catastrophe, and doesn't seemed focused on After.

Is it Compassion? I would say so because it is acknowledgment that one is contrite, and that one is doing their best to shape a world where such a wound will never happen again. It's the blunting of the edge of Contrition that keeps it from bleeding out the body. Look at Will who kept on being a terrible person simply because there was no way for him to redeem himself, so why _try_.

I am of the opinion that Angels come to those that need them, and I would find it interesting if in light of Tariq observing what a tragedy Akua's story is that the Heavens do extend a Compassionate hand. To me that is the final part that would get Akua to stick to the long road without failing.

[Liliet](#)

I just think authority figure is something Akua should not be within the next hundred years or so. She cannot handle autonomy, let alone authority. Just, her decision making process is badly damaged by her upbringing.

Shveiran

I can get behind this reasoning, but I have an hard time imagining Akua as a second to someone that is not Catherine. And I am still afraid she'll not stick around in the aftermath. She is just too large. If she is part of the system, teh system is based on her and not itself, and won't survive her absence.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree!

Akua is very good at making herself small, and being subordinate comes naturally to her. It doesn't come naturally to her *pride*, but as long as it's what she's trying to do, she can do it perfectly.

Shveiran

You are arguing about her skill, and I agree. What I am uncertain is about whether someone else would

take her as a second, and who could she possibly want to serve as second for.

Sinead

Good point.

I guess in my head, what I am picturing is that Akua would be a living lesson of someone who knows the end result of plucking the stars from the sky. That brings the start to the surface and now everyone is dying in nuclear hellfire.

The Doom of Liesse isn't just a lesson in what not to do, she is a living lesson that can interact with and refute similar lines of thought because she has actually held them once upon a time.

What this might boil down to is what we are looking for in authority figure. There is a solid argument that all Names arise from trauma, so you will pretty much never get a stable individual to become Named, let alone the additional forces now pulling at their psych. An individual that walked the path of Named to being in some ways one of the greatest wildfire of a Name to be put down in generations, who then walks the path of trying to do the best she can to make amends could be a strong instrument in advising other Named. Not in her current state, but perhaps in the coming decades.

To me, this can be seen as an authority figure in that she has advice that she can give based on her experiences to help others. You may define this as one element of an advisory role instead of a straight authority figure, but I hope this clarifies what I am trying to get at with regards to saying authority. She is an authority on what she can talk to is more what I am picturing, not a authority of a system.

While I use "Headmistress Akua", I would probably be wrong to use that name even in reference to what I picture as an end state for her. It was just the first that came to mind to try and combine the role of a teacher that can teach both technical methods of sorcery as well as the "You have thought so much about if you could do this, that you never stopped and asked if you should do this." role. Not exactly someone in charge of children.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I think advisory role is very good for Akua!
She also loves showing off her competence.
Honestly she loved being Catherine's whispering
shade from day 1 of Cat bringing her out for that
and we all know it.

Just, not being actually the decider. Not any time
soon.

Midnight Binary

Never headmistress, but perhaps the position of
Librarian would work suitable. Not directly in
authority over the students, except in the context
of books, but at the same time always available to
be an alternate source of advice.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Note that DK's heraldry features stars surrounding his crown....

mamm0nn

The Varlet, though smashed, was snapping tits limbs back into
place

Sometimes we get a little gem of a typo like this. I don't even
want to visualise it, but for some reason I'm thinking finger-
snapping tits casting regeneration when I first read this.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I like this chapter. I think it's... nice.

Sparsebeard

The song ends after the last gate closes... did Akua just sacrifice
herself?

[Liliet](#)

Oh.

Uh.

Good catch.

[Liliet](#)

[after half an hour] actually, not only can Named "sidle"
without opening gates (and I think our beautiful snake counts
for this purpose), but Akua also can open gates of her own with
Night.

beleester

Or Akua just walked through a gate and kept singing. I mean, you may as well finish the song, once you're all away safely.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, Akua would time it so the song ended just before the last soldier walked through if she was going through the gate. The song is for the Binds, continuing it inside is just uncool and might give people an impression she has ever cared about a thing in her life.

Thanatoss

This was GREAT chapter.

But

We all wait for that NAME.

I hope all Cat's new Aspects will be so overpowered even Mirror Knight's and Saint's ones will pale before them.... Would be cool of Cat became something close to Ranger if not I will die inside.

[Liliet](#)

Cat is already something close to Ranger without the Name..

[Mental Mouse](#)

As I've said above, we do in fact see three mighty powers which have been characteristic of Cat for her entire career:

- 1) The "thresher" ability by which she sweeps the powerful into her wake, from individual Named up to entire armies.
- 2) The Take (in variations) meta-power, to claim an opponent's power, and turn it against even its original owner.
- 3) The "flip the board" power, to refactor a situation and reassemble it to her advantage.

[Liliet](#)

Ohhh yesss you're entirely correct.

I can see the first one functioning as a Charisma boost "now everyone listen to me" Aspect.

The second... there'd have to be a new twist, right? Cat has already had Take, and she has a take lite with Night. Would it be Take 2.0? There'd have to be at least a power-up right?

The third... how would that function? Something Seek-like, allowing Catherine to quickly find leverage for aforementioned flipping? A forcible temporary switch of attributes, making the flipping more literal?

Speculate with me! 😊

Jarl Zarl

Something occurred to me for the first one that could be a nice callback. What if Cat got "Lead" for that Aspect? I think it'd function differently from Black's in that like you said it's probably more of a Charisma and morale boost rather than Black's primarily physical one but I think tying it to her father would be a nice touch

Jarl Zarl

For the second ... we've been getting beats of her Name liking it when she stands in judgement over Named. That's making me wonder if it might be something along the lines of Roland's Confiscate. I don't have a verb in mind but something where she removes someone's power as a punishment. Perhaps also the ability to bestow that power on someone more deserving? That'd further support her bringing out the best in her followers/making them stronger part of her role as a thresher.

For the third I don't have much unfortunately, perhaps a Domain of some sort?

Darkening

'Sentence', perhaps, allowing her to bestow punishments fitting the situation? Hm.

[daegone823](#)

I think she will gain this after Hano comes into his name. This will truly cement her place not a sovereign ruler but as the leader of the terms. She will not be present but whispered about. At the moment where a dispute is incurred or a habitual rule breaker stirs up enough trouble she will appear.

The Dark Judge- A priestly named that allows the user to pass judgement on individuals. Similar to the pilgrim who is drawn to service other heroes in there time of need. The Dark Judge will be drawn to all conflicts between named to pass judgments so that there conflicts are "fair"(as determined by the terms).

She is allowed ton :

Forgive: used to redeem the actions of a named offering a chance at redemption. This power manifest as the ability to momentarily revive a named in order to complete one last action.

Compel- allows the control of a named similar to the diabolist unique control of demons. This is a passive ability by which the words of the judge are not just spoken but unavoidable to follow.

Punish- If a named has broken the terms or has intended on rebuking the judgment, they are destroyed. The power of this aspect relies on the judge's indifference to good and evil. Simply choosing the most

Casey Glick

What about "Inspire"? People follow Cat because they want to, not purely because she's a good commander who gives them victories. Cat fights for her people, and her friends, and she pulls people into her wake who genuinely want to become better:

- * Every member of the Woe (Masego learns to be a better person around others, Archer forms long-term friendships, Vivienne grows beyond her anger into a true leader, Hakram becomes the first Orc Named in centuries.

- * Amadeus himself

- * Callow, her Legions, the people, the nobles, the Order of the Broken Bells, who have learned that they can do what's right for their country.

- * Rosala, the Proceran Nobility, and Cordelia putting aside some of their pettiness to work with their former enemies.

- * The Blood of Levant, who, in response to her, and in understanding of her, have set aside generations of blood feuding

- * Grey Pilgrim,

Casey Glick

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- * Every member of the Woe (Masego learns to be a better person around others, Archer forms long-term friendships, Vivienne grows beyond her anger into a true leader, Hakram becomes the first Orc Named in centuries.

- * Amadeus himself

- * The Heroes and the Villains, who start working together, first under the Truce and Terms, and then for the future Liesse Accords.

- * Everybody who likes the idea of the Liesse Accords (and of course those who agreed to form Arsenal)

- * Callow, her Legions, the people, the nobles, the Order

of the Broken Bells, who have learned that they can do what's right for their country.

* Rosala, the Proceran Nobility, and Cordelia putting aside some of their pettiness to work with their former enemies.

* The Blood of Levant, who, in response to her, and in understanding of her, have set aside generations of blood feuding

* Grey Pilgrim, (almost) Saint, and White Knight, who have all learned some value of compromise. Roland who gets swept into their wake.

* Sve Noc herself

* And the entire culture of the Drow, now turned to striving for excellence and not just fighting for power and dominance.

In basically every interaction, Cat has been responsible for people becoming better. Better versions of themselves, better human beings, more aligned in their goals. Almost nobody remains her permanent enemy, and the rest have all been Inspired.

'Ladi Williams

I think take is too literal for the new name.

Cat is prolly going to get simple sounding names that she can use to fit many situations.

I can't seem to think of anyone right now.

not my fault...it's the alcohol

Why is "take" her only aspect that remains? Why can't night duel the others? Or Isit bcos it's closely related to thievery?

[Liliet](#)

I mean it's not like Cat doesn't learn things, power up in desperate situations or break shit. Take is just the most distinct and "herself" power that she ever had.

'Ladi Williams

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Cat is prolly going to get simple sounding names that she can use to fit many situations.

I can't seem to think of anyone right now.

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Andrew Smith

The short version is Night is able to do a similar thing to Take though it might be both stronger and weaker since I think Take was limited to one aspect at a time(or close to it), though she could use it multiple times. Where with night she basically makes one use artefacts out of the aspects.

So yes it is the power of thievery though she could do similar things to other aspects with night most likely but really she is only able to do things similar to aspects none of them are aspects

Mental Mouse

The “story-flip” is another meta-power, or perhaps a meta-meta power.

Really all of them are meta-powers, but there’s something of a progression here. **Thresh** influences people without even registering as a magical touch, and only those with their own story-fu can even spot it much less resist it. The aspect-**Yoink** effect has always been OP, because a metapower to grab other people’s powers is intrinsically so. I’m not even sure it rates a power-up for Cat’s next instar, but she might get more control or flexibility. And the third effect... (I’ll call it **Refactor** for the moment) that’s even more meta, and more OP. From ground level it looks like some unholy amalgamation of divination, influence, and luck, but ultimately it’s manipulating the story itself.

Liliet

Yeah I don’t think the thresher effect is going to be an Aspect directly. Like I said, I think Cat’s going to get a Charisma effect that reflects her charismatic nature as a thresher that’s a lot less meta and a lot more useful.

And the third effect – yeah, I think it should be something grounded too. Maybe something perception enhancing, to match Bard’s whatever?

Mental Mouse

Well, ISTR the Bard’s story-ability actually is an Aspect. But her Aspects are all shenanigans, I suspect Cat’s new set will be likewise.

Liliet

Bard’s Aspect is not the entirety of her story ability, just the ability to be aware of all stories going on at once (or, well, any one of them).

Mental Mouse

There is that... thinking about it, I'm coming to agree with you that the "thresher" thing is probably a direct part of her Role, rather than an aspect. And the table-flipping, perhaps likewise, though I still think an Aspect could represent at least part of that.

But that leaves a slot or two open.... A support Aspect (descended of, e.g., **Struggle** or even **Rise**) would seem natural to her.

Liliet

She's probably going to have an Aspect for Judge / Sentence / whatever, punitive against Named specifically (but also against whatever the fuck she wants, just weaker in that context). A perception Aspect is just a thing of a dream, and it's not like Cat isn't associated with knowing things she shouldn't...

Mental Mouse

Hmm. The thing is, she doesn't usually have special ability to judge or punish people, she has just used the tools at hand to do so: Legal authority as a Named or a Queen, the authority granted to her over Drow and the Night, or simply the capacity to kick somebody's ass. The Take/power-theft capability would certainly serve against Named or similar, but falls under the same heading of "yeah, she has the ability to do that".

Liliet

Yep, Aspects are shortcuts for what a person can normally do. Villainous Aspects normally are, anyway.

Gnoch

The song was absolutely amazing. I was inspired to make a recording: <https://audiomack.com/gnoch/song/pluck-the-stars>

Axel Rafael

Gnocchi, your rendition *Gave* life to this song. Thank you ♥

I have a suggestion, though. Is it possible to use different notes for the singing melody? Something Higher and sweeter?

And for the "bridge", to use pizzicato?

Sorry if it's intrusive. Just got excited 😊

It's Nice to see music enthusiasts in this Community. Especially since the songs are such an amazing part of this webnovel (seriously, I got chills every time Hakram fought with his Poet Double Axe Style 😭)

Gnoch

Thank you 😊 I definitely appreciate the feedback!

My voice isn't that practiced towards either high or sweet, and I was definitely going more towards "melancholy lament" – both of the state of Praes after Triumphant's fall (May She Never Return), and Terribilis II's full knowledge that things aren't going to end well for him anyway, so he might as well strive for the impossible. I'll see if I can get my sister to record some vocals, though! She's a soprano.

I do have a fingerstyle pattern that works, but I'm not too practiced, and it's either do that or sing – not both at the same time. Haven't figured out how to do pizzicato on my guitar.

Which bit did you mean by the bridge? I'd classify the song more as verse-verse-chorus on repeat.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

You really brought this piece to life, dude. Be proud of yourself!

Shaerick 68

Beautiful song, EE

Sorone

I am blind and so use text-to-speech for using computers.

Listening to the poem/song at the end of this chapter very nearly drove me to tears. Well done indeed. I'm not sure that it would have been nearly so effective had I simply read it.

hierenius

This chapter is giving me the fucking chills. that song and the death scene

Shveiran

That speech was amazing.

The best part is that... well, it wan't, not really, you know? I mean, it is a good speech, but it isn't the words that move you. This story is long, it's consistent, and it has a lot of depth; so when she says those words, you don't just hear them: you are reminded of the whole voyage since the first chapters. And it feels amazing.

Grif

"Book Draw" also known as a "Theoretical draw". This refers to an endgame position known to result in a draw if both players make perfect play (play optimally)

In other words, assuming Cat and her opposition don't make any mistakes, this is a tie. But if there's one thing Cat's good at it's forcing people to make mistakes by throwing sharpeners in the middle of their plans.

Fan of Fans

I just gotta share my admiration of EE's imagination, work ethic, and incredible skill at character and story development. Magic origin and practice, battle strategy and action, hierarchy/power/leadership, and some of the most intense interpersonal relationship explorations I have ever read. OMFG. If someone develops – forgive me – a Top 10 Chapters across these wonderful books, I think Book VI, Chapter 69 might be worthy of nomination. And if I were a streaming service CEO seeking original content and was pitched PGTE. Such a no brainer...I truly hope EE is rewarded beyond his wildest dreams (and Patreon). So deserving.

My second paragraph of admiration and gratitude goes out to the loyal, dedicated Commenters following PGTE. Some of you have been around a long time (Liliet, caoimhinh, Mental Mouse, Shveiran, forgive me if I have left you off the shortlist...) some of you have not. ALL of you (well, most of you) are just so fookin' insightful and thoughtful and entertaining – to sit across from you in a pub and listen to you "discuss amongst yourselves" would just be beyond my wildest dreams. Beverage of your choice would be on me. But who knows – maybe it would ruin...the story. All of which is probably way too smarmy a way to say Thank YOU for what you contribute to my PGTE experience. Sincerely, Quite Truly, Dear...

Chapter 70: Solved Game

"Beware of they who laud war, for one who loves the locust cannot love the crop."

– Extract from the transcript of the 'Sermon of the Shores', as spoken by Sister Salienta

Usually the Twilight Ways were a beautiful place, but this time they were as a sea of the wounded and dying.

We did what we could. What few mages were still capable of casting spent themselves raw in the healer tents, the healers among the House Insurgents moved wearily from one half-corpse to another and I demanded the same of every Named that could still move. Tariq, looking himself a step into the grave, moved tirelessly even and he grew more and more wan. Masego – borrowing the last gasps of the Summoner's sorcery – taught the Apprentice emergency surgery on the most brutal of the beds, snatching the slightest sparks of life and fanning them back to a flame. Even Akua, though some refused her help and I had to surround her with a protective detail. I went as well, of course. With Night little more could be done than delaying death, but that served a purpose.

Every hour meant one more priest Light was no longer burning up from the inside, one more mage whose limbs ceased trembling enough for them to be able to cast. I couldn't save them, for Night would ever be the power of a thief, but I could steal them enough hours that someone else might be able to. Time grew clouded, the kind of mist where one could get lost for a lifetime going around in circles, and I went from blood to blood. Soldiers with faces chewed off, with limbs ripped and bones that'd pierced through the skin. And the screams, Gods, the screams. I pulled out poison and curses, slowed the flow of blood to a crawl and forced hearts to keep beating, Night coming to my hand sharp and steady.

I lost myself to the beat, knowing that General Zola and Adjutant would see to the needs of the Second without me.

It was only when the power grew sluggish in my hands, when my weave slipped and I almost drew poison into a young goblin's heart instead out of his veins, that I forced myself to stop. Night didn't heal in the intuitive manner that Light did so any mistake on my part was likely to kill the wounded involved. I limped away after passing my patient to a priest who couldn't be older than seventeen – *I have taken a generation of my people to war, I grieved, harvested them like a farmer reaping wheat* – and leaning heavily on my staff. My leg throbbed so harshly I felt like I might weep, and now that I had released Night my vision was swimming. One of the phalanges, who'd been following me like

loyal hounds all night, came close to offer me an arm to lean on. I gestured curtly for her to leave me be.

I forced myself to ignore the moans and weeping from the tents, the soldiers that would not be saved because we did not have enough left in us to save them. The wind kept carrying them to my ear, though, and so further and further away I went. I found a grassy hill, past the outskirts of the camp, where I slowly slumped into the cool blades of grass. Faintly I saw the phalanges beginning a watch around me, but they were not obvious and I made myself not notice them. I leaned in the grass, staff at my side, and looked up at the twilit sky of this strange realm we still understood so very little. I rested my eyes but did not sleep. I was, somehow, too tired for it. I couldn't be sure how long I stayed like this, but eventually I heard footsteps coming up the hill. *Not Hakram*, I thought, and immediately felt guilty. If the phalanges had not gotten in the way there was nothing to worry of, so my eyes remained closed.

I was only when they lowered themselves into the grass by my side and groaned in pain that I recognized who it was. Tariq's joints were, I had gathered, sometimes even worse than my own bad leg. Not even the favour of angels could entirely protect one from the ravages of time: the Grey Pilgrim was as perfectly hale as one of his advanced age could be, but he was still very much that age. Heroes didn't get to cheat aging the way my side did, forever frozen at the apex of our growth and power.

"The Apprentice has retired as well," the Peregrine said. "Though the Hierophant continues. He is a young man of remarkable willpower."

I half-smiled.

"He is more mind than body," I said. "Always has been."

I suspected it would appeal to him a great deal, to become entirely an intellect and be stripped of all the weaknesses and needs of the flesh. The smile faded soon enough, though. I could not hear the wounded from here, the wind prevented it, but I could imagine it so vividly only concentration kept their cries from reaching my ears.

"There is no other army like this," the Grey Pilgrim eventually said. "I have seen many battles, Queen Catherine, but none ever spared so much thought to keeping its own alive."

I would not claim to be the spirit behind that, not when all I had done was imitate the Legions of Terror while being in the position to recruit priests as well.

"There's always too many dead," I tiredly replied. "Always, Tariq. Even when we win."

The old man laughed, and while amusement would have infuriated me there was not a trace of that in the sound: there was enough grief in the sound to drown a dozen men.

"There are some foes that cannot be won against, Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim said. "All we can do is worry our hands to the bone and bury the dead, hoping we saved as many as we could have."

This isn't a plague, I thought. It's not the banal malevolence of the world that killed them, Tariq. I brought them here. I led them to this place, so far from every home they ever knew, so they could die for strangers. For a greater good. And so they'd come, and so they'd fought, and so they'd died. In droves, scared and in pain. Some of their bodies, those we'd not been quick enough to burn, we would see again standing under the banners of Keter.

"I used to hate you a little," I quietly said, "for that night in Callow. The one where you refused to help me as we stood at the crossroads of the things to come."

The old man did not speak, but even with closed eyes I felt him bend as if under a great weight.

"But," I continued, "I think I understand it better now, why the thought of sitting the Tattered Throne so terrified you."

All hail Queen Catherine Foundling, they'd said as they put the crown on my head. First of Her Name, anointed Queen of Callow. I was a warlord on a queen's seat, my boots still dusty from the road and my sword reeking of blood, but in that room where Fairfaxes and Albans had ruled they'd anointed me. And my people had followed me into horror ever since, unflinching. And my legend, my story – my lie – it was a young one. I had been a glimpse of spring after a long winter, and so more hopes than I deserved to bear had been set on my brow. Tariq Isbili's legend was old, older than even this old man, and it was dyed in the bone of what it meant to be of the Dominion of Levant. My people had, in the years after the Folly, followed me into the dark without flinching.

Levant would have followed the Peregrine into anything at all, even if it shattered them to follow.

"Even your kindness bruises," Tariq finally replied, after a long silence passed.

I inclined my head in concession, as he was not wrong.

"One day I'll ask too much of them," I said, my tone announcing the subject was at a close.

I was not certain what scared me more: that on that day they would refuse me at last, or that they *wouldn't*. In a rough pang, I missed Vivienne. She would have understood, I thought. In a way that no one else could, not even the rest of the Woe.

"Or one day they'll asks too much of you," the Peregrine replied, tone strangely gentle.

We left it at that, the two of staying in silence in the grass, until at last I fell asleep.

—

I woke to a warm meal and mug of tea, Adjutant's wheelchair wedged into the slope of the hill at my side and the Grey Pilgrim nowhere in sight. Hakram let me shake off the last dregs of sleep at my own pace, only beginning to speak once I'd dug into the porridge and warmed my bones with the herbal brew.

"General Zola has the casualty reports," he said.

It was almost enough to put me off eating, but I'd found after a few mouthfuls that I was positively starving. I still set down the spoon, blowing at the steam coming off my tea.

"How bad?" I quietly asked.

"One thousand nine hundred and seventy four dead."

He'd not cushioned the blow, which I appreciated. My fingers clenched around the mug, the too-warm ceramic burning my skin. I pushed through the pain. Almost two thousand dead. A fifth of the Second Army had died at Maillac's Boot.

"Permanent wounded?"

"Seventy one," Adjutant said. "Between Masego and the Peregrine there was little that could not be mended. Mind sicknesses, mostly, come from head wounds that themselves were healed."

I breathed out, relieved. In this, at least, we had been exceptional. It was rarer than rubies for an army to be able to walk away with so many fatalities but so few casualties. I drank down tea, still digesting the scope of what we'd lost. It wasn't the outright one third that just retreating through the gates without preliminaries would have cost us, and we'd certainly mauled the armies that'd assailed us badly – something that we wouldn't have accomplished with a premature retreat – but a fifth of losses was not something to be shrugged off. The Second Army as it was right now, should it be made to fight the battle we'd just fought, might fold before the second wave even arrived.

As an independent force, it was now too dangerous to let it fight a peer army. It'd need to be paired with another set of troops,

preferably one that could soak up most of the deaths for my soldiers. *And we'll have lost veteran officers, I thought. Sappers and mages and other specialists I can't replace.* The heart of the Army of Callow and its component armies remained the infantry trained in the Legion methods and those I could still recruit, but all the specialized troops that allowed the Army to maul superior forces were either difficult or outright impossible to replace. Like the goblin munitions that'd allowed me to seize so many victories from the jaws of defeat, they were slowly running out.

"We got bled deep," I finally said.

"And made our foes pay high price for every drop," Adjutant gravelled back. "Every corpse we put to final rest at the Boot is one that we won't be facing at the capital."

It was true, though I still felt like arguing. Instead I polished off the rest of my porridge, that eternal legionary's fare. The tea was not far behind. Hakram's continued silence did not go unnoticed. I glanced at him, finding his face hard to read, and frowned.

"So what is it that you decided to sit on until I got through my..." I trailed off, unsure how much time had passed and so what meal this was.

"Early breakfast," he provided. "And it is not necessarily a problem, Catherine, though the situation will require careful handling."

My frown deepened.

"Not army-related," I decided, "or at least not principally. So this related to my other authority."

High officer of the Grand Alliance, representative for the villains under the Truce and Terms.

"Someone came into a Name during the battle," Hakram said.

Huh. I supposed it'd been brutal enough a grinder to provide that spark, given the right materials to work with.

"Brandon Talbot?" I guessed.

He stood at the alignment of a couple of stories, if you looked at it the right way. Old blood, valiant in battle, about as principled as a nobleman could be while still being a nobleman. Back in Callow there was still a lot of faith bound to what he represented, in certain parts. I'd not caught scent of anything forming there, but sometimes the final stretch of coming into a Name could be quite sudden.

"No," Adjutant said. "Though from the Order of the Broken Bells. A young man who was unhorsed during the countercharge near the shallows and made it back to the ranks on foot after that flank retreated, gathering other survivors to him."

Huh. Fair enough, I supposed. Crows knew it wasn't always the old names that got the nod from Above or Below.

"What are we looking at?" I asked.

"Sixteen, from Laure. Raised at an orphanage before being recruited into the Order three years back," Hakram said. "I'm still finding out which. His name is Arthur Foundling."

I froze in surprise. Foundling. It'd been a long time since I'd last heard that surname tacked on to anyone but me. Yet I had no sole claim to it, as Creation had just deemed it right to remind me. An orphan, huh. I wasn't sure whether that had me wistful or troubled. Then one last detail sunk in.

"Sixteen," I slowly repeated. "That means he's still..."

"A squire," Adjutant gravelled. "*The Squire*, as of yesterday."

I softly laughed, though there was little mirth to the sound. It seemed Above and Below had at last decided that I'd strayed far enough from the last Name I'd held that another had been allowed to fill those worn old boots. *Fuck*, I thought. A Squire. That complicated things. Not necessarily immediately, but certainly down the line. It wasn't even directly relating to me: while I didn't even know which way the boy was leaning at the moment, either way I had no intention of falling into the trap of offering more than cursory mentorship. Yet a squire, as Malicia had once told me, must one day become a knight. And my people, we liked our knights. Sang songs about them, told stories. Followed them into battle.

Sometimes we even put crowns on their heads.

Sixteen, I considered. Vivienne was older, but not by *that* much. If this Arthur Foundling became the figurehead or even the genuine leader of a force within the Kingdom of Callow, marriage to cement her place on the throne wouldn't necessarily be impossible. I might be looking too far ahead, worrying about things that might never come to pass, but my succession was not something I intended to leave to chance. I clenched my fingers. If he became a threat... God forgive me, but I'd killed boys of sixteen before. It might not come to that, I reminded myself. Yet this stank of the Heavens staking their claim on my home again, and I did not like the shape of it at all.

"What did the phalanges dig up on him?" I asked.

"His past is a dead end, but we have people in the Order," Hakram said. "Popular with the other squires, considered reckless by the knights. The knightess he squired under died at the Boot, and there's been talk of him swearing the oaths to Brandon Talbot instead."

"Not happening," I flatly said.

I liked the grandmaster, but he'd also been part of the Regals – an ill-fated noble faction at my court – before I dismantled them. House Talbot had ruled Marchford as counts once, and had been distinguished among the upper tiers of the Callowan nobility for their wealth and ancient blood. Even stripped of lands and riches, Sir Brandon still had deep connections with parts of the kingdom's nobility that'd never taken to my rule. *And might object to my handpicked successor taking the throne after me, highborn or not.*

"The chatter did not come from Talbot himself, who instead noted that being Named places him foremost under the authority of the Truce and Terms," Hakram clarified.

Mhm. Admirably restrained of him, though I wasn't sure if his hopes would truly toe that line. Talbot knew where my bottom line lay, though, and what the consequences of crossing it would be. That'd keep him in check for a while.

"Personal life?" I asked.

"He was involved with another squire, who died in the retreat," Adjutant said. "The other boy was highborn – House Bickham, landed knights formerly sworn to Dormer. Poor and only nobility for a generation prior to the Conquest."

I grimaced, both at the generous heaping of grief that Fate had seen fit to offer Arthur Foundling and an inconvenient detail just revealed.

"Do we know if he keeps to only men?" I asked.

"Unsure," Hakram admitted.

"Find out," I ordered. "It would close some doors."

Like the possibility of Vivienne wedding him, should it come to that. Dynastic marriages along those lines had happened before, but they had poor reputations for a reason and issue would be, well, an issue.

"Vivienne," Adjutant slowly said, seeing right through me. "That's putting the cart two towns ahead of the horse, I'd argue."

"We're far from a situation where it would even be considered," I agreed, "but I want all angles accounted for."

He nodded. I sighed, stretching my arms.

"I'll have to take his measure in person as well," I said. "And speaking of measure."

I glanced at him with a quirked eyebrow.

"General Zola has proved competent in discharging her duties, though not exceptional," Adjutant said. "Some minor mistakes, all of them swiftly corrected."

"She's been in command for less than a day and got promoted halfway through a battle after her predecessor got assassinated," I flatly said. "She'll settle into the rank, Hakram."

"I'm not impugning her abilities," the orc calmly replied. "I'm trying to temper your expectations, Catherine. She promises to be a solid commander with a good grasp on logistics, but she will not be Hune. She'll be another Bagram, not the kind of rare talents we picked up early in our career."

My fingers clenched. Hune's reputation was not as widespread as Juniper's – the Marshal of Callow had been the face of the military under my reign, and been visibly tied to my campaigns since the first days of the Fifteenth – but it could not be denied she had been highly talented. It had not been without reason she'd been the second highest officer in the Army of Callow. I jerkily nodded.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. "And I do have a curiosity, actually."

I tapped my temple lightly instead of asking the question outright. That Zola Osei had Soninke highborn eyes – more amber than golden, but then the gold was relatively rare – had not escaped my notice.

"Sister of the current Lord Osei, sworn to High Lord Dakarai of Nok," Hakram said. "Not an old line, but they've been in favour for some time and married well. She was on the losing side of the succession conflict after her father died, and she enrolled in the Legions to avoid assassin blades. Used to be General Afolabi's supply tribune, it was us that promoted her to legate."

The last part didn't particularly surprise me, all things told. One of the great enticements we'd had for the officers of the legions we absorbed after Akua's Folly was that the Army of Callow was so starved for veteran hands that any officer that went over was nearly guaranteed to go up at least a rank. The Legions of Terror in the decade leading to the Uncivil Wars had

been relatively slow to promote, too, so the temptation had been even stronger.

"Dakarai is Sepulchral's main supporter, so we'll have to keep an eye on that tie," I said. "She might not be in a position to cause us trouble, at the moment, but that doesn't mean her alliance won't try to get hooks into the Army of Callow."

While I was broadly inclined to back Sepulchral over Malicia, I had no illusions about the kind of viper I was dealing with. I'd known Abreha Mirembé when she was still merely High Lady of Aksum, and back then she'd already been shockingly coldblooded even by Praesi standards. Having an eye on the Tower would not improve her character in the slightest.

"It will be looked into," Adjutant said. "We inherited the work the Eyes put in her, but I will get in touch with Scribe when feasible to see if she might have additional insights."

"Good," I said, groaning as I dragged myself up.

My rest had been, as always, all too short. I stilled, though, when I caught sight of Hakram's face. I liked to think I knew him the way few people did – he was, even now, perhaps the person I was closest to in all of Creation – and I'd certainly gotten better at reading him over the years. Earlier he'd delayed giving me news on purpose, but now his silence was different. He was, I thought, hesitating.

"There's something else," I said.

"It is not news," Hakram said. "Not like the others."

I slowly nodded.

"And yet?"

He licked his chops, still uncertain.

"Masego says that the leg prosthetic has taken well," Hakram said. "He still requires a few days of observation, but he is considering accelerating the timetable for further cuttings."

"The hip," I said.

"I could walk," he said. "By the time we get to Hainaut. Not well, not quickly, and only with crutches but..."

"You could walk," I finished with a soft smile.

He nodded, almost as if at a loss for words.

"I just wanted you to know," Adjutant said.

We took our time going down the hill, between his wheelchair and my limp, but I found the silence between us lighter than it had been in some time.

—

I needed to take exactly one look at Arthur Foundling to know he was going to be a hero.

The boy was almost offensively heroic in appearance, like some higher power had taken the mould of 'young hero' straight out of Callowan culture and poured materials into it. Dark-haired and blue-eyed, with an angular face and strong shoulders, I could already see he was going to grow into a handsome man. He knelt before me after being ushered into the tent, sheathed sword scraping at the ground from the haste of his movement. With a touch of amusement, I saw his jaw twitch from a suppressed wince. Still, after a moment of taking him in I decided he looked... gaunt. Tired. Grieving. He'd lost a mentor and a lover the same day, Adjutant had told me. Under the composure, I suspected there laid a roiling ball of pain and anger.

"Rise," I said.

The young man did, this time careful not to drag his sheath on the ground. He looked unsure, jaw locked tight. He had, I realized in a moment of bone-deep sympathy, likely not been taught the etiquette involved in a royal audience.

"Which orphanage raised you?" I casually asked.

He started in surprise.

"Er," Arthur Foundling got out, "It was Queen Mary's Home for Errant Boys, Your Majesty."

I laughed out in disbelief.

"Wait, you're from *Queenie's*?" I said. "They try to make all their wards into scribes and priests. Gods, do they still have that crabby old sister? I can't remember her name—"

"Sister Jessica's still alive, as far as I know," the squire said, in the tone of someone trying very hard not to speak ill of the clergy. "She, uh, did not approve of my joining the Order."

I wondered how he'd react if I told him that said Sister Jessica had once rapped me on the knuckles thrice with a stick for having thrown a snowball in her face. I'd actually been aiming at this little shit who'd kicked in the wall of our fort three streets up, but I'd missed him and she'd opened the door just then. She'd had a pretty sharp hand for an old lady, it'd stung for several days. *Hells, she must be pushing seventy by now.*

"Our matron at the House would have sent me to the cathedral for remedial moral education if she'd known I wanted to go to the War College," I drily told him.

I'd never found out who it was at my orphanage that was the spy – honestly, knowing Black there'd probably been several – for the Empire, but it'd not been her. My orphanage had been founded and founded by Praes, but the matron herself had not answered directly to any Praesi. The dark-haired boy looked at me hungrily at my words, like he was drowning and I'd just tossed him a rope.

"It's true, then?" Arthur Foundling said. "Your Majesty. That you came from Tit – from the House for Tragically Orphaned Girls?"

"You can call it Tittering House," I snorted. "Nothing I haven't heard before."

The boy's orphanage down the street – not Queenie's, which was in another quarter entirely, but the Laure Shelter for Forsaken Boys – had coined the nickname, warranting the reprisal of theirs being called Flaccid Shelter.

"You really did," the boy said, tone almost awed. "I mean, the stories said, but they say so many things..."

Fuck, I thought. I'd known, on parchment, that there would be similarities. That they might pull on my heartstrings some. Yet I'd honestly believed it'd be easy to ignore, to set aside. Instead I was looking at a boy who might grow up into a threat to the legacy I meant to leave behind and seeing a shade of myself at sixteen, all bruised knuckles and fresh out of the orphanage gates.

"It's true," I said. "But it's not me we're here to talk about."

His face locked up tight. I wondered, idly, if that was what I'd looked like when Black was talking to me back in the day. Always straddling hopeful and afraid, guarding my own thoughts so fiercely I might as well have worn them on my sleeves.

"I know about the Truce and Terms, Your Majesty," Arthur Foundling said.

"No," I bluntly replied. "You just think you do. Unless I'm very mistaken, you're leaning the way of the Heavens–"

"I'm not a *heretic*," the boy said, sounding miffed.

"– which means you're going to be in an inconvenient situation," I finished, cocking an eyebrow at the interruption.

His face blanked again, but he did not apologize. I could appreciate a spine, so long as he understood when he was overstepping.

"As a heroic Named, you representative under the Terms will be the White Knight," I said.

He did not well hide his surprise. I got where he was coming from, of course. A Callowan hero grown in the wilds would not have considered themselves bound to me save perhaps in enmity, but this one had been a squire in my own knightly order for three years. He wouldn't be seeing this in terms of hero and villain – I was both his queen and an older Named, in his eyes I would have been the natural authority. Perhaps not one entirely trusted or obeyed, but undeniably an authority.

"You're the Queen of Callow, though, Your Majesty," he hesitantly said.

"Yes, and unless you intend to renounce your oaths as a knight of the Order of Broken Bells-" I paused there, and he empathically shook his head, "then I still remain your commander. Hence the inconveniences. For now the troubles are minor, but once we rejoin with our sister host I will have to speak with the White Knight about this."

My eyes narrowed and I studied the boy.

"You have intentions," I said.

The Squire paled, his limbs stilled, but he did not deny it. He would not have come into a Name if there had not been something burning in his belly, and we both knew it.

"I thought I knew where my life was headed," he bitterly said. "And now Sir Alexis is dead and..."

His lips thinned and he held his tongue.

"You've been looked into," I gently said. "We know about your lover."

"I had hoped to keep that grief my own," Arthur Foundling said.

And for a moment, as his face grew solemn, I glimpsed the make of a Knight in him. The potential was there. Whether it made him a boon or a danger, though had yet to be decided.

"That possibility went up in smoke," I honestly said, "the moment when you became the Squire. You have eyes on you now, Arthur Foundling. Your actions will have repercussions."

"I just wanted to be a knight," he tiredly replied. "To bring back the banners that the Praesi buried and you left in their grave, Your Majesty."

Now was not the time, I thought, to have a conversation about the difficulties inherent to assembling a large mounted force –

particularly one made up largely of lesser nobility whose allegiance to me would vary between shaky and nominal – in the Callow I'd come to rule after the Doom of Liesse. Maybe one day, if the boy was destined to be anything but a man on a horse very good at righteously killing people, but not today. I was all the more wary of teaching him the way Black had once taught me because I rather wanted to. I remembered what it was like, standing in those shoes and feeling both more capable and more lost than you'd ever been before.

Part of me itched to pass those lessons on the way they had been passed to me, and that was a *dangerous* thing.

"I left them there for a reason," I said, "but that is a conversation for another day."

I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff thoughtfully. Best to carefully control the amount of time I spent around this one.

"Adjutant will go over the details of the Truce and Terms with you," I said, "so that you may fully understand your rights and responsibilities. Until then, you remain a squire in the Order of Broken Bells."

He pressed his fist against his heart in acknowledgement.

"You won't be swearing squire oaths to another knight until I have, at the very least conferred with the White Knight over the matter," I added. "Your position is already too complicated for my tastes."

"Yes, Your Majesty," he acknowledged.

"Good," I said. "Then you are dismissed, Arthur Foundling."

He bowed, but after straightening hesitated instead of leaving. I cocked an eyebrow again.

"The stories," the boy said, "they say you used to be the Squire as well."

"I was," I agreed, cocking my head to the side.

"So you had them too," Arthur said. "The dreams, I mean."

Huh. Name dreams already.

"I had dreams," I said, "but likely not the same as you."

Although, Hells, I'd been the last Squire hadn't I? Was he going to get Name dreams from *my* years bearing the Name? I was still alive, but Black had been as well when I'd gotten glimpses of his life. Unless he was going to get dreams from a Squire that'd been

headed Above's way, and I'd only gotten my father's career in my sleep because he'd been the last Squire headed into a Name sworn to Below. I didn't actually have an answer to that. Crows, it would have been effectively impossible to get answers about this a few years ago: heroes and villains hadn't exactly sat down for pleasant chats about the nature of Names, back before the Truce and Terms.

They still didn't, honestly compelled me to admit, but at least the thought was no longer so glaringly absurd.

"So you didn't dream about the sword, then?" the Squire asked.

"Which sword?"

"The broken one," he hesitantly said. "The pieces are in far places, but always deep below water."

I kept my face calm, though I felt a surge of both fury and indignation. *Fucking Hashmallim*, I cursed. *Fucking Choir of Contrition* and their grubby meddling hands. I'd snapped the Penitent's Blade in dozens of pieces and scattered some of them as far as the Tyrian Sea, I wasn't going to let that damned sword get reforged. Someone wielding it anew had my death written all over it. I was going to have to talk to Hierophant about the practicalities of expressing my displeasure there.

"I knew that sword before it was snapped," I said. "It is best left scattered, Arthur Foundling, lest you want Contrition to sink its hooks into your soul."

He didn't look like he entirely believed me, but my warning hadn't gone into deaf ears either: the young squire had looked distinctly unenthused at the notion of being bound to angels. This time he took his leave for good, leaving me to lean against my desk with a conflicted look on my face. The Squire seemed like a good kid, honestly. A little rough around the edges, but it was nothing he couldn't grow into.

I hoped I wasn't going to have to kill him, before this was all over.

—

On the first day the Second Army rested. On the second it marched, and on the fifth we found the other column.

From there, I knew, there was only one place to go: the capital, where it would all be won or lost.

Cicero

Awesome!

Do it Cat, do it!

Make him your Squire!

Take the high risk high payoff bet!

Darkening

As much as I'd enjoy seeing Cat in a Mentor role to someone, that sounds like a great way for some tragic confrontation down the road where he kills her. Or one of the other dozen ways mentors die to further their charges' paths. Cat's waaaay too cautious for that. We saw a lot of that thought process back with the Scorched Apostate, though she was getting dangerously invested in him. She's probably not eager to have *another* potential protege killed in her care.

[Adrian V](#)

The thing is that the danger is both ways, either the mentor dies or the disciple does, i think the way to manage is that she is A mentor not THE mentor, meaning she is only 1 of many teachers, she can stack the the odds by making it more than 1 disciple so is more of a class.

In a way it could be a prelude to Cardinal too

[Liliet](#)

The best way to manage that is that her path and his path diverge the minute he's out of basic training. That's how you get "oh hey if that isn't my old mentor I haven't seen in five years!" narratives instead of "my mentor could do this task instead of me, if only they were still around" narratives. That's how Amadeus is still alive – his Role and Cat's just don't overlap anymore.

And, uh, Cat IS already planning on abdicating.

[Liliet](#)

P.S. Append an "IMHO" to the above comment.

SpaceDorf

My first thought was a Squire would be the best thing to happen for Hanno getting his Shit together.

And I am looking forward to Cat putting a Ribbon on the Squire saying „I am so sorry for the Axe thing, I got you something nice“

second thought. Arthur ? for real.

Sword Dreams ?

Contrition should be lucky the Mold did not break under all the Bullshit they tried to cram in.

afterthoughts : there should be a Providence Bingo

Tenthyr

Catherine is probably, among the other stuff pointed out, EXTREMELY wary of actions that might shape her name out of the path it's already forming along. A relationship with Arthur would be exactly the sort of thing that might break her name just like how the Bard tried to break it/ make Catherine the new Bard.

goliath1303

Where did you get that Bard was trying make Cat her successor/replacement? I remember that as Bard attempting to use their opposition to shape Cat's name into being her rival. I also remember Bard wanting out of her Role/Name. I don't remember her plan ever being to use that opposition to shape Cat into the new Bard though.

Gibborim

She works so hard to keep the hooks of fate out of her flesh. There is only one word for swallowing whole like that:

Mistake.

[Liliet](#)

You do realize you're gleefully quoting the person whose example she is fighting with the urge to follow, right?

Tattletale

We all know that tempting fate is the best kind of temptation.

shikkarasu

But of course. I won't speak for anyone else, but every bit of Amadeus we see in Cat makes me squee uncontrollably. She loves her dad so much, even if he isn't related to her, even if he is a mass murderer and also a dick. And he's so proud of her, even if she sasses him relentlessly and also stabbed him that one time.

It's the little things that warm your heart, even in the depths of Winter, or the middle of the Night..

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I just really dislike the "mistake" quoting that people do. Amadeus is significantly less clever than he convinces himself he is, his reason for victories is the Power of Friendship, not how rationalist he is. And he doesn't oversell himself in-universe, really, he knows that on some double-checking level, but the fandom's treatment is just... really grating.

shikkarasu

He had a power base, the kind that make it almost hard to fail. I agree it's more Praes-worthy than praise-worthy, but I can't blame anyone for latching on to good, smug quips. It's that or monologuing, really.

[Liliet](#)

but it's not always smug? amadeus has used it in relation to himself too

shikkarasu

True. I did not mean to imply otherwise, I was just getting a little flippant in the latter half of that comment. 😊

[Liliet](#)

the issue is that that's my problem. people ALWAYS use it in a smug way and lose like. most of the nuance)=

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Guess you could say that's a...

Mistake.

caoimhinh

Being clever is most of the reason for his success, actually.

Being genre-savvy, he avoided falling into the classical villain troupes, he went for pragmatic measures rather than grandstanding and flashy schemes, he took on to reforming the army and trusted on the skill of experienced officers rather than in the hosts of Hell. He knew when to step back and when to advance, could tell when he was being led into a story trapping, and

always kept playing the long game.
He doesn't oversell himself, because he is a wise and prudent man whose self-awareness of his limitations has led him to make decisions that most of his predecessors would have disdained and turn him into one of the most dangerous men alive.

Sure, Amadeus surrounded himself with talented individuals and gave them the chance to rise and prove their worth to the world (what he did for the Orcs, Ogres, and Goblins for example), but it's not really that much Power of Friendship so much as tactical use of their respective strengths and clever strategies making not only the Calamities but the Legions of Terror a whole different kind of entities than their predecessors.

[Liliet](#)

Huh.

I think this analysis is inaccurate. Ask me if you want details.

Emily

I might be coming to the comment to late...but I'd like details.

In particular it's been noted many times how he built an amazing institution of the legion of terror and didn't rely on old school villain conquering, those tactics aren't just friendship.

[Liliet](#)

Calamities.
Grem One-Eye and Ranker.
Malicia.

Amadeus gathered talents around himself in a way no other actor in Praes could compete with. He had a solid idea at the center of it, yes, but he couldn't have fleshed out all details perfectly by himself – he is NOT that intelligent and competent at everything. What he's competent at is being the axis of the wheel: he trusts people and gets people to trust him, and so a whole becomes more than the sum of its parts. You have Alaya of Satus working on the same side as the greatest geniuses of orcs and goblins; you think they would have found their way to each other without Amadeus in the middle? You think they would have let each other have their

back without him in the middle as a guarant? The Empire was dysfunctional because of the dog eat dog mentality, the entire system was geared towards "balance of power" through people pulling each other down in the crab bucket.

Amadeus built a crab pyramid, and Hye Su ensured Alaya of Satus never had her bodyguards overwhelmed early on even though they hated each other's guts.

Amadeus wasn't just a reformer – he brought together a generation of reformers, and it was all built on personal trust, because there was no institutional trust for them to lean into. He gathered an army – let me just quote the canon.

> Amadeus of the Green Stretch was the son of corpses now buried, born of a land tread by soldiers under different banners with every season. Duni, he was, his skin the pale shame of old defeats that Praes had deemed filth even in name, and never did he forget it. It was not the Tower's promises that whispered in his sleep but the footsteps of his youth, the wheel of unending defeats seen from the side with cold eyes. In indignation he had become squire, and so sharp a blade found it that it slew his rivals and knighted him in black. To the banner he'd raised the disgraces of the Wasteland had flocked, be they green of skin and red of hand, Named hunted from above or every sharp mind and soul of steel that knew contempt but no captain. His was a company of the hungry and the lost, sworn to bleed for those unworthy of that blood. And so Amadeus of the Green Stretch asserted this: Praes is a mould that must be broken.

Amadeus is an ideologue. A charismatic leader; a standard-bearer. Entire armies trusted him because he meant every word he said in his speeches.

And he trusted people back. He managed to work with Malicia for forty years because he freely believed she was more competent than him, and when she kept secrets he let her keep them. He gave people power and free reins; he won the throne and gave it to someone else. This is utterly antithetical to the Wasteland worldview, and this is key: the contrast. What might seem obvious on context of more pro-social societies, in the Wasteland was a revolution by itself: Amadeus gave everyone as much as they wanted and was available, not the bare minimum they

needed per his plans. Remember the Ehioze measure of orc rations? Amadeus did the opposite of that, on everything.

He didn't build a machine the size of an empire, it would have broken halfway through under its own weight. He planted a garden.

His approach to Catherine is very characteristic of him. He gave her everything she needed for her plans and then some, and she ended up fighting to keep him alive even when he didn't want her to, because he's a very good ally to have.

He's been a very good ally to have to everyone who's ever been his ally, that's why there were so many people Tariq was baiting/antagonizing with his soul ripping plan.

And it's Power of Friendship and Power of Trust, in a very primal way, because again – there was no pre-established body of wisdom for him to draw on. Empire's institutional approach has always been the opposite of his.

This is probably not a fully sufficient explanation of everything, so do ask about whatever I managed to gloss over/assume!

LM

So a couple things:

First, a hell of a chapter, as always. Great politics, and I'm loving that names and the way they shape fate are becoming central to the story again.

Second, Jesus Christ. With the fatality rate in Callow, combined with the percentage of gay folks (it's gotta be 50% by this point), and the lack of serious male-female relationships, when do people have kids they must have quintuplets. Otherwise the population has to have absolutely cratered. Or maybe children form out of the air on the steps of orphanages.

But seriously. Name two alive named characters and the name of their biological child. I'll wait.

Seriously.

Katherine: Orphan, bisexual, dates women when not single, possibly infertile to to literally being made out of darkest evil, no kids.

Maseago, Adopted, asexual, no kids

Cornelia H: single, unknown preferences but unmarried as a ruler is a huge deal, no kids
Thief: single, unknown preferences, again unmarried as a ruler, no kids
Harkem: Straight, but unmarried and no known kids
Black: unmarried, may eventually end up with Malacca. No kids
Malacca: asexual? May love black. No kids
Squire: Gay, orphan, too young to have children
Archer: bi, single, no kids
Akra (the shade, I can't spell): gay and also dead
Pilgrim: Asexual, no kids
Capitan: straight but dead and I think no kids
Klaus: no wife no kids.
Kingfisher prince: straight, no wife no kids
White Knight: no idea on sex, no kids. I think he or kingfisher had a wife once?
Tyrant: only attracted to Chaos, no kids

The list goes on, but there's only one thing in common....

Konstantin von Karstein

Some corrections: Cordelia is straight, she told herself that one of her guard (a man) was not bad but that it would make a scandal.

Thief is straight, Cat said she couldn't get in her pants because of it.

I think Malicia is lesbian, but I am not sure.

Akua was straight, she slept with her second in command before Second Liesse.

Tariq is straight, he was in love with one of the Champion's Blood.

All those people are a bit too busy to have kids or adopt. The Woe were busy preventing Callow from collapsing, and there was a giant war on the horizon that every single one of the people you mentioned could see. Having kids would be a major mistake.

Shoji

Also, I believe that Captain (the cursed werewolf, right?) was married to a Praesi bureaucrat and had two children.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yep, it's true. But she married well before the Uncivil Wars.

shikkarasu

Correct.

Also:

Malicia – confirmed to be sleeping with her spymistress.
No known interest in men.
Akua – possibly ‘twice bloomed’, or she might just be
messing with Cat. There’s really no way to be sure.
Klaus – two dead sons
Kingfisher – Proposed to Cordelia, but mostly as a
political move. No known interest in men. 1 night stand
with the Queen of Callow.
Wekessa – Men only, married with adopted son
Tikoloshe – Up for anything, and by ‘anything’ I mean
anything, and by ‘up’ I mean [REDACTED]. Married with
adopted son.
Ranger – non-committed relationship with Black. Kids
unlikely, but she does what she wants. Long distance
Bromance with the Dead King, but that might just be the
boredom talking.

Shveiran

I don’t really get the surprise.
I mean, most Named spend their (usually short) lives
travelling from dangerous adventure to more dangerous
adventure. That’s really, really not a good match for
having children.
There is a reason why marrying and having kids is
usually referred to as “settling down”: to do it right,
you usually have to settle down!
For crying out loud, Sabah was a member of a highly
successful band and avoided all political roles and she
still left two orphans on their own. Named and families
mix only to fuel future tragedies. If you are Named and
love kids, don’t fucking have them!

Morgenstern

This.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Tikoloshe – Up for anything, and by ‘anything’ I mean
anything, and by ‘up’ I mean ...

... Magic: The Gathering! Seriously, Tikoloshe made it
clear that he was *not* just about sex. Any kind of
desire at all, and after a few thousand years, he’d
explored a lot of the more subtle interests of
humanity.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia is bisexual???? She has mentioned both men and
women as interests in the past???

Konstantin von Karstein

I am pretty sure she mentioned an interest for men, I don't know concerning women.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yes, yes she has.

Cordelia did, though lending an arm was as far as she intended to ever indulge the flirtation. She'd had discreet liaisons over the years, **with men and rather more rarely women**, but becoming involved with one in her service would be... uncouth in many ways.

shikkarasu

I think a good rule of thumb for this kind of story is "bisexual until stated otherwise". It also happens to be my favourite way to write/flesh out characters.

[*Liliet*](#)

Same. Frankly I suspect it's a lot more true about irl people than the current culture has them assume.

Darkening

Captain very much had a husband and kids that she worked very hard to keep completely disconnected from her professional life. Kingfisher prince doesn't have a wife because he's hung up on Cordelia. The, brigand's blood noble from Levant had a son fighting in the battle of the camps with her I believe? Black's with Ranger and I suppose it's possible she's infertile due to being a half breed or maybe she's have to do some weird nature thing given the connection between the forest resenting the elves and them being infertile in universe. Klaus **had** a wife and two kids, they're just dead now. It **does** seem a bit odd that there's no married people anywhere in the major cast, but I imagine that has a lot to do with it being simpler to write unattached people.

Shveiran

I think it's just the result of having a major cast that leads this kind of lives. the only odd ducks are a few of the un-Named, political characters.

Tom

It's because being Named is tough on your family life. Everyone around you ends up dead by your hand or by the hands of people trying to kill you.

Plus simply having encountered Kairos is probably a 100% effective form of birth control for anyone who suspects their offspring could become Named.

RoflCat

I'm pretty certain Named basically can't have children while remaining a Named unless a Story allows it.

[origamiflame](#)

I mean, with this you completely disregard Levant and the whole... Bloodline of names sorta deal?

[Liliet](#)

Captain???

Matthew Wells

Villains creating new Named usually kills them, so it's probably a wise decision on Cat's part.

Sykomantis

Recent studies (not sure when or which, too lazy to look up) have shown that homosexuality has persisted from an evolutionary stand point because the straight, opposite sex siblings of homosexuals actually end up having MORE children, on average, than random chance can explain. Something about how if their homosexual sibling can attract the same sex then the straight, opposite sex sibling will be REALLY good at attracting that sex as well.

AbraKadabra

Sounds like bullshit to me. Being attracted to people does not make them attracted to you... Trust me, I tried. 😊 There is definitely some evolutionary advantage somewhere, but this is not it.

Sykomantis

To reiterate what I actually said, SUCCESSFUL (as in ABLE TO ATTRACT someone of the same sex into participating in a same sex relationship) homosexuals' siblings tend to have more children ON AVERAGE (as in there being a normal distribution for number of children had by the siblings of homosexuals whose median/mean is higher than the total population's at a statically

significant level). At the evolutionary level I'm talking about here, this is sufficient to explain why the HUGE selection pressure of NOT BEING ABLE TO HAVE CHILDREN EVER didn't die out completely: because in a species that usually has few offspring to begin with, having more than other members on average is a dominant strategy for keeping your genes in the gene pool, especially when those genes make you attractive to a certain sex, regardless of your own.

Abrakadabra

And this explanation is Bullshit, because it disregards those homosexuals WHO are unsuccessful in attracting people. Some people Just fails at it and that is that. And the siblings fair no better.

Mental Mouse

I'm not sure I buy that – finding a partner was historically not as hard at it is in modern times after we've abandoned arranged marriages! I could believe that some of the people they *unsuccessfully* tried to court might still be in the family's orbit, though....

A more likely mechanism is that a bachelor uncle or spinster aunt represents an extra pair of hands to help support the breeders, which makes a big difference for their nephews and nieces.

Sykomantis

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/oct/13/highereducation.research>

It's old but feel free to read for yourself

Sceptic

Thank you! The progressive sensibilities of guideverse seem like bullshit to me. Aside from what you mentioned, women in armies. Women in medieval armies? How does a woman hold up in a shield wall? How do they find all these women that are even interested in being soldiers? How do countries that have women in armies replenish their populations after wars? For that matter, how the hell does anyone stand up to Orcs in a war? Aren't they all 300 pounds, raised for war and stronger than humans pound for pound as well? How do farmers stand up to that? Bullshit. Progressivism is possible only in post-scarcity societies.

Bcurly

The beautiful thing about a formation like a shield wall is that it's more about the overall strength of the army rather than individual martial ability. A shield wall of men and women will hold up almost as well as one of pure men, and the manpower increase will likely be worth it in places with low manpower, like Praes, or who need every soldier they can get their hands on, like callow or procer. As for how levies stand up to orks, simply they don't. We see multiple times soldiers from procer getting slaughtered by legionnaires.

Javvies

A few things.

One, even in real life, female warriors were a thing. Culturally dependent, really. Some cultures, they're functionally unheard of or extreme rarities, in others, they are significant. Sure, not 50%, but they are extant in real life human history.

Two, we don't know to what extent magic, magical, and/or alchemical manipulations have altered human baselines relative to real life. Or, for that matter, simple environmental evolutionary pressures and population bottlenecks pushing up baseline norms because the weak didn't survive.

Also, interbreeding with magical creatures – which we know was a thing. And it's possible that the children of Named inherit and pass down some level of enhancement beyond mundane norms.

Three – let's remember, the presence of magic and Names change a fuckton of cultural norms. Plus non-human, and their sexual dimorphism differences.

Four – I'm fairly certain that the human gender balance in armies is not even across the board, but varies by role and specialty. Ie, I'd expect that in the Legions/Army of Callow that the human troops who are heavies are more likely to be men, whereas mages are more likely closer to an even split.

All that being said, it does feel like heterosexual relationships, or even interests, are relatively uncommon amongst the notable characters.

However, since we also know that there are miracles that can allow two women to have children, homosexuality doesn't mean you aren't having children and passing down your genes, as normally happens in real life.

AbraKadabra

The intrresting thing that in real life there was a number of woman warriors and leaders, for example there were The celts. Queen Buodica for example, WHO fought The romans. The roman soldiers were actually aghast that The woman amongst The celts did not sit at home as is right and proper for roman woman.

On a side note I Just cannot fathom why some progressives idolizing romans, when they were a slaving, militaristic, genocidal, empire On top of what they tought of woman, which they passed On to later ages...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Okay, looks like it's time to link this again....
[We Have Always Fought](#).

Isi Arnott-Campbell

When Talbot is new-ish he mentions there are miracles available to allow same-sex couples to conceive together. I'm sure there's an Evil equivalent as well.

Morgenstern

You do realize that _characters in novels_ VERY seldomly have kids, until they fall into the Papa/Mama Bear trope? Because PARENTS do not usually _go on adventures_. That's why NAMED don't usually have all that many kids, least of all official ones, during their active years. NOT because the whole population of the country they stem from has this or that personal preference. Just because gays, bis, asexuals, and victims of friggin trauma are more prominent in this book does not make a population fallout... I find it highly endearing to see more of my actual real life represented here, while in real life people simply IGNORE how many of us there _actually are_, _IRL_.

Morgenstern

Malicia: Was a rape victim for YEARS in the last Emperor's harem before she killed him. Seemed rather interested in Black before she got abducted. She was probably straight or at least bi, but got traumatized so much that the thought of being with a man again, sexually, simply doesn't come up...

[Liliet](#)

Uhhhhhhhhhhhhh no.

She was decidedly not straight, that's not how being a lesbian works. I'd hear you if she was asexual, but she's been sleeping with her spymaster for forty years.

Abrakadabra

You are very sure, but I think in Malicia's case it is unwarranted.

[Liliet](#)

She's. Literally. A. Lesbian.

She MIGHT have been bisexual before being traumatized out of it. Straight? THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS

Abrakadabra

You realize I DID. NOT. SAY. THAT. I hope...

[Liliet](#)

Uh.

What did you say, then? What exactly am I unwarrantedly sure in?

Abrakadabra

And why would they care about that? It is not their business what you do in your bedroom, you know. Most people are not interested at all. Except creepy people, WHO likes to peek, but not many of those around.

[Liliet](#)

In addition to what other people have pointed out, HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF MONASTERIES IRL. So so so many people never getting married and having kids! However did population sustain itself???

Shveiran

Comparing the impact on repopulation of small celibate communities that usually involved a greater number of non-initiated (and thus not oath-bound to celibacy) members to that of armies slaughtering each other is simply disingenuous.

While I am completely in favor of writing fantasy in a way that is inclusive because it is written for a modern audience that greatly benefits from the larger representation, introducing equality of gender and widespread acceptance of every sexual orientation in a

world that still works in a way that it's similar to the medieval age does raise issues concerning realism.

The division of roles between genders and the belief that heterosexual families were the only true way were not (or rather not just) the product of prejudice and close-mindedness. They tied in to actual problems, like the rate of children death and the absence of the very concept of welfare – including pensions.

They were not just cultural mores that can be edited out by introducing a new culture; they were the answer to a problem rooted in survival and biology.

I can elaborate, if you wish to discuss the issue.

To reiterate, I am not arguing that representation should be sacrificed to realism, here.

If anything, the Guide positively convinced me that we should write in a more inclusive way, and provoked a radical change in my own approach to writing fiction.

I am merely saying that when we build a fictional world that is inclusive, we need to either add a meaningful explanation to how these changes are sustainable or risk that world being pointed at as unrealistic.

With regard to the Guide and this issue, the best explanation I can come up with is that most children on Calernia have access to magical healing and that every gay person dies young, is very rich, or has access to the House of Light miracles that allow two people of the same gender to have a child.

Which... well, I really don't think is canon.

[Liliet](#)

First, most children (and childbearing parents) in Good countries have access to priestly healing, which changes the demographic situation significantly.

Second, it's been mentioned that the proportion of men and women participating in warfare is much more equal when it comes to nobility – you know, the people who DO have access to every welfare ever invented and have exactly as many children as they want to. The gender ratio among footsoldiers is much more skewed, and in Callow IIRC the draft applies to specifically male teenagers, same as historically. It's just that anyone can sign up for money on top of that.

Third, every instance of gay marriage we've heard of concerned the elite – rulers and mages and the like, who yet again can afford any miracles they like. And adopt.

With these points in mind, I have no idea what changes are unexplained from there.

The Sanity Faerie

"Third, every instance of gay marriage we've heard of concerned the elite". That's not true. The significant majority were, but that's because the practical guide mostly talks about the elite. There was a sausage-seller that Adjutant chatted with (male, married to a man, had a child). It was part of the storyline where he winds up cutting off his own hand in support of Thief.

Liliet

Oooh, you're right! That happened, I forgot!

Nice.

I think my first point addresses that sufficiently though – child and childbirth mortality would be A LOT lower in Guideverse.

Abrakadabra

Yep. You are right about that. The whole thing actually start with economic reasons. Medieval cities are not self sustaining from a population standpoint. The cities and towns are dependent on villages to maintain their population. The rural people constantly moved into towns and so maintaining the population of the towns. Which means that gays in small villages did not find partners, and moved to towns. Which means that towns are richer in gay people, which leads to a cultural separation, a divide between the townies and villagers. Over time, towns become more inclusive, while villages become more closed. Which is a self perpetuating cycle. Even today, villages are places where there are more children born, and towns and especially cities are dependent on the migration of people to maintain their population. In the middle ages every sickness reaped far more life in towns than in rural places, because smaller population density.

Joseph Perry

Don't let Ranger near him. She may have a convection.

Peter

An Empress needs her Knight after all.

caoimhinh

Ohh... interesting.

Crash

Switch that for Heiress Vivienne Dartwick, and we'll be set.

Juff

Typo Thread:

even and he > even as he
I was only > It was only
sitting the Tattered > sitting on the Tattered
I had been > It had been
they'll asks > they'll ask
So this related > So this is related
same say > same day
there laid a > there lay a
out, "It > out, "it
founded and founded by > founded by
you representative > your representative

[doominator10](#)

I think it's 'founded and funded by'...

SpeckofStardust

So I started laughing at the same time cat did, after all a Squire that got its name due to fighting the undead in a swamp. Also hello death flags.

Naeddyr

oh my fucking god erraticerrata do you have any words in your defense

ChillyPepper

Only her murdering the White Knight and Black Knight left, then we have a whole dream.

[Javvies](#)

Hakram will probably be walking soon. Good news.

Ooh. That's hella complicated, even before the Hashmallin started lining Squire Arthur up to take up Willy's broken angel feather sword. Don't remembe what it's called offhand. Stay away from Angels and the Choirs, kid. But especially Contrition ... what the hell would they be able to leverage him with the way they did Willy.

LarsBlitzer

There are all sorts of levers and hooks the Choir could use to get Arthur to play along with the story they have in mind. Prophetic dreams are only the tip of the iceberg, they can get terribly insistent as time wears on. Granting the use of a Gift of Light to use in the nick of time to save the day, only to take it away when the stakes are lower to hammer the point home that but for the Grace of the Choir the Gift can be lost when he needs it most. It's not below Above to put a thumb on the scale or sneak a card from their sleeve in order to make Arthur's story hit the proper plot points.

caoimhinh

Remember that Angels of Contrition do not so much leverage people so much as mind-rape them into fanatics to their cause. That was why William's summoning of a Hashmal was so dangerous, it would have brainwashed every person in the vicinity into becoming crusaders for Above.

[Javvies](#)

That's when the/a Hashmallin physically manifest into Creation. They can't do that on a whim. To mindfuck a Contrition Hero, the Contrition Hero needs a significant sin to be made contrite about.

Lone Swordsman got mindfucked by Contrition, but he'd killed his sister, which was his primary act that they used to break him.

I don't think Arthur has the same sort of sins in his past that Willy did. They'd still need something to leverage Arthur.

I think that the bigger the sin(s), the easier it is for Contrition, and the more free will the subject gets to keep, or rather, the less damaged and less constrained the subject of the Hashmallin's attentions.

caoimhinh

To manifest into Creation physically and affect the common people, yeah, they need some pretty good excuse like an invitation through a ritual or summoning by their anointed. But to get in contact with a Hero? Nope. Not at all. They don't even need to be sought, *they come to you* uninvited, and unexpected. We actually have several examples in the story that prove that.

William was a ravaging man wandering the woods when the Hashmallim got him, Tariq was simply doing his own things for helping people when he started hearing the whispers of the Choir of Mercy, and Iason (the Stalwart Paladin) was

fighting and about to get killed by Catherine when the Choir of Endurance intervened to bestow power into him.

And now Arthur has been Squire for half a day, and the dreams are already showing him an artifact of the Hashmallim.

We have evidence that they can mindfuck common people into their service, so a Hero doesn't need to be especially inclined to them or vulnerable to be mindfucked. They just need to get to him.

Liliet

We don't actually have evidence of that last thing you said.

William was mindfucking HIMSELF when Hashamallim came to him and helped along. Like yeah they helped but they reinforced what he was ALREADY THINKING. Tariq was already doing the Mercy thing, and you'll notice that when he took a break from that, the angels just quietly weren't there until he was back. Iason the same, and Hanno was *stubbornly seeking them out* more than anything.

Javvies

I don't think a Choir, in this case Contrition, can do that much without either (a) being physically manifested, or (b) the Hero accepting their offer.

They can make offers, and do things like sending enticing/ ploTHOOKED Name Dreams to Heroes who haven't yet accepted them, but unless the Hero accepts the Choir as a patron/ guide, the Choir can't do much else.

Also, I suspect that Choirs have an easier time and more leeway with making offers to those more closely aligned with their concepts ... and I doubt Arthur is particularly closely aligned with Contrition, unlike Willy.

Of course, most Heroes would readily accept an offer of patronage/guidance from a Choir, without much consideration.

Honestly, I half think Cat should tell the kid that the sword he's being sent dreams about is the one that she broke after Willy tried to use it to summon a Hashmallin to mindfuck Liesse. I suspect that would very quickly kill any interest he he might yet have in trying to restore it, Name Dreams about it or not.

Big Brother

It was the Penitent's Blade.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Gorgeous.
Complex Complications.

dadycoool

Whew, it's not very often that Cat's stores of Night run out, but that kind of fight and the delicate work she'd been doing would do it.

Adjutant's post-battle reports are always nice to hear, even if they have unpleasant information.

Wow, genderbent Cat anyone? Working within the ruling government to restore something fundamentally Callowan that was lost? From the sister orphanage to her own? I wonder if Hanno will assign Arthur (Pendragon?) to Cat, for multiple reasons including liking what kind of Story he sees about it. Squires typically go to knights for apprenticeship, but she's a Warlord, so maybe she counts? Especially since she's been avoiding the Mentor role too hard to last.

caoimhinh

Yeah, he is walking one of Catherine's story grooves (and she has many, one of which is currently being walked by Abigail, with an orc adjutant to boot). though it is admittedly the shallowest one among them. The similarities are sticking on a superficial level, but they are contrary in a lot of things.

Arthur is more like "the Squire that Catherine did not become".

MagnaMalusLupus

While that may be superficial in origin, Cat herself almost fell into the groove of Good while doing what she saw as best for Callow. It would be wonderfully poetic for young Arthur to follow the reverse path of being Good to start with and then stumbling into Cat's groove after seeing Good trying to manipulate him.

Morgenstern

Second that. I'd love to see him reconsider the "heretic" thing this orphanage probably drilled into him, or for it to be revealed it's just what to say that has been drilled in, but not quite his own thoughts. After all, he seemed to be looking to Cat for guidance... totally forgetting her ever getting named "Archheretic of the East", it would seem. =P

[Liliet](#)

Cat didn't run out of Night, she just ran out of mental endurance and capacity for fine control.

dadycoool

True, same way mages don't run out of magic and priests don't run out of Light.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. "Light stops burning them up from inside" and "their hands stop trembling". There are circumstances for mages where power can straight up be insufficient, but not in healing it looks like, and not for priests anyway.

Tenthyr

God, contrition really are vultures. And clearly have a grudge against Cat. Hopefully Arthur will go to the white Knight and together they'll find their place in the new age Catherine is pushing them all into

Komplode

Also King Arthur retrieved his sword from a lake, the contritions sword being scattered in different lakes and contrition could be the parallel to the lady in the lake?

Komplode

Sry didn't mean to reply here my phone wiggled out

Frivolous

Can't. Not safe. By his very existence and Name of Squire, Arthur Foundling endangers the life of Hanno of Arwad. Actually working with Hanno would compound the danger.

The only pragmatic choice is to keep Arthur far away from Hanno, inasmuch as that is possible given Arthur answers to Hanno.

The situation exactly parallels Amadeus and Catherine's, which was why Wekesa and Eudokia were so mad at Cat and wanted to kill her.

[Javvies](#)

Not necessarily.

There are multiple possible Heroic Names that Squire can lead into. At least, Callowan Names.

White Knight is certainly one, but I believe there are other

viable Knight Names, in addition to the various Paladin Names.

This, of course, presumes that he doesn't end up going for a different Name, or a new Name.

And Hanno, what with Recall, can almost certainly provide a number of possible Names that Arthur can aim to transition into, and tips on how to get certain Names or avoid getting other Names.

Frivolous

I thought Squires always became White Knights or Black Knights. I thought it was the Heirs and Heiresses who could transition to other Names.

On second thought, I guess you're right. Masego as Apprentice was thought to become Warlock, but he didn't. He became Hierophant instead. So maybe something else could happen to Arthur.

KalDurak

Didn't Black lose his Name after Tariq caught up with him? That leaves another possible path for the Squire.

mamm0nn

Nope, it has been pretty directly and absolutely stated that the Squire becomes either Black or White. No Grey, no Stalwart, no Mirror. One or the other, absolute.

Of course this may be early day Squire lore for when Cat was still beholden to it and the story shouldn't be too complicated or leading to a narrative confrontation, but when EE doesn't come with such a retcon, nope. This isn't like the Apprentice who usually becomes a Warlock but isn't bound to it, it's either Black or White.

SpeckofStardust

I mean at one point Cat almost transitioned into the good queen or some such back when she pulled the sword out of the stone so that as already has been disproven.

Shveiran

True. But she didn't do it as the Squire. She entered in that groove by being the successor of the (de facto) king of Callow. Who just happened to be the Knight she was Squiring under.

She didn't (almost) transition into Good Queen or Black Queen through her path as the Squire. She nearly did because her story changed and allowed her close to the boundary of those Names.

That's a different thing. It's like an apprenticeship in an office, where it is a given that unless you screw up and get fired (or, you know, die) you will be promoted to a higher position in the office (or become a Knight) because through the apprenticeship you learned the job.

It is possible that, during your apprenticeship, another society could offer you a job, and that you'd accept it. But while you may have been noticed because of your current apprenticeship, this new development is not the natural consequence of your apprenticeship. You are changing path.

The story of a Squire is the story of someone that dies young or becomes a Knight. The fact that it is possible to change your story before that happens doesn't mean that the grove doesn't heavily push in that direction.

Liliet

I think actually that was a Squire groove too, though not, like, a MANDATORY one. Note how Catheirne is looking at Arthur as a threat to Vivienne's reign.

Shveiran

Well, yes, but that is because the OG Good Queen Fairfax the first was a White Knight, wasn't she? It's not a Squire grove, is a White Knight grove. So yeah, it's Squire adjacent, but only because a Squire becomes a Knight.

he certainly is a threat to Vivienne reign: he is Named, idealistic, a Knight that wants to bring back the Knightly Orders, and (in time) a war hero. Meanwhile Vivienne is mostly in her spot because Catherine chose her.

I think she is good, don't get me wrong, but I think Callowans like her mostly because they... dislike her less than Catherine? Because she is less controversial, not because they know she is amazing? If a young, charming, veteran Heroic Named starts saying maybe he should be in charge... he could be a threat, you know?

At the very least, he'll be a banner for a political block much more than the Summoner or Talbot could ever be.

[Liliet](#)

Rebel Knight, not White Knight.

And I don't know why, but it sure seems like an existing pattern judging from Akua's reaction back then!

And that's why Cat needs to bind him to her faction tightly enough he'll be a boon to Vivienne instead of a rival.

MagnaMalusLupus

Ah, but that sort of blatant manipulation is exactly the sort of thing a Choir (almost definitely Contrition) would latch onto: "See? Your grand ideal of returning Callow to its former glory is being ground away and perverted by the machinations of Evil. See how deadly the lure, the ease of the path of giving in. You have stumbled from the path. *Repent*."

[Liliet](#)

That's... really not how it works for Named in Guideverse.

Andrew Smith

It like Cat said Callow's people like their Squires and makes kings of them or in simple terms there is story's about that happening. so it would have some of the same kind of weight as what happens when you through a hero off a cliff.

Similar to how if I remember WoE said that cat was most fitting a grey knight name but there was no cultural basis for it

[Liliet](#)

WoE absolutely did not say she fit that Name, only the 'no basis' thing.

Andrew Smith

Yeah lookin it back up the her. fitting that name was in the question part not the answer

Frivolous

I think we should differentiate between the story Catherine used to wrest a resurrection from Contrition

and the plan Contrition had for Cat to become Queen of Callow.

Cat used the sword in the stone story to force a resurrection. That's one thing.

The vision Contrition gave her of her wearing a crown of light? That might not have had anything to do with the sword in the stone thing. That might have been a separate thing, based on Cat having a lot to be sorry for, and Contrition offering a Redemption.

mamm0nn

At first Liessen it wasn't a story of becoming Queen, rather than her following the groove of a Story. Anyone could've followed it, queenship is irrelevant in that regard. And as her 'father' the 'king' from whom she'd inherit it was Amadeus, it's pretty clear that there's no issue with the 'queen' also being the Squire or a Knight of either alignment.

The Contrition promise of her becoming a good queen were for her to come back presumably as the White Knight, Hanno hadn't been introduced to the story at that point so he didn't really exist even if chronologically he did, so this too isn't contradicting.

At third Liessen again it was a sword and a certain fate it promised, but then she was no longer the Squire. So even if there would be different circumstances here, which there weren't, then there's not even an issue of her being the Squire which she's not.

Frivolous

I don't think Contrition's plan for Cat was to become White Knight. I think she was supposed to become a Good Queen.

I come to this conclusion because she was envisioned as wearing a crown of light. Not the typical apparatus of a Knight.

Remember that a few nations have rulers who are always or often Named. Praes has Dread Empresses. The Free Cities have the Hierarch. Callow has Good Kings and Queens.

Some may point out that Squire does not transition to Good Queen. My response is that anyone who climbs the Tower becomes Dread Empress or Emperor, regardless of

their prior Name. The same might go for most who becomes Queen of Callow.

Yes, that does mean that Vivienne might become a Good Queen once Catherine abdicates.

[Liliet](#)

Can you quote that “either black or white” statement?

Frivolous

I’ve been researching that. Best so far is this, from Archer, chapter 24 of book 2:

“Squire isn’t a fundamentally villainous Name,” Apprentice replied. “It’s also the transitional Name leading into being the White Knight.”

[Liliet](#)

That does not append “but not any other Knight Name”.

Imagine the following sentence: “Squire isn’t an inherently villainous Name. It’s also the transitional Name leading into being the White Knight, also Green Knight, Rebel Knight and half the variations of Knight known to date, also occasionally Paladin, Good King, Good Queen, Shining Prince... sorry, what was I talking about again?”

[Liliet](#)

Like it’s natural to read it as “You know White Knight? Yeah, this is the transitional Name that leads into that.”

caoimhinh

Yeah, there’s a mirroring there.

Although, being Heroes, Arthur being Squire to Hanno wouldn’t end with Arthur killing his mentor, as a story of Evil Mentor and Disciple would. Hanno would be in danger of fatally falling in battle or sacrificing himself to save his Squire.

There’s the possibility that Arthur won’t become White Knight. We have seen that there’s Mirror Knight, Errant Knight, and Red Knight, though no mention of them being Squires before getting their Knight Name has been done. Then again, Hanno was never a Squire, he jumped directly into being the White Knight.

Another thing is, Hanno might stop being White Knight and get into another Name that fits his own calling as the Sword of

Judgement, as Pilgrim noted that Hanno's inner conflict was between his calling and the responsibilities of his position, the desires of his Role versus the bindings of his Name, so the conflict might have ended with Hanno making Sword of Judgement his Name. And the absence of the White Knight might have been a trigger for the Squire to emerge.

V Kyrius

Also Hanno and Arthur aren't really the same Role. Arthur is a Callowan Redeemer. Hanno is more concerned with Judgment and doesn't care about nationality. I think Christophe training Arthur would be fun lol. Christophe also has king arthur stuff or lancelet more specifically. I should note we all know of 4 Transitional Names with Arthur so he can even get started on his own team and Pascale is young enough to be in that group as well or even someone like Blade of Mercy.

Oshi

If Cristophe is allowed near even 1 other named I would check them for fleas before they are allowed back into polite society. That asshole can't teach because he is broken into a role that is the opposite of what is needed here.

medailyfun

I guess Cat would want to have a transitional Evil Named in the group, but they're not present (yet?). I had commented about Cat missing opportunities to induce Squire/Apprentice/Conjurer/other minor Callowan or Praesi Names before new Apprentice actually appeared. But it looks Cat still don't think about forcing the Names.

[Dresden 67](#)

He's more likely to become the Knight Errant if anything, we saw a Revenant by that Name recently.

MagnaMalusLupus

While we have seen the Name it doesn't match Arthur's dream; he wants to restore knights to Callow, which makes the Name Squire, a knight-in-training, very appropriate. A knight errant was a knight with a duty that they were sworn to fulfill. I would see that sort of Name coming to a regular knight who swears an all-encompassing oath that they feel is their sworn duty, not an idealistic reformer.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Funny thing, Hanno is himself facing a developing Name-crisis. He might well vacate the post.

Even if he doesn't... well, "Squire *always* becomes the White Knight or Black Knight" is one of those classic story-grooves, but Cat's own career has been *all about* screwing with those traditional stories.

Give young Arthur some story-fu training, and I can easily believe he could at least get say, "Shining Knight", which would resonate with other Callowan-accessible names. That said, if he instead becomes the "Good Knight", we're gonna have to start throwing peanuts at EE... 😊

mavant

Perhaps an alternative candidate for carrying the Severity.

The8ofspades

Unlikely: he's dreaming of the penitent's blade. If he ever gets any magic sword, it'll be that one, not the severance.

MagnaMalusLupus

I think that's unlikely at this point. If he learns the story of the Penitent's Blade, and how it was used to try and brainwash his countrymen into Contrite zealots (preferably from someone in the side of Good so that Contrition can't use the source to discredit the message) I think he'll reject that blade in particular. I don't think Severance is likely either, though, as that screams a bit too much of Judgement. I still think that whatever happens with Hanno will lead to him being the wielder of that particular god-killer.

erebus42

Perhaps. It's always good to have a back up lying around, especially when the apparent primary is such a prick

Big I

My bet: Hanno takes Arthur as his squire, Arthur becomes White Knight, and if Hanno survives he transitions into another name (Lone Swordsman maybe? Or a new one like Sword of Judgment).

Big I

Outside bet: Cat becomes Grey Pilgrim.

Jason Ispwitch

Nah. She's ending up with a Name about Names. Hanno, now... it's possible that Arthur could be the shortest-duration

(living) Squire ever, if something like the following takes place:

Hanno takes Arthur under his wing.

Hanno continues to question his role, even as he mentors the Squire.

The Grey Pilgrim goes out in a blaze of glory.

Hanno becomes the new Grey Pilgrim.

Arthur becomes the new White Knight.

(Possibly with the transitions guided by Cat in her new name.)

All probabl too neat and tidy for our brilliant author, 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm, Hanno could certainly change his Name, but I really don't think he has a plausible path to Grey Pilgrim.

mamm0nn

Let us all appreciate the intricacies of Tariq becoming the Black Queen, first under the Night.

medailyfun

Pink Queen, first under the Dawn

Abhijit Shukla

Well played.

The Sanity Faerie

It would certainly solve his "getting old" issues.

Komplode

"Renewed shall be blade that was broken" (lotr) wonder if Arthur is an unwitting Fairfax or descendent of another royal lineage of callow.

That's at least a hint at Aragorn's sword reforged, as Aragorn dreamed of it before it was reforged I believe?

And King Arthur is a pretty (if not the most) famous legend as well.

Komplode

Also King Arthur retrieved his sword from a lake, the contritions sword being scattered in different lakes and contrition could be the parallel to the lady in the lake?

ohJohN

I think Cat took some wind out of his Arthurian sails by already having pulled that exact sword from a stone 😊

It is interesting that mythological Arthur (at least in The Once and Future King) worked towards harnessing and redirecting the actions of the powerful towards the common good and long-term stability – much like what Cat is attempting with the Accords – and in the process established a chivalric order, like this Arthur wants to do.

Frivolous

Very tricky. Arthur Foundling by being a hero and the Squire is dangerous to both Catherine and Hanno. He's dangerous to Vivienne and a lot of other people. Quite a feat for a 16 year old.

That Arthur looks almost offensively heroic on the same day that he became Squire probably means that he always looked like that, without his new Name changing his appearance to fit his self image. Which makes me wonder if Above chose him in part because of his good looks.

I like that he's gay. Poor guy, losing his knight and his boyfriend on the same day, and then getting introduced to Catherine Foundling.

The Hashmallim are being very foolish giving Arthur dreams about the Penitent's Sword so early. I get that they want revenge on Catherine, but they should have waited. Later on, they might have escaped Catherine's attention, but now she knows they're meddling,, and she's bitch slapped them before. She probably wants to do it again now, and she likely can, especially if she gets Masego to help.

Yes, we have Iron Orc! So happy Hakram is getting back on his feet.

I wonder which capital is being referred to in the last line.

caoimhinh

Yep, that's why Amadeus just killed them and got done with them instead of leaving the problem to grow. Then again, Amadeus is a pure Evil Villain, albeit a pragmatic one, while Catherine is an Anti-villain and a good person at heart, also she is notable for taking choices other people wouldn't have even considered, so everything is possible right now. Besides, Catherine has never been the villain of the stories she is in, except for the most superficial of ways as in "she has an Evil Name", even when having a Crusade and a dozen Heroes rallied against her, she was still embodying a Hero's story, as noted by Pilgrim and Saint of Swords during the Battle of the Camps.

Catherine is so dangerous because the stories she embodies are Heroic Stories, although of course she is unwilling to take the gamble of falling into possible story trappings.

Also, the capital Catherine was talking about in the end is the capital of Hainaut, which is the objective of this campaign. They probably won't be storming Keter until next book.

Liliet

> Amadeus is a pure Evil Villain while Catherine is an anti-villain

> this very chapter Grey Pilgrim praises Catherine for the focus on the wounded that Catherine then remarks to herself is entirely triage protocols of the Legions of Terror + access to priests

agumentic

As is the theme with Amadeus, the "good" and "practical" are often the same. Especially if you interpret "practical" liberally.

Liliet

"Practical for what?" is the key question here 😊

Alex Straughan

The Hashmallim situation is shady but they may just want in the fight against the dead King. Without their sword/feather, which is in Callow, I imagine they are weakened. Waiting for the Squire to grow in power/wiles would be the smarter play if their #1 goal was killing Cat.

Not that I think they don't want Cat dead, just that this seems more like them being desperate to join the crusade while also taking a shot at Cat as well.

Mental Mouse

I doubt a lost feather would weaken them... more to the point, I doubt it's the Choir itself sending the Name dreams! I had a definite sense that the Name dreams were a more-or-less automatic function of in-world Plot Mechanics. In this case, there is a sword potentially available, therefore he dreams of it.

That said... there's *another* Sword handy. In fact, *really* handy right now, because it's actually in Twilight where the army is (and will surely be returning occasionally in the future).

nick012000

Hmm. Now I'm wondering if this is the Heavens trying to get her to adopt a son to become her heir – perhaps creating a tradition that would solidify Named rule over Callow on an ongoing basis via bonds of mentorship, similar to how the tradition of Named rule via usurpation in Praes.

Burlyraven

This is feeling like a double bluff to get Cat to take Arthur as her Squire. If she leaves him alone, his story pushes him to reforge the blade and kill her, and distancing herself actually increases the odds of that along a few paths. If she mentors him, however, she runs the heavy risk of death, but it would also potentially allow her to shape him into a Name that plays well with the future she wants. Plus, it's not like mentorship is an absolute death sentence, just nearly so.

There's also Hanno's delicate condition to consider. First, he might disagree with Cat being associated with the boy in any fashion. Second, while it's more unlikely, he may object to the boy at all; i.e., because he's coming up on either a power up or a fall, Hanno might see a Name that can lead into his as an existential threat, even with his easy-going personality. Basically, it might not even take effort on Cat's part to turn Arthur to the dark side.

Also, all of these points get altered greatly if the boy is bisexual, as that then potentially puts him on a non-violent path to the throne, so that definitely seems like something to define.

caoimhinh

The Heavens do love to stack their odds in their favor and have pieces that can fit multiple jobs. They are known for being the main wielders of Providence and hence the magic of getting Coincidence and Causality on your side.

ninegardens

His Existence is a danger to the White knight- this is true.

But at the same time, it ain't so hard to think of him as being a back up white knight. For Hanno's survival this is bad... for the sake of the crusade....

Is tricky. Hanno dying is bad, but Hanno dying and getting a story boost out of it, and then Arthur ALSO getting a story boost out of it is.... maybe net positive? A trade that Hanno would lean in on? Remember, unlike Cat, who dodges stories, Hanno is one that tends to lean in on stories (if he can groove them the right way).

And if he's already feeling uncertain in himself... taking a squire might be exactly what HE THINKS he needs to clear his vision.

V Kyrius

He is 16 year old Callowan Hero. Even if Hanno died he wouldn't be next in line for one he is too young and has no experience for two being Callowan means he simply isn't going to get enough votes to take over and someone like Christophe would bash his head in.

Shveiran

Yeah. I mean, a new White Knight would be a net positive (a powerful Named determined to help in the campaign and that respects the Chief Villainess enough to be cordial to her) but Arthur is not a possible replacement for Hanno as Representative under the Terms.

He is way too young and inexperienced for that.

ninegardens

Oh yeah, I ain't saying is good for the Truce and Terms. I'm not saying its good FOR things, I'm just saying that the story bumps you get out of the MULTIPLE story beats this Squire has lined up are non-trivial.

WuseMajor

Honestly, I think they need to have a chat with the Pilgrim. Mentors "die" in stories so the Mentee has to step up and demonstrate their awesomeness... but Tariq has been a Mentor to who knows how many Heroes over the many decades of his life and he's /Still Alive/.

So, he must know a few ways to "technically die" and end up out of action, without actually dying permanently.

One of the big things about the Squire is that they get a Mentor, so fate is GOING to be shoving people at that role until someone bites. Better that they put someone in place knowing what to expect and with as many tricks for surviving the heroic sacrifice as possible, instead of leaving it up to Heaven and Fate to decide.

Konstantin von Karstein

Tariq is already supposed to mentor the Mirror Knight, but he could give advice to Cat or whoever will be Arthur's mentor.

Gerionar

You are saying that the Mentor should mentor mentors on how to mentor (and not dying)?

Konstantin von Karstein

Indeed 😊

mamm0nn

Hakram: Cathrine, it seems that the White Knight is either dead or soon to die. A squire has just risen, and he's quite the boyscout.

Cat: A Foundling? Gods, I've forgotten I'm not the only one.

Hakram: Cat, this means that Hanno might-

Cat: He's not that much younger than Vivs, maybe we should marry those two. Surely she won't fall back into self-doubt and a lack of self-worth when we literally decide her love life for her.

Hakram: Cat, do you not want to discuss the practicalities of this so that we blindly walk into Hanno's crisis and/or dead so you can ride it into a darkest hour scenario for you to struggle and stab your way back to dawn again?

Cat: Nuns and snowballs!

Hakram: *Sigh* Ignorance it is.

Xinci

You have to admit a foundling named Arthur is insanely appropriate for a heroic story in Callow. Anyway what a tempting fruit, Cats got a chance to possibly further influence those following her groove. But on the other hand...mentorships tend to get you burned. I am honestly rather curious if she could learn anything from the Perrigan to manage a mix of Black and Tariqs style of mentorship, maybe coupled with some kind of group training that would eventually be at cardinal.

[*Liliet*](#)

Perrigan?

nimelennar

Peregrine?

[*Liliet*](#)

So I'm going to step back from the doomsaying and Cat's paranoia and suggest the following:

1. If I'm correct, Arthur is the first new Callowan hero to emerge under Catherine. This is kind of a big deal, even if the Truce and Terms immediately make it into a nightmare of subordination and that's what Catherine is thinking about. It means that the transition period when Callow went dormant waiting for where Catherine's story goes is over, and they're getting new heroes again – ones that work FOR Catherine and not opposed to her!

2. Arthur's role has absolutely nothing to do with Hanno's. Callowans have a staggering variety of Knight Names, and while White would have fit him, Hanno's taken that one in an ENTIRELY different Role.

3. Mentorship is not automatically a death sentence, and refusing mentorship is a trap of its own. Tancred died in a very immediate sense because Cat refused to take him under his wing – she walked away to do things on her own while other people watched over him, and, well, yeah. Sometimes to make the story go the way you want it to, you have to accept a risk. I understand that Cat's traumatized by Amadeus's "seriously you gotta kill me", but I think taking a Squire under her wing is the right thing for her to do in this instance. It'll give her control over a very dangerous situation, and SHE WANTS IT LOOK SHE WANTS IT. IT TUGS ALL HER STRINGS. Like... come on. Cat. Just take the gift. It'll legitimize the shit out of whatever you want to do if you get this new baby Squire doing it.

4. SQUEEE CAT'S BACKSTORY IS RELEVANT AGAIN

Shveiran

With all the reservation stated below, I too really hope she mentors him, yeah. That would be awesome.

I'm such a sucker for mentor stories with intelligent characters.

[Liliet](#)

~~also it's about time Cat pulled another heroic sacrifice story that ends with her perfectly alive and going "holy shit, that worked????"~~

[Liliet](#)

*take him under her wing

Sinead

I am not saying that Cat may be over reaching in her paranoia, I still think the hesitance in immediately sweeping Arthur under her wing is fine considering that the issues between her

and Hanno arose because Hanno saw her as overstepping her boundaries. Her trying to thread the needle on this is not a bad first step. Hell, I don't exactly see her not taking Tancred as a protege a mistake because Cat didn't have a whole lot to teach him about his Role. To me the mistake wasn't about the not taking him as a mentor (the kid needed to sleep while she did her work), but instead the fact that she let her guard drop in enemy territory.

I am not saying that jumping directly into a mentorship role doesn't have it's risk (and acknowledge the point that Cat's view of mentorship as a death sentence is from rather brutal scarring from the Praesi system), but immediately calling her hesitance a mistake to me is a bit much.

[Liliet](#)

I do agree that Catherine not jumping in with both feet immediately is a prudent choice in context, given the complexity of the chain of command.

But I think she's overdoing it somewhat.

[Liliet](#)

And with Tancred the problem was the symbolism of what she did. Object level, yes, she dropped her guard in enemy territory. Meta level, she flinched away from extending her protection to him.

Sinead

That's fair. I had read the arc at the time as "I am a war priest not a mage, you are better off learning from those other than myself" even though there was that monologue of if she stepped into a mentor role. At the time I read it as "I cannot handle your education fairly as well as everything else" as a well reasoned response and missed the symbolic nature of the decision.

Heck this is a good arc to address the fact that Cat's experience makes any succession role == death and murder (Squire -> Black Knight, climbing the Tower, etc.)

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

She has Apprentice/Warlock as a counterexample, but considering Wekesa is now dead, it's not a very good one.

Shveiran

You know, I just love how... brazen EE has made Contrition.

"LOL, there is a new Named with your old Name in town, he could destroy your legacy simply by being who he is, you can't mentor him or risk dying, he is one of yours so killing him is a danger in itself, the White Knight can't mentor him in the middle of a war with fucking Keter or he risks the narrative trap himself, and Hanno is the only one you can keep this house of cards up with, AND ON DAY FUCKING ONE WE ARE GOING TO SEND THE BOY VISIONS TO REFORGE THE MAGIC SWORD OF YOUR FIRST NEMESIS. Whose inheritance also happens to be completely at odds with what you are trying to build, from his Good-vs-Evil Eyes to his Racist Toes."

I mean, there is being a little shit, and then there is...this.

Also, I'm really worried about Hakram. It has been said often that prosthetics can be hijacked by necromancers, and now he is going to become a cyborg so close to both the Dead King and Catherine.

I really, really don't want Catherine to be forced to kill him after he starts moving according to a will not of his own.

Liliet

I am thoroughly skeptical towards

1) the idea that the sword reforging is meant to kill Catherine. It feels like a prophecy trap kind of thing, where if Catherine tries to stop it it'll bite her in the back in the most ironically horrible way Fate can come up with, but if she ignores it and lets what happen happen doing the right thing instead, it'll pass her by;

2) the idea that Contrition somehow "engineered" this sequence of events as an actor that can be assigned qualities like "brazen". It fell into place because there was story room for it, Choirs don't have agency in that sense and don't have THAT much influence on new Names forming;

3) the idea that he somehow endangers Hanno in any way other than literal (same as any other kid hero). Very, VERY different story tracks.

Liliet

And it was only Hakram's necromantic prosthetic that could be hijacked by necromancy, because it was necromantic. I'm pretty sure his current fitting is not necromantic in nature.

Shveiran

Isn't it?

I think that's just the branch of magic needed to link artificial limbs to living bodies.

After all, if making the limb in stone would bypass the issue, why would warlock ever have made a prosthesis vulnerable to enemy spellcasters for a Named? Especially one that would be a high priority target for the Truebloods – you know, the guys with a lot of arcane spellcasters on the payroll?

[Liliet](#)

I don't think stone would have worked. Hakram is getting a steampunk style prosthetic, it requires high tech of the kind the Arsenal can generate, but Warlock on his own... honestly probably saw no reason to bother to, for some random guy following a kid he disliked in the first place.

Shveiran

I'll believe EE left a Chekov's gun unfired when the series is over XD

[Liliet](#)

Chekhov's Gun only applies to a loaded one.

Shveiran

Yes, and? There were multiple mentions of the necromancers-can-control-artificial-limbs, most notably in Book II. If it never comes up, they are probably better edited out.

[Liliet](#)

Quote?

Sinead

Right when he got the hand it was mentioned, but I was always under the impression that coming into his Name nullified the issue as he is Hakram Deadhand. Cannot find the passage where I got that impression though.

Book 2 Chapt 11

"...The naked bones were just as dextrous as when they'd been hidden under my adjutant's flesh and muscle, though they were now animated by necromancy instead of more natural means. He got no sensation from the skeleton hand, he'd told me, though he could roughly gauge how much pressure he was putting on something when holding it. I could feel the threads of magic that kept it moving according to his will, feel how they dug into his body and

used his soul as fuel to maintain the enchantment. I was fairly sure I could tie my own threads to puppet the bones if I tried, which meant any decent necromancer could likely do the same...”

Liliet

Yup, I also remember it being mentioned ONCE. I also remember the same being mentioned for undead! Cat at Liesse 1 which was super adorable bc she was like “Masego holds my strings BUT WHAT MAKES ME WORRIED IS ANOTHER NECROMANCER COULD TAKE THEM OVER”. Best cousins.

Anyway, the third time something similar was brought up – and the time it actually fired – was Cat’s anti-fae soul scaffolding post-Dormer. Masego had warned her that they’re a vulnerability, but Cat forgot about that entirely in her plan against Diabolist and got controlled.

That gun has already fired! And I don’t remember any more mentions of prosthetics specifically being a vulnerability to make there be another one.

Shveiran

It was also mentioned after the battle of Marchford, where Black and Catherine discussed the issue of her leg.

He said that, technically, she could regain full functionality by cutting off the leg and replacing it with a magical prosthetics, but that such an action would carry this risk.

Mental Mouse

High *magic*, please. I’m pretty sure robotics would have the Gnomes saying “never mind letters, just nuke them from orbit”.

Liliet

Magitec, emphasis on “magic”, the “tec” part mostly referring to the fact the joints can move and hold shape and the like because that’s how the mechanical parts are shaped.

The magic isn’t necromancy, anyway.

Frivolous

I expect that the choirs have zero understanding of tact or timing. That's for favored humans like Tariq or Hanno to explain to them, and perhaps why favored humans exist, so that the choirs don't bungle.

Perhaps Tariq does for the Ophanim what Catherine does for Sve Noc. Maybe he acts as a limit for angelic ambitions and tells them when a plan is foolhardy.

Clearly it's foolhardy here. The Hashmallim bungled their approach to Arthur.

I actually feel pity for the Hashmallim now. Catherine and Masego and Akua are much much more skilled and powerful than they once were.

If Akua could scheme to capture an angel when she was still Heiress, she and Masego and Catherine can do something absolutely nightmarish to Contrition when they work together. And Masego will happily write a report on it while listening to the sounds of angels screaming in agony.

Darkening

While yes, they probably have the **capacity** to pull something like that off, I imagine it would be highly alienating to Tariq and a number of other heroes and the other rulers would likely view a captive angel as unhappily as Cat and Levant are viewing Cordelia's Angel Nuke, so it's unlikely they'll go that far.

Frivolous

First, you might not have to capture an angel to teach it a very painful lesson.

Masego was present when Anaxares crashed the Seraphim party. He probably took notes.

Second, would the heroes who are not already tied to Contrition care? Hanno didn't seem to mind when Catherine cursed at Endurance.

It's not like villains care if a demon or a devil gets ganked. I'm not sure heroes have much friendliness towards angels apart from their rare confidants like Hanno and Tariq, and then only towards their patron choir.

Third, the Liesse Accords only ever mentioned making illegal the bringing angels to Creation. No one ever talked about forbidding the punishing of angels, probably because it was inconceivable.

Dominic Corbin

Float the possibility to Masego and he will want to do it
JUST so he can write the report

ninegardens

So, aside from everything else, can I just say:

This is the kind of chapter I read for.

I get that the war is a thing. That the battle chapters matter, and that chapters like this only WORK between battle chapters.... but the beats of Tired Cat, Tariq conversation, Hakram debriefing, and Arthur (with the dread return of Penitent blade!) is just like, absolute gold.

I did NOT expect that blade to return. And Tariq is a treasure. I love that he was such an antagonist before, and such an ally now, *and that didn't happen via changes to his character*. Don't get me wrong. Tariq grows and evolve (slightly), but I love that him playing different roles in the story is the result of consistent characterization and changing *context*, and that's cool.

[Liliet](#)

YES YES YES YES

[Sugar Roll](#)

I like this new Squire but I won't get attached until he gets his own POV chapter. For all we know, he might die in the next few chapters. I'm not falling for that again.

Burnsy

I've only had this gay heroic squire for one chapter, but already I love him.

Genuinely, as a queer reader, I really appreciate how often and casually LGBT+ characters just... show up in this story. It's really refreshing, and honestly ruined a lot of other fantasy for me because... why am I reading this, there's not even any gay people in it.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, same for me 😊 I am always disappointed when there's no gay character in a story, EE spoiled us 😊

I really hope he will not be killed in the next chapter, and that he will survive till the end of the book 😊

Gerionar

Actually I have a hard time finding "normal", heterosexual couples with traditional gender roles among the cast. Most of

the named characters are either single or their partners are never mentioned. This goes double if they are also Named, with good reasons. They have the occasional fling or friends with benefits, but they tend to be rather careful as seen with Cat or Hakram. The other extreme is the asexual love between Indrani and Masego. I think Captain is the only Named we know of who was in a heterosexual marriage, although with reversed roles.

The side characters often also don't fit the mold. Masego's parents were gay. Akua's parents had reversed roles with her mother being the boss. The other Calamities either had no love life we know of, or, in Malicia's case, were hinted at to have homosexual preferences.

Uncle Klaus's is one of the few examples of a "normal" marriage, although that failed for different reasons. I think Vivian's parents might fit, as do the parents of the Fisher King. But by now we are pretty far away from the main cast. Yet we still assume (and are let to believe) that heterosexual couples and traditional gender roles are the norm in the Guideverse,... at least among the human population. Orcs, goblins, dwarves,... and especially drow are a completely different matter.

ninegardens

Black and Ranger?

They aren't together all the time, but when they are, by the sounds of it they are a classic (dysfunctional) relationship. Doesn't meant Black is "Hetrosexual Classic (TM)", but still feels like its kinda in the region you're describing.

[Liliet](#)

The power dynamics are still reversed. Female mentor is an asshole towards a kind of submissive younger guy is not a classic heterosexual relationship by any means.

Shveiran

On the other hand, we get so much representation in other media that it feels kind of silly to complain, you know what I mean?

Besides, there are heterosexual characters: the Rogue Sorcerer, the Kingfisher Prince, the Pilgrim, the Saint of Swords, the Mirror Knight...

...Uh, that's a lot of heroes.

Crash

You're certainly assuming, but we have not been "led to believe heterosexuality to be the norm".

There is no reaction of any kind to people's sexual preferences, regardless of what they may be. You expect heterosexuality, because that's the world we live in where that is the "norm".

We have no reason to believe this applies to Guideverse.

Compy

Its not going to happen but I'd love for buddy boy Squire to become the Grey Knight as he's permanently caught between trying to do the Righteous White Knight thing and the Actually Achieving Meaningful Goals Black Knight thing. Basically Cat 2.0 I guess.

Darkening

Sadly we've got Word of God that grey knight won't be a thing because there isn't an extant cultural idea of it out there in the setting.

Konstantin von Karstein

There is not yet

Darkening

Well, we'll see what the Liesse Accords do for society.

Shaerick 68

Man, they must be putting something in the water in Calernia.

superkeaton

Poor lad. This is going to be tricky for everyone involved.

Sinead

I wonder if Arthur could be a leader that helps Callow thread the needle between the knighted nobility of Old Kingdom to the modern system. A thing to keep in mind with this (in my opinion) is that the classic tropes "Knight in Shining Armour" is true in Callow in a way that it never was in history, meaning that there can be seen an actual merit to the system. However, the knight system as it currently stands is at odds with the military doctrine of the Army of Callow. I wonder if it is possible to combine those systems in any way to make something synthesis of the virtues of both systems as far as training goes, if not the path of nobility. Instead Knighthood would be a military equivalent of additional training within the Callowan War College (in my head this comes across as the equivalent of graduate studies which amuses me as much as it saddens me because war is terrible).

I guess what it comes down to is that I hope that this doesn't end with Vivienne being deposed or fighting a civil war against nobility and instead you have the resurgence of the Callowan knighthood adapt and embrace some of the changes that has come from the 25 years after the Conquest.

Basically, I think it would be neat if between Cat, Vivienne, and Arthur, you have the resolution of the issue of Vivienne not having a massive military support that really consolidates the Callowan succession in a way that isn't just "political marriage" (as those are only symbolic and are relatively weak ties compared to actual cultural changes).

Another thought that has struck me from the quote of "I am not a heretic" is the fact that there are a few Crow banners within the Callowan legions, and I wonder if the Crows will gain any prominence in Callow as war deities from having the First Under Night as a war leader through the Uncivil Wars* and the (hopefully) Last Crusade.

*Even if Cat wasn't First Under Night for the start of these wars, her legend prior to becoming First Under Night made it possible for the Crows to gain prominence in a way that they wouldn't have in different circumstances

Liliet

I mean, right now the knight military doctrine and the Legions military doctrine are working to complement one another in a way that neither could achieve in its own. The Legions very much don't have their own heavy cavalry, and knights fill that gap.

Sinead

True, and it could be that just taking a "cavalry forces" approach works well enough. My reasoning for an advance track of the War College is because there is status with knighthood that should be refined through basically putting Knights through officer school to justify in Legion eyes the difference in status within society. Then again, could the structure of the Knight hierarchy be structured as comparable to Legion structure, nullifying some of the conflicts of two different systems? The knightly orders become the same as a Legion standard, and the differences between the two systems are just the logistics of infantry vs. cavalry.

Granted, in this case, one would be assigned equipment, not bringing their own, which would break a lot of the influence nobles have over the system.

I guess what it comes down to in my head is that while I suspect Arthur will in time be a savvy leader and can be

trained to stand his own against the influence, his rise to power being military after a generation of war would deepen the damage that Cat's own freeing of Callow has done to the nation. I honestly feel that Vivienne is the better choice, especially when she has plans to take advantage in the breaks in the political status quo to put in trade deals that could end military conflicts East of the Whitecaps.

Liliet

I don't think Arthur's going to take over the throne unless Catherine and Vivienne fuck up REALLY majorly somehow. What Catherine needs to groom him for is a role as Vivienne's SECOND.

He needs to learn from both of them and from the government and military structure they've made, so when he gets to really accomplishing his dream he does so intelligently and with mind to context.

Sinead

Hmmmm, I've been writing poorly.

I don't really see "Arthur overthrows Vivienne" as a thing that PGtE would do, because I think that really undermines the value of the series. I was more meaning in the sense of a trajectory of such a story taking shape from the pressures of the Nobles.

What would be interesting if he does become Vivienne's successor is that do we not just establish a trend to be the Good aligned version of the Tower, with the idea of the throne of Callow being a meritocracy, not a noble bloodline.

Cat's spiritual claim to Callow throne (in the eyes of story) is in part derived from Amadeus' rule and general use of a meritocracy where he could (as Callow existed under some form of Legion rule). Yes she has other claims from her own successes (as acknowledged into the best by her interactions with Edward VII), but the basis of her 'bastard claim' to the throne starts as being the heir to Amadeus work in Callow, and rising to be his chosen successor.

If we follow Cat with Vivienne, and potentially Arthur (if he becomes her successor), along with the general culture of meritocracy that will have been placed within Callow over generations, do you start having the role of the Crown as essentially a constitutional monarch? The Accords grows out of a means to restrict Named, and as the birthplace of the concept of the Accords, along with Cat's

own wishes of Non-Named rulers, the Crown of Callow may be more limited than any of the Named crowns of the Age of Wonders.

Besides, Callow is basically Great Britain anyways, with the Deoraithe being all the Pictish/Celtic occupants before the various invasions.

Completely random thought I just noticed: the Deoraithe are the mythical Invasion of Ireland in reverse: the Sidhe came in and drove Men out instead of the other way around.

[*Liliet*](#)

Nice.

Frivolous

Heroes without the correct Role don't make good rulers. Look at how hard a time Hanno has had with acting as the hero representative for the Truce and Terms. Too many moral and ethical compromises can weaken the connection to Above.

Arthur might be young enough, and the Name of Squire malleable enough, especially if he gets the aspect of Learn, to adapt to the needs of government work, but it's an iffy thing.

[*Liliet*](#)

You're putting the cart before the horse.

People without the correct education and mindset do not make good rulers. People who have not had a *history* that would give them skills and knowledge necessary for a ruler, do not make good rulers.

The Role follows from that, not the other way around.

If Arthur is taught, he'll learn. What is Name and Role are right now is thoroughly irrelevant except as a hint of how he'll act about being taught, and what use he'll put the learning to.

(One can make a guess about the differences in attitude between a heroic Squire, a Bloody Berserker and a Warlock, for example)

Out of these, heroic Squire is actually an excellent choice for a future ruler, and apparently one with a lot of precedent: not only is it immediately where Cat's mind went upon hearing the Name, there was also Akua's

reaction back during First Liesse: she connected the Sword in the Stone with Cat's Name specifically.

(Because the Role is about learning from your elders and social responsibility, it makes good material for teaching a kid to rule)

Frivolous

My point was that a Good King or a Good Queen might make a good ruler, because their Name and Role allow for the compromises a ruler has to make.

A White Knight, on the other hand, does not, because a Knight isn't supposed to rule. Trying to rule could cause what Hanno is now suffering, indecision and the fraying of their Name.

Also, cart does come before horse sometimes. Anaxares had negative interest in ruling before he became Hierarch.

[Liliet](#)

What does a White Knight have to do with this? Squire can transition into a ruler Name if that's where their Role takes them.

Also, Eleanor Fairfax had been a Rebel Knight before becoming queen. Is there a categorical difference between White and Rebel here?

[Liliet](#)

P.S. And what a splendid ruler Anaxares of Bellerophon was! It's almost like one's Name does not have a direct causal impact on ruling competence!

[Liliet](#)

P.S. **Thief**

Daniel E

Hmm. We now have the Squire, Apprentice, and a mysterious Ranger-type (Silver Huntress) assembled for the Gods Above. However, I am completely at a loss for Above's equivalent of a novice Adjutant.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They would show up in response to serving Arthur... I note that the house of light in Callow had no qualms in pitching

conversion to Hakram, so another orc might well have taken up their offer despite the general awkwardness.

Aotrs Commander

Incidentally, if anyone were to have thought that 20% sounds kind of low for casualties (especially if you play lots of wargames or something...!), I'll just note that a 50% casualty rate was so rare in history as to be marked as a catastrophic defeat, like Battle of Cannae or 1st-day-Somme bad. 20%, then, is Pretty Bad.

Though as, Cat says, having so few non-fatal casualties (which normally outnumber the fatal ones) is a stunning achievement for the Legions of Terror.

Crash

The Hashmalim are tempting him with a broken sword under the waters, he is and orphan and his name is Arthur? Really?

Fucking hells.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Pulling together some of my comments at the top level:

1) *Arthur?* Yeah, that's a little on-the-nose there.

2) The Name-dreams are not necessarily coming from Contrition as such – for Cat and Black, they acted more like an automatic function of Plot Mechanics. Pulling a sword out of lakes might just be the closest story-match available, so that's what the dreams focus on.

However, as it happens, there is *another* sword available for Arthur, namely King Edward's! Indeed, that's currently a lot closer than the Penitent's Blade, and won't require reassembly. Arthur happens to be in Twilight already, but even if he doesn't pick it up this trip, he's with an army that's likely to come back here again.

3) Aside from the chance of Hanno transitioning to another Name (given he's already in crisis), that business about "Squires always become the White Knight or Black Knight" was received wisdom from the past – and Cat has already been carving new grooves, indeed nearly developing a science of doing so (not to mention picking up massive story-fu powers).

Gray Knight might not be happening, but if Cat exerts herself and/or young Arthur learns some story-fu of his own, I could easily believe *Shining* Knight.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Addendum: It occurs to me that Arthur probably won't even be able to find King Edward's grove until he's earned an audience, and even then he might still have to earn the right to actually take the sword.

nimelennar

Since no one has brought this up yet, we have another term relevant to chess in the title of the chapter.

A "solved game" is one where, assuming both players play perfectly, you know the outcome before the game starts. For instance, Tic-Tac-Toe is a solved game, because if both players play perfectly, it will always end in a draw.

Chess, from the starting position, is not a solved game. There is a debate about whether it ever will be; although the "position repeated three times" rule and the "50 moves without capturing a pawn" rules for declaring a draw ensure that there are a finite number of possible games of chess, it is a ridiculously high finite number.

However, when you get down from the original 32 pieces to no more than 7, all possible endgames have been solved. You can look at a board with seven pieces on it, and know who will win (or if the game will end in a draw), if both sides play perfectly. Or, at least, you can look that board up in an endgame database and find out.

As for why this is relevant to the story... Cat just lost a lot of people, and the Dead King is being forced to make a move. Enough pieces have been removed that the end is conceivably knowable at this point, if someone could see the entire board.

Onos

Queen Mary's Home for Errant Boys, huh? That is fucking marvelous. Colloquially known as Staggering Shelter perhaps?

Chapter 71: Eschatology

"An enemy may suffer a hundred defeats yet avoid being defeated; seek not victories, only victory."

– Extract from the 'Ars Tactica', famed military treatise of Dread Emperor Terribilis the First

I'd barely set foot back in Creation and already I was itching to return to the Ways.

The Second's outriders had run into a patrol of Prince Klaus', bringing back the uplifting news that the Iron Prince had crushed the dead in a decisive engagement. Soldiers had named it the Battle of the Pools, as it'd been fought near a dry bog where the mud had hardened and stagnant water remained trapped in pools. Way I heard it told, Old Klaus had baited the dead into open grounds with bold skirmishing by Dominion slingers and then forced a clash of shield walls while his cavalry went to hit the flanks. It'd been a close-run thing even so, before the reinforcements I'd sent under Princess Beatrice were found by the White Knight and led into a charge that hit the enemy in the back and completed the encirclement. That'd secured a full wipe of enemy forces, which had numbered more than thirty thousand. It was the kind of clean successes that came rarely in this war.

It'd brought some cheer back to the Second Army, as had the prospect of soon being reunited with the rest of the coalition forces. Klaus Papenheim's reputation as one of the finest military commanders of our age had been proved as well-deserved once more, considering he'd led his beleaguered army in securing two major victories against numerically superior enemy armies – and the first time the dead had even been entrenched! I'd expected that it was a triumphant war camp we'd link up with, perhaps even with ale rations having been let loose in celebration of the victory. Instead, as the Second Army began to cross back into Creation, the word that trickled back to me was that of a somber, tense camp. The fantassin companies with the Iron Prince were, I was told, on the verge of mutiny. They were refusing to march until officers that had been arrested were returned to them.

There'd been trouble, it seemed, within the other column. I got the lay of the land before crossing, wary of putting forward my foot without a good idea of what it was I was headed into. Apparently the Battle of Juvelun, where Prince Klaus had pushed the undead out of the eponymous village where they'd dug in, had been a rough affair for the fantassins and gotten Prince Etienne of Brabant killed. The dead had retreated from the defeat with some semblance of order and began to muster further into the valley for a counter-attack, which had forced the Iron Prince to strike at them before they could mass enough to prove a threat. Except part of his army had balked at the order. The mercenaries felt they'd been ill-used and might be once more, while the Brabantine conscripts weren't eager to march out tired into another bruising engagement when they'd lost their prince in the last one.

There had been stirrings of unrest, so the Iron Prince had arrested or slain the potential mutineer officers and promptly

forced a march against the enemy before the situation could further worsen. It'd worked, at least to the extent that this kind of measure could work. They'd fought, for lack of allies or other options, but the moment the dust had settled the mutineer sentiment returned – only twice as hardened, as they'd been browbeaten last time and were wary of a repeat. The conscripts had been settled somewhat, temporary Lycaonese officers having been forced on them while their formations got mixed – to prevent cliques sticking together – and separated in different parts of the camp. It'd not entirely worked, though, as some clever soul had found a loophole in Proceran desertion laws. It was, technically, no such thing if you signed on with a fantassin company sworn to the same fight. There'd been an influx of fresh 'recruits' after word was spread, which had only raised tensions.

Still, while I saw the sense in some of the grievances voices my sympathy was significantly dampened by the fact that the fantassins had effectively slowed Prince Klaus' march west to a crawl for several days before refusing to march entirely. What little time we'd managed to gain on the enemy through bloody losses and use of the Twilight Ways had been effectively lost. Even if we began the march on Hainaut city this very evening, we wouldn't arrive there more than a few days before the dead. I'd been hoping for a significantly larger margin so that we might repair the defences of the capital as much as possible before Keter besieged us there. Even now, every heartbeat wasted limping through the muddy camp grated at my sensibilities. Each beat saw the dead grow closer, saw our lead narrow and our hopes of victory dim.

The chatter died when I hobbled into the pavilion. I leaned on my staff, step after step, and felt the eyes of all assembled fall on me. I saw the Iron Prince first, at the end of the long table: the white-haired general had risen to his feet and he offered a short bow, to which I returned a nod. The Heavens had their men as well, a tired-looking Hanno of Arwad on his feet besides Tariq. Their greetings were silent and I returned them just as quietly. The last man at the table seemed like he'd aged a decade since I'd last seen him, as if some capricious god had kicked the vigour out of his bones, but the dark hair and elaborate moustache of Prince Arsene of Bayeux could not be mistaken. He did not seem pleased to be here, I decided, as was only fitting.

Old Klaus had raised him to his war council with the understanding that the Alamans would be able to handle his own people, even the fantassins, and in that duty he had failed most utterly. Little of this reflected well on him, in either our eyes or those of the officers he'd stood for. The Prince of Bayeux had been able to keep his soldiers and reputation off the chopping block in this war, until now, but it seemed that at last the blade had pricked the skin. He wasn't going to get out of this

without losing a few feathers, I thought, though it was not my place to go pulling at them.

My eyes then swept to the rest of the men and women in the pavilion, of which there had to be at least forty. None of them were seated, though neither were they shackled as I'd half-expected them to be. There were a few Lycaonese guards around, but not many – I supposed there would have been no point, with the likes of Tariq and the White Knight in the pavilion. The arrested officers did not look like they'd been mistreated, the only bruises I found being faded, and though they were visibly filthy I saw no trace of sickness among them.

"Your Majesty," the Prince of Hannover greeted me. "Your return is a pleasant turn."

"So was the news of the victory at the Pools, Your Grace," I replied.

Only two of my guards followed me in, looming silently behind. I turned a steady eye to the assembled prisoners, noting several bowed.

"Yet this was not," I mildly added, "how I expected my time to be spent after our hosts joined again. The request I received was rather mild on details, in truth. If one of you would elaborate?"

"Your Majesty," the Prince of Bayeux spoke up, calling my attention with a bow of his own. "If I may?"

"Do."

"At the behest of these officers in the service of the Grand Alliance, I carry a plea for your judgement," the prince said.

He had a nice speaking voice, I thought. Practiced, but the smoked honey in there was a natural gift. Didn't make me like what I was hearing from in the slightest. I cocked an eyebrow.

"It was my understanding that the Prince of Hannover, who held command, already passed judgement on them," I said.

"This is true," Prince Arsene agreeably said. "However, no formal trial was held and as both the supreme commander in Hainaut and high officer of the Grand Alliance your authority supersedes his."

Meaning they didn't like what Old Klaus had decided, so they were coming to me in the hopes of a milder sentence. If not an outright amnesty.

"In principle that is correct," I noted, then glanced at Hanno. "White Knight, a question if you don't mind?"

Hanno slowly nodded.

"Did these officers refuse to obey a direct order from their lawful commander?" I plainly asked.

The White Knight looked like he'd wanted to grimace but held back.

"They did," Hanno admitted.

"Then the matter is settled," I coldly said, eyes returning to the prisoners. "Hang them all."

There was moment of utter surprise in the room, until the officers began to clamour. I picked our pleas, in Chantant and Arlesite, but also curses and insults. Some even tried to argue, yelled that there had been a mistake, but all I saw when I looked at them was three days lost. The deaths that the time pissed away would cost us. *I mutilated the Second Army for you, you fucking vultures*, I thought. *And now you want to mutiny and wiggle your way out? I'd slit the throat of every last one of you and not lose a wink of sleep over it.* The yelling continued with no sign of abating, even the guards tried to restore order, and I lost what little patience I had left.

"**Shut up**," I Spoke.

With a snap their mouths closed, like puppets whose strings had been pulled. I felt the gazes of both heroes in the tent move to me in surprise, which surprised me in turn. The Pilgrim, at least, should have known I could now Speak again. I had disciplined the Silver Huntress using the talent. Yet after a glance their way, I saw that it was not the Speaking itself that'd startled. His mouth had wavered. Just for a heartbeat, I figured, but for the barest of moments my words had had an effect on the Grey Pilgrim. It was me who was astonished, as I'd not tried to exert my will against him in the slightest. The rules behind Speaking were opaque even to me, but usually it only worked on people *weaker* than you. Even then it wasn't a guarantee, some sort of claim to authority over them tended to make it easier. *And I'm not much stronger than the Grey Pilgrim*, I thought, *if I am at all.*

What that implied...

I withdrew any strand of will lingering against the four men at the table, freeing them of struggle. The Prince of Hannover looked wary, but Prince Arsene was outright gasping. He rasped out a breath.

"Your Majesty," he got out. "This is a mistake. You did not..."

"I see no reason to change my judgement," I mildly said. "Mind you, it was never formally requested or given. If this talk of appeal was revealed to be only a tasteless jape..."

I shrugged.

"Then I would walk out of this tent and leave this in the trusted hands of Prince Klaus Papenheim," I said. "I imagine you could appeal to him for mercy, were he in the mood to grant it."

I glanced at the prince in question, raising a questioning brow. He gave a discreet nod, to my mute surprise. So he was willing to find a use for this lot that didn't involved feeding crows. Fine. They were his, and his to deal with as he wished.

"Perhaps," Prince Arsene said, "that would be best."

I watched him, saw how now that his breathing was in order he was once more mastering himself. Saw how he was looking around trying to look for an angle, for a way to still come out on top. And maybe on another day I would have said nothing. Let it go. Procer would be Procer, and not even the end of times would make saints out of princes. Instead I found my fingers drumming against my leg the first few beats of *Stars From the Sky*, and I ground my teeth. I could almost smell the mud and blood and ash, hear the screams as the Second Army retreated foot by foot under bloody onslaught.

"Say it," I quietly ordered.

The dark-haired prince blinked in confusion. I met his eyes, unsmiling.

"Your Majesty, I do not und-"

"Say it," I repeated, and my tone was cold as ice.

His lips thinned.

"It was," Prince Arsene of Bayeux got out, "a tasteless jape."

I let silence linger a moment so that the embarrassment could properly sink it.

"Don't ever waste my time like this again," I said.

I turned and limped out of the pavilion without speaking another word.

—

It wasn't a formal war council in the sense that we wouldn't be tactics or arrangement tonight. When it came to that, the crowd of captains and commanders involved would require a far larger

tent than this. Instead it was the keystones of the various forces within the Grand Alliance army defending Hainaut that'd been assembled for the talks. For the Dominion stood Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osen as well as the commander the Lord of Alava had sent to lead his warriors, Captain Nabila. For the Principate three royals had come: Old Klaus for the Lycaonese, Princess Beatrice of Hainaut and Prince Arsene of Bayeux for the Alamans. For the Firstborn, both General Rumena and Ivah had shown up. Rounding up the hosts, Calm-faced General Zola stood for the Second Army while I held claim on both Callow and Below.

As the heroes had sent both the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim, I'd also called for the Barrow Sword to stand for villains – as far as I was concerned he'd proved himself as a lieutenant during his tenure as part of the Iron Prince's army, and I fully intended to keep using him in that capacity. In other circumstances such a gathering of the prominent would have led to an inevitable amount of chatter and hobnobbing, but not this evening. All of us felt the cold breath of Keter against the back of our neck and it had cut through the usual practices. Already skirmishing with undead warbands was starting, a sure sign it was time to get the Hells out of here and into the Twilight Ways before we had another battle on our hands. One we might not win, this time. I cleared my throat to call for attention, the panoply of warlords and royals granting it.

"We're all here, so let us begin," I briskly said. "No one in this room requires introduction, so we'll directly attend to the matter at hand."

Adjutant had arranged for our maps of the principality of Hainaut and its outskirts to be sent, and attendants had artfully displayed them on the great table around which all of us were arranged. Much of where the enemy was shown by markers to have armies was now guesswork, considering three battles had been fought in quick succession over the last week – General Abigail's assault on the Cigelin Sisters, the Second Army's holding action at the Battle of Maillac's Boot and the Iron Prince's fresh victory at the Battle of the Pools. We still didn't know if Abigail had taken the Sisters, but given her forces and the reinforcements involved she ought to have succeeded. Casualties involved on either side were unknown, while the Second hadn't exactly had the time to count corpses as it retreated into the Ways at the end of the battle.

By now the great valley of central Hainaut, a great bowl in which the capital of the principality stood near the centre, would be a tumultuous mess of warbands and marching columns and smashed undead armies. Out east the great undead army of at least two hundred thousand that'd pursued the Iron Prince since his ill-fated march on Malmedit was gaining on us, likely past the village of Juvelun by now. Our reunited army needed to get moving

and fast, if it wasn't going to get stuck between the great force coming from the west, which the Second had bled to delay, and the even greater army pouring down the heights of Juvelun. The only question that remained to be answered was where our coalition army should march to. I believed the right answer to that was the city of Hainaut, the capital itself.

Yet while in principle I had the authority to simply give the order to march and expect to be obeyed, in practice trying to cram my plan down the throat of the people in this tent was only possible if they were inclined to swallow. That meant convincing them, or at least settling their most pressing objections.

"As all of you can see, the valley of Hainaut is swarming with undead," I bluntly said. "Soon there will be a strict minimum of about four hundred thousand corpses running around the region. Remaining where we are now encamped is a recipe for disaster, as it would ensure we would be harassed and ultimately encircled by a massively superior enemy force."

None argued the fact, as it was plainly on the maps and markers to any eye practiced in the trade of war. I swept the council with my gaze.

"More concerning is the fact that we are now running low on supplies," I said. "The column under Prince Klaus was entirely cut off from its supply lines for over a week, so it burned through its entire reserves. The forces I brought north will be sharing our own supplies, naturally, but that's not a solution – it's throwing a cup of water at a bonfire."

And that was after we'd even cheated a little when it came to supplies. Unlike us General Abigail was still going to have access to the supply line coming up from our defensive lines to the south, so I'd stripped the larders of the Third Army and its fantassin helpers dangerously bare before marching north through the Ways. It'd felt like kicking her in the ribs at the time, but I was now rather pleased I'd decided to play it safe.

"The adjunct secretariat, after collating the numbers given by all of you, believes we have around six days before rationing becomes necessary," I said. "After that, we have perhaps a week at half-rations before our larders are empty."

"And if we begin rationing from the start?" Prince Klaus asked.

"Three weeks, maybe a little more," I replied.

Half-rations, though, meant that our people wouldn't be at their sharpest. Given that our main advantage against the dead lay in the qualitative superiority of our rank and file against theirs, that was a bold gamble to make.

"We must act, and act now," I told them. "That much can't be argued with. What must be done, however, deserves a degree of argument. The floor is open to any who wish to speak."

There was a beat of hesitation, as if no one was quite certain they wanted to be the first to put a foot forward.

"You will have a plan, Losara Queen," Ivah said. "As is ever your way."

"I do," I agreed. "But this council is meant to be a fair hearing for any of you with an answer to give."

Captain Nabila, who I could not help but notice was only a few inches taller than me – if significantly broader and more stockily built – cleared her throat.

"I was told that Abigail the Fox took the Cigelin Sisters, along with the forces we had held back until now," she tried.

"We can't be sure she did, but the odds are good," Prince Klaus told her.

"Then we should thrust westwards, towards Cigelin," Captain Nabila said, tone firming. "The dead are in disarray, and we have great numbers. We can smash lesser warbands on our path, and when we arrive at the Sisters supplies can flow in from the south again."

The Princess of Hainaut stirred.

"They'll tarpit us if we try that march, Captain," Princess Beatrice said.

"I do not understand your meaning," the painted Levantine frowned.

"They will fight like barrowmen," Aquiline Osenia clarified. "Throw corpses at us to slow us down until they gather a great enough force to slay us in one stroke."

The captain hummed in understanding, nodding decisively.

"If we stay in the countryside we'll be going through bogs and swamps," Princess Beatrice added. "We'll be moving slow regardless. And if we cut to Julianne's Highway as quickly as possible, our line of attack becomes glaringly obvious."

And predictable tended to get costly, when you fought Keter.

"It seems wise to cede the grounds," Razin agreed, eyes narrowing. "We cannot take or hold them. Yet the westward march itself is a sound idea, I would argue. If we retreat to the

Cigelin Sisters through the Ways, we can muster with the forces of General Abigail and prepare for a decisive engagement there.”

“Keter will not grant it,” General Rumena said. “It will withhold the blow and leave hunger to disperse us without a single blade being raised.”

Razin, I thought with a degree of approval, had good instincts. If smaller armies had been involved, his answer would have been a good one. The problem was that, as the Tomb-Maker had pointed out, we wouldn’t actually be able to *feed* that army if it was gathered together. It was one of the reasons we’d split our offensive into two columns in the first place – the force I’d originally advanced with, some seventy thousand soldiers, had been stretching the limit of what our logistical train was physically able to provide for. All armies involved had taken losses, sure, but at the end of the day we’d still be asking of that same apparatus that’d struggled with my column alone to now also handle the second column and our reserve on top of it. No, Razin had good instincts but it showed that the Levantine wars he’d been raised to fight just didn’t involve the same scale of armies being dealt with.

“Turning back towards Juvelun would be suicide,” Prince Arsene said. “No doubt our pursuers from Malmedit have already restored the fortifications there. We would have to take those grounds from a larger army once more, only this time while being struck at from behind as well.”

“Juvelun is lost ground,” Prince Klaus agreed. “And it no longer has strategic value even if we did take it – we forced that gate to be able to march into the valley, but it’s too late to try and keep it closed for the army that pursues us.”

“We could still attempt a strike at Malmedit,” General Zola said.

That got the attention of most everyone here, including myself.

“If the burden of numbers is too much for our supply train, we must split our forces again,” the dark-skinned general said. “A large detachment can be sent to strike in surprise at Malmedit and collapse the tunnels, as was originally meant, while we consolidate the rest of our forces at the Sisters. If this draws the dead to us at the Sisters, as seems likely, that same detachment can then march in haste to Juvelun and seal the valley around the dead.”

There were some murmurs of approval, and I cocked my head to the side. It was the answer of a classic War College general, I thought. Strategic goals had been set and were to be met, using our relative advantages – mobility by the Twilight Ways, in this case – over the enemy, and concentrating strength at where we were weakest to negate the enemy’s advantages. It was the kind of

war that Black and Grem One-Eye liked to fight, measured and clever and very well-organized. Her answer, however, was also wrong. General Zola Osei understood war through the eyes of a professional, so it was only natural that it was the complete opposite that would find the fault in her answer.

"That's a dead end," Aquiline Osená said.

Surprised eyes turned to her, several disapproving. The Dominion had impressed with the bravery of its warriors, during the war, but not the acumen of its generals.

"She's right," I agreed.

Aquiline offered me a smile that might have passed for grateful, if you squinted a little. I winked back.

"It's a clever trick, but it doesn't *win* us anything," the Lady of Tartessos said. "The tunnels at Malmedit are useless now, there's no army left to go through them – we know where all of them are. Even if it works and we close the valley by holding Juvelun, what does it get us? The dead are already where they want to be."

"It's an approach that tries to mitigate the damage, not achieve victory," I agreed.

If we were trying to mitigate though, it was a solid plan. It would secure us a very advantageous position for an offensive next year and ease the burden of our defense by giving us chokepoints to defend instead of a long line in the lowlands. The issue was that the payoff would come next campaigning season. See, Black and Grem they'd taught a generation of officers to fight their way – as I'd thought earlier, measured and clever and very well-organized. Except that we couldn't *afford* to fight this clean, this careful. If that bridge up north got built, we'd be losing Hainaut. We needed to win the campaign now, before winter came, and that meant we'd have to take risks. The same kind of risks that my father abhorred, that would have gotten him killed if he'd tried them against a hero at my age.

But I wasn't him, and the war I was fighting wasn't the same either.

The Iron Prince sighed, looking at the maps.

"Agreed," he finally said. "If we don't win this campaign now, we might not have the warm bodies to do more than hold come next summer."

Grim, but he wasn't wrong.

"*Can* victory still be achieved?" Princess Beatrice calmly asked.

If anyone else here had spoke those words, I thought, half the people in the tent would have marked them a coward. None dared, though, when the woman speaking them was the princess of this very land we stood on. Few of us here had more burning hatred for the dead, or lost more at their hands. Idly I wondered if she was asking the question because she had genuine doubts, or simply because she'd recognized that if she didn't ask it no one else would dare to.

"Yes," I calmly replied.

"Then where is that that you would have us march exactly, Black Queen?" Prince Arsene impatiently asked.

"Hainaut," the White Knight quietly said. "The capital, that is."

Hanno had remained silent for so long I figured half the people in here had forgot he was even there. As for Tariq, as far as I could tell he'd spent more time using that nosy little aspect of his to have a look at the insides of the people than actually listening. I smiled mirthlessly at the hero, knowing that it wasn't military learning that'd led him to the conclusion. After all, it was not only strategy that'd led me to decide the capital was our shot at winning this.

"The capital is where I would have us march," I agreed. "As soon as possible – tomorrow at least, tonight if at all possible."

"Would the issue of supplies not remain?" Razin Tanja asked. "The grounds between the Cigelin Sisters and the capital are still in the hands of the dead, and I had thought it impossible to arrange a supply line through the Twilight Ways."

"It is," General Zola frowned. "Your Majesty, I have seen the same numbers as you. We simply do not have enough mages and priests for this – past a certain distance and a certain amount of soldiers, the amount of wagons we are able to send at the speed we can send them mean keeping the force supplied is not possible."

"That is true," I said, "so long as you need individuals capable of making gates to actually take the journey."

Meaning, if we had to send a priest or mage with every wagon – more realistically, a few priests and mages with every caravan of wagons – then there came a point where, if we kept sending wagons, all the available priests and mages would be in the Twilight Ways. Either headed to the place getting supplied, or heading back to the place where the supplies were being sent for. If the army was small and where it was camped close to where the supplies came from, that wasn't an issue. The journey was quick, and you could either avoid having a stretch of time where there were no more supplies coming in or make it so short it hardly

made a difference. The trouble came when the army was large, as ours was, and the distance between the origin of the supplies and their destination was large. This was, unfortunately, also the case.

You got rid of that problem, though, if the gate-opened didn't actually need to make the journey. If the wagons could simply get there on their own.

"But that is needed, my queen," General Zola said.

"Unless we open a permanent gate within the capital," I said.

The room went still. It would be a risk, I'd not deny it, because if we lost the capital afterwards then the Dead King would have a gate into the Twilight Ways to study. On the other hand, the capital of Hainaut was probably the single most fortified city in the principality and once my sappers got to work it'd become even more defensible. We'd also be able to feed a *significantly* larger force in the city than our physical supply train would allow for. All we needed for the journey was for someone to open a gate near wagons somewhere in Procer and thread into it the destination of the 'Hainaut gate', and those supplies would get to the capital eventually. We wouldn't hold the road to the capital but it wouldn't matter, because so long as you had a mage around *everywhere* was a road to Hainaut.

"Those are difficult to make, I was told," Prince Klaus said. "Could we even make one quickly enough?"

"Us, I'm not sure," I admitted. "But you might remember we have fresh allies, since our summit at the Arsenal."

"The Gigantes," Princess Beatrice breathed out. "Is that why you sent them with my forces when we relieved the Iron Prince?"

In part, though I'd also been worried about exposing them to the dangers the Second Army had been about to face – or leaving them with General Abigail, where there would be no Named to pull them out of the fire if Revenants attacked in surprise.

"The Dead King might not assault the walls even if we seize the capital," Prince Arsene said. "A long siege to grind us down would suffice."

"A siege with its back to the army at the Cigelin Sisters," Klaus Papenheim replied. "And all the while we could sally out at will through the Ways, with strong walls to return to after. We can only hope they will try what you suggest."

"They will not," the Grey Pilgrim said, breaking his silence at last. "Mark my words, and that of the Choir I am sworn to: once

the gate is opened in the capital, the enemy will know no rest until that city is razed to the ground."

No one, I noted with grim amusement, saw fit to argue with *that*. There was some more talking, afterwards, but I had them and most of the people in the tent knew it. By the hour's turn I had the agreement of everyone there. So on we went to Hainaut, to the last flip of the coin that would decide whether this summer was the dawn of the Grand Alliance's victory or defeat.

That in the city doom awaited none would deny, but like everyone else I rather wished I could know ahead *whose* doom it was going to be.

Javvies

That's an ugly status report. And that's going to be a long and brutal battle at the capital. On the upshot, being besieged and under assault by overwhelming armies of the dead is prime Story material, especially for the Heroes.

Yeah ... asking Cat to override Klaus's judgement was a terrible idea, and they should have known it was a terrible idea before they tried. And Hanno knew what her answer was going to be, which is why he really didn't want Cat asking him what happened, because he'd have to tell the truth.

Huh. Cat is wicked strong at Speaking if she can affect Tariq (and presumably Hanno) when she's not even aiming at him.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's more alarming than that. The idea that a villain at their height having Speaking like that, that's an old thing. Plenty of peak villains have historically gotten those sorts of power levels, it's actually a sign they will fall soon.

Plenty of peak villains.

Cat hasn't even got her new name fully formed yet and she's this strong.

ruduen

I don't think the implication of strength is what would draw their attention. Rather, it's the implication of authority.

To heroes, it would be concerning that Cat's in a place where she could Speak to someone in the role of the Grey Pilgrim, and have creation interpret her as having the correct authority to have that order followed, even if it's a 'mild' order.

dadycoool

Yeah, there's no way a Claimant coming into her name is anywhere near a Mentor Hero in terms of strength. It occurs to me that this is really shaping into a Black Queen v. Dead King Story, with her having authority over everyone on her side by various reasons including trust and diplomacy and him having authority over everyone on his side for obvious reasons. Very Black and Grey Morality here. "I want everyone dead so I can rule them all" and "I just want everyone to get along, even if it means slicing a few thousand throats in order to get them to bite their tongues"

erebus42

Yeah, I have to agree it seems to be more a matter of authority as apposed to raw power. Meta-authority over Named does work pretty well thematically considering her proclivity towards manipulating and extracting aspects as well as maneuvering Named and stories.

RoflCat

The lesson ol Kairos would be gleefully giggling over his....prediction? coming true.

>It was a superb thing, the way the Black Queen could so address a Choir and expect to be obeyed. She'd survived so many close calls with angels she'd somehow come to believe she could match them, and through that utterly crazed belief become something that could genuinely give a Choir pause.

>How long would it take for them to grasp that every time she got away with that, she came harder into the story of someone who could get away with that?

But yeah, her Name being able to influence even someone on the level of Pilgrim is definitely huge, even more so because it's not through raw power (i.e. the typical Villain thing that would likely lead to heroic rebellion for their downfall) but rather authority.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> she could Speak to someone in the role of the Grey Pilgrim, and have creation interpret her as having the correct authority to have that order followed,

Especially when she wasn't even pointing it at him!

Darkening

She seems to be speculating in this chapter that it's not because she's stronger than Tariq exactly, though she might be, but that she has a form of authority over him, which would fit nicely with the theory kicking around that her forming name deals in moderating and standing in judgement over Named.

LarsBlitzer

If that's the case then imagine her glee when the Drake shows up when she's close to the fullness of her power and launches into his usual line of patter but then "[b]Shut up![/b]" stops him in his tracks.

NerfContessa

He, oh yes, looking forward to that.

Drake regenerates from black flame Ball. For the 7th time in that fight.

Cat is aggravated, and shouts/speaks "Stop doing that you prick!"

Drakes regeneration.... Stops.

Mental Mouse

Fun but unlikely. If only because Cat *certainly* doesn't have authority over DK's Revenants.

Liliet

Except, likely, for those who had been Callowan heroes in life.

Drake, uh, is P R O B A B L Y not one of those.....

Mental Mouse

Even with King Edward, freeing him from DK required a major miracle and some negotiation with DK himself.

It's certainly possible that Cat is developing generic authority over Name, but DK's authority over his Revenants is much more specific and active.

Liliet

yeah but there are lesser degrees of power than "free permanently, no strings left attachable"

it's very plausible for Cat's Speaking to work on them IMHO, DK or no DK

Mental Mouse

Mmm. we'll see eventually.

caoimhinh

More like it is unlikely because Speaking won't stop his inherent ability of regeneration, whether it is born from an Aspect or otherwise.

nimelennar

Is this the first time that we've heard Abigail referred to as "The Fox?"

And is she going to be getting the Name that the Intercessor was trying to fit around Cat's throat?

Frivolous

No. Abigail has been called the Fox before, in Interlude: New Tricks.

No idea what Name Abigail is going to get, if she is.

Big I

There's that Callowan outlaw King called the Fox (the one with the song), maybe Abigail will just be "The Fox".

Burlyraven

The title's been applied a few times. Abigail is (or at least was when she last had screentime) still missing some of the needed oomph that Above and Below look for, though.

Mental Mouse

I'm not sure she is, actually. As I've said before, she thinks she's a coward, but she's no such thing – her capacity to come up with creative ways to save herself and her people is starting to look more and more like a drive. I could easily believe a Name of "The Fox" or some variation.

I think the pivot here will be when she learns to accept her own power and ability.

Matthew Wells

Even if she thinks she's a coward, we've already got one cowardly mage villain for her to team up with. Imagine Cat's

glee at Abigail having to figure out how to put down a ghost so her mage can focus!

Mental Mouse

Imagine the Harrowed Witch's glee when Abigail's sympathetic response to the ghost actually calms him down!

Liliet

Even if Abigail gets a Name, it will 100% not be the one that Cat was circling around. The Role attached to the fox association is entirely different: a cunning general vs a one-on-one Named-wrangling trickster.

Frivolous

Asking Catherine Foundling to override Klaus Pappenheim in a matter fully under his jurisdiction was always foolish. As was asking Cat for mercy.

As I recall, Cat only rarely shows mercy, and then only when a trusted subordinate asks for it, like when Masego asked to spare Fadila because she was useful. This is the same woman who ordered hundreds of crucifixions.

A second successful Speaking, first to Be Silent, and second to Shut Up. Silence could derive from Catherine's Wish for peace, I guess.

First Speaking was to Bestowed only. Second was mostly to regular soldiers, but it affected Bestowed.

Still no Name, even. Scary. I guess we have to wait until the Battle of Hainaut for it to emerge.

Daniel

I liked the plea for mercy scene a lot, it spun together several threads very neatly.

Liliet

More importantly than the mercy question, Catherine does not override her subordinates unless they fucked up badly. Klaus did not fuck up badly; she would absolutely not undermine him even if she DID have a better idea.

Mental Mouse

It is interesting that both times Cat has Spoken, it was to tell someone to STHU. And the second time there was bleed to boot. AFAICT Cat hasn't previously made a habit of silencing

people, or I'd be worried that she might blow an Aspect on that...

SpeckofStardust

I mean she did shut up the bard during their fight back when the lone swordman was attempting to kill the warlock.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Huh, I'd forgotten that.

[Liliet](#)

The first time Cat ever Spoke was to tell some heads to shut up too...

Mind, a similar ability of one of the characters in Harrow the Ninth (which I have just been rereading) is also revealed in a "EVERYONE SHUT THE FUCK UP NOW PLEASE" moment, so honestly I think it's just a common use for the power for anyone who ever has it XD

[Liliet](#)

(The thematic difference between using the ability for mind control vs for crowd control – if you're Malicia, shutting people up is not going to be on your list of interests, but if you're someone whose authority is Reasonable and borne of people actually listening to you as an individual choice, organization is likely to be a relevant matter)

[Liliet](#)

(not that the HtN guy is super reasonable, w/e. applies to Cat this way)

Yunamed

Am I actually early for once? Such pressure to say something intelligent. All the best Catherine, I hope you fully develop your name in time to turn this around.

dadycool

"Oh, you think the Iron Prince was harsh? You really think a servant of Below, the Black Queen of Callow, adopted daughter and heir of the Black Knight, each known to be very fond of cold, calculated, and final solutions, the one person that your own religion specifically named Heretic of the East, will give you a better answer?" They really didn't think that through. Also, she Spoke and her assumed equals were compelled to obey? What kind of Name is she getting?

Well, if you wanted to know where each and every single undead is about to head shortly, I think GP just gave us the answer.

nimelennar

It almost sounds like Klaus has been given his own Gallowborne.

dadycoool

Oh, I wish he could piggyback off that Story. A battalion that half-worships him as their savior the way her Gallowborne did? It's too bad there are simply too many differences for that to work.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> They really didn't think that through.
Indeed!

asazernik

(Necro-ing this thread to add)

Forget the Name stuff and her personal reputation.

They were getting stomped on by a Proceran (Lycaonese, but still) general for insubordination, so they appealed for leniency to... a **Praesi legionary**??? There is no world in which Juniper or Hune (z"l) or Aisha are a better bet than Pappenheim.

[Burlyraven](#)

Yeah, that's a climactic fight if there's ever been one. From a story weight standpoint, getting the gate up and running effectively declares the region as won, with a time released lock preventing recapture for decades, if not centuries. Pretty sure we're going to see the five Scourges that've gotten screentime in a dark Band of Five, at least three main character deaths, the new Squire either saving or being saved by Cat, and maybe even Abigail coming into a Name, if she's grown enough of a spine. Also probably Hanno's next step in his character arc.

I'd put more money on some of these than others, but still.

[Liliet](#)

> From a story weight standpoint, getting the gate up and running effectively declares the region as won, with a time released lock preventing recapture for decades, if not centuries.

I don't get that impression! Getting the gate up only gets them access to supplies – and reinforcements, granted, but where the

fuck would those come from in decisive amounts? There's no Rohan that hasn't joined the war yet.

Matthew Wells

The Elves could perhaps be bullied into it.

[Liliet](#)

That'd need to be a storyline of its own, not an auto-win

caoimhinh

Recapturing Hainaut pushes the frontlines, so forces can be relocated from other fronts into the offensive. Plus, there *are* some "Rohans" that haven't joined the fighting yet, besides the 20 thousand or so Helikean that stayed under Cat's authority, the League of Free Cities hasn't joined, and the Dwarves have yet to really fight, so far they have only provided material support.

[Liliet](#)

The dwarves are intending to commit when they launch an offensive on Keter itself, they won't come to defend Hainaut or they'd have committed ages ago.

The League of Free Cities is busy fighting itself, unfortunately.

And recapturing Haunaut **ALLOWS THE FRONTLINES TO BE PUSHED**, not redraws them automatically.

It's a significant strategic advantage, but it's not a win button.

Reader in The Night

The problem with Abigail coming into a Name is that the "reluctant general, cowardly genius" narrative is typically Above's, since it operates by leaning heavily on Providence. If Abigail came into a Heroic Name, you'd have the same problems as with Squire, only magnified a thousandfold because she's the commanding officer of one of Callow's Armies. The chain of command and authority straight-out goes to hell, not to mention Heroes possibly out-muscling Catherine from her own country.

Cicero

Maybe, but such a name like "the Fox" would probably be able to suit it's Role to serving under a villainous Queen – if that villainous Queen is better than the alternatives.

[Liliet](#)

The problems with Squire are specifically 1) high ruling name potential for this Name specifically, 2) the Penitent's Blade.

I don't think Abigail is in much danger of having plans for the throne, it's why Cat cultivates her in the first place.

And tbh I feel like she'd have a Neutral Name if any at all. Skill-based without a spice of Doing The Right Thing sounds like Neutral to me.

Javvies

Not necessarily.

Barring explicit indicators of being a Hero, ie tossing around Light, it is more likely that any Name Abigail gets would be assumed to be a Villainous Name, or at least a Villain iteration of a Neutral Name.

Javvies

Dammit, wasn't done yet.

Besides, Abigail's Story, as perceived by almost everyone except the Woe and probably Tariq, isn't that of a reluctant general or cowardly genius.

She's an excellent commander on the conventional measures, and backs that mundane expertise up with a mad and cunning genius, and probably an uncanny foresight, and possibly an uncanny amount of luck to cap it all off.

Plus she's Cat's handpicked military protege.

The Callowan Fox, perhaps.

Mental Mouse

I'm pretty sure that Cat would have no problem at all with a Heroic General who was utterly loyal to Callow. And lowborn to boot, so despite having earned a title she'll be no ally to the old nobility.

Liliet

> is typically Above's, since it operates by leaning heavily on Providence

I don't think this is valid logic.

Frivolous

I don't believe Revenants can form a band of five. Catherine's words in chapter 48: Hilltop, imply that the undead have little or no story weight.

The corollary of that is that bands of five don't work for Revenants in any useful manner.

Quotes here:

... but it won't be a great uplift like it would be with a living army. Undead armies already don't tire and don't have to worry about morale, there's just less for providence to give them.

"We might not have a story we can ride," I elaborated, "but we've got a lot of godsdamned heroes to weigh in on our side of the scales. That counts. Believe me when I say that, because unlike everyone else here I've fought armies with that many heroes attached before."

Burlyraven

Right, and that's part of the story. They'd be a bastard band without the power of friendship that comes with a normal band of five. They're five extraordinarily powerful Revenants that have gotten a large amount of screentime in this book and given everyone excessive trouble. It's very likely that whatever actual band is set to counter them will have members that mirror but are at a slight disadvantage to one of the Scourges individually, but cover each other as a team.

Frivolous

Burlyraven – You know, it occurred to me just now that, under normal circumstances, the obvious and logical thing for Keter to do would be to send the Scourges en masse to kill Catherine and the other Named.

I mean, if one Scourge is a nightmare, then the more the better, right? Or worse, from the Grand Alliance's point of view.

I now suspect that the reason Keter doesn't do that, and instead uses Scourges in small numbers of 1-3 at most, is that to send too many at once is to tempt Providence and/or Above to gift the heroes and maybe even the villains with the tools and luck they need to defeat all the Scourges.

This reasoning exactly parallels why Keter doesn't send demons and devils.

Mental Mouse

Also conservation of ninjitsu. Notice how with two or three Scourges together they slaughter soldiers but otherwise don't hit any plot markers... but when Varlet showed up by himself, he was able to kill arguably the top non-Named figure on the scene.

Mental Mouse

Nope, as Liliet notes, getting the gate up just gets them supplies – and as Cat and Pilgrim note, it raises the stakes considerably. From that point on, they *need* keep that city permanently, with every undead within range attacking, followed by every undead DK can ship to the vicinity.

They should probably get those Gigantes to raise their wards *first*, because once that gate goes up they'll be using it to GTF0.

Sortale

why is the 2nd army crossing back into creation? since they have to go back into the twilight way anyway, isn't it better for the 2nd army to wait in the twilight way while Prince Klaus army crossing in?

caoimhinh

I want to think it's because they wanted to bolster the forces of Klaus's column in order to secure the location in case of attack, but honestly it could be anything.

The concerns around why they can't feed the whole army put together but can feed it separated into columns are dubious, too. They *seem* to be based on real-life issues regarding the transport of supplies for armies during wars, but most of those don't apply with Twilight.

While in real life there are concerns around transportation going through a single road, making traffic of supplies slow, like how it is easier to send supplies to various Theatres of War and war fronts than taking them all to one front because there simply wouldn't be enough railways and trains for the supplies to make the trip in enough quantity, those concerns should not apply to the Twilight Ways. The whole realm is made to facilitate pleasant and quick travel, the Grand Alliance doesn't need to handle all the concerns that any company, country, etc. would face while shipping large quantities of goods through thousands of miles of road.

They don't even need to gather all goods into one caravan, but from various locations. Different goods probably come at different times because they need different measures of preservation, handling, etc. Like, their munitions supply don't come from the same place, the food, the coin, and the materiel also come from different places, and while there are advantages to gathering various goods in a single caravan, there are also advantages to sending different caravans of goods, and considerations related to the preservation of goods and their demand which changes priorities and decides schedules.

As an example, Concocter's supplies from the Arsenal wouldn't go through Salia, but the capitals of the Principate and key locations of the farmlands are likely used as "nodes" where various food, drinks, clothing, and other stuff is gathered before being sent as part of a caravan.

Also, physical gates can be used too, further boosting capacity.

A similar question is why does Cat (and the people who run the numbers and logistic exercise of running supply trains through Twilight) believe that "if we kept sending wagons, all the available priests and mages would be in the Twilight Ways. Either headed to the place getting supplied, or heading back to the place where the supplies were being sent for". Like...

Can't they just have the gate-openers in the places of arrival?

If you can scry into Twilight and back to coordinate the timing for the opening of ways, why waste the manpower of priests and mages taking the trip? One mage is enough for a whole caravan as the Communications Officer, and the priest and mages that are with the army can open the gates for the caravan to enter Creation.

And why does Cat imply the supplies can't arrive at the place where the armies are camped but somewhere close but still some distance away from the camp?

It's like this chapter is trying to justify the underuse of Twilight, but a lot of these provided "reasons" seem to have a lot of holes.

John

The Twilight Ways don't have a strict one-to-one correspondence with Creation. Without a permanent gate at the receiving end, a mage or priest simply can't "launch" a group of unescorted mundanes for a different free-roaming caster to "catch."

[Mental Mouse](#)

Adding to John's point about not being able to launch for another mage to catch, Twilight is big – I'm fairly sure that they can't, say, send two different armies in from separate points and have them join up within Twilight. (Ranger finding Amadeus would have been riding a different story).

[Liliet](#)

To elaborate on the two previous answers,
Rather than wandering a flat plain, think riding a train. You

cannot just get on a random one then wait for your end station to be built, that will not get you to that end station. All trains are going somewhere specific; if there's one going nowhere, it's not the one you want.

Morgenstern

It's the same problem as it was with all ways back in Arcadia. You need someone who can find the exit with you, or you won't find any at all (unless there is already a permanent gate you know and thus can send to). Also, the time the journey takes is different every time, as is the traversed space. There is no way to make the exit exact unless there's a stationary portal; the way and exit point changes every time, as the whole space you travel through changes every time. Even at her height as Winter Queen, Cat herself could not make pinpoint exit points, they would always only as exact as "a few kilometers off, about here or there".

Impaula

I don't completely understand how all the questions are answered by the replies above, so at the risk of repeating what was already implied, stated or obvious:

There aren't many mages outside the Order of the Red Lion who could scry (even with the Arsenal teaching scrying to any who could learn), or at least enough to be spared for a problem arguably of lower priority.

To send goods from different locations, the army should open almost as many communication lines (the requirements have to be given for the right amount of supplies at least for the case of multiple smaller armies with varying amounts of supplies in different locations). The number of mages required will still be high, since scrying can't be used for co-ordination. It may also make it more difficult for the Grand Alliance to keep track of everything.

I'm not sure how physical gates would be useful, on the supplies side, because a number of mages are still required to open the other end (one mage can't keep a gate open for long). A physical gate on the army side could work, as a few mages can regularly open gates at sufficiently frequent intervals and send the wagons to find their way to the Hainaut gate. The sender can either send a single steady stream (physical gate) or at frequent intervals (regular gates), but the receiver needs it either as a steady stream or with multiple parallel connections (several gates at once to receive).

If scrying were to be a common resource, it would probably neatly solve most of the issues, with physical gates making Twilight use even more efficient. It would not matter how many locations the goods come from, as each mage and priest can open a gate of their own to receive the goods.

As for the Second Army crossing into the Creation, I think the reason was clearly stated to be morale, besides many other possible reasons.

[anonymous4968](#)

You have to remember, these countries and armies are primarily based upon ancient and classical age armies. Back then you didn't have staggered resupply and separating your armies into groups was just starting to get used. The first time it was used in anything close to a modern context, as a reminder, was at the tail end of the Roman Empire, literally the end of the classical age. "Dark Age" armies were usually a lot smaller and used for a lot less time.

The classical era concept of the supply train was carrying everything you needed with you to prevent raiding. Staggered resupply was developed during the early-modern era to cope with increasingly larger armies and faster firing ranged weapons.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's got the same answer as caoimnh's question – Twilight isn't a "higher level in a platformer" that you can ascend to and descend from at will. They cannot set another exit point once they've entered, the path exists as a thread following a needle, and before making another journey they have to end this one. The rules are different for sidling Named, possibly, or random wanderings, but for a mundane army / large group of non-magical people that needs to get from point A to point B, they need to get off the train when it's their stop.

Bennett Palmer

Ordinarily I wouldn't be concerned about Abigail losing, but the fact that they are assuming she won without verification make me very nervous about her.

Morgenstern

As does the consideration that there might not be any (!?) Named with her to fight off Revenants, this chapter raised. Guess I have to go back and look that up. Did they really not leave *any* with her? That sounds like a very bad idea...

[Liliet](#)

Scribe.

Big I

I fully expect Abigail to either a) turn up with a last minute charge to save the day at the capital, or b) go off and burn the Dead King's bridge while everyone's focused elsewhere.

Insanenoodlyguy

Abigail gets blackout drunk celebrating the taking of the sisters, then comes to a day later on the march towards the bridge, having slurred out a plan so great everybody got behind it. She improves it twice over trying to improv through acting like she remembers any part of it.

LarsBlitzer

"AB-AB-ABIGAIL FOX! HERO OF CALLOW'S QUEEN!"

"What!? I never called myself that at all!!!"

"You mean you didn't come up with the 'Bitch-Slap the Dead King' plan?"

"I think I'd remember if I did!"

"But we've already smashed the bridge to flinders. See? The main host of the Dead are stymied. Hooray!"

Imposter syndrome intensifies

Juff

Typo Thread:

clean successes > clean success
and began to > and begun to
grievances voices > grievances voiced
was moment > was a moment
our pleas > out pleas
be tactics (missing verb)
going have access > going to have access
had been sent > had been set
bride > bridge
gate-opened > gate-opener

edrey

this feel like a trap, Dk is the most experience named so far, equal to the bard, there is no way he didnt know Hainut would be the last battle, its way too simbolic. the Dk make mistakes, sure, but so far in the strategic view he predicted everything. on the tactical level Cat had won so far but Hainut just feel like a trap to me

[sengachi](#)

It probably is. But, well, this is the Dead King. I strongly suspect that there was never any set of strategies that would get them through this war having only made secure and sensible decisions the Dead King hadn't booby trapped.

Beating him is a matter of luck, Providence, and doing enough back end work that you have an army physically capable of pulling out a victory when the time comes to march into the mouth of hell like they are now.

MrMaturity

Whats the bet that this book ends with Hainaut being re-captured by the dead, now with a permanent gate into the heart of Procer?

dadycool

They can't use the Twilight Ways. GP tried and almost succeeded in killing that BS Regen V guy by sending him through a Gate. It's basically the single concrete advantage they have that he can't simply overcome with enough time.

Kyle Wong

They can't **currently** use the Twilight Ways. I'm certain that if the Dead King gets access to a permanent portal to study that he will be able to create countermeasures against the realm. Even if he can't find a way to allow his undead to enter the Twilight Ways, he might be able to deny its use to Cat's armies. I could hypothetically see him creating zones where the Twilight Ways cannot be entered, a magical jammer that shuts any open portals, or making the land inside the realm impassably dangerous.

Mental Mouse

> I could hypothetically see him creating zones where the Twilight Ways cannot be entered, a magical jammer that shuts any open portals, or making the land inside the realm impassably dangerous.

The first one he can already do, as wards – remember Cat and her Drow strike force had to deal with that a few chapters ago. And while he probably can't "close every portal in the vicinity", both Revenants and Named have been able to break individual portals.

The third is probably a no-sell unless he can overpower Twilight as a whole. Note that any direct attack against/ into Twilight would probably require DK to risk at least a shard of his own soul – *he really doesn't like doing that, but the Ways are a big enough deal that he just might.*

Luxuria Tenebris

While the dead can't use it, as the chapter say the Dead King will have a permanent construct to study. And if there is one thing we can be sure of is that Neshamah, one of the greatest mages ever, can atleast learn something about the gates.

Sinead

Fun thought: Is it just Nemashah's creations that cannot use Twilight, or all undead?

If it's the latter, that makes an interesting thought experiment about Zombie III...

Liliet

Only Dead King's creations. Pilgrim hates him, specifically.

And yeah Zombie III was already speculated in-universe to be more of a summon attached to a dead body shell!

dadycoool

Maybe Winter's undead-raising is actually fae spirits inhabiting a dead body at their patron's command?

Liliet

I'm pretty sure this was Cat's conclusion/hypothesis, yeah

Mental Mouse

Adding to Liliet's note, Cat's Winter zombies weren't harmed by Light, to her opponents' consternation.

Liliet

That's the loss condition. Endgame. End of the story.

I don't think EE's intentions for the ending of Guide are "just kidding, actual apocalypse happened". Just... doesn't cap off the dramatic threads quite right.

beleester

In theory it might not be a loss, if the Named succeed at taking out the bridge and leave the enemy army in Hainaut stranded. But the book has dragged out for so long that I can't imagine there'd be yet more battles after the siege.

On the other hand, I'm not writing off the idea that Neshamah could find a way to turn the Ways on them in some way. Imagine, they're forced up in Hainaut, the permanent gate is ready, they're waiting on the first reinforcements from the capital... and then the Drake steps out in a Ways-proof suit of armor for a final boss fight. That would be a hell of a twist.

Liliet

It would not be a good twist, I would say.

The thing is, the Grand Alliance's side is already at a huge disadvantage logistically. Living soldiers tire, require food, etc. Technically undead have a weak point in their Bind officers that the living don't, but even a living army will be at a huge disadvantage with their officers killed, even the Legions.

The Ways are the only thing they have that's even the reason they still haven't lost the war. It doesn't balance the scales so much as give them a remote chance in hell. If they lose that? That's endgame. DK can simply portal his armies/Revenants wherever the hell he likes, and there's nothing the living can do about it.

Daniel E

Would be funny as hell though. "In local news, a small fan-fiction community simultaneously burned down the internet while committing seppuku. And now sports."

Hitogami

This is shaping up to be an epic battle. I'm so excited for her Name and aspects

Soronel Haetir

Interesting that her Speaking came so close to working on GP.

Sparsebeard

With all the gates used last chapter and the fact that Cat wants to create a permanent gate in the Capital, I wonder if "Gate" won't end up one of her aspects... she HAS been using portals for quite a while now (lakeomancy is a sub-domain of portalamancy).

sengachi

Or maybe Connect, or Bridge, or something similar. It seems like she's growing into a diplomacy/authority/coalition-building Name, so I feel like any Aspects she gets will at least pull double duty on that front.

Halinn

I think dumping lakes on people is a very authoritative statement.

[sengachi](#)

Cat's aspect for lakeomancy is Offer, as in "An offer you can't refuse". XD

mamm0nn

Wait, they left absolute no Named with Abigail? I thought they took along half, or most. But no one was left with her, and we expect her to have won the Sisters and not get killed when we know that there are several capable Revenants around there?

Halinn

Just priming the situation for her to receive a name in the nick of time to turn the tide of a battle

medailyfun

at least Scribe

mamm0nn

True. So I guess Cat's comment of there being no Named is wrong, even if there's truly no combat Named there.

Aotrs Commander

"If that bride up north got built..."

I'm sorry, I know its a typo and exactly what was meant, but I suddenly had a vivid image of a cackling Neshimah assembling some sort of horrifying necromantic-construct-robot-wife and going "soon, my dear, soon..." and it was hilarious,

[Liliet](#)

-has been playing Curse of Strahd recently-

hmm

superkeaton

Ca's dominion over Named, some kind of arbitration or mediation it seems, is growing. I wonder if there's a point where it would work on the Bard or the Hidden Horror.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's Speaking has already worked on Bard before, in Book 2. She's vulnerable to this sort of thing, as she's always the minor side character in stories she weaves.

Patrick Herke

So the image that popped into my head was that of Cat forcing both to sit down with each other for couples counseling. And being like, "So I know you're both terrible people, but lets go over your problems with each other. And maybe we can find a solution that doesn't involve me removing both of you from existence." (all with a smile)

Tattletale

Not sure if this is my paranoia acting up, but I find the fact that Catherine is referring to Tariq by name and Hanno by his Name in her inner monologue very fucking ominous.

ohJohN

Looking back through this chapter, the text refers to him as Hanno 5 times and White Knight 5 times (she also addresses him out loud once, as White Knight, but that seems more appropriate for the context).

Conversely, there are 3 instances of Tariq and 5 of Pilgrim/Grey Pilgrim (Cat never addresses him out loud, but it's worth noting that one of the GP instances is in literal-thought italics).

I think it's paranoia; EE makes a habit of varying how characters are referred to throughout a chapter (e.g. Black/my father/the green-eyed man) and based on the numbers it's actually Tariq who's referred to more often by his Name than his name.

[Liliet](#)

at least neither of them are the green-eyed man

I cannot get over how fucking stupid addressing Black as that every other time is, especially when it's meant to be "pale green" rather than "vivid green you can spot as such even from a distance". Seeing his eye color through his helmet visor takes the cake though. Anime eyes Black / glowing eyes Black... ;u;

ohJohN

I like the variation – it keeps the text from getting too repetitive, and the descriptors are often helpful reminders of appearance/context for new characters or ones who haven't shown up in a while.

And, like, just because he's referred to as "the green-eyed man" doesn't literally mean Cat is able to see his eyes at that moment, you know? It's a striking physical characteristic she associates with him, and it's not like it's liable to change without direct observation – same as how she can refer to Hakram as "the tall orc" when he's not even in the room for her to check his height or race.

[Liliet](#)

HANNO

HANNO WAS THE ONE WHO DISCERNED HIS EYE COLOR THROUGH THE HELMET

anyway it's just a little silly. deep POV writing means that the way narration phrases things is the way the POV character is thinking about them, and by that measure Amadeus HIMSELF regularly thinks of himself as a "green eyed man".

I do also appreciate the reminders of the characters' appearance, do not misunderstand me. I am a great fan of anime as well.

It's just... fucking hilarious.

Morgenstern

She's done this before. It's (at least was) just a stand-in for their (former) closeness.

Xinci

Mhm, the groove gives you authority, be they gods or monsters. Anyway, Cat may have somewhat dropped the ball there, in that she could have framed it as a story so those mutineer captains could actually understand why they were doing what they were doing. She was caught up in her Name developments and her grief for the second army though, so she did one of her bad habits and lashed out at those who she saw as getting in her way instead of spreading out her perspective to their story as a group of people. Which if she did, she could probably come to a workable solution for the people there. Of course that may have infringed on Hanno's contemplation of justice, so it may be good that she didn't do so.

[Liliet](#)

More importantly, these people tried to get her to undermine her subordinate's decision by going over his head.

Cat does not abide that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They're not only in a military context, but in a do-or-die situation. As she noted, the delay they caused will cost lives, likely more numerous than the mutineers themselves. That noble's lucky Cat let him walk it back at all.

rwil02

the "bride" instead of "bridge"
"gate-opened" instead of "gate-opener"

[Mental Mouse](#)

It occurs to me that Drake is probably going to be sent off to be somebody else's problem, because at this point the protagonists have demonstrated they actually know how to kill him for good. He may have escaped by a trick the last time, but that's not likely to work twice.

And if he goes to bother Abigail, she may manage to kill him through sheer paranoia! "This is the regenerating guy? Ok, first nail him with a lucky copperstone, and have the priests keep bathing him in Light while we scoop up some acid from those constructs, and dig a goblinfire charge out of stores. Then use an unraveler for good measure."

Patrick Herke

And you three go figure out more shit we can do to him. That's your job until he's dead

[aran](#)

Oh neat, she has an epithet already! Name can't be far behind then, right?

[aran](#)

"But that is needed, my queen," General Zola said.

I'm definitely missing something regarding gate mechanics here. Why wouldn't it be enough to have casters stay at either end, opening the gate each time a caravan arrives or departs? Maybe there's no fixed correspondence between locations in the Nether Twilight Ways and ~~the overworld~~ Creation?

Chapter 72: Omen

"As the long summer dies the wolves will dance with the sons of the king, and though cities will fall in the end the only victor will be death."

– Extract from the prophetic 'Book of Manifold Dooms', by the Augur Kaspar Reitzenberg (widely considered useless, as it foretells events both past and future without drawing distinction)

The city of Hainaut was a beautiful sight.

When I'd first laid eyes on it, last summer, the majesty of it had startled me. The capital had been built atop a tall and precipitously steep plateau – at its highest point it must have been at least three hundred feet going down in a straight line – that jutted out of the valley in more or less the shape of a hand laid flat, with the fingers in that description representing a gradually declining slope headed down towards the valley floor. A butte, which was the Proceran name for a hill so tall and narrow it was almost as a pillar of rock, jutted out slightly to the left of where the 'fingers' began, almost like the point of thumb. The most eye-catching part aside from the height, though, was the pale white wall circling around the city occupying the plateau heights. From closer up the ramparts of pale granite were revealed to be more of a pale grey with impurities, but at a distance and in the morning light it looked like the capital was crowned by walls of white stone.

"It is grand city, this Hainaut," the Apprentice said in a hushed tone. "I studied among the schools in the high hills of Ashur, yet even their splendour pales in comparison."

"It's pretty enough," the Squire conceded. "Seems like a lot of trouble, though. I hope they have good wells, or it's going to be a bloody walk down and back up that slope every morning with full buckets."

I swallowed a grin and Hakram gave me a rather droll look. I'd made a comment not too dissimilar after having my first look at it. I suspected the shared experience of having had the water chore – fetching buckets for baths or cleaning – had led to a shared skepticism of living anywhere water would need to be brought uphill.

"There is not a speck of romance in you," the Ashuran mage reproached him.

"Romance I want out of a lover," Arthur Foundling snorted, "but out of a city, I much prefer functioning sewers. Gods, just

imagine if it doesn't rain up there for a month and the drains go dry. The *stink*."

I cocked an eyebrow at Hakram. Boy had a point. Mind you, the Vaudrii – the Alamans tribe that'd first settled here – had not been idiots. They'd not just picked the place because it'd look nice from a distance.

"Almost a fourth of the plateau, like a teardrop at the centre, is taken up by a great pool that the locals call *le Bassin Gris*," Adjutant informed both the young heroes. "It is fed by rain, which is frequent in these parts, but also by several great underground aquifers. Though you cannot see it from where we stand, near the back of the city there is a waterfall going over the edge of the cliff."

"See?" the Apprentice triumphantly said. "It was a sound notion, and soundly executed. You simply cannot stand to seen anyone spending coin anything but a good horse or sordidly unseasoned meat stew."

"If I seasoned it the way you do, Sapan, my skin might just turn permanently red," the Squire drily replied. "And a good horse is a sounder investment than white walls by any reasonable measure. The wall's stuck in the same place, and you can't ride it."

Hakram cleared his throat and both youngbloods immediately went silent, looking somewhat guilty at having bickered into front of us even if it'd been amicably. The orc was only amused, though. He'd been in a good mood all morning. Some of that no doubt had to do with the way that he wasn't sitting in a chair and instead standing on his own, though he was leaning heavily against iron-bound crutches. Even the leg he'd not lost had become weak in the time he'd spent without using it, so standing for more than a few moments at a time was both tiring and painful to him. Leaning on the crutches took the edge off that, though Masego had ordered me not to let him do it for too long. Orc musculature was different from that of humans, so doing this would actually begin pinching a muscle in his armpit that humans didn't have.

"Princess Beatrice told me that about a century back they had to make laws about not throwing filth and detritus into the Bassin Gris," I idly added. "It'd gotten so tainted the locals were calling it the Brown Basin instead, so now there's a designated point for that near the waterfall. All the sewer drains lead there as well."

"See," Arthur Foundling smugly grinned at the other Named. "I told you-"

Adjutant cleared his throat again, which killed that in the crib, and glanced at me reproachfully. I shrugged, unrepentant. Laure rats stuck together, at least to the extent that wasn't going to

get me killed. The White Knight had rather frankly told me that there simply was no one in a position to take the Squire as even an informal apprentice, at the moment, so he saw no need to move the boy from his current placement. For the moment at least. That'd been with the understanding that I wasn't just going to put Arthur in a padded box somewhere into total isolation from other Named, though, so I'd arranged to have him introduced to a few people. Apprentice, whose given name I had recently learned was Sapan, was one of them. On the heroic side, I'd also presented him to both Roland and the Silver Huntress.

I wasn't going to pretend I'd not chosen those names and Names carefully – Apprentice both young and based far away, the Silver Huntress raised by Ranger and uninterested in power games, the Rogue Sorcerer both charismatic and opposed to certain aspects of traditional heroics – but I'd been careful never to actually hinder him in any way. I was well aware of how badly that story could turn on me if I dipped my toe in it. Apprentice was a peer in age and power, Roland was highly distinguished as both a researcher and a combat mage as well as one of the most broadly travelled of the heroes, the Silver Huntress was a frequent leader of bands of five. All of these connections might one day be of use, to a young man with ambitions to make a name for himself.

That they were also unlikely to be connections that came around to bite either myself or my legacy in the ass was, of course, a mere fortunate coincidence.

In the distance there were sudden flashes of light that caught everyone's attention. They were coming from atop the butte on the side of the plateau, a thick pillar of stone topped by a tall watchtower that was best known by Hainaut folk as *la Veilleuse*. The prelude to our retaking of the capital had begun. A small mixed force led by Named – the White Knight, the Silent Guardian and the Vagrant Spear – would come out of the Twilight Ways, a frontline of Osenia slayers brutally scything through whatever dead held the place. In small, tight places like the halls and stairs of a watchtower I'd seen few warriors more deadly than Lady Aquiline's nimble pack of killers. Robber, who'd skirmished at their side more than once, had admitted to me that even goblins were wary of getting in close with that lot. The slayers were unusually quick, for humans, and years of monster-hunting meant that those with bad habits had already been thinned from the herd.

"Can I ask," the Squire hesitantly began, "why we are bothering to take the watchtower?"

I hesitated. Teaching that one anything would always carry risks, and as long as he didn't have a formal mentor the risks were even sharper.

"I am curious as well," the Apprentice admitted. "There are barely any dead in there, I was made to understand. Should our efforts not be concentrated on the gates?"

I decided, after a heartbeat, that shared curiosity diluted this to an acceptable level.

"The gates are what we're aiming at by taking the *Veilleuse*," I said. "It's because of the way Hainaut was built."

"There is only one way in and out of the city," Adjutant told them. "The Ivory Gates, a set of seven great gates. When the city was still inhabited they were each dedicated to allowing certain people in or out – one of the gates, the one in the middle, was even dedicated to solely the Volignacs and those they favoured."

"Very orderly," the Apprentice said, sounding pleasantly surprised. "I'd heard of the Ivory Gates in my lessons, but the Rogue Sorcerer never mentioned this."

Ashurans, I thought with distaste. I expected they wouldn't even mind the Hells too much, if they were set up with proper citizenship tiers and open for trade.

"The city was built with the expectation it would have to be held against raids and armies," I said. "So beyond the natural defences the ancient Volignacs laboured on the land some. It used to be that the slope going up to the walls and the gates was relatively even all around, but over the years they dug a much steeper slope and left just a broad ramp going up to the gates. Actually taking this city, when it's being defended, is bloody work. I'm told the last time the Princes of Arans tried to storm this place, the Volignacs just pushed great round boulders over the walls and let Creation do the rest."

Both young heroes winced at the thought. Yeah, even I had been impressed by that particular historical anecdote. It was typical of the line, apparently. House Volignac was noticeably poorer in coin and manpower than all three of its neighbouring royal rivals, but it'd not lost a significant amount of land to any of them in about a century. As far as I could tell, they'd remained in power largely by being utterly savage at anyone who crossed their borders while simultaneously marrying into the royal houses that were enemies to their enemies.

"That's almost in the same league as Summerholm," the Squire said, visibly impressed.

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "It's significantly inferior, and that's actually what got Princess Julienne Volignac – Princess Beatrice's sister and predecessor – killed. Those gates and that path are the *only* way in and out of the city. So when the dead broke the Iron Prince's defensive line up north and

poured into the central valley, the city was a nightmare to evacuate."

Hainaut city wasn't that large by Proceran standards, maybe sixty to seventy thousand people, but that was a *lot* of scared civilians wanting to keep their earthly possessions going through the same cramped streets to reach the same seven measly gates. The way Klaus Papenheim told it, at the height of the panic it had taken literal days to get a cart from the centre of the city to the Ivory Gates. People had slept in the streets instead of their homes so no one would take their place while they were gone.

"Julienne Volignac rode out with most of her mounted retinue to buy enough time for her people to flee," Adjutant soberly said. "Not a single horseman from that charge returned."

That put a bit of pall on the mood, so I moved on quickly.

"Essentially, going up that ramp and taking the gates from Keter would be a messy business," I said. "The moment our presence was revealed, the dead moved most of their garrison to defend those gates and the plaza behind them. While we *could* use the Ways to enter the city directly, the Dead King has proved in the past that he's capable of putting a temporary lock on gating in the region so it'd be a risk – it could close after our vanguard got through and then the troops would be stuck in the middle of an enemy-held city."

"I still do not see the use of taking the watchtower," the Apprentice admitted.

"The upper half of the tower," I told her, "is significantly higher than the rest of the capital."

Arthur Foundling started.

"Engines," he said. "You had siege engines moved in through the Ways as well as the soldiers."

I smiled. Clever boy.

"Before long our sappers will have them in place and we will be able to begin firing," I confirmed. "Straight into the undead so very tightly packed into the plaza right behind the gates."

The enemy had meant to make that place into a meat grinder that it would cost us dearly to clear, focusing on causing damage to our army rather than defending the city properly since the garrison the Dead King had left in here was simply too small to hold it against us. We'd been disinclined to allow that, though the watchtower tactic had actually been suggested by Lady Aquiline. Girl had a knack for sliding the knife in where it

hurt, couldn't deny that. Dominion leadership was coming along nicely in some ways, and I suspected that after all this should some Arlesite princes try their hand at a border war with Levant they would be in for a rude awakening. The Blood hadn't stayed in charge of Levant as long as it had by being slow to learn lessons.

"What happens if they then retreat into the city itself?" the Apprentice asked. "Would it not be hard fighting to clear the capital street by street?"

"To some extent, but less than you believe," Hakram told her. "If they abandon the Ivory Gates then we will take them, and the moment we do sending soldiers into the city through gates is no longer as risky."

"Ah," the Apprentice murmured. "Because even if the ritual lock is deployed, the forces in the city will be able to reinforce the vanguard by foot."

I nodded in approval. That was pretty much it. If the enemy dug in further into the city, using street barricades and ambushes, we could essentially overturn that entire set of tactic by gating in soldier behind the chokepoints they were trying to hold against us and striking at them from the back.

"It seems like a flawless strategy," the Squire admitted.

I winced.

"Don't say that," I said, and he jumped in surprise. "Never say that."

"I... apologize, Your Majesty?" he tried.

"There's no surer way to get Fate to piss on your plans than calling them infallible," I sharply said. "I once saw the Tyrant of Helike tip a winning fight the other way just by boasting about how godsdamned invincible he was."

The little bastard had done it on purpose, but the point stood.

"Same goes for you," I told the Apprentice, tone softening. "You lot won't get your knuckles rapped as immediately as a villain making the same boast would, but there's a reason that most heroes are intimately familiar with the concept of tragic irony."

They both mumbled chastened agreements, and for a moment the entire situation felt like some sort of fever dream I'd stumbled into. Hakram, ever a prince among men, delivered me from that unsettling sensation.

"We're due for a show soon, so I'd keep your eyes on the sky," Adjutant gravelled. "Our ram is about to strike."

I cocked my head to the side, taking a sniff from the air, and nodded in agreement. Yeah, I could feel it too. Like a storm in the making.

"I'd not heard about the Volignac men taking siege weapons with them," Arthur said, sounding surprised. "The opposite, in fact. The sappers were vocally disapproving."

Which usually meant insulting deeply limericks, if they were feeling nice.

"While I mean no insult to the siegecraft of the Army of Callow, rams and trebuchets won't dent a structure enchanted the way the Ivory Gates were," the Apprentice said. "I am told the foundational enchantments were laid by the famous wizard Yvon de Grandpré himself. The gates were made beyond decay and strength of arms, Your Majesty, so mere engines could do nothing."

She paused.

"Unless the Rogue Sorcerer is sent out," Sapan added. "He *is* a noted spellbreaker."

"The enchantments don't actually make the gate unbreakable, Apprentice," I noted.

In the abstract, according to Trismegistan principles it was possible to achieve but the degree of power and precision required would be impossible. Akua had noted that 'physical invincibility', as she had termed it, would require an empire's worth of sorcery simply to empower a handkerchief. And that was just the formula itself, never touching the trickier issue of materials: almost every substance known to us would shatter under that kind of strain, or some cases be outright disintegrated. And while Jaquinite magic did work in some wonky and counter-intuitive ways – it was godsdamned ridiculous that imitating the cadence and syllables of certain passages of the Book of All Things should empower and stabilize a spell – its fundamental limits weren't actually too different from those of Trismegistan sorcery.

"There's protections against entropies – rust, erosion, rot – and the centrepiece is the famous 'dual enchantment' that made Yvon famous," I said.

Famous mostly to avid scholars of magic, but I did have a distressing amount of those in my circle of closest friends.

"The strengthening of material and the reflection of force," Apprentice admiringly said.

Basically what good ol' Yvon whatshisname had done was he'd made the gates and surrounding stonework denser than those materials

actually were, which in practice made them much tougher. But that wouldn't be enough to actually stop something like, say, a wyrm if the construct decided it *really* wanted to go through those gates. So another enchantment, bound to the other one – that was the impressive part, supposedly, since it ensured that since the magics were linked they'd never clash and erode at each other – had been laid that reflected physical impacts when they struck at the Ivory Gates. There was a hard limit to how much power could be reflected, but it's still been very clever: a trebuchet stone tossed at the Ivory Gates would actually lose a lot of its momentum from the reflection, so it wouldn't be powerful enough to dense the denser materials.

It also gave a pale sheen to the materials when they were touched by light at certain angles, which had earned them the eventual name of 'Ivory Gates'.

Masego had noted the pairing to be quite clever, allowing the enchantments to effectively replicate the effects of much stronger spells for significantly less power expended – meaning there'd be a lot less decay in the magic over the years. The enchantments would have faded some over the years, of course, that was their nature. It was why both Praesi and my people usually preferred wards when it came to permanent defences. Wards were a set boundary forcing certain properties onto Creation and requiring a physical anchor, but they were also static. So long as the anchor was undamaged, any idiot with magic could add magic into the wards to keep them going. Enchantments, on the other hand, were an investment of sorcery into matter to achieve specific properties. Eventually that initial investment of sorcery would fade, and while the enchantment could be restored by another mage it was kind of like repainting a faded painting.

Unless you had a mage of similar or superior talent who understood exactly how that initial enchantment worked and what it meant to do, then there were going to be imprecisions and those were going to keep accumulating and diluting the original effect.

"Yup," I said. "We figure that since it's been about two hundred years since those enchantments were laid there's got to be at least six to ten major imprecisions from patch-up jobs by other wizards. Most of those are bound to be centred about the 'reflection' enchantment, since it's the most abstract and difficult of the two."

"You lost me some time back, Your Majesty," the Squire admitted.

Fair enough. At his age I'd not more or less fuck all about magic too. The wind began to pick up around us, as far away in the distant sky red eddies of power rippled. Among them I could see a faint dot around which the eddies were concentrated.

"There we go," I said, pointing at the dot. "Here's our ram."

"Nothing that small could break the gates," the Apprentice skeptically said.

The Squire laughed.

"I'd heard about this," Arthur Foundling said. "But I didn't actually think it was true."

The heroine shot him an irritated look and I took pity on her.

"It's not a thing," I said. "It's a person."

She started in surprise.

"That's insane, who could actually-"

The eddies of pulsing red contracted, spinning on themselves, and with a deafening detonation the Mirror Knight was shot down at the Ivory Gates at a speed that would have been enough to shred most Named to pieces. Unfortunately we didn't have a great angle from where we stood, so we didn't get to see him hit the gates, but there was a heartbeat of silence and then a detonation even louder than the last as all seven of the Ivory Gates went up in a cloud of stone and smoke and power.

"What?" Sapan croaked out. "*What?*"

"The Mirror Knight has an aspect related to reflection," I mildly said. "So when that nifty little enchantment reflects force outwards, it just goes right back."

"That was enough for an explosion?" the Squire asked, impressed.

"Aspects are finicky creatures, as you will learn," Adjutant grumbled. "In this case, after study the Grey Pilgrim determined that not only does the aspect slightly raise force before reflecting it but, by one of those caprices of Names, it counts every 'threat' individually."

We'd lost Arthur again, but the young girl gasped.

"Yeah," I coldly smiled. "So each of those patch-up jobs tacked onto that original reflection enchantment counted like a different 'threat' to reflect, and since they all drew on the same investment of power the Mirror Knight ended up hitting maybe six seven times harder than he should have because of that heartbeat of reflection games. Comparable to being hit by a mountain in the shape of a man, I'm told."

So Christophe de Pavanie had shredded the enchantment trying to contain him with that excess of force, which in turn had unwoven the enchantment that was bound to that reflection enchantment –

the density one. With that suddenly coming loose, massive force and a bunch of sorcery bursting out the results were the plume of smoke and gravel going the better part of a mile upwards.

"That's really neat," the Squire said.

"And completely *insane*," the Apprentice heatedly added.

"Look, over the years a lot of people are going to tell you that *something* always wins," I said. "Power, cleverness, brute strength, preparations. And it's all bullshit."

I jutted a thumb at the desolation we'd dealt in about the time it took to boil a kettle of water.

"That looks like the work of two Named," I said, "but that's all it is, a look. It took half a dozen people to achieve that. The Mirror Knight and the Witch of the Woods went through the fact, but behind that? It was the Pilgrim that figured out the peculiarities of the aspect. It was the Rogue Sorcerer that was familiar with the enchantments, and the Hierophant that ran the numbers so we were sure that the gates would be smashed without it killing the Mirror Knight. And it's not just Named, either."

I leaned forward.

"Princess Beatrice was the one who was able to tell us how many times the enchantments would have gotten worked on, and how good the wizards paid for would have been," I said. "Without that, the rest was just air."

"So what *does* win?" Arthur Foundling quietly asked.

"Nothing," I said. "There is no single thing that gets you there, Squire. No one has the skills to do it all on their own – even my teacher, a man who spent his entire life learning how to twist and turn stories, got his heart ripped out in the Free Cities because he was facing someone who just... knew more. You want to know what the trick is?"

I shrugged.

"Don't do it alone."

I gestured at the smoke again.

"See, maybe I could have battered down those gates using Night," I said, "and maybe the Witch of the Woods could have ripped them off the ground, tossed them up in the sky. Maybe the White Knight could have carved his way through with Light, or the Rogue Sorcerer broken the enchantments and so an assault could follow. All of those answers, though, would have cost us in some way."

I forced myself to refocus on the pair instead of simply the orphan watching me as if spellbound, the Ashuran mage studying me closely as well.

"So instead half a dozen people sat down, kids," I told them, "and talked. Shared skills, shared powers, shared knowledge. And then we smashed those fucking gates without losing a single soldier."

I let that sink in for a moment.

"It's a big world," I said. "There's more than one pair of shoulders keeping it from falling. You don't have to do it all alone."

In the distance, a banner rose. A golden griffin rampant on blue, crowned by three golden daffodils. And under the ancient banner of House Volignac boots hit the ground at the bottom of the ramp leading up to the smoking gates, the men and women who'd fled this place with bitter tears three years ago returning to the city they had lost.

Swords cleared scabbards, glimmering under the sun, and with a roar the last soldiers of Hainaut came home.

—

We held the city by midafternoon.

There were still undead in hiding, waiting to serve as spies and inside forces when the Dead King came to besiege us, but the streets were ours and we were combing the capital for the infiltrators house by house. When it'd become clear the fight was over the dead had turned to sabotage, lighting fires and fouling the Bassin Gris, but it'd been nothing unexpected. There'd been fires when the capital was first taken, so the most flammable of the neighbourhoods had already gone up in flames and the humid summer air meant it was not easy for the arson to spread. As for the great pool of water, we'd put our mages to purifying it under Hierophant and already there'd been measurable success. With constant rotations of mages for the ritual, Zeze was confident that by dawn the pool would be fully restored.

Princess Beatrice gallantly offered to cede me the right to live in the ancient palace of her house, as I was the highest ranking noble and officer in the city, but I declined. I'd rather let her savour the comeback, and besides the place was too large for my comfort. I'd rather a smaller, more easily defensible place I could cover in layers of wards. I put Robber on the task, shaking him loose from Pickler – who was designing a replacement for the Ivory Gates with Akua and Roland as designated magical specialists – and was rather pleased with what he found me. It

was a large guildhouse for what had been a guild of cheesemongers, with a small adjoining estate and two side wings. Well-located, in the southeast of the city but not too close or too far from the water.

Adjutant had begun rustling up mages to install wards and organizing guard watches before Robber even told me of the place, so I left it in his hands and instead headed to the open plaza that Princess Beatrice had suggested as the most fitting location for a Twilight Gate being raised. It'd been a good pick, exactly as the princess had described: Althazac Square was large and about as square-like as the name claimed. More importantly, it was located at the confluence of four major avenues, including the great street that circled through most of the capital like an unfinished ring. Supply wagons would be able to flow in without getting stuck in sidestreets. I sent a runner to give me agreement to the location, hoping the Blessed Artificer would be as up to it as she believed she would be.

I'd wanted Roland to be the one opening a gate, but he'd been quite firm in declining. Something about his talents being poorly suited to it. He'd seemed genuinely worried about the outcome, so I'd let it go. Masego and I had already forged a gate together and the Ways got... snippy when you tried to do it more than once, so like it or not Adanna of Smyrna was our best bet. I sent for her and we were discussing how long it would take her to begin the attempt – apparently a lot less than anticipated if healing priests and the Pilgrim leant a hand – when warning horns were sounded from the very same watchtower we'd taken that morning. An army approaching, it meant. I left the Artificer to it and saddled my horse, riding for the closest rampart and intercepting a report on my way. It was not an enemy army, I learned, but a surprise nonetheless. The Fourth Army, which should be at the Cigelin Sisters right now, had emerged from the Twilight Ways and was now approaching at a brisk pace.

That much was already unexpected, but even more so a particular detail I picked out after limping my way to the edge of the rampart. There was a banner flying above the advancing vanguard of the Fourth that I knew well, for it was my own – the Sword and Crown. That was not unusual, as every host within the Army of Callow had received one such standard when first founded. This wasn't a standard, though, but a formal banner.

Aside from me there was exactly one person alive that had the right to fly it, and her name was Vivienne Dartwick.

Big Brother

Oh, the Woe are back together again, it seems.

Insanenoodlyguy
haihappen

The chapter title is "Omen". That can't be good.

Miles

So many flags in this chapter. The prophecy saying the only victor will be death, a statement of what could go wrong (but nothing did yet), both rulers in the same theater of the war... yeah.

Only I don't understand how Viv is supposed to have met up with Abigail, unless she was there the whole time.

[Liliet](#)
[gpptmarvin](#)

If it wasn't clear I'm pretty sure the "prophecy" at the top refers to the fall of Keter, not what's going on in the present.

therealgridlock

It's also an extremely apt description of the graveyard of princes.

And, since it's described as describing past and future with no distinction... Maybe it's both?

Anomandris

Abigail – " Please don't kill me for this, but Scribe 'accidently' made my noble name Dartwick!"

Sir Nil

Is this the first instance of metagaming aspects so far?

caoimhinh

What do you mean?

Sir Nil

Well, pretty much just figuring out all the limits and specific workings of something, then use it in an extremely specific way for great effect. Here it would be MK's reflection aspect being a multiplier and reflecting each individual instance of the damage reflected by the Ivory

Gates. Leading to the huge explosion. A better phrase might be Rules Lawyering the specific wording of an ability, but since most of the Aspects are pretty simple I feel like it hasn't shown up till now.

Javvies

Eh ... I mean, we know that Antigone, the Witch of the Woods already enjoyed her habit of using Mirror Knight as a projectile against undead constructs.

That said, I think this is probably the first time we explicitly know that somebody did the math on the exact capabilities of a specific Aspect and the target for a specific operation.

On the other hand ... where is the line between something like that and Cat's lakeomancy and gating tricks (especially early on) or magical or Named rituals, especially those involving or interacting with Aspects going to be drawn?

Actually, I suspect that Warlock's Imbricate Aspect may have involved working out the math to use it to best effect, even if it was a shortcut. Unless it's a different Aspect of his I'm thinking of. But we don't know for sure.

Sir Nil

I meant in a way that's less about maths but more about the specific interactions between two different things, that's why I wouldn't count Lakeomancy, it's smart but it still only relies on one side doing gate tricks, similar to Warlock's Imbricate which I recall overlapped different planes of creation and since it is just an upgraded version of Cat's trick I wouldn't count that. I'm more so thinking along the lines of them knowing how two different things would interact beforehand. They worked out MK's and the Ivory Gate's reflect would create an infinite loop until one side broke. Ritual casting I suppose could count but we haven't gotten any specifics of that, like how specific aspects would work together when used in conjunction. Especially those not originally meant to be made to work together.

beleester

Yeah, this interaction feels significantly more rules-lawyery than most. Normally an Aspect either has an obvious, hard limit (Rise works three times per day), or a vague "power supply" limit (Black gets exhausted if he tries to Lead too many people or Destroy something too big). This is the first time where the fine details have really mattered – someone sat down and asked "So, what counts as an 'attack'".

for the purposes of Reflect? Is it a single application of force? A force applied over a certain amount of time? Does Reflect have a limit on the number of hits it can reflect with one usage?"

And even when you do understand the details, some Aspects are just not that amenable to rules-lawyering. For instance, Black has clearly sat down with his aspects and thought "Okay, Destroy works on one object, is it limited by size? Can I destroy sorcery as well? What about Hanno's past lives, can I Destroy that?" but it all fits pretty well with the ordinary definition of "destroy." No matter how much you rules-lawyer it, it's only going to blow shit up. Here, we've got the Mirror Knight making an argument that *crashing into something* counts as an attack he can Reflect, which is a pretty damn impressive bit of rules-lawyering.

Liliet

The funny bit is, I think that's the intended meaning of the Aspect, not a rules-lawyering. They're abusing the hell out of it, but Mirror Knight was always about "fuck you, your eye doesn't get to hit my fist back".

Zoolimar

Actually crushing into the gates didn't count as attack. Ivory Gates had multiple damage reflection enchantments pasted over each other. Total power of enchantments was more or less the same as it was initially but due to being done by different people Mirror Knight's Aspect counted them as separate attacks and smacked them right back with sevenfold power.

Rey d`Tutto

Which sevenfold power then destroys enough of its paired Density enchantment to destabilize it completely. Which decompressed... Explosively!

Javvies

There might have been some bouncing between the Gate's defensive magic and the Mirror Knight's Reflect Aspect involved, each cycle increasing the amount of stain on each until the Gate's defenses broke first. Depending. It's not entirely clear whether it was just the one sequence or multiple cycles of mutual reflection and augmentation being iterated through.

It doesn't really make a difference either way. At least for this point in the story, though if it was

multiple cycles, it's possible that it's a trick that could be useful and repeated against other targets. Assuming, of course, that there are targets worth using this trick on that have the same or a similar sort of vulnerability.

Mithyc

MK feels like he plays off of Newtonian physics in all honesty. It's basically a magnified reaction combined with the reaction having minimal, if any, effect on him.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm. There was the way Diabolist outplayed Cat, expecting her to gate into Arcadia and preparing accordingly.

[Mental Mouse](#)

On consideration, Hanno's heavy use of Recall probably qualifies, especially once Cat got involved.

softle

To this degree, definetly

Frivolous

Very nice chapter.

I note that of those heroes introduced to Arthur; Rogue Sorcerer, Apprentice, and Silver Huntress; two are women and the man is straight, so none of them would be a possible lover or rebound infatuation.

Something I found in book 5, chapter 50: Sunset, that has a more sinister meaning now that we know Catherine can Speak again:

"If you feel like you're winning," Indrani said, "the single stupidest thing you can do is let Catherine Foundling talk. Go on, Tariq. Before she turns it around on us."

From now on, fighting Catherine will involve in part keeping her silent so she can't Speak at you. Though I wonder if Speaking works on the undead.

Bennett Palmer

That isn't how Speaking works. You need some sort of authority over someone to Speak at them. Unless Catherine has an aspect that effects how Speaking works, like Malicia does, she can only speak to gain control over subordinates just like anyone else.

Frivolous

Catherine was able to Speak to the talking heads in the Tower. She had no authority over them, right?

They were even undead, probably. As in, they were dead and still talking, so maybe.

BritishTeaLover

She was Named, which gives a level of authority over regular mortals, and she was the Squire to the Black Knight who served the Dread Empress, and had been summoned to the Tower. That connection would also give her authority, as she was one of the highest placed individuals in Praes at the time since the only people above her in the hierarchy were Black and Malicia.

It could also be there's a matter of willpower and conviction involved too.

Miles

She was the Black Knight's squire. That let her borrow his authority. I think that was even explicitly stated around that time.

Frivolous

Sorry for double posting, Bennett Palmer, but looking back at Eschatology, the relevant quote seems to be this:

The rules behind Speaking were opaque even to me, but usually it only worked on people weaker than you. Even then it wasn't a guarantee, some sort of claim to authority over them tended to make it easier.

So authority over someone helps, but by Catherine's assessment, it isn't necessary.

Composaurus

Do you need actual authority? I can't remember every instance of Speaking but I thought it was just a will contest, basically a "I am a larger piece in the story right now" stick to hit people with

KageLupus

But, when Cat spoke last chapter it had a mild effect on both the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim. Neither of which could be considered to be her subordinates. So I take that as foreshadowing that her Name itself will be related to having authority over any and all names.

The only way Cat could affect those two is if the groove she is wearing in Creation is "Someone who all Named have to listen to."

Miles

She did get asked to comment though, so as the one whose turn it is to speak, she had some authority to tell everybody in the room to shut up

[Liliet](#)

The creepy part is that she affected them without even TRYING to. They weren't among the people shouting iirc, they were just sitting there. They got hit with an AoE side effect and it was still enough to affect them.

Zedalb

As the originator of the truce and terms that everyone is operating under one could make an argument that she has some amount of authority over all named.

Also she does outrank the gray pilgrim though she's not directly in his chain of command the organization they both willingly serve under she is superior in.

The white night is trickier but I would still argue she wrote the terms and gave him a position that's equal well she is also having greater political clout so she may not have a direct authority over him but she could be seen as an authority figure greater than him.

It's like they're both Kings but she is of the more powerful prosperous country she doesn't have authority over him but she has a power over him that leads to him needing to cater to her which is sort of an authority.

antlan87

Good question, especially as the skeletons do not have ears. Which raises the question, can you Speak to the deaf? Seems like the kind of loophole the gods would employ, like in a "no weapon forged/wielded by man" scenario.

Inay

We don't know if Arthur is gay or bi/pan though, only that his last lover was a man. (Unless I missed a word of god about it)

[Liliet](#)

> the man is straight

Did we have that explicitly stated, or are you drawing the conclusion that the one (1) romance we know of him having was with a girl?

Though that's irrelevant considering he's also significantly older, and without him being a creep it's infatuation only, and that... would not be impacted by him being straight.

Also, we don't actually know that Arthur is gay and not bi.

AbraKadabra

We don't know that. Cat specifically ordered Hakram to find it out.

[Liliet](#)

> From now on, fighting Catherine will involve in part keeping her silent so she can't speak at you.

Rule #1 of fighting a bard...

[Barthumphries](#)

"so none of them would be a possible lover or rebound infatuation."

The new Squire is basically Young Cat. That may or may not include being bi.

Boadicea

Death flag for Vivienne, long live The Squire?

[Liliet](#)

[from Imgflip Meme Generator](#)

<https://imgflip.com/i/4m7s29>

Miles

Why would those 2 be arch rivals?

ruduen

Just a reminder to boost!

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/boost>

Amusingly enough, for scenes like this, it's good that Cat has someone to discuss things with – I think that improves the chances of things going smoothly. If you can't discuss it with someone, it means there needs to be something else filling the gap – and with a plan this ironed out, that means the story might fill things up with things going wrong.

dcarter8419

It was really cool to see Cat teaching the youngbloods but also worrying

Ezario Gerion

She is definitely becoming a mentor here. The Story of it is so strong that it strongarms her, even as she tells us that she doesn't want to become a mentor.

I think that this is Above planting seeds for her downfall. "Two bickering Heroes, apprentices to an older Villain, destined to join forces and cast her down."

[Liliet](#)

I honestly think Catherine is overthinking it and neither is Above "plotting" anything (asksadfjlaksdfj;l) nor is this going to lead to her downfall. SHE WAS ABDICATING ALREADY THE SQUIRE HAS NO POWER OVER HER

Sykomantis

I'm thinking that she's starting to get compulsions from her future Role as Headmistress of Cardinal. With that in mind, I think she should actually be LEANING IN to her desires to mentor others, because one reason that people become headmaster of schools is that they started out as great teachers

[Liliet](#)

I'm actually not sure at this point that Cat's going to be the Headmistress of Cardinal, but she's been in the role of Wise Elder (who is for some reason in her early twenties) since Everdark. And it's great.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

She had the Story-Fu to take on the Intersessor (sp?) and stalemate/win.

What she cannot Eliminate, she will Regulate.

The Regulator.

[Liliet](#)

The Sam Vimes.

Nobody understands what the fuck that means, least of all Cat, yet that's the Name and they just have to roll with it.

jamesc9

I had the impression that Names need a bunch of people to tell the story. Do we have a way of having a discworld book drop out of the sky?

[Liliet](#)

What actual in-universe mechanics? Sam Vimes is way too cool for that.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Lollipop!

medailyfun

I'm sure there's no story like this in that world

Cicero

Nah, it's a subversion story. The greatest villain who founds the new age, mentors two heroes, who go on to make her new age into one that favors heroes instead of villains as first expected.

Miles

I'm pretty sure it's not supposed to favor either. It's supposed to keep them away from civilians.

Soronel Haetir

Human artillery is the bestest!

ninegardens

What is Vivian doing here?

What the hell just happened back in Callow?
Cause... I'm guessing ain't good.

Big I

Vivienne wasn't in Callow, I believe she was back at the Alliance defensive lines with the Daoine reinforcements.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's even worse. What was dangerous or urgent enough to make her leave the defensive line? It's very bad news

[Liliet](#)

Not necessarily, IMHO.

Cicero

It also made Abigail abandon her designated target, so I don't see how it can possibly be good news.

[Liliet](#)

Did it? Is Abigail there?

Cpt. Obvious

Her army is...

[308924810a](#)

I bet it was something in relations to whatever was happening with the elves, that crown of spring, and said Daoine reinforcements.

Cat's reaction: are we at war with the kingdom of the golden bloom now?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I thought she was already in the field, but probably shouldn't be *here*.

AbraKadabra

Maybe Vivian got a name? Heiress Maybe? Anything else is bad news.

[Liliet](#)

Nah Heiress is bad news bc it seems to be a villainous Name and that would undermine her credibility in Callow badly.

Shining Princess, now? 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

And they're *still* using Christophe as a missile? Okay, an exceptionally impressive one, but this really doesn't seem like something that would help his attitude!

Oshi

It might be a reminder that he has to work with people though. Catherine just gave a speech to the kids about it. He's probably gotten the similar one from the Pilgrim. That it has to happen now and not when he was younger is embarrassing as fuck but there it is.

Practicality

I don't believe that he's going to mind once they walk him through the logic: He's a hardcore Proceran nationalist, that admires sacrificing the few to save the many. By being a part of the assault they save time and lives, both are highly valuable and necessary. And it is honestly a too useful gimmick to neglect.

Cicero

He probably had an initial reaction of "not again" only to think about it some more and decide he really likes the idea. I mean, basically he got to be the key player who took a vital location in the reconquest of his homeland.

[Mental Mouse](#)

We'll see what he thinks of it **after** he can stand up again afterwards! That said, they did take the time to make sure that he was going to survive it.

mamm0nn

Well alright Christophe, I guess we'll go and ask Champion if she wants to do it. She's always so cheerful and helpful about it...~

Mirror Knight: Damn it. Fine, I'll do it. **Glares at his living ammunition rival, the only rivalry he hasn't woefully lost yet.**

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Christophe de Pavanie? More like Christophe de Force Contondante.

I got this via google translate so don't crucify me if it's incoherent. 😊

Big I

The Squire and the Apprentice joking with each other in the middle of a war, how nostalgic.

Damn that's an ominous quote at the beginning of the chapter. Maybe they will lose this siege.

I'm beginning to like the Squire, hope he doesn't die and gets a chapter of his own.

[Dresden 67](#)

The opening quote seems to refer to the fall of Sephirah and the rise of the Kingdom of the Dead. The wolves are the ancient

Lycaonese invading Sephirah fighting against the Neshemah's siblings.

In the end the victor was death, as the Dead King converted the entire population into undead.

Cicero

It's the third generation of that happening too. Only this time they are both heroes instead of villains.

Miles

Oh. Oh they're the heroic baby we. That's so cute.

Miles

Woe. *

Raved Thrad

Does this mean their group will be called "The Weal?" 😊

[Burlyraven](#)

I think Apprentice and Squire being a duo works in Cat's favor, as far as defense against stories goes, especially if they share the same pool of mentors and tutors. I've read the story it puts them in, but I can't name it specifically. While it doesn't remove them as a threat to her, it does set them up as something like lower champions. Basically, Cat gets to be the eccentric and blatantly sinister "aunt" character that gives solid but strange advice while the pair take down lower threats guided by reliable instruction from RS and SH. Their stories could turn sinister, which would make them a threat to Cat, but that only really becomes probable if she puppetmasters too hard. Hell, the fact that Cat plans on stepping down and going quietly actually plays into the story.

Oshi

The story is one in our world though. I'm skeptical something that like has been done in Calerinia. Besides that whatever else Cat may do she won't be leaving the stage just swapping roles.

[Burlyraven](#)

Yeah, but the role she's promised to take as of the Villainous summit was as a broker and guarantor, which is typically a Villain that even Heroes leave be. It's probably enough of a sidestep to dodge some of the more dangerous parts and possibly force some aspects of the story into place.

[Liliet](#)

> The story is one in our world though.

It's born out of basic rules of drama though: what gets to be the center stage, what gets to be the antagonistic force, what gets to be the tension.

Frankly, with Catherine's impending abdication, even straight up mentorship of the Squire would not *really* be a death flag for her: it'd have a very specific expiration date, and long before Squire was ready to stand on his own.

mavant

I dunno, she still could end up sealed into a tree.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Especially since Squire has plenty of advancement opportunities even without arguing with Catherine at all.

[Liliet](#)

I notice that Vivienne is there...

[Mental Mouse](#)

If they meet-cute this could get "interesting"...
Especially since Contrition might have their eye on Arthur...

[Liliet](#)

Squire needs to squire for Vivienne while learning from Cat. This sets up a dynamic that is way too interesting as such to lead to any of their deaths any time soon, and with Cat leaving for Cardinal after the war it's going to transition into a "how the fuck do we manage all of THIS without our teacher" story without any deaths involved.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

I'm not convinced that abdicating removes the risk of mentor-related death. There are a lot of stories where the mentor's been out of the picture for a while and then gets ganked immediately upon returning. Under that hypothesis the abdication just kicks the can down the road.

[Liliet](#)

From the point of view of those stories, Cat just needs to keep serious story-weight, ie have more to her than just

"this one kid's mentor". Which, she inevitably is going to.

[Burlyraven](#)

In the scenario I presented, abdication doesn't so much remove her as a mentor as it does shift her story. She goes from dark teacher, to the mob boss "relative" the otherwise straight laced cop (Squire into whatever Knight Name he takes or possibly even Apprentice) turns to in desperate times. It still could force her into a sacrifice, but it at least buys a few decades.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm! It's basically about what narrative threads are open.

erebus42

Potentially it could turn against her if both stick around enough to be considered her student but one of each transitions into a Hero and Villain respectively. Then she'd be in danger and they'd both get pushed into a story of former fellow student's turned enemies.

[Burlyraven](#)

That is true, but they both have very "pure" vibes to their heroics. It's not out of the question, but it would require a sacrifice bunt on Above's part for one of the two.

erebus42

They're young and you never in what directions chance is gonna push people. That's thing about transitory Names though, there's so many things they can grow into.

[Liliet](#)

The question is not whether THEY stick around but whether SHE sticks around. She's going to be the villain representative full time after the war is over and she abdicates.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That's assuming she doesn't become the Guide, with natural authority over *all* Named.

[Liliet](#)

That Name isn't happening, but either way, her story is going to stop intersecting with theirs immediately.

Mental Mouse

I'm using "Guide" mostly as a placeholder Name, but what makes you so sure of "that Name isn't happening"? The "authority over all Named" part is certainly hinted.

Liliet

How is "Guide" an authoritative name?

Also, no-one has ever referred to Catherine as that or described any part of what she's doing as "guiding".

You're right I'm not 100% certain, I'm... about 80% certain. I'm 99.999(9)% certain about it not being Practical Guide, though -_-

Mental Mouse

A Guide is the person you follow, the one who tells you want to do or where to go. It's not the same kind of authority as a queen has, but disobeying the guide in many cases... is just being stupid.

Pretty much as soon as she got out from Amadeus's shadow, Cat's been pulling people into her orbit... and reshaping them to varying degrees, though often with a light touch. She's surrounded by people who are powerful enough that she can't in fact give them orders unless they're willing to obey – and yet, somehow she consistently sets the tune.

Even folks like Cordelia, Pilgrim, and Hanno would have done a lot better if they *had* done what she told them earlier. And now of course, she actually has a pair of youngsters to guide....

Liliet

Hmm.

Cosmicjay

Think of one synonym to one sense of "guide": Ruler.

A guide may give you rules to follow too.

Liliet

thats a really fucking big stretch of the use of the word 'synonym'

dadycoool

So she gets the Squire after all. Big I raises a good point above me about the Squire and the Apprentice messing around while in the general vicinity of a big event. Arthur has so, so many parallels with Cat that I'm not at all convinced he'll stay on the side of Above. After all, the Black Knight position is open. Then again, Cat didn't go the normal Squire to Knight route, so he probably won't either.

I see that the tried and true method of "Witch throwing MK at it" is still considered a viable option.

Vivienne? Is the Woe about to be reunited again? How many red flags can we raise at once? Also, maybe more importantly, why is she here?

Oshi

If Hakram doesn't die then i expect the woe won't either. I think the climax of the book is set for just around Thanksgiving this year with a half month or more of denouement. Whatever it is, I think its gonna be big.

Konstantin von Karstein

Black Knight is a specifically Praesi Name, with a Praesi Story. Cat could have become one because Callow, was part of the Empire at the time, but it's no more the case. Arthur could become a Villain (which I doubt), but certainly not the Black Knight.

Ben

Cat has heard the song (the Girl Who Climbed the Tower, I think?) that presages someone potentially becoming the Empress of Praes, unless I got really confused somewhere along the way. People have been speculating about her getting some sort of new name giving her specific authority over Named in general, but if she somehow swerves and tries to climb the Tower then maybe Arthur could get dragged along somehow. But that's pretty damn speculative, I'll grant you.

Konstantin von Karstein

Did she heard that song recently? I don't remember.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

No, it stopped after the Doom of Liesse.

Cicero

There were hints that she could still claim that role as recently as the confrontation of the Bard in the Arsenal if I remember right..

ninegardens

Nah; that was a bluff.

She was hearing the song of the fox king, and Bard be like "What tunes in your head?" and she hummed the tune of the girl who climbed the tower. It was a lie. Bard knew it was a lie. Cat just did it to piss Bard off, and to emphasize that *she knew* that the fox king tune was Bard making a play.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/04/21/interlude-set-them-up/>

mavant

With a name like Arthur Foundling, surely he's going to end up pulling a sword from a stone.

Earl of Purple

Hopefully not one in the shade of a yew tree in a ruined city in the heart of the Twilight Ways. Hopefully there's another sword he can pull, one less royal.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As Cat pointed out, him getting to the throne is not necessarily a problem, though there are details we don't know yet. Having him hanging around Apprentice should yield some important information.

Konstantin von Karstein

Him picking that sword and then marrying Vivienne would be the best option, so it's not necessarily a problem. But it works only if he's bi.

[Liliet](#)

Also if Vivienne doesn't mind. You know.

Konstantin von Karstein

Arranged marriage for the sake of alliance were common, even if the 2 spouses didn't like each other, but you have a point 😊

[Liliet](#)

I'm just saying Vivienne should be the one arranging in this case -_-

[Liliet](#)

Cat was already Black's "lighter grey" student. For the next one in the chain to actually stay with Above this time only makes sense 😊

Elbrasch

Practical hero, that would be a nice change.

[Liliet](#)

300 heroic axioms

erebus42

Dammit Arthur! I know you're still in training wheels but still, it's really just common sense to never say shit like that. Careful Cat, you may not be a mage but there are plenty of stories where a master has two apprentices -especially when events unfold and have each apprentice on a different side of divide (say hero and villain)- both of their names are transitory after all...

caoimhinh

Yeah, and those cases are always dangerous for the teacher, because the typical way of those stories are that one disciple kills the master and the other disciples avenges the teacher. So Cat shouldn't get comfy in that role of having two pupils.

[Liliet](#)

You're overthinking it, IMHO.

There are many variations, and in the context of Guide, the stories of any of them just aren't going anywhere near there right now.

medailyfun



medailyfun

credit to Oglaf comic creators btw, the unique mix of humour and sex in a fantasy world

Xinci

Well that was a lovely reminder on a lot of mechanics. Good to see Cat has fully embraced that methodological frameworks don't actually have a size limit in what they can include and what entities can be part of their formulation. Would be no point in having souls and multiple different methods per individual, monster, entity, dimension, etc if you only needed one. Each part a weight on the scales in the end

Also for all of those earlier statements that the Book of All Things may just not be true, it definitely looks like its words are binding (suspected as much with the knights armor). I wonder what entity or entities made it binding when it first got written. Well or if it was even it first being written that made it binding instead of some collective decision.

Some more information on enchantments and enchantments is useful. Helps reinforce why Tariq noted similarities between miracles and wards. Both are reinforcing specific dimensional properties, but miracles presumably need no anchor as they are natural to Creation and or have a direct line to reinforcing that order (not

that, the form of how they do this cant be usurped). I am still rather curious on the nature of the twinned enchantments. Seems like it possibly worked by the force being used to "increase" density also being what was used to mitigate and reflect foreign forces acting on the gate? Which would be pretty clever

Wonder if Roland is worried about confiscating something while he makes the gate, or if its just the whole process would go against his role(Though Adanna being able to do it, makes it seem like a proper method could be used). Probably a issue in him not actually having his own magic I suppose. Might taint the gate with the magic of those one would rather not have access to such power.

Liliet

My wild speculation is, it's that Twilight requires a mage to commit their power to one (1) gate. Going more than once is cheating. Using someone else's power would allow you to go more than once and is therefore also cheating. Roland doesn't have his own power to commit, and he really doesn't want to do something Twilight would regard as cheating.

Javvies

Viv showing up is something I didn't expect to happen. On the other hand, it was probably inevitable that the Woe would be properly reunited at some point.

Squire and Apprentice learning together is a good thing because it helps lay the foundations for Named being instructed by various people, as will be an essential part of Cardinal.

Plus, it's a helluva lot safer to answer their questions than to be the Villain withholding knowledge. In addition, Cat's going to have to do some teaching of/imparting knowledge and understanding to Arthur to make sure he understands why she's not rebuilding the Callowan Knightly Orders as they existed before ther Conquest, so that he doesn't decide to try to do that despite all the very good reasons she didn't, and Viv won't.

Heh. Witch of the Woods is using Mirror Knight as a projectile again. I bet she still enjoys it, and doesn't think it's going to ever get old.

Especially after his dumbassery at the Arsenal, where he cut up Hanno (who we're pretty sure she's interested in, or at least that's implied). Hanno may not hold a grudge, or says he doesn't, but I'm willing to bet that she's not as forgiving of Mirror Knight.

caoimhinh

I will just point out that it's not implied Antigone is interested in Hanno, just that the two are close because they share a background related to an apprenticeship under the Gigantes, and they speak to each other using the Gigantes' silent body language.

It's likely that the people around them ship them or believe them to have a relationship, much like Tariq (and maybe others) initially thought that Hanno and Cat had a thing.

When Nephele implied that Antigone had a thing for Hanno, he mentally stated that as false, as apparently the language they use conveys such nuances and they have firmly stated the boundaries of their friendship.

Of course, he could be wrong. And one of the stereotypes of stories is the hero not realizing someone has feelings for him until a long time later or fate forces a confession out of the partner, so there's that...

Javvies

True. We don't actually know for sure if Antigone is interested in Hanno or not ... and I kind of doubt that Hanno is necessarily reliable. After all, assuming that she is interested, it's unlikely there was a love at first sight situation – which means that they started out acquaintances, became friends, and then Antigone got interested, but hasn't made a move to indicate that her feelings have deepened, because there's been no indicators that Hanno's have changed in the same way. She may feel that it's better to not tell him and not risk their existing relationship.

Though even if Antigone isn't romantically interested in Hanno, she's still fond of him and considers him a good friend. And I get the feeling that she doesn't have that many people she calls friend. That would be more than sufficient grounds to enjoy using Mirror Knight as a projectile even more than she already does. Forever.

Mental Mouse

Yes this... adding to your points, they're both orphans cut off from their own societies who were very socially isolated and completely enveloped by their Roles. Companions in arms, no need to be lovers.

Liliet

I'm not so sure that Vivienne won't be willing to reinstate the knightly orders.

Mental Mouse

Indeed, but *later*, when it's not so much a problem. Specifically, when all that lesser nobility making up the orders are folks who were raised by the throne and enculturated to loyalty, rather than formerly-independent sovereigns absorbed by conquest.

Liliet

No shit it's for later. Arthur is sixteen.

Javvies

I think Viv's position is going to be a lot closer to Cat's when it comes to how the Knightly Orders are going to exist and function in Callow going forward.

Remember, the reason the Orders were originally broken up was to prevent their quasi-independent military might, drawn largely from the ranks of the nobles, from being able to be a single, unified, voice and influence in politics.

The Order Of Broken Bells is, IIRC, sworn directly to Cat in her position as ruler of Callow and integrated into and subordinate to the command structure of the (mostly) apolitical Army of Callow, itself largely copied directly from the post-Amadean-Reforms Legions of Terror, where the nobles had no influence.

Point is, Arthur has expressed interest in restoring the pre-Conquest version of the Knightly Orders ... which is a thing that I'm pretty sure won't be happening. Cat's brought back Callowan Knights, but not the pre-Conquest separate and independent Orders, and I don't see Viv changing that any time soon, if ever.

Liliet

Cultural demands are a significant political argument, though.

People are going to want to see a multitude of knightly orders, bonus points if they've got the same names as the old ones. There's a lot to be gained from wrangling a reorganization of Broken Bells into technically-multiple-orders without compromising the military advantages of the current structure, and I don't think it's at all impossible.

Arthur is just the early bird of that cultural wave, and honestly it's a good thing they are getting the warning now!

Javvies

That'd easy enough to bypass – they're all the same order, but the primary subdivision is the chapter – which is roughly equivalent in size to the immediately pre-Conquest Orders.

And internal organization was modeled on the old Orders by Talbot.

If you want to reuse the pre-Conquest Order names, just use them to label the various Chapters of the Order.

The fundamental point of Cat (and Viv) keeping the Order of Broken Bells as the only Knightly Order, and part of the Army of Callow, and sworn to the Crown of Callow, is to prevent future problems.

Separated Orders means complicating the chain of command, and letting there be one or more independent Orders is going to get a hard no, as significant military forces not under the control of the Army of Callow or the government of Callow is not going to happen, because that's a recipe for trouble waiting to happen.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, independent Orders are a no, but a complicated chain of command from separate Orders might well be worth it from a political point of view.

Juff

Typo Thread:

point of thumb > point of a thumb

"It is grand city > "It is a grand city

shared of experience > shared experience

seen anyone > see anyone

coin anything > coin on anything

into front of us even > in front of us, even

into total isolation > in total isolation

the Silver Huntress (extra space)

in our out > in or out

gating in soldier > gating in soldiers

or some cases > or in some cases

famous 'dual enchantment' that made Yvon famous (should remove the first famous)

but it's still > but it'd still

dense the denser (dent?)

most abstract > more abstract

I'd not more > I'd known more

could seen > could see

"It's a person. > "It's a person."

slightly raises force > slightly raise force

six seven > six to seven

force and a bunch of sorcery bursting out > force, and a bunch of

sorcery bursting out,
through the fact (not sure what this means)
"So instead half a (extra space in front)
give me agreement (is this right?)
That much was already unexpected (extra space in front)

[Liliet](#)

Woe reunion Woe reunion WOE REUNION

We didn't get a proper one in the Arsenal because of Harkam being indisposed ~~and depending on if you count her, Akua not being~~ there NOW IS THE TIME HYPE HYPE HYPE HYYYYYPE

[Casey Glick](#)

Eh, I'm sure that Indrani and Masego will just go hang out elsewhere and we'll never get that reunion. After all, which is the stronger story: "the band gets back together for one big hurrah" or, and I'm sure you'll agree with me this is better, "an endless game of phone tag"?

[Liliet](#)

you make a good point

Hitogami

Lol, they actually used the mirror knight as a battering ram! 😂😂

That is absolutely hilarious.

Tom

I wonder if they could enhance the effect by strapping goblin munitions to him.

Earl of Purple

No point. If that's what he could do against the enchantment on the gate without artificial help, they aren't needed. And adding some to 'just make sure' wouldn't be accepted, either. Cat can't replace the goblin munitions easily any more, since the civil war in Praes and the situation in Foramen and the Grey Eyries make resupply functionally impossible. The only munition that could have had an affect is goblinfire, and there's no way they're using that in Procer.

TeK

What about doing it for fun?

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Guess you can't have the pivotal battle of the war without all the main characters being there. Cat will have to do some crazy thinking to dodge the "band reunites for a last stand" trope.

It would be suicidal but I really want a scene where all the Woe is sitting around a campfire, just like when Procer was invading. They really do seem like a special band of five. Doubt it's going to happen but a man can dream.

[Liliet](#)

I think campfire meetups are enough of a tradition for Cat's circle that we're going to get one come hell or high water.

Aotrs Commander

Finally a task which is intellectually suited to Mirror Knight!

(It's be too much to hope for it will knock some sense into him, of course...)

Also, Arthur does seem to be a bit of Smaller Cat, doesn't he...?

[Liliet](#)

Catherine herself certainly thinks so! 😊

[Javvies](#)

Smaller Cat? Impossible. Remember, she's short and complains about it. A lot.

Younger Cat, sure. A look at what Cat perhaps could have been had she gone Hero instead, quite possibly.

laguz24

A city of seven gates is this Hainaut or Gondolin here, also a moment of badassery from Mirror Knight. He wishes that he did all of it himself which runs counter to cat's thinking where you need other people, Mirror Knight does not get the difference between friendship and being used as a tool. Since he is such a tool himself.

JRogue

Has it been specifically stated that the Squire only becomes the Black or White Knight? We already know of a few other "Knight" names, like Knight Errant and Mirror Knight I am pretty sure there was a Drake-Knight or something similar. All of the Paladins are technically knights as well. There is also always the possibility of a new Name which has happened a lot recently.

As has been stated, I believe that the Black Knight is a Praes only name, although Below, by its very nature, is more than willing to break the rules. Hanno is either setting up to transition into a new Name, or will have an epiphany that transcends him at an important story moment, and then most likely kills him. As has been mentioned over and over Arthur has Hero written all over him.

Could Squire conceivably become a different "Knight"?

[Liliet](#)

Considering that Name transitions can go fuckwild if you deviate from the archetype anyway, and depend on what's really happening with you – your Role – rather than what has happened to your predecessors, – yes. Yes, he could.

[Barthumphries](#)

'Could Squire conceivably become a different "Knight"?'
Absolutely, yes he can. This is all the long con by the Bard. The Squire, working with both Hanno and Cat, firmly with morals on the side of good and having had his life saved multiple times by the works of evil, and with the Grey Pilgrim right there as an exemplar, will become the Gray Knight. And thus the terms and accords will be smashed because there's now a new Neutral side.

superkeaton

Cat just taught young Heroes about the Power of Friendship. Amazing.

[Liliet](#)

Like father, like daughter.

[Barthumphries](#)

And that's why she's going to die. She kept thinking, "I don't want to be their mentor. I don't want to be their mentor. I don't... oh, hey, let me give you all a valuable lesson that will lay the foundation for everything you do in the future while waxing rhapsodic..."

IDKWhoitis

I think Cat should take the mentorship. Her paranoia is well founded, but if she can directly influence the next generation of major Heroes, it will set a solid foundation. Heroes in the future won't need to be the strongest, or the fastest, they will need to be clever and know the shortcuts to counter the kinds of villains that will sprout and fester in the Age of Order. The villains will adapt by themselves and they would likely reject

the notion of Cat mentoring some kid villain (they would try to assassinate them).

However, if Cat can implant some deep pragmatism and awareness of consequences into the next Callowan White Knight, then I shudder to think of what Callow becomes. It goes from being a scrotched backwater country into the foremost Named Superpower in terms of influence and sway it would hold in Named politics.

Frivolous

Hmm. Occurred to me last night that Vivienne might have arrived because she acquired a Name. If she gained a Name, she'd have to go to Catherine to sign onto the Truce and Terms.

After all, she's been the only Callowan princess for 2 years. She won't be the Shining Princess, though. She's not a hero, I think. She might be the Shadow Princess.

The argument against that is that someone would have noticed Vivienne's Name coalescing during her visit to the Arsenal.

Anyway, it's a thought.

Earl of Purple

Who says she's not a hero? She was as Thief. And Callow still generates hero Names, Alfred's enough for that. Say it is Shadow Princess, though, that could be a subtle enough Name that it lurked without anyone noticing until it was ready, like Thief did.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Shadow Princess would seem to be unprecedented – Viv might indeed get Shining Princess, but she's not Cat – I don't think she'd manage a new Name.

Rathalos

Oh gods. We have a Squire, we have an Apprentice. We have the Heroic version of Archer and a Villain's Name that turned out to be Heroic (opposite of Vivi's) (vide Roland's extra chapters)... And it's a Rogue/Thief themed, too! Now we only need 200 pounds of muscle (maybe MK?) and we'll have the Third Calamities. Damn.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I notice there's no mention of the Fourth Army looking particularly mauled, which just increases the mystery here.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Cat: "I can't let myself become a mentor to this kid because his story could be dangerous to me."

Also Cat: "I'm going to teach this kid exactly my villain mentor taught me, by carefully exposing him to people and advice that will make him helpful to my cause while avoiding any villain traps by making sure it's legitimately helpful. In no way will this result in a parental relationship with an underlying threat of prophesied parent killing."

[308924810a](#)

So, the strategic situation as I understand it is that unless they endure (and preferably, break) this siege they're proposing to get involved in, they're not going to have a reasonable chance to reach the lakes and get the Gigantes wards up, nor a chance to take the bridge site, nor much of a chance to ever strike at Keter.

I need to go reread the section where Cat was trying to plan out this campaign, because I'm laboring under the probably-mistaken impression that they had a need to take the bridge thus campaign, I might be mistaken, maybe just getting closer is fine, and if they can break the siege before the end of campaigning season, and simultaneously build up a store of supplies for a further thrust later in the season they might still be fine for that.

Also I guess Hainaut city would be a valuable forward base from which to try to do that in the winter campaigning season, or they can still try infiltrating a small force to do it and accepting the risk of a trap.

The real issue is that I can't see why they're certain this won't end up like another siege of the Morgentor and hold them up for the rest of the season. Maybe that conclusion is based on the relative numbers of forces? Or on the force they have in the potential siege's rear area? But what do they do if the Dead King decides to hold back a lot in his attack, circumvalate and wait for bridge-transported reinforcements of a higher quality in the next campaigning season before he makes his serious attempt to storm the walls?

jesdynf

Seriously? Nobody else is going to call her out for rules-lawyering her way past a two-hundred-year-old enchantment and then allowing fate to guide her to the mightiest throne cheese has built upon the continent?

Bargle Nawdle Zouss

A couple of s thoughts:

1. I'm kinda hoping that the new Page joins the group with Squire and Apprentice. He'd be the annoying kid brother to both, and add

more international flavor (Callowan, Ashuran, Proceran, respectively), with a bit of hero worship of Arthur.

2. How could there have been such a powerful wizard as Yvon de Grandpre 200 years ago, if mages had primarily been looked down upon in Procer for so long until Cordelia Hasenbach created the mage order (whose name escapes me at the moment; the Red Lions, perhaps)?

Earl of Purple

1) Me too.

2) Because even though they were looked down on and distrusted, they're still wizards. Their abilities and powers are very, very useful, and if you own a city you will probably want to be sure that the city is proof from magic, just in case your enemies come at you with magic. And priests won't do that because that could be seen as favouritism within the House of Light, which is a political power bloc in its own right in Procer.

Chapter 73: Signs

*There's nothing impressive about oracles, Chancellor.
All that's needed to foretell the future is a fool and a
tiger pit."*

– Dread Emperor Malignant III

I'd never seen Vivienne in armour before.

Mind you, she wasn't exactly barded for war and wearing full plate. She'd put on a blue riding dress, then accentuated that with a good steel breastplate topped by matching spaulders and a loose gorget. She'd not bothered with a tasset to cover thighs, preferring only a broad belt, and the lack of greaves and gauntlets softened the look. It was a good choice, I'd decided. Playing the warrior queen outright would not have suited her, but a martial touch that added to her increasingly regal manners would toe the line just right. It was a reminder that she might not be a soldier, but that she'd ridden out some of the worst scraps the Woe had ever been in without being dead weight. Considering Vivienne had spent most of her adult life wearing loose leathers and treading rooftops without ever developing an interest in fashion that I'd noticed, I could only praise whoever it was in her service that'd made the suggestion.

"Too much?" Vivienne asked, taking off her riding gloves.

Dry as the tone had been, I suspected that the slight undertone of abashment I'd picked up there wasn't just me looking for pearls in a pigsty.

"It suits," I replied, shaking my head. "And I notice you made sure you'd be able to fight if you had to."

The riding dress wouldn't mess up her footing too much, and she was a nimble one even without a Name to heighten the talent. I did not hide my approbation. There was no call to ever feel safe north of Salia, no matter what we liked to pretend.

"It's the classic Summerholm cut," she told me, sounding amused at my ignorance.

I snorted. Yeah, if there was one city in Callow where there'd it's be a fashion staple to be able to fight in your dress it'd be the Gate of the East. I probably would have had to learn about this stuff if I'd ever held a proper court, with all the attached feasts and festivals and formal receptions that involved, but my kingdom had half on fire and on permanent war footing from pretty much the moment the crown was set on my brow. Mind, you as the daughter of a minor baron who'd held the title mostly in name since the Conquest it wasn't like Vivienne would have been swimming in new dresses. It'd been a wealthy of upbringing, but that wealth had begun dwindling before she was ever born and the noble title had, as determined by Tower law after the Conquest, died with her father. There was a reason I'd had to raise her back to the formal Callowan peerage.

Black had preferred leaving my people's nobility to wither on the vine with their titles intact rather than strip those outright, you see. It was less likely to lead to conspiracies, with all those suddenly landless knights and barons instead worrying about how they were going to pay for the upkeep of those mansions my father had so *mercifully* left them to own.

"The cloak goes with everything," I shrugged. "What more do I need to know?"

"I still remember when you avoided wearing black like the plague," Vivienne smiled. "How the times have changed."

I grimaced, as this was a bit of a sore spot. I'd gotten used to the darker colours, in truth, but I did still have the occasional craving for a pretty sundress or a tunic in a tone you'd seen on a rainbow that'd not been cursed by some fucking warlock. The trouble was that the 'Black Queen' couldn't be seen wearing those things, it'd take a bite into a reputation that'd come in too useful too many times for me to be able to justify wearing a dress that'd not been rolled in a barrel of soot beforehand.

"When I retire," I told her feelingly, "I will wear nothing but pastels for a year. I solemnly swear."

"I'll look forward to the Mirror Knight expounding on how the pink dress is really a hint of your many perfidies to come," she snickered.

We shared a moment of quiet amusement at the thought. I'd seen precious little of ol' Christophe, as it happened. The White Knight had not been softhanded in making it clear that he'd disgraced himself, which had seen his popularity dry out some. Even those who would have been inclined to still lean his way had been kept away by the neat trick of there being no one really willing to argue with the Peregrine when he told you to go away. Tariq was proving a finer check on the Mirror Knight than I'd anticipated, though I still had to wonder if even the Grey Pilgrim was going to be enough to set that man straight. The chuckles faded, though, and I did not resume banter. It was Vivs here, not an officer or a ally, so I didn't bother with subtlety.

"Why are you here, Vivienne?" I bluntly asked.

"Always a pleasure to see you too, Catherine," she replied.

The way she tucked in that perfectly fine milkmaid's braid told me that, once more, she was a little more nervous than her tone and face would imply.

"Don't give me that," I dismissed. "You know well that the only reason I could even spare you from your duties in Salia was because we need you with some battle honours to your name before you succeed me. I'm happy to see you, Vivs, but we're not really in a time and place where happy's what takes the day."

"I know," she admitted with a grimace. "And the truth is, my reasons for coming are thinner than I'd like. I take it this is just going to be the two of us?"

She gestured at the solar around us, situated in the same guildhall that Robber had found me hours earlier. Adjutant had accurately deduced that I'd want this solar – nice windows but not too large, sun-facing and with room enough inside for multiple desks and chairs – for my own and made warding it with our usual suite of protection a priority. He was still arranging the last details for the rest of my new lodgings and headquarters, but he'd be on his way soon.

"Hakram's coming as soon as he can," I told her. "Zeze's got duties for a while still, and I left word for Indrani but I've no idea where she is in the city."

Hunting for undead, I suspected. It was all a little too cat and mouse for my own tastes, but Archer had always liked a hunt and

Keter's last infiltrators made for interesting – if not overly dangerous to a Named – quarry.

"I was asking whether you wanted to bring in allied commanders, actually," Vivienne said, "but I suppose you answered the question regardless."

I shrugged. I wasn't going to keep anything from them unless there was a call for it but I felt no need to include them into what was, on the surface, a purely Callowan matter. Both the Fourth Army and Vivienne herself were of my lot, it was to myself they answered first and foremost. Being in the room for this conversation was not a courtesy I felt I owed them.

"You were meant to command the troops at the defensive line down south," I noted. "If General Abigail did take the Cigelin Sisters-"

"She did," Vivienne confirmed. "It was a rout. The Tyrant's Own under General Pallas baited the dead out of the defences with a feigned retreat, and when the battle was engaged the fantassins under her command found a way through the hills the dead hadn't. They were struck in the sides as well, and their lines collapsed. Some five thousand withdrew, and the relief force the Dead King sent decided not to risk taking back the Sisters from her."

Huh, fancy that. My nervy little general had come through once more. I'd expected a victory out of her, but this was more decisive than I'd anticipated.

"Good, then we should be establishing contact soon," I grunted. "Doesn't explain why you're here and not commanding the Deoraithe and levies that we funnelled up to hold the defensive line."

The Daoine troops I trusted to handle themselves, but Proceran levies had a nasty tendency to run when things got rough. Wasn't some deep moral flaw, even if some of my soldiers like to pretend otherwise, but more or less what you should expect when you put a spear in a shoemaker's hands and told him to fight something like beorn.

"The Augur believed that if I was not here by the moon's turn, and the Fourth with me, then Procer would fall within the year," Vivienne bluntly said. "The Astrologer wasn't quite so sure, but she agreed that the storm about to come for Hainaut is going to be a horror and the signs are largely against us."

"The Augur can't see the Dead King," I pointed out. "Or myself, for that matter."

She could also be outmanoeuvred, as Black had proved during his ill-advised Proceran campaign. Her long-term predictions tended

to be vague and her shot-term ones only mattered when they got where they needed to be in time for them to be useful.

"The First Prince saw fit to reveal that the Augur been working with the Forgetful Librarian to find a way around her blind spots," Vivienne said. "It's a process of elimination, or at least Hasenbach hinted as much. Every time I'm not here before the whiteout, after it the Hainaut front collapses."

I frowned.

"The whiteout?"

"All our prophets encountered something similar," Vivienne said. "Trying to peer into what happens during the coming battle here is somehow blinding for oracles. They've theorized it's because there are too many entities involved who resist or outright muddle foretelling."

Huh. I supposed we had gathered a significant amount of Named, which would pretty much twist Fate into a knot. On top of that there were Choirs involved – at least Mercy, possibly Judgement if it triumphed over the Hierarch at a critical moment – here on the Dead King and my own's ability to screw with predictions. That was a lot of moving parts for a mortal oracle, maybe more than they would be able to physically comprehend all at once.

"The Astrologer insists that the stars indicate the Gigantes will be critical in what is to come," Vivienne added, "but that one might be muddled. She's also sure they'll be crucial to something in Twilight's Pass, and there's barely any of them there."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"I wasn't aware there were any at all," I said.

"Hasenbach wrangled further concessions out of them through the Dominion," Vivienne said. "She had to first get the Highest Assembly to vote a formal apology to the Titanomachy for the Humbling of Titans, though, which cost her some support in the south. Among her prizes is that the Gigantes sent a group to fortify the Morgentor, with an eye to doing the same to the rest of the fortresses in the pass."

Well worth some Arlesite grumbling, in my opinion, but then I wasn't the one that had to keep the shitshow known as the Highest Assembly in a semblance of functioning order. Somehow I suspected that if we'd not cooperated to let that same Assembly try the Red Axe for attempted regicide Hasenbach would have had a harder time getting that vote passed. It was easier to get princes to bend their proud necks when you'd proved you were willing to cross Named to protect their lives.

"We do have Gigantes in the city," I said, "mind you, at the moment they should-"

The air shuddered, and for a moment it was as if all the world had gone still. As if I was a fly caught in amber, as if all the empty spaces of Creation had chillingly filled. And when that power released me, as primordially indifferent as the wave that could guide the sailor ashore or drown him, I found myself gasping as I leaned against the table. Vivienne was looking at me in a panic, already on her feet.

"Cat, are you all right?" she asked, taking my arm and supporting me.

I closed my eyes, focusing on breathing in and out. The urge to empty my stomach passed.

"I'm fine," I got out.

"You're not *fine*," Vivienne bit back angrily.

I gently pushed her away, still leaning against the table slightly.

"I'm not being stubborn, it passed," I said. "And it won't happen again."

Blue-grey eyes examined me, as if looking for a lie.

"You didn't feel that?" I asked her.

Slowly she shook her hand.

"Feel what?"

"I'm guessing," I sighed, "that was my first taste of what Gigantes spellsinging feels like for someone... attuned to the parts of Creation I am."

"Bad?" Vivienne quietly asked.

"What the Witch of the Woods does is a pale imitation," I ruefully said. "They tap into something larger, Vivienne. It was like standing next to Sve Noc if they were losing their temper, but less... targeted."

Masego has once called the godhead a trick of perspective, as the Hierophant's eyes had always seen further than those of other men. I'd once *been* such a trick, when I had scavenged my way to rule over Winter, but it'd been blind flailing. It was not without reason that the Dead King had described my apotheosis as 'accidental' when we'd first met in Keter. These days I could touch those deeper rules on occasion, as I had at the Second Battle of Lauzon's Hollow, but my understanding was limited and

the use was rough on me. What the Gigantes had just done – and it must be them, for no one else in the city should be capable of this – had... ridden such rules, for lack of a better term. Like a ship on the tide, using the sea without mastering it. It was not they way I did it at all, but that I had the capacity in the first place must have been enough to make me... sensitive.

Hierophant would have been as well, I figured, but no one else in Hainaut.

"I'll be ready next time," I told Vivienne. "It was the surprise that left me vulnerable."

Like a sucker punch in the gut, though they'd probably not meant it to be.

"Perhaps they could be prevailed upon to give warning, next time," she mildly said.

"Yeah, I'll ask the White Knight to pass the request along," I softly laughed. "Shit, it's been a while since something took me this badly by surprise."

An overdue reminder, perhaps. It was a big world, and I'd not seen all there was to see in even my little corner of it. We resumed the conversation until Hakram joined us, but there really wasn't much to add to what she'd already said. Vivienne had come to the capital with the Fourth largely on the word of the Augur and the Astrologer, and though she had freshers news than we about the going-ons in the south she truthfully didn't have much to add. She was just as lost as we were, only now in addition to our uncertainties about the defence of Hainaut there was a hanging sword above our head to remind us that oracles were pretty sure if we lost here the entire war was lost. Lovely.

At least we had Vivienne with us, so even at the bottom of this freshly dug pit things were looking up.

—

There was need for a war council, as there so often was these days, but we went about it briskly. General Bagram, a large and aging orc who'd been the right hand of Juniper's mother for decades before becoming a general in his own right under the Army of Callow, was added to that ever-expanding roster of people with a seat at the table along with my designated heiress, Lady Vivienne Dartwick. Discussions were without frills, as we all felt the invisible noose of Keter's advance tightening around our necks, and there were few arguments. Given the very real possibility that we were going to lose either the gates or the walls at some point, Princess Beatrice gave formal permission to my sappers to prepare the streets to repel invasion. Pickler was

still busy replacing the Ivory Gates, but no doubt she'd be delighted when informed.

Quartering was revised to accommodate the addition of the Fourth Army, which had blessedly come with an overfill of supplies that'd allow us to avoid rationing before the first supply wagons arrived through the Ways. I'd been right twofold, as it turned out: it'd been the Gigantes that had startled me, and the gate they'd helped the Blessed Artificer make was already technically finished. It was recommended it still go unused until dark, though, as apparently the parts where they had *melted* the veil between the Twilight Ways and Creation were still 'cooling off'. Fucking Hells, the more I learned about Ligurian sorcery the more it fucking terrified me. And Triumphant had gone toe to toe with those people at their peak? Gods, what an utter monster that one must have been.

By sundown we all left the palace that Beatrice Volignac seemed so deeply happy to have reclaimed, most of the practicalities of our defence hammered out into a working shape. It was the Pilgrim and the White Knight who reached out to me afterwards, though, to arrange a formal council of Named as well.

"It can be considered a given that every Revenant in the principality, including the Scourges, is now headed our way," Tariq said. "We need to prepare accordingly."

"Agreed," I said. "We need to divide our people into bands. And more importantly-"

"Your insistence that a band of five needs to be sent after the bridge immediately," Hanno frowned. "Yes, I was told of it."

"A heroic band of five," I said. "Given the steep odds and how it'll be impossible to really prepare, it's the only setup with a chance of getting it done. And if Tariq told you about that, then he told you I'd like for you to lead it."

It'd be a loss, because the White Knight took to most Revenants like a sickle to wheat, but I had doubts about any band led by a lesser hero succeeding. The Grey Pilgrim might make it as well, maybe, but Tariq always shone most when he was in a supporting role and that would muddle things up some.

"To clarify," the White Knight mildly said, "on the eve of a battle prophesized to be decisive for this entire war, you request that I leave."

"Yes," I bluntly said, "and the Witch as well, you'll need her."

A light touch on my arm interrupted me, and I turned to find Vivienne cocking an eyebrow.

"I will leave the three of you to your conversation," she easily said, "but if I might make a suggestion?"

She gestured at our surroundings, namely the now dead gardens leading up to the front gates of the Volignac family palace.

"There are perhaps more appropriate venues for you all to talk," Vivienne finished.

"Common sense," Tariq ruefully murmured. "Such a rare, precious thing. My thanks, Lady Dartwick."

"I still feel the urge to take to rooftops on moonlit nights," she replied, "so do not bestow upon me a surfeit of honours, Peregrine. Lord White, Catherine, a pleasant evening to you."

Hanno returned the courtesy, while I cocked an eyebrow at her. She had a deft hand with heroes, as she'd just reminded me. I sometimes forgot she'd been part of William's band, back in the day, and had been a decent fit there from what little I knew. Heroes tended to be split between those who considered her a fallen heroine, just punished by Above in the form of losing her Name, or those who essentially considered her a retired heroine who'd embraced other duties. Tariq tended to lean that way, though I'd never quite been able to pin down Hanno on the subject.

"I'll see you later," I told her. "It's been too long."

"Agreed," she feelingly replied. "I'll try to see if I can rustle up Indrani from whatever winesink she'll have stumbled into by now."

"Don't bribe her with my liquor cabinet this time," I warned, "it's impossible to get the good stuff this far out, and..."

I suddenly coughed, feeling the distinctly amused gazes of two of the most prominent heroes of the age as I argued with the heiress to Callow about the fate of my booze stash.

"Carry on," I said, vainly trying to claw back a bit of gravitas.

It, er, might take a while. Vivienne took her leave and I went for a walk through a garden of dead things with the Pilgrim and the Knight. To my surprise, I found the sight oddly troubling. I'd thought myself well acquainted with death, for how could I not be? I'd waded through it on too many battlefields to count, and thrice I'd come close to staying in those cold arms forever. I'd deal it out and suffered it, used it as a tool and flinched from it. If my throne had been set upon a foundation of anything, death was it. And still, limping through the garden, some part of me was dismayed. It was all dead. Ever tree gone grey, ever flower wilted every blade of grass frayed. Black earth had gone

fallow, covered by dead leaves and insects forever still. This wasn't the coming of winter or even some black tragedy. Intent had done this. Thorough, patient intent to kill every living thing there was to kill.

There was bare, graven beauty to the garden that felt like a knot in my throat. Was this the world the Dead King wanted? A field of grey from shore to shore, so utterly barren that even the sea grew lifeless lapping at it. I forced myself to set aside the thought. Stroking the thought of failure instead of tending to the needs of the moment was as good a way to see them turn true as any.

"It has to be you," I said, standing in the shade of a leafless tree.

"I am not certain we need to send a band at all," the White Knight calmly replied. "It would strip the defence of much-needed strength, and there will be time enough to attend the bridge after victory is secured here."

"If victory is secured here," I pointed out.

"In this, I believe the Black Queen to be correct," the Grey Pilgrim said. "We should not bet the fate of all Calernia on our ability to win in battle against the hordes of Keter. It would be dangerously irresponsible."

I nodded in appreciation at the old man's words. Not that he was speaking them for my sake – Tariq had never been shy about disagreeing with me on anything at all, to my occasional displeasure.

"It weakens our ability to win that battle to send Named away," Hanno flatly said. "In particular fighters as apt as Queen Catherine seems intent on assigning, in all humility."

"Smashing that bridge isn't going to be a pleasant autumn stroll, White," I said. "I mentioned you and the Witch of the Woods because the job needs a captain and the power to collapse a bridge. To add survivability, I'd throw in the Forsworn Healer and pack the rest of the five with one set of muscles and a specialized killer."

The kind that'd be able to kill something that couldn't be killed conventionally, like the Painted Knife or the Rogue Sorcerer.

"There I must disagree," Tariq said. "Not with the necessity of power, but with the White Knight's presence being required. His role would be better suited to a situation like the approaching battle."

Fuck, I silently thought. Part of me wanted to get snippy that the Heavens got to have two people around for this talk, but honesty compelled me to admit that there really wasn't anyone else who would have made a difference. Hanno took advice from many parts, but it was my understanding that people who could make him actually reconsider a decision were few. The Pilgrim was as close to a peer as I'd be able to rustle up in Hainaut.

"You genuinely believe in the wisdom of thinning our forces before a major engagement?" Hanno asked Tariq, frowning.

"Empty prayers birth no miracles," the Grey Pilgrim replied.

I cocked my head to the side. Huh. Yeah, that was solid *namelore* even if he was coming at it from the other way. He meant, I gathered, that for a prayer to be answered it would need to be sincere. In this case, that meant sending *Named* even when it would be costly. Black would have phrased it more along the lines of Creation being a machine that gave out according to what you gave it, while I myself preferred to think of it in terms of weight: you couldn't topple a wall with a pebble. If you wanted a trebuchet stone, you needed to use a trebuchet in the first place.

"That only reinforces that we *do* need to send him," I insisted. "We can't half-ass this, it'll backfire on us."

"This isn't a ritual field and we're not bleeding prisoners to make a tower fly, Your Majesty," the Pilgrim flatly replied. "There is no need to open our own throats to make this work."

I bit out the very unflattering answer I had on the tip of my tongue, as I was pretty sure he knew the *Kharsum* words for both mother and goat.

"I remain unconvinced this should be attempted at all," the White Knight said, frown deepening, "but when the two of you are in agreement you are rarely incorrect. I'll concede to sending a band, and a heroic one."

That was a start.

"I appreciate that," I said.

"But I am horrendously wrong, and you must now tell me why," Hanno drily replied, and I remembered why I liked him in the first place.

"I wouldn't go quite that far," I said, since the truth-teller couldn't read me. "Look, I've seen you ride this horse before. Picking out traps with the *Fortunate Fool*, picking fights specifically because they put you at a disadvantage."

"Heroes placed in situations where it is possible but unlikely for them to triumph buck the odds more than they should," Hanno agreed. "It is the way of stories, and stories have power."

"But that's the thing," I said, "in those stories, you don't send some nobody to kill the dragon and win the princess' hand. Sure the guy *seems* like a nobody, but we know he's not because the story is about him. He's really a prince, or a knight, or fated in some way."

"Your argument is that we must look for a specific manner of fate, then?" Hanno curiously asked,

"No," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said. "It is that the dragon's lair is full of skeletons whose mishap was being... insufficiently fated, yes?"

"Weight," I said. "See, the bridge looks wide open right now: all armies are accounted for and far, we know where it's being built and where most of the Scourges are. But it won't actually be open."

They were both looking at me like was belabouring something very obvious, which I supposed for heroes I was. Villain lairs were always trapped and vicious, while heroes didn't really *have* those.

"So there's going to be a fight," I continued. "Which you figure you can win sending some solid heroes while keeping here our finest. That's a mistake, though, because that bridge is something that could lose us this entire war. It's the reason we began this campaign in the first place."

Hanno's eyes narrowed.

"Weight," he repeated. "You imply that if we do not send shoulders capable of bearing the burden of this entire campaign, all they will be is... skeletons in a dragon lair."

"I do," I said. "And that means it has to be you. Because pretty much the only other person in your camp with that kind of pull on the war is the Grey Pilgrim, and no offence Tariq but--"

"No, I agree I would be ill-suited to the task," the Pilgrim murmured. "Perhaps if Laurence was still with us it would have been different, two of us ancients with three younger, but as things stand the forces within the band would not be in harmony."

"So you agree," I pressed.

"I don't," Tariq replied. "You see this weight as a scale that must evened, when instead it should be seen as a crucible to help the rise of another great character. We should be discussing who

among the servants of Above in the city could benefit from this opportunity, not entertaining sending away the White Knight before a pivotal point of a crusade."

Godsdamned heroes. There was a point where optimism became delusion, and thinking every test was some sort of ladder was well past it. Sometimes you just *failed*, because you hadn't been prepared enough and you'd underestimated the foe.

"This isn't a fucking crusade, Tariq," I said, exasperated. "I know it's more comfortable for you to think about it that way, but my side of the fence is here too and *we count*. The role of a White Knight isn't the same it would be in-

"Enough," Hanno said. "I understand the need for a swift decision, but I will not let myself be strongarmed before considering this properly."

"We can't afford to wait long," I bluntly said.

"The discussion can be resumed tomorrow, after our council of Named," the White Knight said. "I will sleep on this, at the very least, and consult with others I trust."

Not what I'd wanted to hear, but I could already see that pushing any further now would just burn goodwill for no gain. I suppressed a wince, looking back on how I'd gotten drawn into an argument about 'the role of a White Knight' with the Pilgrim while said White Knight was right in front of me. Hanno was remarkably even-keeled, but that probably hadn't done me any favours. It'd been a mistake, too, since the man I actually needed to convince hadn't been the one I was arguing with. I snuck a look at Tariq. Had that been on purpose? Getting my thoughts out so the White Knight could see them splayed out without having been drawn into the thick of it.

"By all means," I said. "We can continue this when everyone's rested."

"A good evening to you, then," Hanno said, inclining his head,

I returned it, and he bade a significantly less formal goodbye to the Pilgrim. Who stayed behind, as I'd hoped he would. The two of us continued the walk towards the opposite end of the garden, his slow gait and my limp evenly matched. Neither of us pretended this was about anything but continuing the conversation that'd just abruptly ended.

"He is in a pivotal moment of his journey as one of the Bestowed, Queen Catherine," Tariq said. "Sending him away from the battle could have deleterious effects."

"Or it could be exactly what he needs, Pilgrim," I replied. "We don't *know*, either way."

"His own leanings-"

"Are a consequence of his character, not some arcane working of fate," I bluntly interrupted. "If he had some instinct niggling at him that this was a mistake I'd reconsider, but he argued based on logic. He thinks his place is here in the thick of it, herding heroes, so that's where he figures he should be."

"Because that *is* his place," Tariq just as bluntly replied. "He is the White Knight, and the hordes of Evil has come."

"Maybe that was true a century ago," I said, "but you gave me a whole speech about how he has to find a new way, Peregrine. What you're describing is more of the same."

"This new way you argue for is also *your* way, Black Queen," the old man said. "Not his. If this were his own notion I too would reconsider, but it is not."

I grimaced. Yeah, I could see that from his perspective this was meddling on my part.

"It's a strategic decision I'm pushing, not a personal or even a story one beyond my understanding of forces that need to be addressed for the operation to be a success," I said.

It wasn't exactly an apology or a justification, but it flirted enough with both he should be able to understand I wasn't unaware of where I was treading.

"I believe you to be acting in good faith," the Pilgrim acknowledged, "but that does not mean it would not lead to error."

I breathed out.

"All right," I said. "Then I'll back off and stop pushing, if you do the same."

He cocked an eyebrow, clearly less than inclined to agree. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. I was going to have to pay for the goods.

"I'm calling in my favour," I said.

I'd not agreed to keep an eye out for Razin and Aquiline without putting a price on it. The old man's face remained calm, but he studied me for a long moment.

"I will not argue for something I believe to be a mistake," Tariq Fleetfoot said.

"I'm only bargaining for silence," I replied.

He didn't look happy about it, but then favours weren't supposed to be things you were inclined to give in the first place.

"Then the bargain is struck," the Grey Pilgrim reluctantly said.

We shook on it, wrists clasped, and broke off the grip as we reached the end of the path.

Leaving the garden of death behind, we went into the city and instead saw to the living.

Dave

oh boy first again? This chapter felt short? Looking forward to more buildup

caoimhinh

The calm before the storm.

If you can call calm to actually feeling how the winds are gathering and the clouds are darkening. These build-up chapters feel like a coil spring being compressed and every five paragraphs a new weight is added to the pile over that device.

[onedollargum](#)

Felt longer than usual to me.

Sparsebeard

A valorous White Knight,
Bought and sold in the night.

[Liliet](#)

Literally what Catherine bought was for him to make his own decision without Tariq meddling.

Sparsebeard

I'll be surprised if the Knight doesn't end up in the heroic band now I'll admit. Whatever the decision Hanno makes though, it'll impact on both his and Cat's Names.

Christian Oaks

Yeah the white going where the black sends him definitely is him tacitly agreeing with her role above all other named

Cicero

My instincts say it will be the Squire, and maybe the Apprentice.

devildragon777

Yay, the Woe will be together for this! Figures that it has to come on the eve of 'The Most Important Battle of the WAR'™, though.

Gigantes sorcery continues to be absurd, and scary. What the heck did they *do*?

...I dunno if leaving Hanno to stew on matters on his own is good or not. He hasn't gotten much out of it so far?

ninegardens

>...I dunno if leaving Hanno to stew on matters on his own is good or not. He hasn't gotten much out of it so far?

Oh, but he has... all of this stewing is basically just a kettle of story weight (at least, according to Pilgrim). This is effectively a ritual built of time and doubt rather than iron and blood.

Simmering is like... its like a pair of poker players repeatedly raising the stakes. It doesn't say which way it will go, but it does say that when it does go, it'll either be terrible or fabulous.

KageLupus

"Gigantes sorcery continues to be absurd, and scary. What the heck did they *do*?"

"...apparently the parts where they had melted the veil between the Twilight Ways and Creation were still 'cooling off'."

Sounds to me like the Gigantes helped the Artificer burn a hole through creation and into the Twilight Ways to create a new permanent gate. How they did it would probably require some more info from the Witch's interlude as we don't have a really firm grasp on their magic right now, other than the fact that they are pretty good at warping Creation with words.

dadycool

So it's confirmed that she's a minor god. Creation rippled with power from something far greater than her and she felt cowed by

it in a way that a mere mortal like Vivienne, and likely even other Named, isn't.

Wow, that garden. It's honestly a little depressing to see it dead simply because it was once alive.

lol, "The White Knight you're talking about is right here, by the way." What would happen if Cat, a Leader of Named, coming into her own Name, joined by her Squire and the three Heroes she's had him associate with, were the ones to burn the bridge? It satisfies everyone while being ideal for no one.

Konstantin von Karstein

She was a minor god, it's probably why she felt it. Cat will not be a Hero, it would muddle Providence to send her destroy the bridge. And Arthur doesn't have enough weight, experience or destructive power to be anything than a dead weight in that band to destroy the bridge.

Cicero

I don't know... Cat has played the role of Hero a few times before when she was the Squire. (Despite not being a Hero). Maybe she could do it again.

[Liliet](#)

Demigod sounds right for Catherine.

God I'm hype for every single thing happening here.

mamm0nn

She's not a minor god, she once was a minor god. There have been a great many hints of attunement lingering for her of her past powers of Winter, from still sensing certain wards of containing to the luring of the Maavii prayer. She's not the power that is but hidden, but the power that was, and that's sufficient to feel these kind of things.

Sinead

I think where I slightly disagree with this analysis (and it's probably in line with the Dead King's perspective) is that while Cat is a Former Minor God, she a) wasn't broken from the loss of her apotheosis b) still has the spiritual grooves carved into her soul that can allow her to grow into something More. Not saying that she will become a full god, but considering the perspective of the Titan in the last bonus chapter (Colossal 1 for the record), I think "godhood" is something relatively flexible.

Given all the parallels drawn previously, perhaps the Tower was an ascension ritual in it's own way, and Triumphant's breaking of the Tower, and the world's rejection of that path broke that path to the Tower for ever, leaving only the echo in the song from nowhere. It would explain why it's the Girl who Climbed the Tower, rather than something more gender neutral.

The setting really seems built around the fact that one cannot do things that they cannot in some way to conceive or perceive (Cat's apotheosis was accidental, but it really was the cumulation of her putting herself in the line of succession for Winter and then killing off everyone above her. She just didn't think through the implications). So the fact that she can still sense the workings of the Gigantes to me implies that she could be capable of working at that scale if she so chose to. It may be that other non-spellcaster Named could sense the power, but I don't think they would be as sensitive to it, more just aware of the movement of power.

[Liliet](#)

You believe the "lingering attunement" to not have current godhood implications. That's the view Catherine herself takes, but it's not the only possible interpretation.

Florian Hötzl

Agreed.

New heqdcanon: She rebuilt tower is a pale imitation of Tower of God.

Matthew

If Cat wanted to win... and win easily, send the squire and the White Knight to the bridge. Hanno would get killed and then the squire would ride the death flag to greater victory.

saithorthepyro

That would be a terrible idea for Cat to try. Hanno, despite their disagreements that they have kept away from professional decisions, is one of the few Heroes she has a rapport with who also has a lot of pull with the entire Heroic community and is likely to help get the Accords up and running after the war ends. Getting him killed to try and give a power boost to a kid that she has purposely distanced herself from and she is actively worried about becoming a threat just because of his name and where he is from sounds like a terrible idea.

hakureireimu

Is Rapacious Librarian supposed to be Forgetful Librarian?

[Liliet](#)

Good catch -_-

Crowley

The Forgetful Librarian was a villain who Hasenbach recruited to serve her in Salia. I think you're getting them mixed up with the Rapacious Troubadour.

Crowley

Re-reading that part and some of the comments, i believe there might have been a typo that got the two mixed up, sorry.

shikkarasu

OK, but real talk I would LOVE a story about the Rapacious Librarian. It would be like Masego if he was never born with the Gift. Devouring knowledge both metaphorically and literally.

Florian Hötzl

But books are not dietary well balanced.

Too much Fibre, you know? ^^

medailyfun

with so many Named around the Creation itself starts to confuse and forget the Names

[origamiflame](#)

Looks like EE was the Forgetful Librarian this round hahaha

Big I

I'm going to speculate on who gets sent to the bridge.

Not the Witch, since she's tied to the giants and they're in the capital. Not the White Knight, same reason, plus this is the climax of the war. Not the Valiant Champion, since she and the White Knight have got a buddy cop thing going on. Squire, Apprentice, Page and Young Slayer are too young.

That all being the case, I'm picking; Blessed Artificer for fire power, Rogue Sorcerer to be in charge, Vagrant Spear as DPS, Silent Guardian as tank, Forlorn Healer as healer. Maybe swap

Vagrant Spear for Silver Huntress or the Guardian for the Mirror Knight, since VS and MK have history.

[sengachi](#)

Hmm. All solid tactical choices, but the Rogue Sorcerer isn't really a *leading* Name. He's not the one you have rally your haggard band in the darkest hour to go into the mouth of death exclaiming battle cries in the defense of your homeland.

And going up against the Dead King's strong point, that's what they'll need. Someone who can stride into the mouth of hell knowing they'll die and make you want to follow them.

Matthew

Rogue sorcerer has been the MVP of the heroes. Like he is competent, resourceful, not prone to ego, and works well with Cat.

[sengachi](#)

Oh yeah, he's easily one of my favorite Named in the story and he's good at what he does. He's *really* good at what he does.

He's just ... if I were to make a Lord of The Rings comparison, he's a Legolas, not an Aragorn. Pound for pound Legolas is probably one of best fighters in the Fellowship, has one of the best heads on his shoulders, and isn't prone to problematic personal issues. But if you need someone to give an inspiring speech at the darkest hour, Legolas is not your guy. Aragorn is.

And the Rogue Sorcerer just isn't an Aragorn. If they're going to assemble a band of five to break the bridge, someone on that band needs to be an Aragorn.

Cicero

I wouldn't say the Rogue Sorcerer is Legolas, if I where to pick an equivalent from LotR it'd be Faramir. Which means he is exactly the guy you'd pick to go take the bridge when Aragon is needed to defend the capital.

It's just... he's likely to die, or be wounded nigh unto death in the process. Along with most of his band too.

He's the man who gets it done, despite not being the fit for the role, but "get 'er done" is not the safest method in heroics. Heck, it's not the safest method in real life either.

Anomandris

That's kinda the reason why doesn't fall into the "Charge of the Light Brigade" band category. He is too pragmatic to be manipulated by Above and as you mentioned, works well with Cat. The bridge job needs a quasi-Fanatic leading it for the story to make sense, and Roland definitely isn't .

Actually MK might be the best idea if not Hanno – especially this is twisted as a redemption arc.

Cicero

Hmm... and interesting idea. The Mirror Knight would probably fill both Cats and Tariq's criteria. He has both the weight and has the potential to grow from the mission.

Be a bitter pill for Cat though. Though I suspect the White Knight might think of it himself.

Cpt. Obvious

Sending MK to destroy the bridge would be risky. Not that he wouldn't get it done, he's an excellent fit for that. But the question is what it would do to his ego.

Something like that would change him. The fight in the Arsenal blew his ego up like a balloon. That he'd destroyed five or six demons almost single handed inflated his ego to the degree it took WK beating him unconscious barehanded to bring him down to earth again. If he is sent and succseed it might trigger the same reaction, or it might force him to grow as a human. We've heard his internal dialog and know that he's probably as straight an arrow as can be found. He doesn't really have a bad bone in his body, but with the kind of power he has and his tendency to see any shade but pure white as being evil he can cause a lot of problems.

beleester

Rogue Sorcerer would be a natural fit for a raid behind enemy lines, though. He's spent most of his life alone and on the run, and he's good at improvising his way out of tight situations. And he's still got a good amount of firepower if things do turn into a straight-up fight.

This is a commando raid, not the charge of the light brigade. Get in, blow up the bridge, get out. Roland is good at that sort of thing. You're right that he's not necessarily a motivating or leading sort, but he's the rock-solid second in command that the whole operation would rest on.

Hmm, now I'm warming up to the idea of Mirror Knight in command with Roland as his Designated Thinker.

Liliet

Blessed Artificer is an ARTISAN. She requires supplies for everything she does. She's a terrible pick for an independent mission.

Konstantin von Karstein

The problem with the BA is that she needs here artefacts, and if she use them all she's useless. I doubt that in the middle of nowhere she could make new. The WW is more likely. If Hanno stays here there's a Name to speak with the Gigantes, it's enough.

ninegardens

Right... so it feels like Tariq play is to aim Mirror Knight at this situation. He's the obvious upcoming named that Grey Pilgrim has been hanging out with, with enough of a story that he might just about pull it off. I can't think of anyone else with the story weight to pull this off? But MK having his redemption arc here... feels about right. Possibly sending him to his death in the process but...

Meanwhile, Witch of the Wilds and Hanno have SYNERGY with the Giantese, which makes them a good fit for hanging back, even if it weakens the bridge attempt.

Give all the auspiciousness, it almost feels like the story wants Viviane to head to the bridge... but she isn't named at the moment.

Is there anyone I'm forgetting? The new squire and other newbies just don't have the weight to them.

LarsBlitzer

The only other heroic Names I can think of are the Relentless Magistrate and the Grizzled Veteran, but their place would obviously be back with the army. The Veteran should be with the other Fantassin Companies that the Iron Prince had to cow to get them to come along, to keep their morale and nerve up if nothing else. The Magistrate's Name is tailor made for ferreting out undead infiltrators in an urban setting. Setting him loose on the alleyways and courtyards will turn up tons of undead vermin faster than you can say "I am The Law!"

Liliet

You're probably thinking of Grizzled Fantassin, and I don't think she's a hero. She's about as iconically Neutral as it gets after Ranger. She had to be bribed with a lot of money

to come along to a world-saving-important mission, which should tell you all you need to know about her allegiance, I think.

beleester

It's the "possibly ending in his death" bit that worries me. The Mirror Knight is an enemy of Catherine, and I feel "Villain sends troublesome hero on a suicide mission" is one of those stories that ends badly for the villain, even if we know that heroes pull off suicide missions all the time.

On the other hand, if Cat is arguing for the White Knight and the Mirror Knight bravely volunteers in his stead...

ninegardens

Oh yeah, CAT can't send him. But if MK volunteers, or if... Tariq (the wise old mentor) or Hanno (the man who has no reason to trust MK, that man who lost a finger to MK) turns around and says "Christoph, you can do it. I believe in you", that is a very different story weight.

I think the main trick is... Christoph is used to going in their and being the only survivor. In order for the bridge story to work out for him, he also needs to keep the rest of his band alive. (If they live, it is heroic growth. If the other band members die, it's a "failure with one lone survivor")

[sengachi](#)

Oh this will be interesting. Especially because it seems like Catherine's name is built around authority over or passing judgment upon other Named, I wonder if that might come into play here.

[Liliet](#)

I think this is the one place where Catherine proves she's a good pick for this authority by NOT meddling. And by keeping away other meddlers, using her favor for that, by the way.

[origamiflame](#)

Given her use of speaking mostly to shut people up, and also this bargain, I wonder if one of her aspects could be around silence?

[Liliet](#)

Doesn't really sound like Catherine "add some sharpeners to it" Foundling. Now, order/discipline? Absolutely yes 😊

shikkarasu

'Order' doesn't really feel like Catherine "Set The House On Fire While She's Still In It" Foundling, either. Chaos is a little too baked in to her for that.

[Liliet](#)

Order's been her goal from the start, she kind of bonded with Amadeus over that. Chaos is the method, but order is the goal, always. This is the gal whose solution to all of the world's problems she can reach is an international treaty binding parties that have never been bound by a treaty before, and whose reaction to being turned into an increasingly mad fae was to take rigid oaths to limit what she could do.

Do not be confused by applying strict DnD alignment rules. Catherine is a fantastic example of [Chaotic Lawful](#) (where Kairos, by the way, is an example of her opposite from that same post, Lawful Chaotic)

Tom

Peace has always been Cat's goal, as explicitly observed by Kairos. That peace requires life, and if we're sticking to the whole "order vs chaos" dichotomy, life is always a mix of both. The Dead King's world would be much more orderly than anything Cat has envisioned, and she finds it horrific: "There was bare, graven beauty to the garden that felt like a knot in my throat. Was this the world the Dead King wanted? A field of grey from shore to shore, so utterly barren that even the sea grew lifeless lapping at it."

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, it's true that Catherine is not at the extremes of the Lawful alignment as envisioned in DnD-like verse. It is also true that relative to the average normal state of Calernia, her wish is to make it more Lawful.

dcarter8419

I feel like Cat it's right in terms of named and weight but that it shouldn't be Hanno. MK would be a better pick IF it swings into a redemption arc

[Liliet](#)

Same here, to be honest.

Sinead

Especially if he is assigned Severance to have the systemic acknowledgement of his possibility of growth. Then again, I am a sucker for the idea of Christophe becoming "The Sword and Shield". I blame JoCat.

I'm always mixed on Christophe, since as pointed out, he was left to fester. Yes he could have "gotten himself out", but I think that ignores that there is a lot of pressure on Named to do things a certain way, and he wouldn't have had the same support structure as Cat did while he came into his power to keep him from making to grievous mistakes or to more importantly correct him. Cat probably had more exposure to the idea of actually working with foreigners before becoming Squire and rising up through the Imperial Legions, while Mirror Knight seemed to have come into his own just before the Tenth Crusade.

In my head, I compare Christophe to Hakram, but while Hakram gained his power when he gained that certainty in his life, Christophe was handed power and chucked into the world, where the lens that he viewed it through was found to be horribly flawed. And while adaptability is possible, I think it is important to recognise that Names don't encourage character growth in the same fashion we would expect people to grow (I think the magnification of virtues and flaws is true of all Names, not just Dread Emperor/Empress. The Tower is just the one with the most resources to back it up).

Liliet

Yeah, Christophe was kind of fucked over by his surroundings. He's a good egg.

Sinead

I kinda felt guilty after we got chapters from his perspective for all the frustration around him. Protagonist centered morality is a hell of a bias, but I thought I was pretty good at avoiding that in this series.

ninegardens

I mean... even in his chapters he was kinda an idiot... but he was an fool, and a tragic figure, not selfish, not a monster. He was just... kind of dumb. But that's a forgivable flaw, so long as he accept that he needs to trust people and not lead with his own wisdom.

But yeah, realizing how many times he had been the "Last man standing in a massacre" was... it put his

story in more context, that he *knows* about the failure.

[Liliet](#)

EE is REALLY good at writing conflict where both sides are reasonable and virtuous 😊

caoimhinh

So the pattern of chapter titles for this arc is “predictions of the future”.

With Eschatology (which is the study of the end of times or the end of the world in theology), Omen, and now Signs, these chapters titles are painting an eerie but cool picture.

And all clairvoyant Named agree that the coming battle is a whiteout where they can't predict the outcome? And that's already the best scenario, considering if Vivienne isn't there they can predict assured failure?

Well, that's a war with the fate of their civilizations on the line, alright.

Reader in The Night

You know, this conversation didn't really read like two Heroes and a Villain making a decision, it felt like a Hero (Tariq) and a Villain (Cat) trying to sway his opinion, and Hanno at a crossroads.

We heard before that Cat couldn't transition into the Grey Knight because there was no cultural demand for the role, but that's no longer true, is it? Here, in Hainaut, the battle isn't between Good VS Evil, it's between the Living VS the Dead.

And it's not just that: this entire campaign has been taking an axe to the old rivalries, the old way to do things, the old Black-VS-White Duality. Cat said it herself, this is not a Crusade. This Tipping Point feels decidedly more... Grey.

And we have much speculated that Cat will have a name to stand in Judgement over other named, haven't we? And yet, even weakened as it is, I feel that it's very unlikely that Cat will get to pass Judgement on the Chosen from Above without the Choir of the same name having a say on things.

Currently, the Choir of Judgement is locked in battle with the Hierarch. The Hierarch himself is largely factionless in the Above-Below conflict, but he ends up weighting more for Below because he's tied to Bellerophan Law, and that polity is typically Below's. If the Choir manages to absorb the Hierarch, it might not come back as lily-white as it used to be.

A new power, a Greyer power, coming into play at a dramatically appropriate moment, claiming both the Representatives from the sides as it's own (with lighter or darker shades of Grey, of course), could have a lot of narrative strenght. More, it would have a lot of story symmetry.

hakureireimu

I don't think the Practical Guide to Evil is to be ... not Evil. Arch Villain is still my guess.

[Liliet](#)

The Practical Guide to Evil being not lowercase evil has been the case since Chapter 2, when Amadeus first walked Catherine through the implications and reasoning involved with governance.

Uppercase Evil has to stick, though, alongside uppercase Good 😊

Sinead

Re read Chapter 2 because of this. I had forgotten that Cat didn't drink a lot in the start of the series.

[Liliet](#)

It's beautiful, isn't it?

...yeah, she only started to drink a lot after all the trauma 😊

dcarter8419

This.

edrey

To put a cherry on top of all that, the bard make a move. Who want to bet?

Now i have a theory about triumphant, she was close to be a god, the DK said she has clarity like anything he had seen before and the godhead is a trick of perspective. She fought a angel head on and won after all.

Also, The Rapacious librarian? Wasn the forgetful librarian?

saithorthepyro

If I had a nickel every time events that happened were theorized as a Bard Plot...let's not forget that not only does this require Bard fooling a lot of augurs and prophets at the same time, but Augur has gone toe-to-toe with Bard before and

won. There's a very good chance that she cannot really mess this up.

Crash

Althought I do see your point on this(The Bard is much like Death Flags and Rules of Three, in this comment section) this might be the one time where there's some merit to this.

It's not so much that she had fooled the augurs but that her presence in addition to Cat's and the increased interest of the Dead King in this fight makes her being present a good explanation for the issues the augurs are experiencing. Not by way of nefarious 45D Chess, but by her nature as one of the people who fuck with the Augurs.

She doesn't need to be masterminding anything here, just showing up and fucking with predictions and generally disrupting the situation by simply showing up to say Hi and immediately sending Catherine into paranoia would be enough to fuck with this very delicate situation.

[Casey Glick](#)

Foundling's Law: as the length of a PGTE thread approaches infinity, the probability that the Bard is blamed for an event approaches 1.

[origamiflame](#)

This one's definitely a logarithmic curve

Black Spiral Dancer

Honest word!

ninegardens

But... but logarithms tend towards infinity... not towards 1. D:

[origamiflame](#)

Hmm you're not wrong.
... Sigmoid-esque curve?

[Liliet](#)

This is a good bet, IMHO. Not that Bard's necessary for this – there's plenty of mess already, as Catherine has commented, and “we literally cannot fucking tell what's going to happen” is a good oracular backdrop to a climactic battle – but her presence would definitely contribute to it, and is not entirely unlikely.

mamm0nn

My own theory is that the Bard has made many Named to dilute the batch. Named are rare and powerful and meant to leave an impact, but then a Named came along who went around creating little Named to remove that. Now we've got so many Named that most are even forgotten or just one-note Roles.

We know that Hierarch wasn't one of Bard's creations, she said so herself, and he without any training other than existing went up against a Choir. Perhaps the likes of Triumphant and the Dead King were such true Named too, ones that trickled through in the early days of the Age of Wonders where the Intercessor appeared and broke the power of the old Named.

True Named are greater, more meant to create Stories than follow them. They'd be like Triumphant, able to do so much more despite being in an era way behind the modern advances, or DK who is still the leading figure in knowledge of the arcane even after millennia. Maybe Cat has broken through to such a True Name herself, but whether that's the case or not there's no real need for a pre-Age of Wonders Named to be a god of any sort to be as potent as they are.

edrey

Its possible, but at the same time i would say that hierarch was so powerfull was because his first rival was the bard. He led creation guide his aspects and his third aspect is based on the soul of a city without a story for a millenia and with the corpse of a god as base. The power of a name depend of the story but we lack the details to say more.

mamm0nn

Tyrant's Helike was the one with a god in the basement. Bellophon just has a scribbled-on rock.

agumentic

Scribbled-on rock that happened to be a corpse of a god, though.

Frivolous

The upcoming Battle in Hainaut is already a WB move. See the conversation between Tariq and Catherine in chapter 61 Adouber:

"But why the sudden obsession with the armies in Hainaut?" he finally asked. "What changed?"

"You fight the Bard, Catherine," he said. "Neither walls nor locks nor oaths are enough to keep her from learning secrets if she wishes to know them."

"You think she sold us out to the Dead King?" I skeptically said. "If there's one person I'd buy she wouldn't sell us out to, it'd be him. What would she even-"

I froze the dreadful thought that came all too soon. The Grey Pilgrim sighed.

"So he comes after us with his entire hateful might," Tariq said. "So we suffer a stinging defeat at his hands and, like children in the dark, we pray for deliverance by our own guardian angel."

Chances are very good that everything Vivienne mentioned about how Hainaut will be the result of the WB tattling to Neshamah.

And yeah, it should be Forgetful Librarian.

medailyfun

I suspect Bard had made her move already, and this move was about the elves and Forever King

Konstantin von Karstein

Good catch, she could have leaked the existence of the Spring Crown to those pricks.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, this is all waythehell off Bard scripts. I suspect Bard could screw it up, but that's the only thing she could do – and she doesn't actually want the Dead King to win.

[Liliet](#)

So I fucking love this.

Neener neener to everyone who expected a disaster to the south to be the reason for Vivienne coming, FUCK DOOMSAYING.

Of course, doomsaying is also what actually happened in-universe, and like... holy shit. This is so cool. There are so many ways this can go, with the premise being that if the whole Woe isn't gathered together everyone will lose. Scenarios range from "Catherine dies and Vivienne needs to be here to substitute for her" (I'd say it's unlikely given book 7 will also exist, but knowing Catherine's history with dying so far,) to "Vivienne needs to talk Catherine out of a stupid thing / openly go against her at a crucial moment to prevent a mistake" to "Vivienne needs to MAKE a mistake that would unpredictably lead everyone to victory" to "this conversation was literally it, Vivienne's addition to the mix at the start changed the dynamic to one that would lead to the better outcome" to "the Woe needs to be together to make a collective self-sacrifice" to "Vivienne is

about to come into a Name and save the day” to HOLY SHIT I HAVE NO IDEA THIS IS SO MUCH FUN.

THE WOE IS BACK TOGETHER SQUEEEEEEEEEEE

Crash

So, knowing Cat’s history with dying I’m about to go ahead and make a bold claim: I don’t think she dies again, and if she does it’s next book at some very climatic moment.

As she mentioned this very chapter she has danced with death thrice already, I think she’s gonna give it a rest for a bit. Reckon the next one might stick haha

Althought doubtful, I’m here for Named Viv and the absolutely horrible migraine that’d cause Cat lmao (been leaning towards Heiress lately, cause that’s fun)

[Liliet](#)

I’m sticking with Shining Princess for Viv, as it will cause a headache and solve a problem simultaneously in the most entertaining way! It will also illustrate a problem with Cat’s “no Named rulers” idea even further than it was already discredited XD

anyway yeah I’ve been leaning more and more towards “naw Cat’s not dying easily” like, those previous three times? they were legitimately with a chance of her not coming back from that. they were for real now? Cat has established a pattern of “death is temporary” and now she’s unkillable unless you go to the same lengths as she had to to even get a hit on the Wandering Bard.

I really want Cat to die again, only for it to gloriously not stick, this time for no particular reason other than “she’s Catherine Foundling”. It probably won’t happen, you’re right – I want many things, some of them mutually exclusive – but if it were to, it would be great and fit well. IMHO.

Earl of Purple

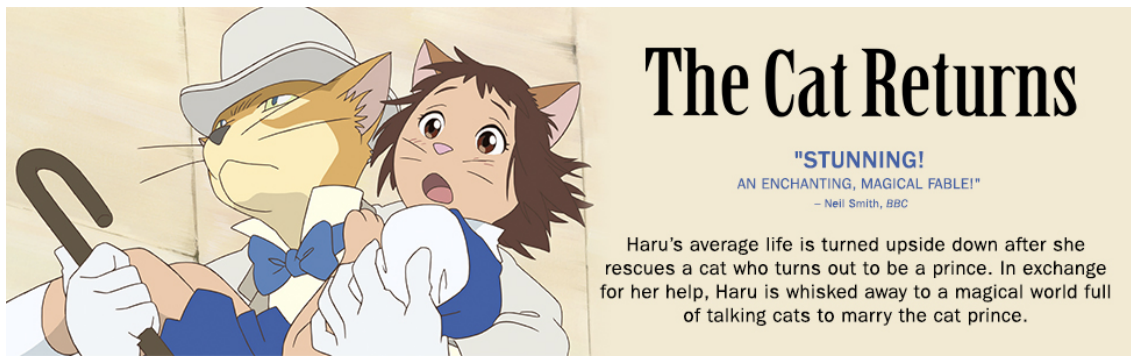
Maybe her first Aspect will be Return, letting her cheat death on her own.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly that sounds like Cat.

Also allows her to make the best last minute saves.

medailyfun



Isi Arnott-Campbell

Love that movie.

Sinead

Will Return only work....nine times?

John

Nine day cooldown after each self-resurrection, maybe.

Sinead

Oooh that's even better than my "Cats have 9 lives" joke. Perhaps if we want to really make it interesting, her resurrections are like her soul searching, where she has to murder both the Below and Above representative in her soul to come back to life.

That would be an interesting twist. You get the resurrection, but you have to earn it every time. And I like it more than Bard's body snatching (it took me so long to realise that Wandering Bard is basically a Name that became sentient, considering that she checks to see what her calling name is every time she takes a new body/kills the mortal)

Crash

Yeah, I like Shining Princess since I saw it as a suggestion it's just that a Callowan Heiress sounds interesting.

A traditionally Praesi Name in the hands of a Callowan born, who often opposes the Wasteland but acts as heiress to the Squire who proved the curren Practical Evil works.

That's kinda poetic. Also Viv would absolutely fucking hate it lmao

Sinead

I just think it should be "Shining Princess -> Sun Queen" because she's not just any old Good Queen of the Old Kingdom. She's the Dawn of the new era.

Vivienne's reign will be an enlightened era, but her work to not have Cat discarded by Callowan history is to frame her reign as "Dawn restored from the dark by a thief in the Night".

Vivienne recognises that she would not be where/who she is without Cat/the Woe extending her trust. If she frames her entire reign that while is worthy of respect in it's own way, also a tribute to Cat's own work, I think it would be the best ending that Cat's work in Callow can get.

Of course, we could both be wrong. Perhaps Vivienne just gets fridged to motivate Cat because she isn't motivated enough already.

The whole point of the Book 4 was that it was the pit of despair for all the Woe (save Hakram). Now it's "breaking all the armies in Creation" time.

Liliet

> Perhaps Vivienne just gets fridged to motivate Cat because she isn't motivated enough already.

The one thing I'm fairly certain will not happen!

Sinead

I just word it like that because I am getting really pissed off at all the "DEATH FLAGS!"

Maybe characters will die, but I really feel like PGtE is a much happier setting than people give it credit for. The most common elements that are used to make a setting "grimdark" are avoided for the most part, and pointed out as exceptions when they do occur.

This is why I genuinely expect the Woe to make it through more or less intact. If Hakram was going to die, I really feel like Arsenal was the place to do it. The fact that Cat made a point to mend rifts between the Woe (her talk with Vivienne) enable Hakram to wake. Yes, Cat and Hakram had their own working out to do, but that has progressed positively! Why do we need to undo all that hard work in a story that genuinely rewards investing in others? To me that's the actual moral of the story: "Institutions/cultures/groups matter more than any one person. invest in people, and

make the point to do so, and you will be rewarded with what they do for you in turn."

Liliet

THIS THIS THIS THIS THIS

> PGtE is a much happier setting than people give it credit for

THISSSSSS

It's "MATURE" but it shows how MATURE doesn't have to mean grimdark and deadly and hopeless????

> I genuinely expect the Woe to make it through more or less intact.

ME T0000 FUCKING GOD

> Why do we need to undo all that hard work in a story that genuinely rewards investing in others? To me that's the actual moral of the story:
"Institutions/cultures/groups matter more than any one person. invest in people, and make the point to do so, and you will be rewarded with what they do for you in turn."

this is some good shit right here

AbraKadabra

The two of them NOT mutually exclusive. Heiress is a transitory name. It May TRANSITION into a heroic name, possibly.

Sinead

On one hand, I see where you are coming from, but I think Cat's legacy is helping bring Callow out of the Age of Wonders into the Age of Order, and that is better reflected with Vivienne starting with a Name that fits the Old Kingdom (especially with the rumblings about Cat ignoring the Old Ways) and transmuting it into something that will thrive in the the Age of Order.

Vivienne is the Heiress of Cat's legacy, yes. But since that is for the Crown of Callow specifically, not the general flexibility that Heiress implies in Praes, Shining Princess is a better fit. Plus, coming into Shining Princess could be the finalised boost to Vivienne's own martial prowess.

Hmmm, some speculation: what if one of the reasons for Vivienne to be here is as the rallying point of pitched army battle? Part of the issue is that the White Knight is the only big rallying point Above has, so if Vivienne becomes another such figure (along with her reputation as one of the Woe), this may serve as something to bolster resolve.

Either she along with Cat bolsters resolve during the siege while the White Knight rides after the bridge, or she does the same role if the bridge assault fails and she is needed to serve as an additional rallying point in the second siege.

It is a lesser pull than the White Knight, but a band of 5 that works as closely as the Woe do could make the difference, especially if you have the work that Cat has put in for the lesser named to have the holding power amplified (Arthur with the legions, Sapan and Masageo with the mage lines, etc.)

Mental Mouse

> I really want Cat to die again, only for it to gloriously not stick, this time for no particular reason other than "she's Catherine Foundling".

Oh, that would be awesome. Just imagine the looks on people's faces... While Cat's all "well, I guess I am kinda special...".

Liliet

Cat: "I swear I wasn't even trying this time!"

Point

When I read the Augur's words about Vivienne and the Fourth, it felt like a death sentence to me. As if her presence leading the Fourth will result in her death and that will bring Cat's name to finally bloom to decide the battle in favor of the Alliance.

I hope to be wrong, but it gave me that impression.

Liliet

It's one of the dozen possible interpretations 😊

Crash

I spent half this chapter convinced the cause of the whiteout was either Cat's Name(though I still believe it makes most sense for it come at the very end of this book) what with the whole Woe

back together again, or, failing that, the Bard making a move, possibly by means of the angel corpse.

But then this conversation came, yeah it's definitely Hanno. Guess he is about to find his pivot. And there's a Squire in the mix for it (Named Arthur! Gods Bellow and everburning, I'm still not over this.)

Either way, we're approaching a climax here, might be we're heading into the final (extended) conflict of this book?

The Queen's own band of five is back together, there is a Dragon in need of conquering that requires a Heroic band of five to match and all the augurs are having mild panic attacks, this should be fun.

[Liliet](#)

> all the augurs are having mild panic attacks, this should be fun.

MOOD

Axel Rafael

I'm calling it, if Cat doesn't get her name until the end of this battle, she'll either get a lot deeper into it or get closer to a form of "godhood" (that's going to be inevitably related to her forming Name) 😎

Also, this Chapter sets so many things for the future of the story 🙄

And I missed hanging out with the Woe. Watching them interact with each other reminds me they're still human with Petty flaws and preferences 😊 Love The Guide ♥

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

Watch her become the first God Alongside, of Names and Narrative.

[Javvies](#)

Heh. Abigail is successful once more. This time offscreen, so we missed out on the entertainment of her inner thoughts juxtaposed with what those around her see.

Viv being present with the Fourth just makes things indeterminate as opposed to definitive loss? That's definitely going to be rough. Though, of course, we already knew that, and so did they.

If Hanno's not in charge of the bridge Band, then who else does Tariq think could be?

Mirror Knight could maybe be part of the Band as the muscle/tank, but there's no way he could lead it. Both because he lacks the leader skillset, and because nobody would accept him as leader.

Unless the Kingfisher Prince is present and nobody mentioned it, I cannot think of a Heroic Named that could lead a Band of Five on something this high stakes.

ninegardens

See, I would argue, from a story perspective (IE, what Tariq was pushing), the fact that MK has failed so horribly before is precisely why MK *should* lead it.

mamm0nn

Ah, so that's how everyone dies.

I hope not, Pilgrim would doom us all if he thinks that MK is going to pull through in that regard. He's been quite stubborn about being stupid.

Crash

Which is absolutely the kind of moon logic heroes ascribe to, "those who don't want to lead are best suited to it" bullshit.

This is most likely what Tariq would like. The Squire is also an option in this, potentially the Blessed Apostate and the Apprentice, if he truly wants to make this a learning experience.

Konstantin von Karstein

The Blessed Artificer would be a catastrophically bad pick for leader thanks to her personality. Sending inexperienced Named to lead what is probably the most important Band of 5 of the century looks foolish.

[Liliet](#)

The Blessed Artificer is a catastrophically bad pick for an extended independent mission because of the nature of her Name. She's an ARTIFICER. An Artisan. She's a Tinker. She needs materials and a workshop for every trick she can pull later.

Crash

I didn't even mention the Artificer though? I fully agree with both of you. Adana has never met someone she hasn't instantly annoyed or insulted in some way.

I meant the healer that was opposite to the Burned Apostate (?), The boy Cat met early in the book.

[Liliet](#)

...Stalwart Apostle. Neither of the halves you mentioned were a part of her Name. You confused Apostle and Apostate, which was Tancred's Name (Scorched Apostate), and has the exact opposite meaning.

So yeah, we assumed at least one had to match who you meant 😊

Crash

I also fucked up the Burned Apostate ,it's actually Scorched. Fuck.

The amount of Names is starting to confuse me lmao

Sorry for the mess!

Konstantin von Karstein

She a bit too young for a mission that sensitive:)

[Mental Mouse](#)

"those who don't want to lead" fits *Hanno*, not Christophe! And no, this is not the time to send in the kids.

Crash

It isn't but Tariq has already implied he believes the Bridge can be used as a way to take whoever goes there stronger through the triumph

[Mental Mouse](#)

But like Cat says here, you need to be able to *back up* your story.

Before the Keter trip, Pilgrim could have said "well, I have more experience"... but that doesn't necessarily apply anymore, what with Cat's stolen Bard power.

dcarter8419

Yes Kingfisher Prince!

Juff

Typo Thread:

cover thighs > cover her thighs
there'd it's > it'd
had half > had been half
wealthy of upbringing (wealthy sort?)
you'd seen on > you'd see on
soldiers like > soldiers liked
shot-term > short-term
the augur been > the Augur had been
here on > along with
my own's > my own
must be them > must have been them
they way > the way
freshers > fresher
winesink > wineskin
I'd deal it out > I'd dealt it out
wilted every > wilted, every
accounted for and far (is this right?)
like was belabouring > like I was belabouring
must evened, > must ne evened,
hordes of Evil has > hordes of Evil have

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, I wouldn't even know which chapter to dig into to find out, but wasn't Kingfisher with Hanno? EE seems to have sidelined him after giving him "too much" of a spotlight, but this kind of suicide mission is literally what his Name was crystalized around. He's a leader that's meant to succeed when no one else can, and just leaving him to collect dust on the sideline seems a waste. I'd rather he be properly killed off than forgotten.

[Burlyraven](#)

Tack a *if nothing else* on at the end there. I'd ideally like him to be Cat's retirement plan.

[Liliet](#)

Why wouldn't the Kingfisher be at Twilight's Pass?

[308924810a](#)

Eh, Rapacious Librarian? We already have a Rapacious Troubledour, they seem kind of overly-similar. Though it could be another case of there being a bunch of Champion variants.

I still think Scheming Librarian or Grasping Librarian, might be better.(also we totally need an Ambitious Advisor, or Sinister Vizier)

[Liliet](#)

Forgetful. Forgetful Librarian is the Named who was with Cordelia. This is EE making a mistake most likely.

JJR

It's actually the Forsaken Librarian. One of his aspects makes people forget the first part of his name and substitute a random word though.

=P

[Liliet](#)

Her. It's a her.

Black Spiral Dancer

You're just proving his point. Or hers.

[Liliet](#)

Theirs.

Gerionar

We have a Name for the sinister vizier, It's Chancellor.

nick012000

Calling it now: it's gonna be the Squire, the Apprentice, the Page, the Young Slayer, and one other young hero mentored by Vivienne are going to go out and become the third generation of the legacy of the Calamities and Woe, facing a trial by fire destroying the bridge.

If Catherine wants weight, then what greater weight than the weight of the legacy she wants to pass onto the future?

Konstantin von Karstein

There's no way. They were speaking of WK, WotW and GP, it's not to send young transitional Named. It's one of (if not the) the most crucial mission in the war so far, and a failure would be the end of the Alliance.

Like Cat said in this very chapter, sometimes you fail, and sending children to attack a target primordial to the DK is bound to fail.

nick012000

They're Heroes. If their doom is certain, that just means that their success is inevitable.

Konstantin von Karstein

I am sure the dozens (if not hundreds) of Heroes killed by Neshamah will be comforted by that thought

Liliet

Yeah, no, sending children at death is not a success story, it's a callousness-becomes-your-downfall story.

Cold Cyberia

I love that Cat sees fate as a set of scales. It fits with the arbitrator/judge theme and she's already got the heraldry for it. I'm a bit worried she'll be blinded in the battle to fit the fair justice trope.

Hard to say what the whiteout will be caused by. Initially I thought it'd be Cat's Name – especially if she's going to fill in the Role of the Choir – but it seems a bit over the top? I'm going to go with Unspecified Bard Plot™. Maybe she manipulates Arthur so that Contrition says hello again? Lots of opportunities for her meddling.

Mental Mouse

> I'm a bit worried she'll be blinded in the battle to fit the fair justice trope.

Or blind oracle.

Sinead

I mean, if she gets blinded, she could use shadow construct for Eyes. Especially if Zombie III comes back as a Nightmare (long odds I know, but I gave it a shot since Zombie III got a lot of attention right around the description of The Summoner's own creations), Cat is right on the Odinn path. Especially if she only loses one eye. Granted, Cat's had vision, but no real oracle ability before now. Granted at the scale she is operating at, it might just be a "trick of perspective"...

Mental Mouse

Also:

> she's already got the heraldry for it.

I noted way back then that her motto cuts both ways...

Sugar Roll

A crucible to help the rise of another gear character? The Squire and the Apprentice fits the bill. My money is on them being sent out.

agumentic

No, they really don't. A young party would work if that bridge was their final goal after a long journey, but they are too close to it as it is, both geographically and temporally. It would be like taking the final exam at the beginning of a school year. If we follow Tariq's logic, what they need is someone already powerful, but in need of a harrowing test to rise above themselves – which really does describe Mirror Knight, as some people above have theorized. Pilgrim can even go with him to fill the role of both a support/healer and mentor, even if that would likely end with his death.

ninegardens

I would argue that Pilgrim **can't** go with him. In order for it to truly be MK's "coming of age" "Rise above self" test, we need for the mentor to be ABSENT in order for it to work.

It needs to be a "We trust you" moment, not a "Let us hold your hand through this lesson"

agumentic

Well, he can't hold MK's hand at the most pivotal moment, but I think he could participate before that. It's just that the way mentors tend to bow out before pivotal moments is death.

[NunoSempere](#)

Refusal of the call, huh.

Black Spiral Dancer

A whiteout... cool name. I like it. Thrilling chapters ahead.

Josh Grim

Finally caught up .

DJ CARTER

Same. What a chapter to get caught up on...

Frivolous

I have to wonder: Will the whiteout be because:

1. There will be too much interference and power for Bestowed like the Augur to see through?
2. Creation itself will shake and shatter during the battle?

So far we're expecting #1, which is a relatively technical issue affecting unusual senses and Named aspects, but it could be #2 that happens, which will affect everyone.

Darkening

Well, with the Gigantes being there being critical and them apparently melting holes in reality, who knows lol.

emperorirritant

My predicted lineup for the bridge mission is: WK as leader, Blessed Artificer to take down the bridge as I feel like she could make some sort of device or tool for the job, I think Forsworn Healer would be a good pick just like Cat said to add some survivability, Silver Huntress for a sniper/specialized killer partly because we have seen and heard that the Revenant Archer is really good at sniping but the actual Archer needs to be with the Woe, and as a final muscle the Valiant Champion could go assuming she's in the city. I could also see the Rogue Sorcerer going on the mission as I think he's probably more pragmatic than the other heroes and just willing to get dirty, he's also super versatile which is always handy

ChillyPepper

Let's see how this would go. Creation wants Hanno to carve a story path that will become a blueprint for future names of his new one. In such an attempt the Witch of the Woods is going to be hurt and/or die in this battle.

It might have something with her trying to do a Gigantess thing she was taught by her 'godly' mentor, and this is why the other Gigantesses are important in keeping things from going downhill after she does I assume?

In her hurt/death she will become a motivation for Hanno to carve this new path.

Although, I do have to wonder if the fourth and Vivienne fit into this narrative as the cushion to the blow going against creation.

[Liliet](#)

> In her hurt/death she will become a motivation for Hanno to carve this new path.

I am fairly certain "fridging a female character to motivate a male character" is the one thing we will NOT be seeing played straight in PGTE. Ew.

ChillyPepper

Did not mean it as a male female thing. More as a love interest partner going down, like in Squire, or guilt trip since she is most likely the one he knows best.

Liliet

Considering they are however respectively female and male, I do think EE will not write it like that.

I do not think it's a coincidence that Squire's Dead Backstory Partner was written to be a guy.

Doylist-ly speaking.

hoser2

One way Vivienne becomes necessary is if someone needs to hold things together in Cat's absence. I can see Cat being disabled or going raiding. I prefer raiding, but nobody asked me. Vivienne as proxy leader seems like it will give her some of the experience Cat wants her to have.

hoser2

On further reflection, another unique contribution that Vivienne could make would be to intervene with Akua. IIRC, she was aware of some of the previous mechanisms that Cat implemented to check Akua and there was a recent interlude wherein they interacted. Vivienne could have crucial interactions with Akua (particularly in Cat's absence).

Frivolous

I predict that former Dread Empress Triumphant, probably a Revenant but who knows, will make an appearance at the Battle of Hainaut.

Why? Story-wise, tons of foreshadowing.

More logically, she's one of the few people who has ever proven to be a match for the Gigantes.

Or maybe the causality is reversed. Maybe the Gigantes agreed to help the Alliance because they knew or predicted that their great enemy Triumphant was an ally of Keter.

Triumphant would also explain why the odds are against the GA at Hainaut. I mean, it's Triumphant, may she never return. And now she has.

Trebar

Maybe Vivienne needs to be there because the band going for the bridge ends up being the Woe. I know the claim is it can't be a

villain or a mixed band because that messes with Providence, but I could definitely see the story going in that direction. If they want to send the big guns, then the Woe is the biggest gun they've got.

Liliet

Wrong kind of gun. Hakram's an administrator who currently walks on crutches, Masego needs to pull power from others to use it, Catherine's entire Role has been building up around being a leader of nations and armies, Vivienne isn't even NAMED at the moment, Indrani's the only one who matches but at that point you might as well send her solo, she'll do better without having to cover for the others being liabilities.

Chapter 74: Herald

"It is not the grand choices of our lives that determine who we are. It is the small acts of small days, the quiet kindnesses and cruelties, that shape us like a smith's hammer. And when those grand choices come calling we are already formed, already shaped, and we understand that it was never really a choice at all."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

I'd returned to the cheesemonger guildhall with what I believed to be pretty sensible hopes.

By now Adjutant ought to have gotten the first set of wards anchored around the property and the watches set up, so I'd be able to steal a few seats and drag my friends into the solar for our first homecoming in much, much too long. A quiet evening before the storm blew in would do us all some good. Instead as I limped my way down the cobblestone road leading to the hall, cloaked under a veil of Night, I found that the place was swarming with activity. Wagons were being dragged by oxen into the estate, some filled with live chickens and the occasional goat while others were crammed fit to burst with barrels bearing the seal of my army's ale rations.

Soldiers and officers from both armies that'd come to the capital were all over the grounds, seated at tables or on dead grass, talking and drinking and eating their fill. A few pits had been dug and pigs were roasting as well as a few birds, while sergeants stood by open ale barrels and marked tankards with red

stripes after filling them – making sure no one emptied a keg on the own, I figured. Magelights had been put up, hanging from ropes crisscrossing the grounds, and braziers had been spread around to beat back the coolness of the night. It looked like a festival, honestly, and pretty rowdy one.

Some fighting circles were already emerging, greenskins and humans brawling under the eager shouts and bets of their fellows, and some mages had set up a pair of tables for an old Wasteland sparring game called *achoma* – kettleburn, in Lower Miezán. It was a Legion favourite, since all you needed to play it was six small cauldrons and five marbles. Two teams of three mages were trying to shoot the marbles into the cauldrons of the other side, using only low-grade fireball spells to both attack and defend. Anyone whose cauldron got scored on had to take a drink, which meant games tended to end with a need for healing by a still-sober practitioner.

To my amusement, I saw that some boys and girls from the House Insurgent had dragged up tables of their own and were trying to mimic the game using Light tricks instead. Mind you, what drew the crowds wasn't any of those but the unholy melding of my own people's proclivity for open-air plays and puppet shows during fairs and the goblin tradition of *takha*. A Taghreb word, that, since the Tribes had unsurprisingly never shared their own for it. It meant 'jeer' and stood for the way goblins tended to put on farces making fun of other people's traditions, typically stealing the structure of an already existing play or story and then twisting it into a parody of itself.

Blending my people's tendency for spite and the typical goblin fearlessness in mockery had birthed shows like the one I was currently looking at. They were called trick plays, or sometimes 'Barber and Edward' plays after the two characters that were a recurring motif in every show: the cunning goblin sergeant Barber, whose beauty always caused suitors to swarm after her, and morose young squire Edward, who always ended up winning and then losing a fortune before the end of the show because of his need to settle every slight. The two of them always ended up triumphing over the damned foreigners, usually by getting one of Barber's suitors killed and Edward sacrificing his latest gain to screw over his latest enemy.

And so, surrounded by a drunk and cheering crowd, half a dozen Callowans and goblins were putting up a play on a table that, by the sounds of it, claimed to be a recreation of the Princes' Graveyard. Gods, I really hoped there weren't any Procerans or Levantines around. Trick plays did tend to be harsher on nobles than soldiers, but they weren't kind on *anybody*. Not even me. In at least one of them, set after the Folly, Barber stumbled onto 'me' having nicked the standards of the Sixth Legion and painting

them blue to use them for the Army of Callow, hoping no one would notice.

Which, you know, fair.

"- so we should just cut them!" a goblin wearing a tabard shouted.

Half the audience shouted it with her, as it was apparently a recurrent line, and I realized with a start that she was supposed to be the Saint of Swords. The real laughter came when the 'Saint' turned towards the 'Pilgrim' and found him asleep again, though, having failed to notice Edward stealing his staff with the intention of pawning it off to some Procerans. It uh, wasn't an interpretation of the Graveyard real flattering to anyone who wasn't part of the Army of Callow. There was a swift scene change, with a mage tainting the magelight green instead of blue to signify it, and I was treated to the sight of the Tyrant of Helike – played by a young Liessen girl – duelling one of his own gargoyles as played by a grizzled sapper.

The both of them, I grasped from context, sought Sergeant Barber's hand in marriage. I smothered a laugh, still under my veil. The wretch would actually have gotten a kick out of that, I figured. I lingered long enough for the Tyrant and the gargoyle to defeat each other in a draw and was about to leave when the scene was changed once more and Edward ran into a cloaked shape, dropping the staff and when picking it up accidentally taking up the other person's instead when he scampered off. Wait, that was a patchwork cloak even if the colours were faded. And a *staff*?

"I swear I've seen this somewhere before," the Black Queen on the stage observed as she looked at the Pilgrim's staff, to the hooting laughter of the crowd.

My character then proceeded to go through an overlarge laundry list of foes real and imagined it could belong to, always with a second line dismissing why it couldn't be them. I couldn't help but smile when it came to the Lone Swordsman and the line went '*alas, 'tis too long a stick to have been the one up his arse*'. Meanwhile Edward, on the other side of the stage, lost 'my' staff while in a panic and began deploring his upcoming executions by various methods in between foe couplets declaimed by the Black Queen. It ended with him imploring whatever Gods might be listening to bring the staff back, which a goblin with hands painted black making crow noises seemed about to answer.

On a whim, I drew on Night and wove two shades of darkness into crows. I passed them my staff of yew and let them fly, dropping it on Edward's head. The crowd went utterly silent.

"And don't lose it this time," I sternly spoke through the Night, before unmaking the crows.

Half the actors looked like they weren't sure whether they should be awed or terrified, but the crowd was not so ambivalent: there was a deafening roar of approval, followed by cheering. The play was waylaid for a bit, and with a satisfied smirk I left them to it. I'd send someone to get the staff back later, but there was no harm in it serving as a prop for a bit. Drifting away from the crowd, my attention was caught by a figure at the outskirts of it. Wearing a hooded cloak, it was lingering at the edges and sniffing about as if looking for someone – but never actually looking at people, as far as I could tell. The silhouette was hard to make out under the cloak, but those careful steps I knew well. I extended the Night veil to cover the both of us after hobbling close, which was nit immediately noticed.

"Taking a walk, Vivienne?" I idly asked.

She didn't start, or even look particularly surprised, which kind of took the fun out of it. Bringing down her hood, she shot me a put-upon look.

"I had people waiting for you on the road, but you never showed up," she accused.

I shrugged.

"Got curious," I said, and gestured at the festivities around us. "Your doing, I take it?"

"It's been a long war," Vivienne said. "And it'll get dangerous to cut loose when the dead start arriving."

Fair enough. I wouldn't begrudge my people a night of rejoicing, even if I'd not been the one to order it. With the supply wagons coming in through the Ways, we could afford to bite into our reserves a bit.

"It's a good call," I said. "Maillac's Boot was rough on the Third, and the Fourth has known little but Twilight and battle for a month."

"Hakram described that one as a little more than just *rough*," she grimaced. "And General Hune dying's a blow. I know you weren't close, but..."

My fingers clenched. It wasn't always about closeness or friendship. If people stuck with you through long hardships, sometimes that alone was enough to be a bond. I'd trusted Hune, even while aware her allegiance was not deep, because I'd known her in ways I now knew the leading figures of the Army of Callow less and less. The circle that'd come up with me through the ranks was dying off.

"If we look back, all there is to find is ghosts," I quietly said. "Forward we go, lest they catch up."

The sounds and lights of the feast reached us through the veil of Night, muted as if belonging to another realm entirely. I sighed.

"I need a drink," I said.

"That I can provide," Vivienne amusedly said. "Brought a crate of Vale summer wine, too."

"You give the best bribes," I praised.

"You're just a cheap date," she snorted, linking her arm with mine. "Even the wakeleaf's not that expensive, for a royal vice."

I smiled, both at the repartee and the subtle way she'd made herself into a support for my bad leg now what that I'd leant out my staff.

"You've seen the treasury, Viv," I drawled, "if I were an expensive drunk, Mercantis would own the country by now."

"I like to think that, as a kingdom, we could afford to help you drown yourself in at least second-rate wines," Vivienne solemnly replied. "That it what it means to be a patriot, Catherine."

My lips quirked. I'd missed this more than I'd realized. Even after we'd settled some of the tensions between us at the Arsenal, there'd not been much time to spend together. And while most of the Woe had been with the army since the campaign began, I'd spent most of my hours in war councils, fighting or scheming – with a lot less of a reprieve for sleeping than was probably healthy. It was Hakram I'd seen the most, and over the last few months that relationship had grown... complicated in ways it'd not been when we were younger. From the corner of my eye I noted we were drawing away from the lights, past the guildhall itself and into the adjoining property.

"So where is it you're taking me?" I asked.

"We made a fire," she easily said. "Indrani found a good place and Hakram gathered everyone."

My steps stuttered. Even leaning against her arm that led to a painful twinge, so I pull Night from the veil to smooth the sensation away as I gathered myself.

"Cat, are you all right?" Vivienne asked.

I nodded jerkily, righting myself up. I couldn't quite grasp why that had blindsided me so much. It was the first night in ages we were all in the same place, it was only natural we'd have a fire. If I'd not been busy speaking the White Knight and the Pilgrim, I

would likely have arranged one myself. Maybe that was it, I thought. Had we ever had one of these without my arranging it before? I couldn't recall a single instance. It wasn't like I should feel insulted by this, and I didn't, it was just... I breathed out, somehow gladdened and saddened at the same time.

"You don't usually keep your thoughts to yourself like this," Vivienne said.

She tried to make the tone a teasing one, but it did not seep all the way through. I was smelling smoke and our steps had brought out as the edge of a cove of dead trees and skeletal bushes, so we couldn't be far. I could almost see the fire's light, the shadows it cast against the darkness.

"You ever feel like the world's passing you by?" I quietly asked.

Our steps slowed, and she slid her arm out of mine. Smoke came on the wind, and the distant sound of talk and laughter. I could see the edges of the warm light, licking at the dark we were still cloaked in. It touched the side of Vivienne's face, framing its shape. The dainty nose and heart-shaped chin, the cheeks that had lost some of the hollowness they'd born when she was still the Thief. And those piercing blue-grey eyes, considering me in silence.

"I used to," she said, leaning back against the tree. "After joining the Woe. I didn't know it, at first, because there were always so many things to learn, to do, to see. But it sunk, in eventually."

"Not anymore, though?"

She smiled.

"I figured out what I want to do," Vivienne said. "It was easier, before we met. I didn't need to think, not really – I knew the Lone Swordsman was a hero, so his cause was just. If I fought for that cause then, I would be just as well. There was no need to look further."

"A lot of the things he wanted were good," I softly admitted. "I just didn't think his way of getting them would work."

"That's always the trouble, isn't?" Vivienne ruefully smiled. "The means. Everyone likes the dream, but no one can agree on how to get there."

"Didn't you?" I asked.

She snorted, shook her head.

"I know I want to see our home safe and happy and prosperous," Vivienne said. "And I figured out, before it was too late, that

being the Thief wasn't going to help me with any of it. Once I knew who I wasn't, it just... didn't seem to matter as much that I didn't know who I was."

She leaned her head back, against the bark, looking up at the night sky.

"I wasn't going against the current anymore," she murmured. "I wasn't drowning."

Though her lips quirked into a smile, it was mirthless.

"Hakram saved my life, that night where he cut off his hand," Vivienne said. "He shocked me out the nightmare. And every time I felt the urge to go back, to dismiss it, I saw the blood again. The bone and the flesh. And words can lie, Cat, but not those."

We let the silence lie between us for a moment, almost comfortable.

"I don't think I can do this for strangers," I quietly admitted. "Maybe when I was young and it still burned in me, the knowledge that I was *right* and I was going to *fix it*... maybe back then it was enough, just the principles. The ideal. But now it's the people that bear me through it, and with every year there's a few less."

My fingers clenched.

"You are bearing me through this," I said, "and it is breaking your backs."

And at the end of the road, what will I find? I did not voice did, did not dare to, but terror coiled in my guts like a snake as the thought came unbidden. *A world of strangers, and a graveyard where everyone I ever loved lies sleeping the dreamless sleep.* Vivienne learned forward and slowly reached up her hand. I froze, wondering if she was going to cup my cheek, but instead she flicked my nose. I started in surprise and outrage, wrinkling it.

"Don't be so arrogant," Vivienne Dartwick chided me. "Do you think the banner's yours just because you raised it, Catherine?"

My mouth closed. I was taken aback enough to be speechless, for once.

"We've all stayed with you for our own reasons," she said. "For oaths or causes, because we believe in the woman or the dream, because we have our own pride. You don't get to take that from us, Cat. It never belonged to you."

"It'll get you killed," I hoarsely replied.

"There are things worth dying for," she calmly said. "It's not all on your shoulders, Cat."

She looked at the light of the campfire in the distance, the drifting sounds of what seemed to be Indrani loudly singing. I followed her gaze.

"Sometimes other people can light the fire," Vivienne gently told me. "You're not the only one it keeps warm."

She offered up her hand, slowly, and like a lost child I took it. She tugged me along, and as the veil of Night fell I let her take me home.

—

"- you take that back," Robber said, tone deadly serious. "Sallastus? Really, *Sallastus*?"

Akua Sahelian, somehow making a fallen log look like a sofa to lounge on, cocked an imperious eyebrow.

"His comedies were among the finest Miezan works that remain to us," she replied.

"Oh Gods," Indrani said, grinning like a loon, "you actually sound defensive."

I pulled at my bottle — like most evenings whose bounty was arranged by Archer, it was heavy on bottles but low on cups — and shared a look with Pickler, who was rolling her eyes. It was always unsettling on a goblin face, especially at night when their eyes got somewhat luminous.

"I hate it when they talk theatre," I told my Sapper-General. "I don't know half the names."

"My mother made me read some plays so I wouldn't look like a fool if I participated in a *takha*," Pickler admitted, "but I always despised the stuff. I might as well have spent the time clipping my nails, at least it'd have improved my life somewhat."

She was drinking from a tankard of dark beer that was about as large as human head, and so a significant chunk of her chest, which someone had painted the side of with a very nice, if threadbare, rendition of a human being set on fire. There were also notches around the rim, which I decided not to think too much about. There were a *lot* more than I'd anticipated.

"Neither of you have a speck of culture in you," Hakram mourned, seated to my side. "It's sad what this army has come to."

"You read Proceran bodice rippers," I sneered. "I take no commentary on taste from you at all, buddy."

"Gobbler, Hakram, *why?*" Pickler asked him, sounding genuinely puzzled. "It'd be like reading about mountain goats mating, only with pretensions of sentiment."

"Hey," I objected.

"No, she has a point," Masego noted.

"- *Augustina?*" Akua hissed, sounding outraged. "Perhaps if you want to hear Aulus Blandus' verses as butchered by a second rate-

A heartbeat passed, eyes moving towards the irritated-looking orc.

"Hierophant's a member of an Ashuran love cult," Hakram revealed, shamelessly betraying a comrade.

"I am?" Masego asked, sounding surprised.

Vivienne coughed, sounding a little embarrassed.

"It is possible as fee was paid in your name so you might be added to the rolls of the Covenant of Gasping Ecstasy," she admitted.

Indrani, leaning her head backwards over Vivienne's shoulder, wiggled her eyebrows.

"All right, you now have my undivided attention," Archer announced. "Continue."

"Tell me you didn't use treasury funds for that," I begged.

There was a beat of silence.

"It was from Indrani's pay, she's still stealing it," Hakram said.

"Hakram, you treacherous whore," Vivienne cursed, as I began laughing convulsively. "I knew it was a mistake to bring you into this."

Indrani, not unexpectedly, was more amused than offended by the fact that Vivienne had continued robbing her for years. It wasn't like she usually touched the coin I had kept in her name, anyways. Masego cleared his throat, cutting through my snickers and Vivienne's continued tongue lashing. Indrani flopped gracelessly over Vivienne, landing on the dark-haired lady's lap and then extending an empty hand – only for Masego to fill it with her bottle without even turning to look.

"Are there obligations attached?" he seriously asked. "I do not want to be a feckless associate."

"He's right," Archer approved. "What did I even pay for? There better be naked parts."

"I don't believe participation in the yearly pleasure festival is mandatory," Vivienne said.

"Are you quite sure?" Indrani hopefully asked.

"The priests have their sermons compiled every few years," Adjutant told Zeze. "I'll try to get you one of the scrolls."

"That is very kind of you," Masego beamed, but then his expression turned shifty. "Though am I to understand that as a trick this is an acceptable specimen?"

"For a human, maybe," Robber said. "Not enough blood."

"I *am* human," Zeze helpfully reminded him. "Good, then. How might I go about making Adanna of Smyrna a member?"

Indrani, useless as always, began belly laughing and even Vivienne couldn't hide a smirk. Neither of the goblins were inclined to intervene and I'd recently been informed that Hakram was a treacherous whore, so that left either me or Akua. I glanced at her, finding her looking mightily amused and very much disinclined to help.

"Zeze," I said. "That, er, might be misinterpreted."

He looked at me in surprise.

"How?"

"You'd be trying to make her part of a love cult of which you are also part," I slowly said.

Indrani contributed a gestured that, while accurately representing what I was getting at, was very much less than helpful.

"This is why I call you a wench," I told her.

"Ugh," Masego said, wrinkling his nose. "How could anyone make that mistake? She is terrible. And she must know she is, as I frequently tell her so."

Yeah, I had no trouble believing that. The frequent screaming matches were something of a hint.

"I do believe it is possible for Ashuran citizens to become parts of a prestigious ship's crew in an honorary manner," Akua idly said. "On occasion even ships that have sunk. Perhaps *that* might make a more fitting present, Hierophant."

"Oh," Masego muttered, "it would be as if I were telling her to go to the bottom of the sea. That *is* clever."

He actually seemed pretty enthusiastic at the prospect of trying to get one over the Blessed Artificer, which was kind of heartwarming in a very Praesi way. The conversation drifted towards some of the more elaborate slights we'd seen dealt out over the years, something Robber was quite interested in arguing with the rest of us, and Vivienne eventually got tired of Archer being sprawled over her so she pushed her to the ground. Pickler had moved to sit on the other side of Hakram to discuss something about a fellow War College student I'd never known who'd recently gotten promoted back in Praes, so Vivienne slid into the spot by my side with a bottle of her own in hand. I offered up mine and we toasted, drinking down.

"I'm surprised we're all here," I said afterwards, eyes flicking on the other side of the fire.

Akua was telling a story about some ancestor of hers who'd drowned a Stygian slaver in melted slave chains, to the vocal approval of some around our circle.

"It's out of my hands," Vivienne murmured. "And I have made my peace with it."

I hid my surprise. Forgiveness was not something either of us would ever offer over the Doom of Liesse, so I was not sure of her meaning. She must have sensed my uncertainty.

"I don't deal in absolution," she said. "Not for me, not for you, and certainly not for her. The Folly must and will have an answer. But it's not for me to decide what it will be."

She half-smiled at me.

"You've trusted me with a lot, Catherine," Vivienne said. "And it's not a tie that goes only one way. I trust you with this – I believe you'll see justice done, in the end, or something like it."

"I have you an oath, once," I quietly said.

"I relieve you of it," she said, without a speck of hesitation.

I went still with surprise, which had her smiling.

"What good would it to, for me to demand her suffering?" Vivienne murmured. "Would it unmake the tears of a single orphan, mend a single inch of blighted land? Liesse was lost, and all who dwelled within it, but I'll not chase vengeance of healing."

"I have not forgotten the Doom," I said.

"I don't expect you will," she said. "It lingers in your dreams more than mine. Worry not of me, Catherine, when you see to this. I would be quite the fool, to need twice to learn the lesson that no amount of taking can ever set things right."

I wasn't quite sure what to answer to that. It felt like getting her blessing, somehow, but also like she was... washing her hands of it. As if it no longer concerned her. Troubled and yet dimly relieved, I sunk back into the warmth of the conversation instead. It was not long before my bottle was empty and the smile back on my face, the ebb and flow of conversation with old friends filling me whole. The hours passed, long into the night, and most of us stayed around the fire instead of returning to the guildhall. Indrani had brought blankets, and though Robber disappeared into the dark it was only after tucking in a very drunk Pickler affectionately. I drifted into sleep easily, but woke while it was still dark. There were still hours left until dawn, Sve Noc's first gift told me.

I tried to stay under the blankets, by the dying embers of the fire, but I got restless. Taking care not to wake anyone I snuck away, finding my staff propped up against a tree not far. I couldn't remember if I'd actually asked Hakram to see to that, but I suspected that even if I had not the dead yew would have turned up on its own. It was not an artefact, not exactly, but it was not a simple staff either. With the moon hung in the sky above us and a cool wind beginning to blow, I found my steps leading me to the guildhall. Not to find a bed, no, but to seek another old friend: the roof. It was flat atop, easy to tread, and easier still to limp to the edge.

I could not see the great valley that'd be spread out below around the plateau, but I could fix it in my mind's eye. I breathed out and learned forward, as if tempting the fall. The streak of ice, that fear I would never entirely master, came as bidden. Like an old friend. Not the only one, though friend was not the right word for her.

"Do you still have the dream?" Akua softly asked.

I'd not heard her come, but I had known it. We were bound, she and I, had been since I ripped her heart out of her chest and stole her soul. Though she was next to me, I did not turn.

"Yes," I murmured. "Though I came here, I think, because I am curious."

"Of what?"

"If you stand at the edge of the cliff a hundred times, or a hundred times that," I said. "Does the fear ever go away?"

I felt her gaze on me.

"Does it?" Akua asked.

I half-smiled.

"I don't know yet," I said. "Maybe it's something that can be taught, with time and will. Maybe it's just nature, Akua, and the best we can ever do is put a bridle on it and hope it doesn't pull too hard."

"Then why do you keep coming here, dearest?"

"Because I don't know the answer," I said, and turned to meet her eyes.

Lovely in the gloom, as she was lovely everywhere. And I felt it my clenching stomach, the fear of the drop, but it did not rule me. Not tonight. So I reached out, slowly, and as her gaze widened in surprise as I cupped her cheek. It was not a loud thing, or one requiring much power. Just will and knowledge. My fingers withdrew, having barely grazed her skin, and she went still.

"What have you done?" Akua Sahelian asked.

"I no longer have power over you," I said. "You are bound to neither my mantle or my power, and Sve Noc has no purchase over your soul save what you give them."

"You are mad," she faintly said. "I could leave, right now. Even without Night, I know such tricks that..."

"I know," I agreed.

"Then *why*?" she hissed.

"Because I don't know the answer," I said and turned away, closing my eyes.

For a long time I stayed there, the wind in my hair, and let silence keep the night. When I opened them, Akua was still at my side. I almost smiled. Wasn't that something?

In the valley below, far from my sight, the dead began to gather.

tithin

I can't say I saw this outcome.

Sir Nil

It's inevitable. If Cat's trying the Redemption thing on Akua then Cat has to make it be of her own will. A Redemption isn't worth shit if someone else forced you to do it.

Cayle

Contrition more than redemption I think

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. Wrong flavor. Contrition basically accepts that nothing can undo what you did and that change is meaningless. You should try to do something to make up for what you have been, but you are what you've been. The point of this whole thing, at least the point up till now, was to make Akua actually change and grow. I think given a contrition attitude about it just wouldn't take. "Nothing can undo the evil that I've done and am... so why would I be anything else?"

agumentic

"Nothing will change what you are and what you've done" is a lesson Cat specifically made a point to teach Akua by using heroes as proxies.

[Liliet](#)

What you've done, no. What you are, yes.

And Contrition in this universe is about taking up a sword to go kill what made you do what you did that you're now hating yourself for. It's not about trying to quietly change yourself into someone who does good about an entirely unrelated issue.

agumentic

I won't really argue that Akua is going to go for Contrition or anything – for one, I am not convinced she will – but, in Cat's own words, "if (Akua) saved ten lives for every one she'd taken, she would still be the same woman who'd murdered an entire city". It doesn't mean she can't be something else as well, but it's not going to change what she already is.

[Liliet](#)

'what she is' and 'who she is' are different questions here

Cpt. Obvious

The “revenge” Cat is shaping is Akua growing into a person who realizes what she missed in the way of friends and love as she grew up. How she was robbed of a childhood, and how she spread that taint through her actions. Once she realize, and understand, how much suffering she has caused and truly regrets it then Akua’s suffering really starts. And the only one torturing her will be Akua herself.

Now what she’ll do then is hard to tell. Fleeing by terminating her own existence would be the cowards way, and whatever she is, coward isn’t it.

I doubt it could lead to redemption. Conscience or not, she’s not likely to suddenly turn to the light. If she did Contrition are the only ones I could see being interested in taking her in.

I find it more likely that she will do something big that claims her life and use her final wish to ensure that it succeed.

It’s either that or she takes up some task needed to anchor the Liesse accords (and I can’t spell worth shit) even though it ends up binding her.

Whatever happens Cat are counting on the result being that Akua is going to end up paying the long price and be perfectly aware that she’s doing it to herself.

Vin

Hopefully this won’t happen result in the dead king exerting power over her.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. He’s probably going to kill her though, at least indirectly.

[onedollargum](#)

It’s more likely to be the opposite, I think. If Cat was able to relinquish and unbind control so easily, the Dead King would probably have also been able to do so, or maybe even wrest ownership for his own goals. Now that Akua is free she should be able to better defend both herself and Cat.

[Sethur](#)

From a story perspective, I think this will push and/or free Akua to do something that will decide the battle for Cat’s army. Vivienne told Cat that everything will go to shit if

she does not go to her before the battle. And Vivienne was the only person who could have pushed Cat to alter the relationship with Akua in this way. This was the pivot that the oracles saw by process of elimination. Cat needed a free Akua to win this battle and Vivienne was the only person who could convince her to set the Doom of Liesse free.

Cicero

That makes sense.

Also, this is a heroic tale. Viv is a retired hero who convinced Cat (the heroic piece stolen by the Black Knight to become a villain) to play a heroic role once more. Freeing another villain (a most villainous villain), which then leads to...

Redemption of a villain? To becoming a hero instead?

What kind of repercussions will that have for the new world being built? In which heroes and villains interact and not always in hostility?

miles

Redemption = death. If Cat wants to redeem herself it has to be through metastory shenanigans

Shveiran

Redemption equals death only if we give death a very open description: it can mean the end of your life, sure, but it can also mean a more complex and less literal death of the self.

if a character changes so radically it no longer fit its former mind frame, you can argue that it did "die": everything he was has ended. Something new simply took its place and kept breathing through the same lungs.

Redemption has to be a radical change. But even when the Pilgrim did it to Cat, she muses that death was the most **LIKELY** outcome, but the only certainty was that she would no longer be the Villanous Queen of Callow. Which likely was Tariq's point.

Frivolous

Ah. I wonder how much of this can be attributed to Catherine's association with Kairos Theodosian.

From Interlude: A Hundred Battles:

====

"Truth of truths, my friend," he chortled, "I already gave you the only answer to that question worthy of being spoken."

A Rochelant, when they had first begun this dance of theirs.

"That's the entire point," she softly quoted, "finding out."

====

The quote is not the same, but the sentiment is. That's the entire point: Finding out.

Soronel Haetir

Wow, somehow Akua continues to tread the path of fatal redemption. And even Vivian will be moved when that curtain falls.

[marillius](#)

I doubt that's the story being played out. Fatal Redemption is the easy way out. Practical Guide to Evil never does things the easy way. She is an immortal shade like spirit with countless lives on her shoulders being given a heart. My prediction is that she will not die. She will never die. She will live forever, never quite doing enough to make up for what was done. Not when she has saved as many souls as she has claimed, nor tens times that number.

KageLupus

My money is still on Akua becoming an eternal part of Cat's new school for Named. An immortal presence who is canny enough to keep all of the intrigue the school will generate in check, while also being committed to seeing Cat's ideals get passed on. How do you atone for something as terrible as the Doom of Liesse? Spend forever making sure it can never happen again.

Michael Hawkes

Hold on a minute. Is Akua going to sacrifice herself to end the Bard by replacing her!?

Hitogami

Wow, that is one scary punishment and it could be accurate, but I still think that something will happen to cause her to die. A death she has to volunteer for.

Insanenoodlyguy

She might have the narrative weight that it's unavoidable though. Generally anybody at her tier going for redemption has to pay for it in blood. I don't think Cat's actively trying to push her into it anymore, but that just means she'll walk into it herself. Black Avoids the stories, Cat wields stories, but Akua has always ridden them hard when she gets on one, both good and evil. Even when fully evil she had a very fatalistic viewpoint: She essentially said "I'm going to do this until I inevitably die violently like all others who have walked this path, and that's the game and I'm fine with it, I'm playing." I'm not saying she'll become a death seeker, but she's got a good chance of being right where somebody can do massive good with an ultimate sacrifice at a critical moment. I think if she doesn't walk off that cliff at the end, it's because Cat actively gets involved in squelching that story, which vow lifted or not might be asking too much.

Cicero

Auka volunteers for the bridge job? Fully expecting it to result in her death?

The Mirror Knight gets tapped for the bridge job (because he volunteers for it?) and the Witch does not want go, so Auka volunteers?

Or the Squire or the Apprentice end up going (maybe the White Knight decides that it has to be all volunteers, because of the danger – and the heroic story being better served that way?) and then Auka volunteers, and promises Cat her charges will come back alive?

There are a lot of ways for Auka to go wild playing the heroic role hard. Something she never had a real choice for growing up. Auka being the villain that always secretly wanted to be a hero? I could see that.

[Liliet](#)

Auka was a villain who played a heroic role for her homeland in her head.

[Liliet](#)

> She might have the narrative weight that it's unavoidable though. Generally anybody at her tier going for redemption has to pay for it in blood.

Not even Cat thought that when she thought Tariq was trying to assassinate her.

No, they don't have to. It's just a common writer copout.

Daniel E

I just want to mention that The Guide has absolutely taken the easy way out, the one time it actually mattered. Killing my favorite horse 🐾

Miles

Ah yes of course. The purebred Liessan Charger gifted to the de facto ruler of the League of Free Cities. Truly a noble steed.

Frivolous

Also from Kairos Theodosian, although not something he experienced or likely shared with Catherine.

From Villainous Interlude: Thunder:

====

"I think what he wanted was to see if a lion was still a lion, having lived in a cage all its life," he confided. "I think he just... wanted to see what would happen."

Nature tells, my friend. Nature always tells.

The boy's grinned widened, long and sharp and pearly white.

"I wonder what your nature is, Hierarch."

====

Cat set Akua free, at least a little, from the cage of her upbringing and conditioning, the cage Akua herself tried to escape by becoming Diabolist and defeating her mother, Tasia.

Now she sets Akua loose completely and waits for her to act, now that she has free will for the first time in her existence, if not her life. Though, knowing Catherine, she has contingencies in place anyway.

I wouldn't put it past Cat to, for instance, ask Tariq or Sve Noc for help.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat will have contingencies to minimize damage from worst case scenarios, but they won't be Akua-specific – that's an insult, and a wrong way for this story to go. No, everything that'd make the fall softer if this goes south will be coincidental to it, and serve another purpose as a primary one.

I love every single word of this chapter so fucking much, especially Cat fucking with the play. And Vivienne trying to get a wider perspective of what she's doing through her thick skull (I don't think it's quite all the way through yet, she's just taking Vivienne's word for it, or we'd have rephrasings in the narrative in her own voice). And Masego having a wonderful, friendly feud.

Oh yeah, and Vivienne finally relieving Cat of that oath. That'd been a long time coming ♥

RoflCat

No, she won't have contingencies. Or rather, she can't, if she has any it'd not only make this gesture pointless, it might even have the opposite effect.

If she still have something over her, then it's just changing the cage, not a true release.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ this

Frivolous

You could be right, Liliet and RoflCat.

I think one example in your collective favor was Malicia's use of Rule-empowered Speaking to plant subliminal commands in her officers, as a contingency in case her loyal Black Knight Amadeus betrayed her. He did, which made Malicia's initial betrayal a good idea.

Do you think it's a Story rule in Creation that if one plans for a friend betraying you, those plans must inevitably become useful?

That would be a really nasty rule, requiring blind trust in your friends, though it does seem a likely corollary in a universe where the Power of Friendship exists, i.e. if you plan for your friends to betray you, the Power of Friendship is retroactively null and invalid.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Do you think it's a Story rule in Creation that if one plans for a friend betraying you, those plans must inevitably become useful?

I'm pretty sure that would be a Heroes-only rule. For Villains, "[blind] trust is the wager that takes your life".

Frivolous

Mental Mouse: Heroes only? But how often do villains employ the Power of Friendship in the first place?

In other words, the trust your friends rule might be invalid in the case of (most) villains because they don't have friends they really trust in the first place.

In other news: I've begun prefacing each Reply with the handle of the person I'm replying to, because it can get confusing and hard to discern otherwise.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Frivolous: Yeah, but that's how story-grooves work. The Calamities were unprecedented, and the Woe took that even farther. Cat also plays hero stories, but heroes don't normally have to worry about other heroes betraying them.

I think the Woe are breaking new ground story-wise.

And yeah, the WordPress comments are staggering under the conversations here.

Hitogami

Mouse, I suspect there haven't really been enough villain cases of blind trust to start that as a story groove, I support the idea that having specific measures against her is just a means of widening the cage she is in as opposed to setting her free. She has to be free to go or stay and to help or hinder for it to be true freedom; and for whatever story Cat is making it must be true freedom, remember that Cats revenge is to make Shua go willingly to her own doom, just that we don't know what that doom is going to be

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Mouse, I suspect there haven't really been enough villain cases of blind trust to start that as a story groove

Oh, there's plenty of cases in our own literature – consider the classic “villain's beautiful daughter betrays him”, or various guards and other underlings that shouldn't have been taken for granted.

But yeah, in this case, Cat is playing a deeper game – “trust in their nature”, but Cat has heavily investigated *and* reshaped Akua's “nature” Even without magical constraints, Cat has swept up Akua into a story that Cat carefully laid out for her..

shikkarasu

I think it's an extension of Chekhov's gun. If the trap is set then, in the third act, it *must* be set off. It doesn't need to work, but we have to see it *try*.

[sivarajan](#)

I vaguely recall the Calamities having contingencies in place to kill each other. Would that count as planning for betrayal?

Frivolous

sivarajan: More like in case a fellow Calamity went crazy or got corrupted by a demon.

At least that's what Masego said to Catherine that one time she apologized for giving him an amulet triggered to explode his head off in case he really was corrupted by that demon.

I don't judge that to be true betrayal. That's in the spirit of friendship, not against it.

Malicia's subliminal commands in case Amadeus went rogue are different, though.

[Liliet](#)

Those were contingencies they deliberately gave to one another, so it's kind of the exact opposite.

jamesc9

Liliet: Cat didn't talk to Masego before giving him the hair ornament.

[Liliet](#)

True, I was talking about the Calamities!

The story with Masego was much more amazing and high drama than that. She did actually talk to him, she just didn't tell him what he was doing, but she did talk to him to try and assuage her worries, which didn't happen XD

Anyway, the point with that one was that she might not have told him, but Masego KNEW from the start and accepted it willingly. That's a verrry different story from Malicia violating Black's trust behind his back with him none the wiser and confident she wouldn't do something like that.

[Liliet](#)

*didn't tell him what SHE was doing. jeez wordpress
let me edit

Liliet

Malicia didn't just make a contingency for Amadeus's betrayal, she factually did that by betraying him first. The commands did long-term damage.

Shveiran

Are you talking about the commands seeded into the minds of the Legions? Because if so, I don't really agree. I mean, granted, it was not nice by any stretch of the word, but at the end of the day they were the main military force within her empire and they were clearly more loyal to someone else and only served her as a consequence.

Even if we don't consider Praes' history of betrayals, it's not really strange that she sought a way to ensure they would obey her commands at a critical juncture, even if Amadeus told them not to or if, say, Amadeus died and someone else brought them under their banner.

Again, it wasn't nice, but nice doesn't always cut it. If the Iron Prince or Cordelia had the capacity, I can't say for sure they wouldn't have done the same just in case of a rainy day.

Liliet

There could be all sorts of ways to ensure that, that weren't seeded mind control commands doing long term damage to the subconscious of people Amadeus personally cares about?

(Let's remember Juniper is the daughter of Ingrid, one of his old and close friends)

You're not wrong that it's not surprising. It's the opposite that's surprising: the concept that they could have worked together for so long WITHOUT turning on each other.

Mental Mouse

That said, Cat's still the Black Queen, with the Woe at her back. If Akua gets too far out of line, she can be extinguished. But Akua has already come too far to turn back to Wasteland ways....

Akua's bonds now are... the same bonds of relationship and care that everyone else wears.

shikkarasu

"Then fear me, drow, for I wield the power of friendship."
-Akua Sahelian, activating Catherine's Trap Card

Florian Hötzl

Agreed.

And dang, this was a beautiful chapter.

TeK

It seems I am a honorary member of a ship that sunk a long time ago, but now had unexpectedly re-emerged.

caoimhinh

Just make sure to pay the fee of membership to Commodore Liliet.
She commands all ships in these waters.

BlackPhoenix7777

How much for lifetime membership?

[*Liliet*](#)

Lifetime devotion.

To the cause of Not All Relationships Are Sexual Or Romantic
On One Or Both Sides.

Not much, right?

BlackPhoenix7777

I'll take it.

[*Liliet*](#)

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BlackPhoenix7777

Kinda feel like I made a deal with Sve Noc here... Nah,
it's probably just my imagination.

ATRDCI

Somewhere in nonexistence, Tikoloshe is proud his son wants to be a member in good standing of a sex cult.

magesbe

Can I just say that this chapter's quote is fantastic and really covers some of the chapter's major underlying themes. How powerful a simple night around a fire with close friends is. And even more about Akua. Once Akua was freed, whether to stay or leave seems like a grand, life changing choice.

But it's not. Akua made her decision as far back as Great Strix, and she's continued to make it again and again. In the end when it came time to leave or stay, it wasn't a choice at all.

[Liliet](#)

It's a life-changing choice, but what if you don't want to change your life? 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Staying the course" is also a choice.

[Liliet](#)

It definitely iSSS : D : D : D

Insanenoodlyguy

I disagree. It may well be true that the choice was already made, but narrativm makes this a pivot. This is her grand, life changing choice moment, even if it's easy. There's a few ways this could have gone and Akua started on a particular path.

[Liliet](#)

Sometimes, pivots ARE about choices that aren't really choices at all.

BlackPhoenix7777

Agreed. Come to think of it, the chapter quote reminds me of a Mercedes Lackey song. Time for a relisten. Also we need to find or bribe someone to give voice to the PGtE songs.

dadycoool

Wow, this was a very nice deep breath before the plunge. A festival, a bonfire, a sleepover, and a relationship development that we don't understand yet. It's nice to rest for an evening once in a while.

[Liliet](#)

Don't we? Don't we really? 😊

Unless you're talking about Masego and Adanna, because I want to see them on-screen together right now very very much.

dadycool

Eh, I've never been great at reading deeply into subtext etc. so things like Akua's continued presence has subtleties that I completely miss until someone points them out. I'd never last in an aristocracy.

[Liliet](#)

...doooo you want a link to reddit character analyses of Akua?
9u9

dadycool

ooh, sure!

[Liliet](#)

[It is my hope that if I link it like this it will not blow up and take up half the comment section. Sometimes I do that on purpose but now is not one of those times. Anyway this one's fuck-off old](#)

[This one's newer!](#)

I think two links should be able to go through without moderation pause, if I'm wrong you'll find out by it not being posted an hour after you asked!

[Liliet](#)

(my comment is awaiting moderation bc two links is too many apparently)

[Liliet](#)

(it's up now!)

Necarion

Not quite a Beach Episode, but I'll accept "Cat Fucks with the Ember Island Players" as an appropriate substitute.

Big I

I'm probably in the minority here but I'm expecting Akua to repay her freedom with betrayal.

ninegardens

I'm expecting her to repay freedom with loyalty... then betrayal.... and then sudden, unexpected redemption.

Insanenoodlyguy

It will be loyal betrayal. Cat's gonna have like, a "My sacrifice will clench this for everybody" moment, and that's when Akua blasts her with her new name trick or something to take her place, possibly making some brief but epic monologue about how she just stole all the glory of this moment.

TideofKhatanga

Akua buying time for the White Knight's party by standing alone at the almost finished superbridge, which will from then be known as Gjallerbru.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Kinda like Pilgrim did in Liesse III?

[Liliet](#)

Yo, respect for making clear claims :3

We'll just have to see, won't we?

Juff

Typo Thread:

pretty rowdy > a pretty rowdy
tainting (should this be tinting)
nit immediately > not immediately
That it what > That is what
pull Night > pulled Night
speaking the > speaking to the
had brought out as > had brought us out to
did not voice did, > did not voice it,
Sallastus?Really, (missing space)
as human > as a human
as fee was > a fee was
a gestured > a gesture
have you an oath > gave you an oath
would it to, > would it do,
vengeance of healing > vengeance or healing
and as her gaze > and her gaze

mamm0nn

"I'd send someone to get the staff back later, but there was no harm in it serving as a prop for a bit."

Meanwhile on stage

No, really! I can't move it! The damn thing is immobile! *The goblin screeches as he puts his entire weight behind trying to move the standing upright staff without avail, much to the amusement of the crowd thinking this is a goblin size joke.*

Mental Mouse

> No, really! I can't move it!

And then the Edward character stumbles into it, and it falls over with perfect comedic timing.

Sinead

I just like the idea of the staff enjoying itself and messing around on it's own will.

Of course, letting it spend it's evening among trick plays may give it a sense of humour...

(Long shot I know, but I like the idea of continuing that empathetic back talk Cat got when trying to disguise herself as the Wicked Enchanter to a full on sense of humour.

Just so that Cat can get back talked by a stick.)

BlackPhoenix7777

Huh. I think this is the first time my hopes for this ship went upwards without plummeting immediately after.

Burlyraven

Of course there's a magical beer pong. Damnit, I want to play.

And did Cat just resurrect Akua in truth? I think that's the only way she could have really been set free, but that's a terrifying power for a Villain to have, even with qualifiers. I've been calling Cat developing into a Great Old Power in her later years for a while now, but that might just be the most concrete evidence in support of that concept.

Matthew Wells

I think Akua's probably a greater undead of some sort now. We know those can retain a soul and be unbound, e.g. Dread Emperor Revenant, Barrow Lord, First Llesse Cat...

Matthew Wells

Come to think of it, all of those were Named. Akua's probably eligible for a new Name now.

agumentic

Technically, Akua never really died – her soul never left the mortal coil.

WuseMajor

I feel like this is a very important point. One of the main things we know about the undead is that they can't fundamentally change. While they can accumulate knowledge, they can't learn. They can age, but they can't grow.

If Akua is actually becoming a better person, if she's actually changing, she's not undead. She's something...else.

Nicholas Guyett

I think you finally helped me address this niggling question mark in my brain about how there were these repeated hints about Cat's necromancy being weird and her raised undead developing intelligence and personality that necromancy doesn't usually give.

It's been a chekov's gun that's been unshot since book 1 and it was driving me batty.

Konstantin von Karstein

Since book 3. It was the fae undead who could learn.

caoimhinh

Her heart got ripped out of her chest, and her body burned to ash. So, yes, she died.

Admittedly, that body didn't have her soul, as she had ripped it out of her own body by the time she was 13.

She wasn't "dead" because there was still a connection between her body and soul.

But after the destruction of her body, and the prevention of the ritual which would have let her possess a baby (that was Akua's countermeasure for her death), by stealing her phylactery and tying it to Cat's Mantle of Woe then we can very well say that Akua really died.

agumentic

I guess it depends on what exactly you can call "Died". I would say that since her soul never left for other realms or dispersed, she never died, she just changed bodies. What is the difference between flesh and Mantle of Woe, in the end?

Matthew Wells

Well, blood, for a start.

[*Liliet*](#)

I think she didn't resurrect her technically speaking per se. I am boldly claiming Akua still won't need to eat / will be able

to turn intangible at will / probably won't be able to bear a child, for example. Akua is not currently a human.

But, uh, *functionally* speaking...

Sinead

Hmmm, I wonder if Cat has one more "oddity" as far as bringing about new varieties of beings into Creation to put in play.

We have Akua, Larat and the Wild Hunt, and I wonder if we'll see a third one.

Thinking about what The Wild Hunt represents in our mythos, is Akua going to have a similar fate to Jack O'Lantern?

Panda

Your pen game is immaculate. I'm thankful you chose to share your vision.

mavant

Man, I really thought they were gonna kiss for a minute there.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat and Akua or Cat and Viv? I was thinking both (to clarify, I don't think Viv would be changing preferences or anything but rather that a single kiss might happen, it did seem like this was going to be punctuated with one of those for a moment there.)

[Liliet](#)

I swear Catherine and Vivienne were blatantly flirting there for a moment.

RubberBandMan

It only took six books for Cat to have the queer girl experience of 'are they flirting with me, or just being friendly?' and have it 'being friendly' for once. Except that one time with Killian it's typically been 'yes, it's flirting, even though it's an enemy'.

And of course Cat does the cheek-touch to Akua that was denied to her from Vivi. No symbolism here, themes are for nerds....

[Liliet](#)

Akua vs that cheek touch: <https://media.oglaaf.com/comic/trapmaster.jpg>

Zee

I made the following connection: Viv came to Hainaut because the Augur said the front will fall in a year if she didn't. This chap, Viv said to Cat she is no longer pushing for Akua's punishment. Then Cat releases Akua. Therefore, Akua's role in Hainaut will have a significant influence on how this campaign develops, mainly in the battle to come.

Mental Mouse

Vivienne has also knocked a bit more sense into Cat, perhaps keeping her from doing something stupidly self-important and self-sacrificing.

Or maybe the Dead King tries stealing the Cloak of Woe, only to find that it doesn't actually give him control over Akua anymore....

Regardless, the party chapter becomes a potential plot pivot for the climactic battle against the Dead King... All hail EE!

Frivolous

Zee: That makes sense, yes. A free Akua would have more agency. Her future would look very different to a precognitive compared to that of a bound Akua.

Maybe Akua has tactics or knowledge she managed to keep secret from Catherine, or that Catherine never bothered to ask about, that could be useful in the coming battle.

Earl of Purple

Aah, Masego. If Cat hadn't let you out of the trap you walked into, Adanna would have been quite embarrassed. She would have seen the subtext, and possibly enjoyed membership, but I don't think she knows Zeze well enough to know he didn't see it.

Necarion

Earl: I'm pretty sure the made-up subtext would have encouraged Indrani to make a public "I shall fight you for the affections of the Hierophant" declaration to Adanna, much to her utter mortification and amusement of literally everybody else on all sides, Heroic and Villainous.

Liliet

And Masego's utter confusion.

Kini

I don't think words can say how significant this is. Nor just how far these two have come since they first met.

Akua is the Rival, the whetstone that honed Cat into the wicked blade she is today. And here she is now, freed of all burdens and obligations, but as she is now she is one of the Woe. Indelibly, and irreplaceable.

The beauty of this all, is that Cat made Akua want to be better, not by threat, not by guile, not even really by example, but by giving her somewhere to belong

Sesostris

Am I the only seeing some foreboding with Cat tossing her staff into a play about object switcheroos? Either narratively because she's a Villain, or more pragmatically because the Dead King has a hidden revenant in the city who lays in a nasty surprise on the staff that'll bite her at the worst possible time during battle.

Sinead

In short, I think that is worrying overmuch. It is just to be a bit of light hearted amusement that bolsters morale and Cat's own story amongst her subjects. Please stop looking for hidden daggers in everything. That's why Malicia is so isolated. In this story, putting in the actual work pays off.

The staff is not some overpowering relic, it's just a useful staff that helps Cat when she needs it. She doesn't put any serious demands/ expectations on it, so it cannot fail her. As such, there is little value in such a switch. While the staff has mystical origins and is a symbol of Cat, much like the Mantle of Woe, Cat doesn't use these items for anything that any other high quality version of those items would not also do. Even when there are surprises, they are all meaningfully telegraphed in the story.

Also, this deep into GA territory, I don't think Revenants could meaningfully hide for long.

In general, I wish people would stop panicking over these little details. I think EE has earned enough faith after 6 books to not pull stunts like this. The Night of Knives was a direct and brutal response to Cat's attempt to assassinate Malicia. It wasn't some "surprise contingency". The mental hooks in the Legions was known of when Malicia executed Akua's mother, and were a contingency in place against Amadeus, not Catherine.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, the staff itself would probably object to tampering.
Remember, it didn't even like when Cat put a glamour on it.

Frivolous

Lesser comments:

Priests of House Insurgent using Light to play a game while intoxicated and especially to gamble sounds heretical to me. Does anyone else agree? It sounds like that 'perverse service to earthly powers' thing.

"So we should just cut them!" being what is always said by the Saint character in the play is sadly faithful to the original. Laurence basically always did want to cut someone.

Cat using Night to create a fake Sve Noc seems horribly heretical, too. She was basically using powers granted by her goddess to pretend to be said goddess.

Though I guess it could be explained, if Andronike got pissy over the lese deity, that anyone who got fooled deserved what Cat did to them. The drow are a raiding and theft culture after all, and deception is likely a strong theme.

Covenant of Gasping Ecstasy is a good name for a conspiracy. Gaping Ecstasy would also be good.

Liliet

> Priests of House Insurgent using Light to play a game while intoxicated and especially to gamble sounds heretical to me. Does anyone else agree? It sounds like that 'perverse service to earthly powers' thing.

They're decidedly not... serving a power, in doing that. Arguably, they're creating problems for earthly powers instead, which is in fact quite virtuous by the mirror of that logic!

> Cat using Night to create a fake Sve Noc seems horribly heretical, too. She was basically using powers granted by her goddess to pretend to be said goddess.

I think it was obvious enough it was Cat fucking around in a theatrical context it doesn't really work like that.

Mental Mouse

Also, Cat's move both flabbergasted the players and got major cheers from the crowd, which would probably both amuse and gratify the goddesses.

Liliet

e x a c t l y

Sinead

I love the idea that “trick plays” make it to the Drow, since they already have rap battles, so twisted mirror plays that mock the opponents could also fit some form of drow humour.

(At least I want Rumena’s reaction to trick plays.)

Some Smartass

>Priests of House Insurgent using Light to play a game while intoxicated and especially to gamble sounds heretical to me. Does anyone else agree? It sounds like that ‘perverse service to earthly powers’ thing.

No, just frivolous. And it could be part of Above’s plan for all we know, perhaps by showing more people than just Tariq that the limitations of Light are mostly imposed by the wielder.

>Cat using Night to create a fake Sve Noc seems horribly heretical, too. She was basically using powers granted by her goddess to pretend to be said goddess.

They’re demonstrably willing to rebuke her for anything they don’t like no matter how petty, and did not do so.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It’s pretty well established that normally, summoning Light is basically a magical ability, once granted a priest or Named can use it freely according to whatever their usual rules are. The only exception we’ve seen, was an occasion where Pilgrim’s Choir was Right There Watching, and eager to make a point.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but why would they not like this?

[Liliet](#)

...ignore my previous comment, i got a brain fart and didnt finish the sentence

Insanenoodlyguy

Some of the army has already began adapting crow iconography, and Sve Noc has allowed this. It’s not hard to view it from a lens of “observing these troops making a small performance effigy to Sve Noc, the Priestess then granted them a small vision of the true goddess power, eliciting shock and awe.”

Admittedly, if they actually made a caricature of the Goddesses themselves it might be different, but I feel like their take on the play itself would be “Yes, this is both amusing and accurate. There is no other God closer than us to answer entreaties, and frequently we have to compensate for your inadequacies and get things done while you contemplate pointless things.

Sinead

Also, isn't one of Cat's goals with her Role as First Under Night to teach them to emphasise with people to avoid becoming faded and unchanging monsters a la Nemashah and the Wandering Bard? I would think at this point, they could appreciate the humour, even if Andronike may be a bit more clinical about it. I could totally see Komea being genuinely amused by this though.

Cicero

I think a more likely outcome with Sve Noc is that they get curious about Cat involving them in the play, and then they start taking an interest in the play themselves. To the point where they start answering small request in the plays – making Sve Noc goddesses of the theater.

[Liliet](#)

Goddesses of death and theatre is a fantastic dual domain.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's the divine portfolios of Vidiuus, from TGaB, 😊

[Liliet](#)

how could i forget ♥

Florian Hötzl

Which, heck, I really need to start reading again.

That God seemed less of a bastard than most, but then I wasn't even halfway through...

Also agreed on it bei g a great mix.

Sinead

Sve Noc, the Goddessess of Death, Strife, Competition, Excellence, and Ambition.

They are twinned because while they are united, they debate and argue over issues, refining the positions down to something more flexible.

One represents the focus of the "Here and Now", favouring reckless abandon, and jumping into the fray, while the other is more cool and methodical, aiming for precise methods to thier own goals. Dedication to the long process for the final pay-off.

Why wouldn't they become patrons of the Arts?

(I am now picturing crow versions of the classic Greek comedy and tragedy masks)

In case you haven't noticed, I am kind of a big fan of Sve Noc

Sinead

Here's a fun thought: If Tariq decides to criticise Cat for this choice with Akua, she could counter with "Empty Prayers birth no miracles."

Not saying that the scene won't happen, but considering how much Tariq asks people to take things on faith (with good reasons, yes, but it's still faith), it would be a fun little callback in my opinion.

[Liliet](#)

I was wondering about that scenario, and I think Tariq understands INTRISTICALLY what Cat is doing. We've had a scene of him interacting with Akua, and it notably played into Cat's plan exactly – because Tariq's instincts go in the exact direction that Cat's driving this. He's not going to have *objections*, I don't think. It's a trick from his book in the first place.

Sinead

That is a fair point. I am more thinking of the perspective of the discussion of trust, but Tariq does have that understanding of the path one needs to take to get someone to change.

Xinci

I do wonder if Cats oath affected her thinking. Oaths seem to act as bindings on souls, and bindings seem to affect the ability to think, amongst other things. So it could have been pushing her down a specific path of behavior to complete her oath and curtailing other paths of thought.

Seems Cats is drifting inevitably from her “home” framework of Callow, which is a good sign for her shifting Name at least.

[Liliet](#)

Oaths don’t have effects on souls unless you’re a fae or unless it’s a special magical soul-binding oath.

They do have an effect on the mind through the mechanism of you knowing you gave an oath, though, which has this exact same result functionally.

superkeaton

I appreciate that Cat’s flaw of being determined to own sins that aren’t her own keeps coming up, and reinforces why she needs the Woe. That little bit at the end was lovely.

[sengachi](#)

“I don’t think I can do this for strangers,” I quietly admitted. “Maybe when I was young and it still burned in me, the knowledge that I was right and I was going to fix it... maybe back then it was enough, just the principles. The ideal. But now it’s the people that bear me through it, and with every year there’s a few less.”

That hit really hard. Damn.

agumentic

It’s both funny and very sad that Cat is like what, 25? Even less than that? She is still young by any measure of years. But then she did spend most of the last decade on the battlefields leaving friends and supporters behind, that will age anyone far more than simple time.

[sengachi](#)

Oh jeez that hurts. She’s my age, but she’s been so damn aged by all of this.

[Liliet](#)

She’s 23 or 22, depending on if you trust erratic or the manual timeline calculations.

[sengachi](#)

I posted this and the following section in a discord server I’m in and just like that finished convincing 3 people to finally pick up PGtE and read it. 😊

Goibnu

What better punishment for a selfish monster than to get her to willingly sacrifice herself for friends she never knew she could make. To make her human and look back at all the horrors she has committed and truly regret them deep in her soul cat really is a cruel one

[308924810a](#)

Booo, hisss.

Still kiind of pissed off at Akua and how it seems like this is just making it more difficult to punish her for the mess around Liesse. A bunch of deaths which still hasn't been proportionately answered for.

I can sort of imagine a 'she's doing this to redeem Akua and make her want things she knows she doesn't deserve, and thus make her punish herself'-type situation. But any failing there will lead to akua escaping and making another giant mess, so she really needs some amazing countermeasures prepared for the betrayal.

There's also the whole issue around how Cat and Akua never really stopped being rivals in conflict over the fate of the Dread Empire, Cat just refuses to see it.

I mean, does Cat seriously imagine that miss Praesi noble pride isn't going to do something about it when the man who killed her father starts slaughtering his way through the nobility in a bid to annihilate their entire culture?

This decision is a lead-in to Cat and Akua's inevitable third major conflict.

[308924810a](#)

And then there's the problem of what happens if she succeeds too far and Akua ends up as a Heroic Named trying to sign on to the Truce and Terms? There's essentially no way to spin such a situation that doesn't become a pain in Cat's ass.

kini

that's...kind of the point though?

it's been pointed out repeatedly that Akua can never truly atone for what she did, that the scales will never be truly balanced.

This all began with Akua trying on the idea of being "good" while she was in control during the Battle of the Camps, mainly because it was fun, and then over time Cat realizing that this was the better path forward, the longest price she could possibly extract from Akua: redemption. Not as a destination, but as the process it truly is. Like I said above, Cat managed to make Akua want to be better through the simple expedient of showing her what the rewards were.

And even beyond that, this redemption *will not work* if it is not done fully and freely of Akua's own choice. It's a gamble that isn't, the answer was known long ago.

Because yes, Cat does, in fact, actually trust Akua at this point, and honestly, I don't understand why you don't.

[308924810a](#)

I don't trust her because she learned the wrong lessons from her parents, and as far as I can tell isn't unlearning them by working with the Woe.

When she was sent into the maze to kill her friend as a child she learned that any act, any suppression of personal feelings is justified if it is for the glory of evil. And as she rose through the nobility she learned that the loser follows the winner until they can become the winner.

You'd think her whole 'iron might sharpen iron, but iron is brittle' revelation might change her, and it does, as does her observation that victory can come without having to reign supreme and be in control and that by accepting that you can avoid having to fight in the first place, but by necessity these things cannot change her need to come into conflict with Catherine.

Not so long as she loves her people, the praesi nobility, who Cat would rather see wiped away, nor so long as she hates Black, who Catherine loves, nor so long as Cat and Akua's story conflict within Narrative Causality over whose legacy of the nature of evil that will come to shape the Dread Empire remains unresolved.

So maybe Akua does want to uphold fidelity in her relationship with Catherine and the Woe, but for that desire to become reality it needs to first overcome her impulse that she needs to seek greatness, and the lesson that setting aside whatever impulses are ancillary to greatness in evil is always justified.

And even then, she can feel comfortable in betraying Catherine so long as she encounters a situation where she can believe Catherine has betrayed her first, of which there are several surrounding Black, the lords of Praes, and Catherine's own followers.

[Liliet](#)

> Not so long as she loves her people, the praesi nobility

She really, really, really doesn't. They've killed everyone she ever cared about, be it directly or through teaching HER to put them in danger.

kini

Also: Akua never truly hated Black. He was, at most, an irritating roadblock to her ascension.

Don't get me wrong, Akua always thought that Black was wrong, and despaired of the culling of the old ways, but it was never personal. And now, most of a decade down the line, Akua has come to realize that *she was wrong*.

And it's not as though Akua was ever any great patriot of the Truebloods in the first place. Remember how she was planning to throw off that yoke too once she had her flying fortress?

So yes, this has been a long time in the making, and there was never any other choice Akua could have made. Not any more.

Sinead

Is she "Praesi Pride?" She seems pretty scornful of Karois, wjlho is basically the last harrah of the Irritant/Traitorous style Evil, when before she embraced them.

I don't think there is going to be a conflict, since I see her following her great uncle's path and leaving Praes behind.

[Liliet](#)

I want it so badly to come up that Adanna is her cousin and that Akua kind of low key would have liked to be her.

Sinead

I know, as soon as Adanna was introduced, I thought, "I want Akua's reaction to her."

Sinead

Also, if my long shot of Akua being taken up by the Choir of Compassion is correct, there could be some mirroring involved, especially since my understanding is that Adanna's original foil was supposed to be Diabolist, not Hierophant, though she despises both Roles of those people.

Another penny weight I'll put on the scale is the fact that every Calernian faction mentioned in the story does show up in some form or another (the gnomes may not show up, but the Red Letter in my opinion count), and I think of all named Choirs, Compassion is the only one we have yet to hear from.

Besides, if Akua is moved by the harm she has done and seeks to atone, the bind of Compassion (no harm to sentient creatures) could be taken to an extreme of cause no deaths up to and including animal and plant life.

I know this counters my earlier post about Akua mimicking the tale of the jack O'Lantern, but you may still have the wandering sinner trope, especially since she will have turned away from Below while not really being in a position to be embraced by Above.

[Liliet](#)

> I mean, does Cat seriously imagine that miss Praesi noble pride isn't going to do something about it when the man who killed her father starts slaughtering his way through the nobility in a bid to annihilate their entire culture?

She's going to cheer him from the sidelines or wade in and help.

Akua's been hurt by that culture more than most, and during Book 4 we've established that her thoughts on the topic have been going towards "no yeah that WAS wrong all along".

[Openendings](#)

Akua has accrued a narrative weight bigger than Liesse at this point: like Kairos, she can pass, if you squint right, as the Last Great Villain of the Age of Wonders. It's not necessarily her *true* Role – while alive she was more of an Age of Wonders cover band (Malicia-funded, too) than an encore tour – but as the constant angel on Cat's shoulder singing praises of the old ways, she seems to qualify as "symbol of an era" more than any other villain, uh, alive. (Amadeus/Malicia are transitional, Neshamah is in a whole other category, etc.)

So insofar as the shoe fits, and the Age of Wonders is "dying" with each treaty Cat brokers, Akua's long price is going to be one hell of a pivot. For Akua, pretty much *being* the fulcrum on which centuries' worth of narrative weight is about to get yeeted...

...that might get heavy.

So, uh, very looking forward to seeing what happens. And kind of rooting for her to get a fate exactly as bad as a hundred thousand deaths and no worse.

Daniel E

Just want to say that I very much love the visual concept of yeeting several centuries worth of narrative.

[Liliet](#)

yessssss

Black Spiral Dancer

By the title I thought her Name would finally start to manifest...

Storm

hmmmm, reminds me of the Warlock and his husband's final moments

Chapter 75: Desolation

"My dear Chancellor, I am most disappointed in you. If she escapes the crocodiles before the rope snaps, then of course she will go free. What does it matter, that she will oppose us again? Only the fearful insist on winning every game of shatranj they play."

– Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

I didn't know which part should rightfully be considered the miracle: that we'd managed to cram this many Named into one hall, or that a brawl had yet to ensue.

"Some among us call them the Scourges," the White Knight said.

The tone had been calm, unhurried, but the words alone were enough to kill every whisper in the ruined basilica where we'd gathered. There were nearly thirty Named were here – twenty-seven, if you counted my own coalescing claim – but Hanno had the undivided attention of every last one. Revenants were never pleasant surprises on the battlefield, but most people here had run into one of the Scourges at some point. Some had walked away with scars or dead friends, and even those who'd gotten lucky to be spared either now knew better than to believe the Dead King was without champions of his own.

"That is not without meaning," Hanno of Arwad said. "You all understand, as few ever do, that names have power. That they bind us to Creation and bind it in return."

The dead had not been kind to the Basilica of Perceval Martyred. Neshamah had made sure that no holy grounds remained in the capital after taking it, and it would take long before the priests were able to consecrate this place again. The defilement had been... thorough. Dust, soot and ash now painted once-pale walls, and there was hardly a single pane of tainted glass that'd not been shattered. An entire hunk of wall had been ripped out to the side, reduced to rubble, and the front gates were unusable from the bell tower that'd been smashed down against them. Even

the ceiling had not been spared, some kind of great horn piercing at it, and so sunlight came down in dusty rays on the tall terrace where the White Knight stood.

Below the rest of our Named were gathered in small gaggles in gangs, keeping to circles of their owns even within the greater allegiance to Above or Below – however loose it might be – and seated on the same ornate stone benches where the mighty and wealthy of the city of Hainaut had once sat to be lectured by priests now long dead. I stood above on the terrace as well, leaning against a sloping arch with my staff of dead yew resting against my shoulder, but I liked the coolness of the shade better. I'd looked like a right idiot if I had to pull down my hood because the sun was getting in my eyes, and I could only be amazed by the way that the White Knight could stand in a sunbeam and apparently not mind in the slightest.

Truly, his powers were beyond the reckoning of mere mortal such as myself. Hanno glanced at me, either smelling out the sarcasm or to indicate I should pick up where he'd left off. We'd not planned this out in great detail, but it was true in a way I had more experience with this part than he did. I pushed off from the arch, limping to the edge of the terrace.

"Naming them gave them weight," I said. "Part of that was in your minds, holding up as something to be dreaded or fought, but what truly matters is the weight it gave them on Creation. A Revenant belonging to their number is no longer simply one of the Dead King's stolen corpses, it is now a *Scourge*."

I let the word ripple out, enjoying the way it reverberated in the hall even now that there was a gaping hole in the wall. Say what you would about Alamans, they knew how to build temples.

"That story will be as wind in their sail," I said. "They'll be harder to destroy because of it, a little luckier and a little sharper. More than that, they'll find it easier to kill *you*."

No one argued with what I'd said but I found some faces growing blank or, for the less practiced, outright skeptical. Mostly on the heroic side, as my lot rarely needed much convincing that the world was out to get them, but the Berserker and the Headhunter stood out in their almost-derision. Irritated, I struck at the stone with my staff once and let the clap jolt half of them.

"Don't be fools," I said, tone grown sharp. "You think you survive falling off cliffs and make it through blood-curling curses because you're just *that good*? As Named we are not only subject to the common rules of Creation, but those of our kind as well. Sometimes that is a shield, but if you act like a strutting boy it will bury you."

I swept the crowd with a look and this time found a more receptive audience. Good. I wasn't going to tolerate our losing Named just because the world had not yet gotten around to beating some measure of humility into their bones.

"If we raise the Scourges above our other foes, as we have, then Creation will follow," I said. "And the least of the ways they'll be raised is in the way that all those little fortunate turns, all those coincidences in your favours? They're gone. 'The Scourges can kill Named'. That is the very bedrock of the story we made about them."

I flicked a glance at Hanno, who took back the torch, and retreated back to my more comfortable nook as he stepped into the light again.

"Yet we can kill them as well," the White Knight calmly said. "Names, Bestowals, Choosings – however you would call what we are, it is a nature that thrives when overcoming adversity. All that the Scourges represent is an adversity to overcome."

I almost cursed, since that kind of 'life is a trial we are destined to win' attitude being reinforced by the fucking Sword of Judgement was the last thing we needed before this scrap, but I was pleasantly surprised after a moment.

"Make no mistake," Hanno continued, "the Black Queen did not misspeak. Fail to heed her warnings not only at your own peril but at that of everyone here, and millions more across Calernia. Yet in raising our opposition higher, we have also given ourselves deeds to strive for."

He smiled, face serene.

"Great foes are overcome," the White Knight told them. "That is the shape of such stories."

Well, that or you died. I could see how that wouldn't be the greatest speech to give on the eve of battle, though, so I'd let it slide. I stayed back and let him keep at it a while longer. We'd already tended to the few complaints under the Terms there'd been, which for once hadn't mostly been backbiting between his folk and mine. My armies hadn't been the only one to enjoy a night of drinking and festivities, after the Fourth arrived, and in the drunken celebration that'd ensued a great deal of... indecorous behaviour had ensued. It was worth hearing them out just for the petty pleasure I'd felt at Hanno making the Page admit that the 'desecration of his affairs' he was talking about was some drunk Volignac trooper taking a piss on his saddlebags. The mood had been pretty lighthearted, even through the inevitable amount of sniping that ensued when Named were forced to sit in the same hall, but moving on to the meat of the reason

we were here had doused that. Revenants were rarely a laughing matter, and the Scourges never.

"- by joining the combat and eyesight reports, we have determined which of them are likely to be participate in the coming battle for Hainaut," Hanno said, then paused. "Our thanks to the Adjutant for this work, as it was him who saw to the work and found signs of the Tumult having operated on the outskirts of Prince Klaus' column."

There were some murmurs of appreciation, several grudging, and stone silence from others. I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff, committing those faces to memory. One of them had me sneering: like I'd needed *more* of a reason to dislike the Valiant Champion.

"So how many are we in for?" Roland asked.

"Eight," the White Knight calmly said.

Yeah, that did little to raise spirits. Each of those Revenants were dangerous on their own, but several became significantly worse when they were paired with proper allies – the Hawk and the Mantle in particular. The Berserker let out a low whistle and grinned.

"Eight out of ten," she said. "Keter *really* wants us dead, looks like."

"Eight out of nine," I corrected, pushing off the arch. "The Firstborn got the Stitcher up north."

That was well received. The Tumult was more of a danger, practically speaking, but the Stitcher's tendency to turn up in a dragon's worth of animated dead bodies was more of a horror to behold than the Tumult's own preference for tossing storms at soldiers.

"The Seelie is missing," the White Knight said, "but we believe her to out east, leading the assault against Princess Rozala Malanza. Every other known Scourge has been encountered by one of our columns as they advanced, and they should all be within marching of when we believe the battle in Hainaut will happen."

I smiled, beginning to methodically stuff my dragonbone pipe with a packet of wakeleaf.

"So now we talk about the pleasant end of the business," I idly said. "Namely, how we're going to destroy them all."

Even coming from the – former, thank you Cordelia – Arch-heretic of the East, that won some cheers both sides of the gallery. Hanno picked up the thread as I passed my palm over the bowl,

lighting the leaf with a small flicker of flame, and I breathed in the smoke with a small pleased sigh.

"We have some knowledge of the abilities of all eight, and will speak of them in order," the White Knight said. "Beginning with the Wolfhound."

There was a beat of silence, then I cleared my throat.

"Hierophant," I prompted.

Masego started, as if surprised. My eyes narrowed and I threaded small tendrils of shadows along the arches going up the ceiling. He'd not had an open book in hand, no, but looking at it from above... that sneaky little shit. Three rows back there was an open book in Mthethwa, which I was pretty sure he'd been turning the pages of discreetly with wrested magic. He'd been using the clairvoyance of the glass eyes to look through the back his own head and the rest of the things in the way, reading without even giving a visible hint. I gave him a look making it clear we'd be having words about this later even as Indrani, seated at his side, snickered in amusement at his expense. She did deign to tell him whose likeness had been asked for, at least, and Zeze had an illusion of the Wolfhound up in the blink of an eye.

It was pretty obvious why the Revenant had earned that sobriquet: a sculpted helmet of iron in the shape of that animals head had been its signature since its first appearance, though he also seemed to prefer using a sword a board when it had the choice. Armoured from head to toe, the Wolfhound's face had never been seen, though he'd spoken with Named on occasion.

"Most of you will have encountered the Wolfhound at some point," Hanno said. "He is, by our reckoning, the Scourge with the fewest deaths – Named or not – to his name. That is because he is rarely out alone."

"He's a bodyguard," I bluntly said. "And one of the better Revenants when it comes at taking a blow. He seems able to see through illusions and able to partly shrug off aspects. As I understand it, the Mirror Knight experience this firsthand."

Christophe the Pavanie, seated near the back of the heroic side and with only Tariq sharing his bench, looked surprised to have been called on.

"I did," he replied. "We've clashed... six times, now? One of my aspects allows me to reflect the blows of my enemies, to turn them back, but it did not affect him the way it should have. The strength was weakened before it touched him."

"It has been the same with magic," the White Knight added. "He is not immune to spells, but they do seem to weaken when turned on him."

"Weaknesses?" Roland called out.

"We haven't found any," I admitted. "He doesn't seem to have any great offensive talents, but when it comes to the defensive he doesn't seem to have any great flaw. It's why we usually see him partnered with another Scourge, they're expected to be handling that aspect."

"The Twilight Ways would destroy him," the Grey Pilgrim said.

I nodded.

"They would," Hanno agreed. "For those of you who are able to open gates, it is a valid tactic. Still, as with all Revenants I would warn you of mobility – even the slow are quicker than they seem, and they appear to be able to feel the forming of a gate into Twilight."

Which did make an unfortunate amount of sense. Creation liked balance: the Ways were deadly to Revenants, so the Revenants could smell them out. I would have appreciated the Gods suspending that rule until the lives of everyone on Calernia were no longer on the line, but deities did tend to be inconsiderate shits. Except for my own splendid and flawless patronesses, of course. I felt Andronike's unamused touch brush against my mind, the divine equivalent of a half-hearted glare.

"We do have some other talents we believe would go through his defences," I said. "Among them, the Rapacious Bard is capable of affecting souls. That should ignore the protection."

"Overwhelming physical strength works as well," Hanno said, a tad drily.

Between the Berserker, the Champion and the Mirror Knight we had that covered.

"The partner is usually the trouble," the Barrow Sword pointed out. "Whoever runs into him needs to expect a hard knifing."

"Colourfully put," Hanno said, "but essentially true. So far we have seen him paired with the Hawk-"

I saw the Mirror Knight wince, as if still hurting, and Archer smile unpleasantly. She'd not liked that the Hawk had gotten to escape from their duel in the slightest.

"- the Mantle and the Varlet," Hanno finished. "We should not dismiss other possibilities, but Keter does tend to favour certain sets of tactics."

I pulled at my pipe, blowing smoke upwards. The White Knight was right. It was, I suspected, because Neshamah was undead. He couldn't really *learn* anymore, even when infusing himself with the knowledge of his latest acquisitions. So instead he let his Revenants find approaches that work and then used his wits to make openings for that knife instead – a skill he'd mastered while still alive.

"We burned two aspects of the Varlet's at Maillac's Boot," I announced. "So I won't count them out, but they're got a lot less of a bite now."

"It's the sneaking aspect that's left," Indrani said. "So watch for daggers in the back, it's what it has left."

It was a spirited decision that ensued, moving through one Scourge after another. The Hawk, deadly at range and harbouring an aspect we believed gave her the simple ability to 'kill'. It was why her arrows, even though often made up of mundane material, could wound even someone like the Mirror Knight: there was nothing that she could not, in principle, kill. She was weak up close, though, and tended to leg it when Named closed range. The Drake, though very difficult to kill by most villainous means, fared poorly against Light and Tariq had teased out of him at Maillac's Boot what we believed to be his last survival trick. The Mantle shared the weakness against Light, at least great quantities of it, but was capable of hamstringing practitioners the same way she did me.

The Tumult – or Archmage, as heroes insisted – was a spellcaster on par with both Masego and the Witch of the Woods, meaning if we didn't want casualties to start shooting up the moment it showed up we needed to field either against it immediately. Its fondness for using storms and weather meant most of our fighters struggled to close range. Indrani couldn't do shit to him even using **See** to aim. The Axeman, as they called the Pale Knight, hadn't been encountered frequently save by those who'd served in the Cleves front. While he was just as frustratingly hard to scratch for everyone as I'd found him, the Headhunter pointed out that the way he'd always avoided the Myrmidon and the Red Knight in fights meant he must have some weakness to his armour. The Mirror Knight noted he seemed to often serve as leader among not only Revenants but the lesser dead, a tactician as much as champion. There was little to say on the Varlet, save that not even our finest wards seemed entirely capable of stopping its sneaking about, which left us with only one left.

The Prince of Bones.

"Light can make a dent," Hanno said. "Though only so much."

His stance had loosened over the length of the conversation, first going from calm to easy and then all the way to him sitting

at the edge of the terrasse. I was, myself, leaning against a half-broken stone pulpit and pulling at my second packet of wakeleaf.

"He can close Twilight Gate, if they are still forming," the Witch of the Woods flatly said.

I cocked a brow. She'd not taken off her painted clay mask, but I gathered that under it she was frowning.

"Mine as well," the Pilgrim agreed. "Though not quickly, and it can be fought."

"Sorcery doesn't work either," the Harrowed Witch volunteered. "Mine, anyways. I can dent if I put my full strength into the spell, but think we'd have to strip him layer by layer to get anywhere."

I didn't see an obvious solution to the Prince of Bones either, to be honest. The illusion of him Masego was providing made it clear why: we were dealing with, essentially a corpse encased in what had to be a few hundred pounds of steel. It looked like armour, but it wasn't. Just layers upon layers of metal, moved by the necromancy buried safely deep within. Worse, that steel was layered with enchantments and whatever devilries the Dead King could muster. Running away wasn't usually an issue, the Prince was slow on the move, but when you *couldn't* run? Even the Pilgrim hadn't been able to put him down, and the man had a Choir whispering tricks in his ear.

"The Firstborn tell me it's essentially the same with Night," I offered up, having never fought him myself. "And he usually sticks with the Grey Legion, so he won't be easy to pick off."

"We just need to crush him head on," the Berserker insisted.

"Crush what, solid steel?" the Barrow Sword mocked. "No, what we need is the right blade."

A few looks were flicked the Mirror Knight's way. The Severance hadn't been a secret since the incident at the Arsenal.

"We mean to use it for the Dead King alone," the White Knight said, "lest he find a way to overcome its edge."

"If it comes to that, we've been able to bury him before," I said. "The Witch of the Woods has done it. It's not a killing stroke, but we can keep him out of our hair long enough for enough Named to gather *something* will stick."

It wasn't the most confidence-instilling of suggestions, but at the moment it might genuinely be the best we got. And, to be honest, if we could deal with the Grey Legion for good the Prince

would be much less of a threat. I pointed out as much, which Tariq backed to the hilt.

"Alone he is a slow, lumbering monster," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Much of his power comes from his legion – the Hashmallim believe some of his Bestowal is invested in his soldiers, and that they in turn empower him."

"If it comes to that," I finally said, "I'll authorize the last of our goblinfire to be used."

That cheered some but other less. Not only because the green flames were notoriously prone to spreading out of control but also, I realized in a startling moment, because some of the people here believed the Prince would actually survive the fires. Most of them had never encountered the substance, I reminded myself, but I still found myself shaken by the skepticism. The conversation stretched out for another hour, mostly when Named were willing to share particular talents that made them well-fitted to fighting one of the Scourges, but eventually we called the council at an end. I kept Ishaq back, as the Barrow Sword had essentially been confirmed as my lieutenant among villains when I kept bringing him to war councils, while Hanno was instead accompanied by the Pilgrim.

"Some bands seem like natural fits," the White Knight said.

"Agreed," I grunted. "Troubadour, Summoner and Guardian?"

The Silent Guardian had signed that she believed she'd be able to handle the Wolfhound, due to an aspect of hers, so the Summoner for mobility and the Troubadour for the killing stroke were the obvious additions.

"Either Huntress or Sidonia with them," Hanno replied, nodding in assent.

"Huntress," I said. "I know for a fact she's not only competent at range but trained herself in tactics against archers."

By which I really meant Archer, but it'd work against the Hawk as well and she could imbue her arrows with Light so that'd be trouble for Mantle too.

"The Young Slayer with them," Tariq suggested.

I cocked a brow, but Ishaq was stroking his beard in agreement.

"As a spotter and a skirmisher both, the boy has talent," the Barrow Sword said. "If you desire the Huntress to be one of the strikers, then you need a replacement."

I glanced at Hanno, who after a moment nodded.

"Sold," I said. "Mirror Knight for the Prince of Bones?"

"There's no one else who would be able to take a hit from him," the White Knight replied. "Who to pair him with is the issue. I would argue against a full band here."

The Barrow Sword, I saw, was watching us both like a starving hound being shown into a larder. *Why?* After a moment I realized that even as I thought the question, Ishaq had asked it out loud.

"Because Hanno doesn't think we can kill the Prince of Bones," I said, "which means investing a full band there would be a waste. A partner, though, is pretty much a precaution to keep the Mirror Knight alive."

"I do not understand what makes him different from the Wolfhound," the Barrow Sword slowly said, "save perhaps greater strength."

"The Prince of Bones is a hammer," Tariq calmly said. "We can dull the blow, but it will fall. The Wolfhound, and whoever will accompany him, are blades we can break."

"It's going to go the usual," I explained. "You know, the beats – we win, we lose, we win again. Only with Wolfhound and partner, like Tariq said we have a good change of rolling those two Scourges up outright. Kill them clean. We don't have that with the Prince. Instead we use those beats to pull out the Mirror Knight when this goes south on him, and we just need a partner for that. Not a full band."

The Barrow Sword looked at us, smiling in glee and yet somehow almost frightened.

"Is it always like this?" Ishaq asked. "Battles between Bestowed. Like... shatranj for the mad, with half the rules unknown and the rest shifting?"

I cocked my head to the side. In my experience?

"Yeah, pretty much," I shrugged.

I turned when the heroes chuckled, met with almost fond looks.

"The Black Queen has sharpened herself against exceptional opponents," the Pilgrim said. "I have known few Bestowed, either by Above or Below, whose knack for stratagems was stronger."

The Barrow Sword had the gall to look kind of relieved, the shit.

"If this practice is to be considered an art," the White Knight said, "in all humility you might be considered to stand before some of its finest living practitioners."

Compared to the Intercessor we were all rather lacking, but then I supposed that was rather his point. I cleared my throat.

"I was thinking Stalwart Apostle," I said. "I'm told she's worked with him before, and though she's hardly a veteran-"

"I must disagree," Hanno said.

"Indeed," the Pilgrim said. "Christophe is a remarkably enduring young man, but the foe is not one to underestimate. The Forsworn Healer would be a more appropriate partner."

"That leaves *you* as our primary healer, Tariq," I said. "Which is a fucking waste, considering your striking power."

"More lives will be saved by your hand red than pale, Peregrine," the Barrow Sword said.

There was a challenge in the tone, but Tariq seemed disinclined to address it.

"We can revisit," the White Knight said, correctly ascertaining I wasn't convinced. "For the Axeman – the Pale Knight, if you insist, though we seem to have a profusion of knighthoods these days – the Headhunter and Vagrant Spear seem like our finest foot forward."

I mulled that. The Headhunter knew their way around fighting the Pale Knight, and Sidonia had a knack for killing things she shouldn't be able to. Neither were good at taking hits though.

"Needs muscle," I said. "Berserker?"

"I had thought to leave them a pair," Hanno admitted. "If we use bands to go aggressively after the weaker elements at first..."

"That's a recipe for bodies on the floor," I grunted. "Two pair against two of the Dead King's heavies? We're losing at least one of those for sure."

"The Hierophant against the Archmage seems a match all can agree on, at least," Tariq stepped in.

I inclined my head to the side.

"I was considering going after them with the full Woe, actually," I said.

"Not Lady Dartwick, surely?" the Pilgrim asked.

"No," I said, "we'd need muscle instead. I have candidates."

One was by my side, but the downside to taking Ishaq was that he was a natural captain: he'd be a lot more useful as the head of a

band of five. That left two other options, each hard to swallow for different reasons. The Valiant Champion was honestly probably the finest shield left, with both the Guardian and the Mirror Knight already assigned. I just happened to despise her. And the other was, well, the Squire. Between Arthur and Indrani we'd be able to hold a line up close if we had to, while Zeze and I could slug it out with the likes of the Archmage without missing a step. The issue, though, was that Arthur Foundling himself might be a threat to our lives. His story was not one that seemed all that friendly to the continued survival of the Woe.

"I would agree in principle," Hanno slowly said. "The Archmage is the Scourge I would like dealt with soonest."

It was all haggling after that, were I began to discern different strategies. Ishaq was fresh to this sort of planning so he tended to fall back to the Levantine conception of a band of five, the same that'd founded the Dominion itself: Champion, Slayer, Binder, Brigand and Pilgrim. Which wasn't a bad instinct, in most circumstances, but he needed to wean himself off it. When facing the unknown balance was useful, but when planning the destruction of a known quantity it was better to tailor the band to the foe. Tariq, on the other hand, was coming at it from another angle entirely: he was setting things up to keep Named alive. Not because the old man was a soft touch, although when he could afford to be he was, but because in the Pilgrim's experience if heroes fought an enemy for long enough they *won*.

I wasn't going to argue with that too much, but there were risks to that kind of thinking. Both sides of the fence were playing here, and I'd proved at the Battle of the Camps that some calibre of foe time wasn't enough to overcome. Yet theirs, were in away, the old conventions of Named warfare. Hanno and I had been raised by our teachers to approach those fights differently. The difference between us, I began to notice, was that he seemed much more inclined to take risks. I chalked it up to the habit of having providence on his side, at first, but eventually I was forced to concede otherwise. I was just used to planning from the starting position that I was going to lose *something* before it was all over, while the White Knight *had* known the kind of full-throated victories that'd been so rare in my career. He'd known them pretty regularly, too, with the defeats at Black's hands being pretty severe departures from the norm. We settled what we could for today, agreed to speak again tomorrow and broke off.

Except he didn't leave and neither did I, because I'd noticed something and he'd not tried very hard to hide it.

"Witch of the Woods," I said. "Valiant Champion. Stalwart Apostle, and last of all the Merry Balladeer."

Names he'd been careful never to let drawn into an assignment, along with his own. A pretty neat band of five, though the

Apostle was young and Hells if I knew what he wanted out of the Balladeer. No Named was every truly without strength, but as far as I knew she was a bardic Named without any standout talents.

"I did not mean to hide it," Hanno said. "It was simply not a discussion I wanted to have with company."

My brow raised, as did my wariness. I'd already sworn oath to Tariq that I'd not meddle with how the White Knight overcame his doubts, and that meant not letting myself be drawn into too pivotal a conversation.

"It's a band of five," I acknowledged. "I'm simply not sure what you mean to do with it."

North, to end the threat of the bridge that was still looming tall in the distance? Or to lead them here in the city, a blade against the Scourges. Hanno chuckled, though the days where the sound would have carried that undertone of serene amusement seemed pass. Whatever certainties it'd been that'd lain at the heart of the calm, they had been shaken. *Shit*, I thought, *Tariq's right*. I'd still half-believed, deep down, that the old man had been exaggerating. Not so much, looking at the unease on the White Knight's face now.

"I was not so certain myself, when I woke up this morning," Hanno said. "But it is going north, Catherine. It must be the north."

I slowly nodded. It was what I'd wanted, only now getting it was making my fingers twitchy. Unsure if a mistake had been made or not.

"The bridge at Thibault's Wager must be broken," I finally said, choosing my words.

"How carefully you speak around me, these days," the White Knight wanly smiled.

I did not answer. I knew a dead end when I saw one.

"I do not know," Hanno finally said, "how much good I can truly do here in Hainaut. You are a capable leader and tactician, seasoned in leading Named."

"Your departure would be a loss," I honestly said. "And not just because of your skills in combat. But I still believe it to be a necessary one."

"I imagine you do," the White Knight said, "though that is not what moves me to go."

He looked up at the ceiling, where the afternoon had turned the lay of the sun. Shadows gone bright, light swallowed up by the shade.

"There are goods I do not know if I should strive for," Hanno of Arwad said. "If I can achieve, even if I did."

He breathed out.

"So I will start, perhaps, with the good of which I am certain," the White Knight said, meeting my eyes. "It will be north, Catherine Foundling, and the light that still lies within my grasp."

Dave

Dang, people really have moved mostly to reddit?
Don't forget to vote!

[Mental Mouse](#)

And Discord....

Raivshard

Ages ago, at that

mavant

I wanna hang out with Masego.

KingJulius

You can try but unless you are an Encyclopedia made person he will likely be reading a book he stashed the next room over through the walls.

mavant

That's why I want to hang out with him; to get excited about learning together.

Russell Todd

Oh boy, our White Knight seems to be taking a step towards Gray.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, this is just the belly of the whale. The lowest point.

[308924810a](#)

Unless this is all according to the Bard's plan.
In which case he's not only going to have to overcome

whatever the Dead King has lying in wait for him(which I now expect to include the missing Scourge up near the bridge), but also a loss of the power of his Name, and random swings of narrative causality against him, like that thing with the reflection off the Mirror Knight's bracers making it clear that he was appearing uncaring.

Or? the whole plan is to get him to spend more time off in these small strike teams because he has faith in the righteousness of working with heroes to end a great evil, but less so in the righteousness of making uncertain morally but goal-directed compromises in service to a military campaign.

[Liliet](#)

...you know, this is really making too much sense for a comment that starts with "unless this is all according to Bard's plan" 😊

Sinead

I can see that being the plan. What would be interesting is if there is an interlude where Hanno's talking to Rafella, and it comes up what Cat's relation to Sabh is. Or perhaps why Cat reacted poorly to the Stalwart Apostale. Hanno has Cat's perspective on those two. And I would argue that his role as a leader also involves helping mediate conflicts, of which he will now have two Heroes that have personally started a feud with Cat, and they potentially do not know why.

People keep saying that Rafella should know why Cat is angry with her, but 1) Cat is rendered to speechless fury upon seeing her, and 2) everyone else sees this as not their problem to deal with.

As for Pascale, I don't know if Cat ever addressed her issue with her at the time.

Also, while that could be the plan, it can also be the pivot that defines the Accords and the functioning of Names being assigned where they are the most effective. And as pointed out, Cat is the actual general. Hanno is a warrior, not a soldier.

In short, there could be a plot, but I can also see this just further cementing in the power of the Truce and Terms, especially if there is Heroic discussion around the terms

[Liliet](#)

> People keep saying that Rafella should know why Cat is angry with her, but 1) Cat is rendered to speechless fury upon seeing her, and 2) everyone else sees this as not their problem to deal with.

That is a very apt summation of the impression I thought their relationship was giving off when it came up, well put -_-

> As for Pascale, I don't know if Cat ever addressed her issue with her at the time.

Considering Cat's general mood and wellbeing at the time, I'm confidently betting on "not".

You have such a good point here, damn.

Sinead

I generally find this story to be a fairly optimistic story overall, so I really expect the best from all parties involved. It's why I get really pissed with the more nihilistic takes on the story.

I blame the grimdark of the 90s and then Game of Thrones. People just expect the Varlet to pop out and cut everyone's throats and forget that while this is free at the moment, EE has plans to refine and sell this story in the end. If they divebomb the story, they ruin 6 years of work along with any attempt to trying to turn this into a publishing success.

As far as more character expectations, I do think Hanno has the right shape of this. Cat surprised him at Arsenal around the Red Axe, but he also recognises that a) she is juggling an equivalent work load to him with her lot + his on top of being a ruler, a general of an international coalition, a religious leader and representative of the Firstborn, and b) she is someone who takes her people under her dark wing and will pull goblinfire on those that go after what is hers (a "goddess of impossible victories" cannot gain that loyalty without extending it in kind).

Not saying that Cat did not over react in her reactions to Rafella and Pascale (both Hanno and Hakram have pointed out as much). However, Hanno is someone who really can have the perspective to aid reconciliation.

I genuinely like Hanno. I think he works better as a priest/guide/guardian than a politics/logistics leader. So I think his choice here is the right one. It doesn't set aside the "other goods". It just acknowledges that

Cat is probably the single greatest asset to oversee a seige, while he is best suited for a sortie and a "full throated victory". Besides, if he finds this sortie clears his head, he may be better off when he comes back "at the first light of the 5th day" (hell I think he actually comes from the east too....)

Sinead

Correction to the last point: The bridge is to the North, yes, but I think in terms of return strike, the battle front makes coming through a flank would be better.

Plus I like the imagery of Hanno's cavalry charges. Wouldn't it be neat if he does something where he turns Recall into a Light based equivalent of the charge of the Oathbreakers in LoTR. Manifestations of the Heroes of the Age of Wonders where he doesn't have the absolute judgement of the Choir, but he has the ages of wisdom of centuries of Heroes. I'm not sure if Hanno's able to do something where he "wakes" the memories into a shade that can discuss/debate/offer advice (as much as undead who cannot really change overmuch) and thus synthesise a path forward. If possible, this would be Judgement's 'Will of the People' to balance out Hierarch's demands.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno does still need to catch up to what Cat's reasoning was exactly wrt the Red Axe issue, because last time he reflected on it, he thought Cat did it for political gainz with Hasenbach, which is. not how that went

I'm with you on every single point tbh

Earl of Purple

I think Hanno would have gone to Pascale after he met with Cat after their first meeting. To reassure her that the greatest villain of her generation wasn't Pascale's lifelong enemy.

Cat wouldn't, it's not really her place- Pascale is a hero, not one of Cat's, so an explanation or a one-on-one chat isn't really appropriate for Cat- and she doesn't have the time to do it herself, anyway. But Hanno **does** know the story, because Cat told him, at least enough that he can go to Pascale and say 'Cat's not angry at you, really. She's upset at herself, because there was another. A young lad who would have

been your rival. She wasn't able to save him, and seeing that you were saved, with a Name so similar, was a reminder of that'. Or... Something that reassured her without making Cat seem quite so human.

Sinead

The only thing I would disagree with there is that Hanno at the time would not have any reason to think that he should not humanise Cat. That doubt may have arisen post Red Axe Trial, but not in the time before. He still may have had some discussion with her, but it would be easy enough for the spectre of that first impression to still be lingering.

However, Hanno's seems to be not that great with intra group mediation, which is why I think in terms of more coming out in this raid away from the GA army. Think of how he didn't handle the heroes meeting in Arsenal because he couldn't handle the intra party stresses that were showing up in interparty issues. That is why I think something more coming out of this raid than saying that things are already in their end state at the start of the journey. It would be interesting if Hanno gains perspective he needs through helping others with their own struggles.

Honestly, my guess is that Rafella doesn't think in terms of Sabah really being human, since the shape shifting monster is still a monster no matter the shape it takes. The fact that Lykaia (Antigone's companion) is of similar description as Sabah, and is seen as almost a reverse role to Sabah (a big beast that is elevated mother figure, while the mother figure is reduced to a monster due to side they are on).

I am not saying that Rafella is being deliberately cruel, but I genuinely don't know if she has the perspective to realise that while Cat walks around with the banners of the hosts she have fought, Cat sees Rafella as walking around with a flayed human skin.

(I know that Pascale was the main point of your post, but I just find the complexity around Rafella so damn tragic)

[Liliet](#)

True, Hanno probably told her stuff, yeah.

Andrew Hulse

Where are all the comments? Where are the conspiracy theories?

Half the fun of the chapters is reading all the wild guesses afterwards...

[amit27592](#)

Mostly on reddit. WordPress commenting system leaves a lot to be desired.

miles

There wasn't much new in this chapter to guess about.

ninegardens

Welp, no MK vs bridge arc for me. 😞

[Burlyraven](#)

Taking Squire as a temporary part of the Woe might just be the single worst idea to come out of this. I know Cat was opposed to it, but even that fact that it was considered is concerning. If he absolutely **must** be around Cat or any of the others in the Woe, really, it should be as a duo. Hell, put him as a roving resupplier or reinforcement, because at least then it only puts a death flag on Hakram (see ammo kid in 3rd Matrix movie/Spiderman in Endgame for my mental image of his role). Otherwise just keep him with Apprentice or one of his established tutors like Huntress or Roland.

Also: oh look, a female alcoholic themed bardic Name pops up that absolutely no one is suspicious of despite no one seeming to know anything about her. Nothing suspicious at all there.

Cicero

The Squire taking Viv's place inside the Woe?

It could be bad, but it could also be very good. I'd classify it as a high risk high reward tactic.

It increases the ties the Squire has to the Woe, to Cat, and even to Viv. If successful, it makes it less likely that he will lead heroic opposition to Viv, and more likely that he becomes instead a heroic tempering of Callow as made by the Woe. (Something Cat would not object to).

It creates the room for a romance to naturally develop between him and Viv (assuming he is bi, which can not be dismissed – after all he parallels Cat who is bi).

It also emphasizes a mentor role for Cat, along with all the possible death flags from it. And the possible death flags for the Woe as a group – protecting the youngster is always a threat to an established band,

And it creates potential death flags for the Squire as well. As youngster with the vets dies is a trope.

Auka might be the one in the most danger though. She's got a big "redemption equals death" flag around her, and Auka of all people protecting the Squire of Callow? Ii has all sorts of symbolism to it.

Liliet

Yeah, well, I'm pretty certain it'll be fine.

Leaving aside how we still have a whole book left so Cat's not dying for good... actually that's a pretty important part of this, as a reader I'm fairly certain of her survival... taking risks for the common good has been Catherine's best strategy so far. Remember when she literally got her head cut off because "it would be cheap at twice the price"? And how that ended up for her? Yeah, this is one of those. Cat needs to put on her big girl pants and take a personal risk, and that's exactly what she's doing.

The thing about the Squire is that he doesn't really have the apprentice-dooming-the-mentor Role. Catherine is stepping way from Callow as soon as this war is over, so she's not in his way in any way, shape or form. She won't be looking after him. Vivienne will, and the story relationship between the two of them is quite different. If Cat teaches him? They'll be *both her students and successors*, as a pair rather than rivals. That's a story that's VERY good for them and VERY bad for whatever obstacle decides to stand in front of them.

Also, he's a Foundling and Cat feels kinship with him and I want to see more of him on screen with her SO MUCHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Shveiran

Uh. Those are... very good points about Vivs and Arthur. Color me convinced.

Burlyraven

Oh, see, I'm very much in favor of Cat taking Squire under her wing, I'm just adverse to him joining this battle. I don't see Cat dying either, but she's coming into a powerful villainous Name, and the combination can result in a lot of deaths for other characters surrounding her.

Cpt. Obvious

I feel the fear of the mentors death story is a bit exaggerated. The Grey Pilgrim has mentored many heroes and managed to avoid that story. Black mentored Cat when she was the Squire, arguably the most dangerous combo for him as he not only risked the mentors death but also the death by backstabbing as he mentored a villain. To make it even worse the Squire is a transitional name to become the Knight. And even so he managed to navigate all those stories and come out with not only his life but with someone who he consider family.

Sure, Cat being the arch villain of this generation and the Squire being of the Heroic bent complicates things but I don't think it's enough to paint a permanent death sign on anyone.

Besides it seems either the grove she's in, the emerging Name or Creation itself really want her to mentor this Squire and to a degree the apprentice.

Notice a symmetry here? Just like Black mentored Cat, and she ended up befriending those who makes up the Woe, which just happens to be a lot like the Calamities, she's just taken the Squire and the Apprentice under her wing. Looks like a band of five in the making.

The Calamities were all Villains. The only one that seemed to straddle the fence being Sabha, though being born a monster she didn't really get that choice.

The Woe however counts:

A former Hero Thief whose only claim to Evil is guilt by association.

A former Villain Squire who obsessively tries to do as little Evil as possible to people at large.

A former Villain apprentice who frankly does not care about the Above or the Below other than as something to be researched.

A disciple of Ranger, who were a Calamite, and who is just south of being neutral.

A truly practicing Evil Villain who also is the most loyal and self sacrificing friend imaginable.

And finally the shade of a criminal who murdered over a hundred thousand people in a single ceremony. A shade that are tottering on the brink of being able to claim her heart but at the cost of having to deal with the consequences if her former life.

The Calamities started out with a newly minted Squire and Apprentice meeting.

The Woe started with a fresh Squire and a not quite as new Apprentice meeting.

And now Catherine just happen to be mentoring the fresh Squire and a just slightly more seasoned Apprentice.

Now the question is will this be a classic band of five that's all Heroes, or will they carve a new grove?

[Liliet](#)

First readthrough? :3

agumentic

Taking the Squire as a part of the Woe has certain story risks, it's true. On the other hand, not doing ones' utmost against the Scourges runs into another bad story Cat pointed out – namely, "You weren't prepared enough and the Scourge killed you all". I think this one has a much worse and is much less open to the kind of story manipulation Cat can pull. So, taking him as a part of the Woe doesn't seem like such a bad idea to me.

Cicero

Signs Herald Desolation

Yeah... I'm feeling nervous too.

Lox

Don't forget omen

dadycoool

Love how they're divvying up the Named for the upcoming battle. Poor Ishaq, "Is it always this insane?" For basically everyone else, it wouldn't be, but Cat has taken peeks behind the curtain and is able to discern shapes and patterns on the other side, with lots of practice honing that skill.

All the candidates for a fifth Woe member are bad in their own way. Looking at Squire, taking a kid along doesn't sound quite right. I'm half convinced that he'll become the Black Knight, but that seems like a very long shot.

Cicero

It's not a serious suggestion... but I had the stray thought that one of the ways to lessen the threat of the Squire to the Woe would be for Viv to participate as a member of the Woe, and then claim the Squire of Callow as her bodyguard. So the Squire isn't acting as a replacement in the Woe, but rather as an accessory to Viv who is a member of the Woe.

It would leverage Viv's role as heir designate to the throne of Callow. Emphasize the Squire's links to Callow, while diverting him from the link to Cat. And with Viv as a retired Hero it also lessens the hero messes up the villains threat.

It just puts Viv in a dangerous situation. On the other hand, the story would suggest her survival...

[Liliet](#)

I think it's going to work that way on the narrative level anyway. Taking Squire instead of Vivi puts him in the role of her... deputy? partner? equal. He's stepping into the shoes of "the Woe's hero recruit", where Vivienne has already moved on to "Catherine's apprentice and successor". Which is exactly the role Catherine is worried about him taking on, as well. But with him substituting for Vivienne here while she's busy with duties she's a better fit for and has more affinity for? Where the combat role he's taking is not one she ever liked or wanted?

Yeah, this is good setup for the two of them working together, IMHO.

Sinead

That being said, 20 gold that Vivienne ganks Varlet who attempts to assassinate the leadership of the Army. Full on knife fight.

She then dusts herself off and gets back leading the army

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne has always been shit at killing.

It would be so great for her to succeed this time specifically :3

Sinead

I see that I accidentally ended up double posting on the same idea. Whoops, my apologies.

The reason why I would like Vivienne succeed here is because Varlet is reduced down to just hiding, which was Vivienne's specialty. She also made a point to not lean on the skill overmuch, so her spotting a strike coming and just dealing with it when she is seen as the least of the Woe would be great.

Of course, what I want is for her to pull off some Sun shenanigans that is Light-like but specifically not Light (she held the Sun in a third of her soul for a

number of days, that gotta leave some marks) to flush out the Varlet and then just end them quickly.

...I may be too invested in this theory for someone who doesn't have any input in this story in the slightest.

[Liliet](#)

Okay but imagine Vivienne standing over *tied up* Varlet as her guard rushes in. "Stabbing isn't really my thing"

Sinead

OK, yeah, that would be good. Especially if the narrative goes full ham, and she comes out of this dust-up with Varlet spotless. No dust, not a single mark on her.

Cat would be friggin pissed

[Liliet](#)

Yessssssss

Sinead

I'm not sure if my previous comment got eaten (or is somewhere else in this comment section), but I really hope we get Vivienne take down the Varlet trying to assassinate leadership. As in they sneak past Squire on guard duty, and Vivienne just takes them out and then continues on with her other duties.

This doesn't require Squire to be on guard, but it would make a hell of an impression.

hakureireimu

Unless Hakram becomes cyborc, Cat needs another member to have a full band of 5 anyways.

Raivshard

I mean, he already is, at this point, but yeah, he's not fully acclimated to the new limbs yet. Maybe Masego figured something out?

Sinead

Stand could be used to help make the final step (hah) to cyborc. Perhaps meditation with Find, rise with Stand, and then a full on Rampage?

I know there is the whole thing of “do not rely so fully on your Name for things”, but that shouldn’t destroy progress I don’t think.

shikkarasu

There’s not relying on your Name, and then there’s working things into your Name. Hakram’s Dead Hand became part of his identity much like Cat’s Mantle of Woe. This can turn even a mundane object into something more. I am hoping that he can weave prosthetics in general into his identity and make them stronger in turn. Might be a use for **Stand**, or it might be a rare/ previously unheard of case of one Aspect turning into another.

Or heck, maybe just one of those OP Name perks like how Black Knight can manipulate shadows and perform limited Necromancy without the Gift, or how Lone Swordsman could detect lies. Adjutant is a new Name, so its still likely malleable.

[Liliet](#)

Akua.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Ubua

dadycool

That sounds nice. I was rather bummed that Viv didn’t get the chance to play with her friends. Without her, it’s not truly the Woe.

[Liliet](#)

Vivi never liked combat anyway.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

No, but she excelled at STEALING what Artifacts the Enemy relied on.

Banners, a Fleet of ships, the Sun...

[onedollargum](#)

Ishaq feels more her successor than Squire does. Wide eyed wonder and everything.

Sinead

Successor to the leader of the Damned, sure.

Cat has many Roles to divvy out. She doesn't need one successor.

rwil02

4th?

Wow

rwil02

10th by the time I posted 😊

NerfGlaistigUaine

I love intelligent pragmatic villains, I really do, but you gotta admit politics must have been so much more interesting back when the old breed were around.

Matthew Wells

Yes! Hanno learned a moral lesson! Power-up time!

ninegardens

But did he learn the right one? Or did he learn the wrong one, and the correct lesson is about to be handed to him along with an entire can of whopass?

Sparsebeard

So now, Cath is the undisputed authority on the front. I'd argue both for named as the only representative of the accords on site and militarily as the Black Queen.

Hanno knows it might be "good" to stay as a balance of power but decides to give Catherine a chance.

This is what Cat's favor bought.

hakureireimu

Is Rapacious Bard supposed to be Rapacious Troubadour?

Daniel E

Unless it's the Rapacious Librarian again.

laguz24

You know, this sort of story leaves a great opening for a sort of lower decks episode where we get to see some more heroes and villains that aren't as invincible and are still learning the steps of the dance.

General Chaos

> the Hashmallim believe some of his Bestowal is invested in his soldiers, and that they in turn empower him
I'm assuming this is Ophanim

Juff

Typo Thread:

Named were here > Named here
either now knew > now knew
tainted glass > tinted glass
Below the rest > Below, the rest
their owns > their own
I'd looked > I'd have looked
holding up > holding them up
tolerate our losing > tolerate us losing
be participate > be participating
marching of when > marching distance of when
animals head > animal's head
sword a board > sword and board
experience this > experienced this
Christophe the Pavanie > Christophe de Pavanie
Knight winced > Knight wince
spirited decision > spirited discussion
believed have > believed gave
close Twilight Gate > close Twilight Gates
dent if > dent him if
didn't seen > didn't see
something will > something that will
were I began > where I began
that some calibre > that for some calibre
theirs, were in away, > theirs were, in a way,

beleester

Rapacious Bard -> Rapacious Troubador

Also, a continuity error: The Seelie is stated to be attacking Malanza in the east, but Malanza is holding Trifelin to the west.

Darkening

Yeah, there's been a lot of east/west confusion this book.

mamm0nn

Hm, another bard. Could be useful, especially for such a mission.

I always assumed that Book 1 Cat looked at bards as lovable but woefully ineffective because they're in stories already touched up by success in the end and plot armour by being past tense and

retelling both. However, the true purpose of Bards being a greater understanding and control over Stories and Providence.

Not as in, they'd have insight of things like Cat does, though that is indeed one of their powers, but that they have greater control over it. Cat can foresee a pivot or story and prevent it happening by direct act, the Bard can see a gap for a Story and insert it. They can see the groundwork for a treacherous lieutenant betrayal and urge the story to do it at a chosen point, or see a dead mentor story and twist things around by taking the pupil away so that it becomes a Hero overcoming all adversity again.

Taking such a figure with them would greatly aid the odds of the Band of Five, as it would essentially make four much more lucky and effective fighters over five that can do a lot yet still stumble if the Story doesn't go their way.

Hitogami

Cat is so jealous that the White knight has had enough one sided victories that it's affected his tactics. To be fair the enemies that she's faced usually were powerful to threaten creation, but still, she's jelly 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well – double-edged sword there, especially with him running off to take a bridge,

ninegardens

So... the dude wasn't sure what to do this morning, and then woke up and decided "You know what my party of five needs? A *Merry Balladeer* that no one seems to have mentioned previously. And we'll head north. Good plan."



Is that you WB? Are you doing evil things? Hmmm.....

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure the Merry Balladeer has in fact been mentioned before! Let's see...

Hmm.

> Hanno had already sent the Balladeer and the Harrowed Witch, two of the more level-headed among his Named, to prevent that particular situation from spinning out of control.

> Respect for the Chosen would stay hand and the Balladeer was highly popular besides, while the Witch had the means to quickly send word to him if need be.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/10/09/interlude-ietsism/>

Yeah, I think this is the same Named, Hanno is just used enough to her he shortened it, where Witch is not one of his so he didn't (also, there are multiple Witches lol)

Earl of Purple

Wandering Bard always drinks from a distinctive flask, and carries the same instrument. They're too much part of her to hide them. She can't hide herself like that for long.

Merry Balladeer doesn't have either, I think. And if she's been around for more than a year, she's survived a WB face change.

Christian Oaks

Seems sus. I'd vote em out

agumentic

It is kind of hilarious how Cat continues to deny that she is teaching Arthur.

"I am about to propel this man's whole career... But I am not a mentor".

Kofi Abbey

Wow, is there really no voting link comment after all this time?

[Liliet](#)

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Boost the vote and vote for the boost!

Frivolous

I'm a little surprised that they didn't run a hero lottery to determine which Chosen would be assigned to go after which Scourges. But I guess even heroes don't trust Providence that much, even when there are so many heroes fighting on the same side.

Or perhaps it's merely that most heroes benefit from Providence equally, with only rare exceptions like the Fortunate Fool being lucky to a reliable and great degree. Therefore logic and tactics remain important.

Villains, of course, can't trust Providence very much, so they'd use logic and tactics almost exclusively.

I wonder if the Page and Apprentice were assigned to do anything, or if they were even at the meeting. Maybe one or both of those transitional heroes was assigned to guard Vivienne during the battle.

[308924810a](#)

Here's a quote from Quora on the subject of how the selected the Venetian Doge:

"For more than five centuries (from 1268 to 1797) the procedure to elect the doge (chief of state) did not change.

Choose 30 members of the Great Council by lot.
These 30 people are reduced by lot to 9.
These 9 people choose 40 other people.
These 40 are reduced by lot to 12.
These 12 people choose 25 other people.
These 25 people are reduced by lot to 9.
These 9 people choose 45 other people.
These 45 people are reduced by lot to 11.
These 11 people choose 41 other people.
These 41 people elect the doge."

Apparently the logic behind this was that god intervened through incidents of random chance, so they wanted to give god as many chances as practical to intervene in who would get elected as Doge.

In a world where fate and providence demonstrably warps probability I could totally see this kind of system being popular.

It might even work right here in this siege, because they're riding off of a story of being the last stronghold with any real chance of stopping Keter from rolling over a big chunk of Procer and killing a great number of people. And of the heroes and their allies making a heroic final stand for the sake of Procer, where they'll savage the enemy either before their defeat, or in a successful defence. So Providence should guide heroes into the places where they can do the most good more easily.

ninegardens

So... is it just me, or is Cat making a pretty significant Story error regarding The Severance.

As in... she's saving it up as a final weapon against the Dead King.

Like... she's treating it the same way villains treat a flying fortress.

She is *relying* on a magical sword to save them or whatever.
Like... I dunno.

It just doesn't feel like it has the weight for that. It *does* feel like it has the weight for cleaving the prince of bones, or taking down the bridge, but using it in the final push feels like a recipe for failure (or for DK to steal it, which is even more terrifying).

Like... this EXACT kind of thinking is what had Black pissed off at Malicia back at the end of book 3: don't rely on flying fortresses or magical artifacts. Just don't.

Now... maybe she's going to use the Severance for slaying some kind of gatekeeper or whatever at the entrance to Keter- sure, fine, whatever... but the idea that it has anything near the weight needed to roll DK seems laughable (especially when wielded by MK).

Is there something that I'm missing here?

[Liliet](#)

Heroic vs villainous story.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Flying Fortress thing is about sweeping all before you with your mighty weapon... if they did overuse the Severance, e.g. against the Prince Of Bones and the other toughest Scourges, then they *would* be playing that story.

The Ultimate Weapon that only gets used once against the Big Bad, that's another story entirely, and a heroic one that's more likely to succeed.

ninegardens

I can see the logic, and I get it but...

I still don't think it will work. I put strong bets AGAINST Severance being of use against the Dead King, and the reason is... Its not tied to him? And its not tied to the hero using it?

Its not "The mirror knight's destined sword" and its not "The blade destined to kill the dead king". If Tariq was using it it would be "a meaningful token from a fallen friend", but it ISN'T that.

At the moment, its just a very pointy stick. It's a tool, a war asset, there isn't any STORY imbued in it. Its the product of Name necromancy and industry, and heck, maybe that works, maybe that *is* the story of Cat's new age of order ("Collaboration beats destiny")... but at the moment,

according to oldschool story tropes, it just.... it doesn't fit?

I dunno, maybe if whoever wields it **isn't** the mirror knight, and thus the sword bleeds them, then it will have the weight. The weight of blood being spilled, sure, but weight nonetheless.

But at the moment, because it isn't **personal** to any of the characters, it doesn't feel like a heroic weapon. Its origin too industrial and impersonal, its path is too tainted.

Heck, If Zeze was into revenge more, it could have been "the weapon of heirophant's vengeance", but he honestly doesn't seem to give a damn about the sword, or vengeance, and is more interested in having fun with quartered seasons.

Mental Mouse

"The mighty weapon prepared for the final battle" is a story in its own right. It's weakened by not being secret anymore (and by having been used previously), but I think it can still be of some use, if the first time it appears outside the Arsenal is for that final battle.

Andrew Smith

I mean Zeze did have that talk after the whole forming of the twilight ways with Cat on killing the dead king to sum up/quote him I saw how gods are made and so how they can be unmade.

Magical heroic sword of bullshit power that has a only the worthy may wield effect(Hanno even brings up he can tell that the sword won't let him use it thanks to it kinda being the embodiment of miss NO TRUCE WITH THE ENEMY.) Really it is kind of like an edgy master sword from Zelda

That by itself makes it powerful(add in this sword took years to make by an experience hero since pretty sure it is Decree(think it was that aspect) Taking the sword that was the Saint of swords(who was thought of as someone who could kill the dead king) and using it to then kill the dead king is a story

Of course it isn't the only thing the war is riding on since quartered seasons was being made for the exact same purpose fucking over the dead king

Sinead

I think something to consider is that the Lawrence could cut anything, so a blade that cuts whatever it's swung at is a

solid war asset that is still a good thing to keep out of the Dead King's sight to give him minimal time to try and adapt.

Even if it doesn't succeed at being a tool to break the Dead King (since Quartered Season seems to be a means to make the Dead King sealed Evil a can with no undead armies to make assaulting Keter easier), it's still useful to only keep back as a tool used to respond to the escalation of taking on the Crown of the Dead.

Granted, I tend to think of these things as less meaningful than the actual people behind them. The stories are more the way these forces get applied. I think it's all a lot more blind than it seems like on the ground.

hakureireimu

Yes, it's not a flying fortress, and the war doesn't depend on it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "We burned two aspects of the Varlet's at Maillac's Boot,"

"We". Cat is being modest!

Frivolous

Mental Mouse: Possibly hoping to keep her ability to steal and/or destroy the aspects of others a secret, given it can probably be used against living heroes and villains as well. That capacity is a weapon, and Cat is too savvy and paranoid to brag about it.

But she can't or won't keep it secret that the Varlet is reduced to just one aspect, either, as that would be tactically foolish. So saying 'we' did it helps occlude the capacity without intruding into folly.

Because I sometimes forget smaller details about the Practical Guide to Evil: Can someone confirm or refute that Cat's ability to destroy or steal aspects of non-corpses is known to anyone outside the Woe?

I know that Tariq and Laurence were there when Cat used her capacity to steal aspects to help destroy the Spellblade, but Laurence is dead and I think Tariq is probably too cautious of angering Catherine to risk spreading that information.

I can't remember any other circumstance.

Sailorleo

The Ophanim gave everyone present at the Prince's Graveyard visions of Cat using the ability to grab Forgive from Tariq and use it to revive him during the formation of the Twilight Ways.

Mental Mouse

Actually, IIRC the visions explicitly did **not** extend past Tariq committing suicide, remember how surprised everyone was when she brought him out alive.

Mental Mouse

Hmm. Certainly few people have survived that trick, but she has also been fairly public about harvesting Revenant and villain corpses during this war, and some extensions of that idea are natural.

Someperson

Feels like Hanno just decided his Role is more about going out and executing the tasks that undoubtedly need doing than it is about leading the Named front and center in the most decisive battle of this vaguely crusade shaped confrontation.

Whether he meant to or not, it seems like he just granted a great deal of legitimacy to Catherine's incipient Name, which appears to involve authority over other Named. If anyone would challenge her right to such a mantle of authority, it would surely be Hanno, who is both her equal under the Truce and Terms and the White Knight in a battle of Named against the hordes of evil.

Chapter 76: Rapt

"Princes dream of victory, farmers dream of peace."

– Proceran saying

There would be no hiding the departure of the White Knight, so there was no point in even trying. We did the opposite instead: all but threw a godsdamned parade for his band, gallantly going into the unknown as they were. We rustled up a crowd drawing from all armies, got them cheering with a few speeches about heroism and how of course we were going to win, just look at how Evil that fucker the Dead King was. Paraphrasing as I might be, I liked to believe I'd seized upon the essence of the oration. If you filled the belly of soldiers and opened up casks of booze

they'd cheer at pretty much anything, in my experience, so I had it arranged. Because the cheering was what mattered, you see. It was what would stick in their heads when they thought back about this.

The White Knight and four other heroes were leaving in broad daylight and the streets were half a festival, so of *course* it was a good thing. Not something to get angry about, or afraid. Hanno and the Witch of the Woods were both major losses from the perspective of defending this city, and soldiers would know it deep down, but so long as we set the tone on how they should think of their departure it shouldn't result in a morale loss. I supposed it would be in poor taste of me to hope that the Valiant Champion got herself killed during the adventure, you know in a magnificent sacrifice for the sake of the world and all that good stuff.

Thankfully I'd never been above bad taste, so I hoped my petty little heart out.

We had fresher cats to skin, though, so I did not spare much thought for the matter as I had no doubt that Hanno would smash that bridge to pieces. Besides, perhaps removing himself from the turbulence of politics for a while would help the White Knight settle his doubts. There was nothing like a straightforward, hard-earned win to help the world make sense again. The defence of the capital would not be as straightforward an effort, and there was no doubt that a defence would soon be needed: the dead were gathering in the plains below. Like rivers coming down the hills circling the great valley at the heart of Hainaut, undead came flowing at our feet.

We conducted sorties, at first. Every day or so we sent a few thousand horse through the Twilight Ways and attacked some of the smaller packs of undead, striking quick and hard before withdrawing into the Ways before the enemy could gather in sufficient numbers to force a melee. Even a run-in with the Archmage wasn't enough to get us to stop: the Blessed Artificer and myself took to accompanying the sorties, and we were usually enough to stalemate him. But after a week, we were forced to admit that sorties were no longer really feasible. Adanna took an arrow from the Hawk about half an inch to the left of her heart, which was an unpleasant wakeup call, but beyond that the tactic itself was no longer viable.

There were just too many of the dead.

I'd never really seen it put to us so starkly, how much more of the enemy there were. Yet the city of Hainaut stood atop a tall plateau, and it made the truth impossible to deny: the capital was like a rock surrounded by the tides, a sea of death gathering below us. We couldn't pick at the enemy because there wasn't anything like enemy formations to pick at. Just a mass of walking

corpses that covered the land like a carpet of iron and bone, standing terrifyingly still. The sight of it was... not good for morale. It was one thing to know that we would have to defend the city against at least fourfold our number, it was another to see that fourfold standing silent on the field. Waiting, watching, dreaming of that final stillness. As was so typical of the Dead King, he'd drawn first blood before the battle even started and no cost to himself.

Shaping our mundane defences was not difficult, or at least not complicated. There were four stretches of wall to defend, the four cardinal directions, and a fifth force would have to be kept back as a reserve. The Alamans, now consolidated behind Princess Beatrice Volignac – who was the least powerful of them in truth, but remained the ruler of these lands in principle – tried to push for the 'honour' of defending the northern stretch, the great gate, but were refused. That task would go to the Fourth Army, as the Army of Callow's siegecraft was superior to that of any other force here. We gave them the west, instead, since the dead were certain to try to use the butte known as the *Veilleuse* to take a proper crack at overwhelming that rampart. The Levantines got the east and the south, as the latter was little more than a sheer drop and so would be easier to defend.

The Lycaonese and the Second Army were kept back as the reserve, in deference the casualties they'd already taken in the campaign. As for the Firstborn, though on parchment they belonged to the reserve as well we had particular duties for them. We were not blind to the Enemy's favourite ploys, or above turning them to our own advantage.

It had been in the air for days now, but it was the Crows coming that told me we had reached the knife's edge. The Sisters had first come to me in my dreams, always perched on my shoulders as I stood on the edge of a hundred different drops and flying away as I fell. Then one fateful dusk it was all with eyes who were able to see them circling the skies above the capital. Sve Noc had come to Hainaut in the... flesh, for lack of better term. Though I was First Under the Night, it was the Firstborn they'd come here to tend to – as was only natural, considering near every drow south of Serolen was currently quartered within the walls of the capital. The Firstborn were largely holed up along the eastern shore of the Bassin Gris, the broadly oval pool of water at the heart of the city and feeding the waterfall at its southern tip.

Rumena had pushed for it, mentioning that most drow had once lived in cities or towns that'd been near underground lakes or rivers in the Everdark. It'd been a risk putting them near the Levantines, considering the Dominion folk were just as touchy and prone to duelling, but putting them with the Alamans near the western shore would have been even worse. Alamans reputation

among the Firstborn had taken a sharp dive downwards after it became broadly known that the Langevins of Cleves had planned to backstab them over territorial gains even while they were fighting to defend the lands of that family. Not that the Firstborn were usually above a spot of backstabbing, famously, but even by their standards that'd been a tad egregious.

The cohabitation with the Levantines had actually gone rather smoothly so far. It probably helped that they mostly came out at night, taking up the majority of the watches during the dark, and so the hours spent out and about only partially overlapped. The relative peace there was a relief, as there always seemed to be a hundred things in dire need of getting done and I was ever moving from one to the next. Hakram and Vivienne did what they could to lighten the burdens, but I still felt like I was being pulled a dozen ways at any moment. Still, I could justify setting aside time for a meal with the Woe at least once a day on the basis of needing to prepare stratagems against the Archmage and I embraced the justification wholeheartedly. How much planning was actually done varied between some and none, but it was still a balm on my day to spend at least an hour talking with people I actually liked. But there had also been... changes recently, and though Akua had not acted on them immediately – or even shown much of a change at all – eventually it came to a head.

"Your patronesses have offered me power for fealty, did you know?" Akua asked me one evening.

We'd already polished off dessert and both Indrani and Masego had wandered off – they had shared quarters, but neither of them actually slept there regularly – after Hakram went to solve a jurisdiction dispute between Princess Mathilda Greensteel and the Fourth Army over a Lycaonese soldier in her service who'd palmed some of our supplies. Vivienne had excused herself after I opened a second bottle of wine, noting she still had correspondence to see to, and that'd left me alone with Akua Sahelian.

"I figured they might," I noted. "They tried the same with Masego."

And I expected Akua to decline for much the same reasons he had. Praesi had no issue with gaining power through contracts and sacrifices, but submission was another thing entirely.

"Alas, I am not so eager to surrender my soul anew," Akua said. "Though given my current straits the offer was more tempting than it would have been once upon a time."

I half-smiled, sipping at my wine. Some pale Proceran thing, from somewhere in their south.

"Is it really that hard?" I asked. "Power always comes with strings. I always thought it'd be restful, to be without them for a while."

She dressed, I had noticed, somewhat more modestly now. Still with an eye to grandeur, she'd always had that much, but the red and white gown she wore tonight was high-necked even if it was closely cut. I'd been somewhat surprised she could still change her shape even without Night, but Masego had been all too willing to tell me that was actually a consequence of her nature as 'shade' rather than anything born of Winter or Night. In most circumstances a soul split from a body, which was what Akua was, would either pass into the world beyond or be remain as either some sort of diminished apparition. Those rules, though, applied largely to people who *hadn't* cut out their own soul the way Akua had when she'd been a teenager.

She was stable, and even somewhat in control of her own nature – her appearance and movement at least – because the split had not been accident. She had taken a knife to her soul long before I put a bloody hand through her chest.

"Hypocrite," Akua chided, though with more amusement than anger. "You have clawed desperately for power ever since your first taste of it, Catherine. Your only doubts were I finding a form of it that was not personally distasteful to you. You rhapsodize on powerlessness like a queen lauds the virtues of the common farmer – but without, I notice, ever retiring to live on a farm."

I flipped her off, earning a smug smile, but did not outright deny her words. While I might be intending to abdicate queenship over Callow, I didn't exactly intend to make my sword into a ploughshare afterwards. I still had a few decades in me handling the rise of Cardinal and the steadying of the Accords. I drank of my wine, leaning back into the seat I'd years ago stolen from Arcadia, and cocked a brow at her.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

She went still, as if surprised. In that moment, it struck me that I'd not seen Akua wear any jewels since that night on the rooftops. A riot of elegant clothes yes, and the occasional veil, but never once adornments of silver and gold. Golden eyes watched me, hooded, and I stopped to wonder at the fact that even dressed in a simple gown she still looked as much royalty as any woman bearing a crown I had known.

"You do not offer words of caution?" she asked. "Warnings about the price of seeking power?"

Thin veil that they would have been, covering up the fear of what she might do should she gain strength again.

"It's not another cage, Akua," I said. "Only larger and with bars harder to see. I meant it."

"And should I desire to leave, here and now?" she harshly asked.

"You are," I simply said, "not my prisoner."

Her hands clenched, those long and deft fingers you saw so often on mages.

"Would you have spoken the words," Akua bitterly said, "if you thought I might leave?"

You will, I thought. Before it's all over, you will. Because that's what fate is, Akua Sahelian: the recognition that, no matter how many doors there are, there was only ever one you were going to take.

"If it is my blessing to leave you want," I said, "then you have it."

Without another word, she rose from her seat. I met her eyes in silence, not moving a finger, and she left the room without a single look back. I poured my glass full again and waited, but she did not return. I wasn't sure how long passed as I stayed there, seated and silent. I wondered, for a moment, if she'd truly left Hainaut. No, I eventually decided. She'd not yet the crossroads in her story. I finished my glass and hoisted myself up, wandering under moonlight. I could have gone to have a look at Adjutant's arbitration, but why bother? It was Vivienne I sought instead. She wasn't far, considering she was quartered in the same guildhall as I was: easier to guard, if we were both there, and it wasn't like we were lacking room. It might have been for letters that she left, but it wasn't what I found her doing.

Magelights lit up the salon she'd claimed as her work room, but instead of being seated at a desk she was on her feet. A thick plank of wood with targets painted on it, circles and squares of various sizes, was propped up against an empty bookcase and I watched with a cocked eyebrow as the heiress-designate to Callow palmed a knife and threw it. It spun with a sharp sound, the tip tearing in the middle of a painted red circle at least half an inch deep. I clapped and she turned to roll her eyes at me.

"It's a knife trick, that's all," she said.

I shrugged. I was a decent hand with a throwing knife myself, but not as good as her – not without relying on the unnatural dexterity and senses a Name could lend you.

"I didn't know you were keeping your skills sharp," I said.

I'd known she still carried knives, obviously, but that was just plain good sense.

"Knives are easiest to practice," Vivienne admitted. "Henrietta Morley has been on me about learning to use a sword passably, but I've only kept at it long enough to avoid skewering myself."

"I still have sword spars with my guards on occasion, but I'm not as keen on it as I used to be," I admitted. "I don't fight the way I used to when I was seventeen."

"Knives always came easiest to me, back when I was the Thief," she said. "Mind you, I learned more out of a month of regular lessons on that with Robber during the Iserre campaign than out of several years of kicking around as Named."

I stared at her. She'd picked up lessons from *Robber*? Well, she wasn't going to be winning any prizes for chivalry anytime soon but I figured she'd probably be quite good as slitting throats if she were ever in a bind.

"What'd you even bribe him with?" I curiously asked.

"Two months of knowing where Hakram kept his aragh stash," she grinned.

"That would have done it," I snorted.

I limped across the panelled floor until I could run a finger against the knife stuck in the plank, easing it out and testing its weight. Well-made, and if it wasn't goblin steel I'd eat my own hand. I flicked it at her, and to my pleasure she snatched it out of the air.

"So why'd you start?" I asked.

More than once I'd tried to push her into picking up a weapon, back when she'd been the Thief, but she'd always been reluctant. Even back when she'd despised the Legions, she'd been less than sanguine about killing us. I honestly couldn't remember her ever seeing her take a life outside of a battle.

"The same reason I started learning Mthethwa," Vivienne said, sitting against the edge of her desk. "I used to be envious of how the rest of you got it spoonfed, did you know? Masego was raised by the Warlock and 'Drani by the Ranger, you got the Carrion Lord as a tutor and Hakram had an entire aspect prodding him so he'd always know what you needed him to."

She smiled mirthlessly.

"Me, all I got what the scare of my life from the Assassin and a few years of running, making sure never to stay anywhere long enough the Eyes would be able to find me easily," Vivienne said.

"Gods, Indrani was raised in the middle of the fucking woods and somehow she still knew four languages and her classics in Old Miezan. So I was a little bitter about it, but mostly I used it as an excuse for why I was dragging behind."

I hid my surprise. I'd known she'd had some issues with how she felt different from the Woe, but honestly I'd figured it came more from her late arrival and well, to be blunt, being used to siding with people that were just *better* than us. Morally speaking, at least.

"But then Masego kept devouring books," Vivienne smiled. "Indrani started spying on woodworkers in Laure, you and Hakram started studying Chantant. And what did *I* do?"

"You essentially put the Jacks together from the ground up," I pointed out.

Courtesy of Aisha and Ratface we'd long had some contacts in Callow and Praes, but we'd been hopelessly outmatched by the Eyes and the Circle until Vivienne folded the Guild of Thieves and the Guild of Assassins into her Jacks and began turning our old mess into a proper network of spies.

"And I did good work," she agreed. "But you were all improving *yourselves*, and I was spending more time on excuses about why I wasn't than figuring out how I could do the same."

I wouldn't throw stones there. I might not have enjoyed learning Chantant, but part of the reason I'd been able to force myself to was that the other most arguably useful thing I could teach myself was basic magical theory and I would have preferred eating a ball of goblinfire. If Akua hadn't been particularly skilled at keeping the lessons I requested of her interesting, I'd probably still have some major swaths of ignorance there.

"After Hakram got through to me, I guess it was harder to swallow the excuses," Vivienne continued. "So I started looking at doors I'd left closed. This was one, so was Mthethwa. It's also when I set to thinking about what good could be brought to Callow, instead of lingering on all the evils still needing to be cut out."

I slowly nodded, clenching my fingers and unclenching them.

"I'm sorry, Vivienne," I quietly said. "I had no idea."

"I'd hope so," she smiled, "you were the last person I wanted to know, Cat. You'd just taken me in, I didn't want to be the dead weight."

"You never have been," I frankly told her.

The smile turned fond, but it was nothing more than that. It was, I thought, a devil she'd already faced. There was no uncertainty left there.

"It was hard to be angry with you about it, when you shared secrets so readily," Vivienne said. "I'd been with a band before, and even among heroes tricks are not often simply *given* when asked. It was one of the first things I liked about you, that you didn't hoard your knowledge."

"They weren't my tricks to start with," I shrugged.

She shook her head, as if amused.

"It's one of the reasons follow you, Cat," Vivienne said. "You don't think of it as cheapening you, when you help others get stronger."

I cleared my throat, almost embarrassed.

"And to think I'm the one who's been drinking," I teased.

She chuckled.

"Get the bottle, then," Vivienne said. "I've got a letter to Duchess Kegan to finish, but when I do it occurs to me it's been ages since we've played shatranj."

Gods, I was *definitely* finishing the bottle then. I'd take away from the sting of defeat. And still, as I limped out of the room, I found I was smiling.

—

I did not see Akua the following day.

Much as the thought dug at me from the side, I let it pass. Thankfully, there was quite enough to busy myself with. We'd sent a few outrider companies far in the valley through the Ways to have a look at the situation there, and the answers were not promising: the dead were almost finished gathering. We'd be facing an assault soon. I delegated more and more to generals and commanders, instead focusing on the Woe. If we wanted to kill the Archmage without losing one of ours in the process, we needed a solid plan. Thankfully I'd had a few ideas, and there was a reason that even now he'd finished working on the new gates Masego barely bothered to sleep. I'd asked him to make anew a breed of artefacts his father had once made for the Calamities, and later on once for myself at the Camps, and he'd taken to the request with a grief-tinged fervour.

"The spellcraft behind these is fundamentally akin to scrying," Masego said. "Which means they won't work outside the walls."

Proper scrying didn't even work within the walls, even behind the cover of the city wards, but as I understood it the 'paired stones' worked just differently enough the interference would be minimal.

"The Lady mentioned the Carrion Lord liked to use these," Indrani mentioned, chin resting on her palm.

On the table were four pairs of polished, smooth stones. One was meant to be kept inside the mouth and the other in the ear, the former to speak and the latter to hear.

"Father made them at Uncle Amadeus' request," Masego agreed. "Though he found them an interesting challenge, he always said. Their limitation as an artefact was that there was a single 'master' pair, which was the sole that could both receive and send sound to every other pair."

Which Black wouldn't have minded, since his core strategy when the Calamities fought was typically to keep Warlock out of sight and call him down like some sort of magical artillery. The master set went to the Sovereign of the Red Skies, and there was really no need for anything more complicated. My father had always been wary of complexity, when Named fought. Fragility was to be avoided at all costs in his tactics.

"Yet you've improved the design," Hakram said.

Masego clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"I have changed it, certainly," Hierophant said. "Improved is a premature assessment."

The other object on the table was, I suspected not by coincidence, something that rather looked like a legionary's backpack. The resemblance was only a surface one, however, as though there was straps to make it easier to carry the artefact itself was mostly wood and copper. A sort of large rectangular box, it was covered with neat sets of runes set around incrustated stones. By the box a flat stone with carved Miezian numerals from one to four was waiting, and what looked like the mouth-stone from a paired set. The Warlock Wekesa had preferred a simple, smooth design to his artefacts as that fit the tactics and philosophy of the Calamities. Masego, at my behest, had created something a little more sophisticated. Aware of the fragility of such designs, we'd acted accordingly and focused it all in one place: this master box, until someone found a better name for it.

"So this lets us talk to each other instead of simply to the master set," I mused, eyeing the box.

"Inaccurate," Masego sighed. "Which is why we will require Hakram to field it."

Adjutant had been studying the box all the while, eyes narrowed.

"The incrustated stones each pair with one of the ear ones for you?" the orc asked.

Zeze smiled, visibly pleased.

"Correct."

"The box is relay of sorts, then," Hakram mused. "Only there will be a complication, one that requires active administration."

"Isoka's third principle of scarcity," Indrani drawled. "Can't use two spells that use the same parts of Creation in the same place at the same time."

Masego beamed at her and she preened.

"So the spells that transmit the sounds can't be used simultaneously," Adjutant said. "You will need me to either serve as a relay for planning, or establish a connection between two sets of stones."

"That'll be one part," I said. "Our great trouble with the Archmage so far has been that it's fucking impossible to get at it. When it knows Named are close it puts up a storm around itself, and then it usually falls into a certain pattern."

"One major offensive spell at a time, keeping an eye on the opposition in case it can breach its defences," Adjutant slowly said.

"We'll be coming at it from different angles, simultaneously," I said. "That means we need someone who can actually figure out what it's preparing to hit us with, and where. That will be you."

As additional prizes, it would also significantly lower collateral damage – if we could catch large-scale spells before they wrecked the inside of the city, we could counter them – and keep him out of the direct fighting. Hakram wasn't a fool, he was aware that he was in no shape for a scrap with Named, but this approach meant that he was still fulfilling a role and an important one to boot. I'd not invented this for him, I'd just told Masego that we were in a position to have someone dedicated to handling the core artefact if it improved its uses. Adjutant looked at me for a long time, then slowly nodded.

"My Name seems to approve," he gravelled, then shook his head and changed the subject. "Have we decided on a final roster for the combat?"

"Everyone in this room," I said, "and one more."

"Akua?" Indrani asked. "Viv's not in a place to brawl with a Scourge these days."

"I was considering the Squire," I admitted.

"No," Hakram said, without missing a beat.

"Look," I said, "I know-"

"No," Indrani flatly said.

I scowled.

"No," Masego snickered.

"I didn't even say anything," I protested.

"The kid's not ready for a fight of that calibre, even if he wasn't a replacement the Heavens are trying to line up for you," Archer said. "It's not happening, Cat, let it go."

I grit my teeth, but found no takers at the table. Fine. I'd find another use for him.

"The either we bring in Ishaq or Akua," I said.

"Akua's a stronger hitter," Indrani frowned. "And muscle's useful, sure, but the Barrow Sword's not used to working with us the way she is."

"I cut Akua loose from the Night," I said. "Along every other binding I had on her."

A flicker of surprise from Archer, but that was all.

"Good," she simply said. "About time."

Tense, I studied the other two. Masego looked puzzled but largely indifferent, while Hakram... thoughtful, but not angry or disappointed. Either of those would have stung. He gave me a look that made it clear we'd be discussing this at some point, but did not otherwise pursue the matter.

"I'd still prefer Akua either way," Indrani added. "That's why she's not been around, isn't it? She went to find some fangs."

"Good odds," I agreed. "Though she didn't tell me before going. She could just have left."

Indrani rolled her eyes.

"Sure she did," Archer said. "Zeze?"

"I would prefer her to the Barrow Sword as well," Hierophant said after a moment. "Even if she regains only middling power, her

state as a shade means she can ignore a great many traditional magical defences."

My gaze moved to Hakram.

"I prefer Ishaq in the abstract," Adjutant said. "You already have spells, steel is what you lack. But in practice, he'll be more useful as the chief for a band of five."

I breathed out. Well, that was a rather strong endorsement for her.

If she returned.

—

Dusk found me on the ramparts, looking down onto the plains below with company.

"The Dead King's making a mistake," I said.

Tariq stood at my side, rheumy eyes on the sea of death below.

"Is he?" the Grey Pilgrim mused.

"It's a pivotal battle with our backs up against the wall," I said. "We're surrounded and outnumbered. I know I warned your lot about getting cocky, Pilgrim, but I expect that they'll cut through the lesser chaff of Revenants like knives through butter."

That was the way those stories went, wasn't it? The lone company of paladins on the hill, scattering the faceless evil hordes. The few stubborn souls on the wall, keeping down from failing one more time. Creation loved a last stand, loved to turn them into victories – ruinous ones, often, but victories nonetheless.

"I am not so certain, Black Queen," Tariq said. "You knocked a gate into the wall we have our backs against."

I cast a look at him, found his face solemn.

"You think the gate tips the scales the other way?" I frowned. "It shouldn't. We could flee through those, sure, but we're not getting reinforcements. What we have is what's here, and we're severely outnumbered."

"It is not as simple as that," the Peregrine murmured. "It is not about what the gate brings as much as its existence. The stands we make, Catherine, they are not... strategic. Measures. That is what brings them power, you see. It is not a scheme, a trick."

An empty prayer, I thought.

"So you're saying that the gate muddles that," I tried.

"Is the Dead King trying to take Hainaut to destroy us and blow out the last candles of hope," the Grey Pilgrim said, "or because a twilight gate is a great war prize?"

I took a moment to let that sink in, reaching for my pipe and stuffing it. I had to turn around, as the wind blew back the first mouthful of smoke into my face, and I leaned against the crenelated rampart as Tariq kept looking below.

"If it's the candles, we win it," I finally said. "But a prize? He gets to win those. He *has* won them before."

I pulled at the wakeleaf, troubled. It was not an angle I'd considered.

"Creation is a fickle mistress," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It can be hard to tell what yarn it is she will spin. We are not without a tale of our own, I reckon. One about how a defeat here is the end of the Principate, the first step to the ruin of Calernia. Such stakes bring attention, and attention here is to our advantage I would think."

He glanced at me, arching a white brow.

"It's been hinted to me that Below's less than fond of the Dead King," I acknowledged. "Mind you, he's one of their greats. If they put the finger to the scales here, which I'm not sure they will, I don't think it'll be in his favour."

He nodded, as if he'd expected every word. Considering the angels whispering in his ear, he might have.

"And so it is not a mistake, I do not think," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It is a gamble, instead. A roll of the dice. And even in defeat, he loses nothing here he cannot afford to lose."

I almost objected that if we deal him grievous losses defending the city we'd be able to roll up and expel him from the entire principality of Hainaut, hopefully as a prelude to the Gigantes warding up the shore, but I got what Tariq actually meant. There was nothing down on the plains below that wasn't ultimately expendable to Keter, because everything but the Dead King was expendable to Keter. If this war ended with every undead made ash save for Neshamah himself but all his opposition buried, that was still a victory for the King of Death. His empire of death could always be rebuilt. He had all the time in the world. Us? Not so much. Even a sufficiently costly victory for us here played to his advantage. Every veteran soldier we lost here was one more conscript in the ranks when we came for Keter, every trick and artefact used here one fewer up our sleeve.

Attrition had always been the Dead King's favourite trick, that slow and insidious poison for which there was no cure.

"It still feels like a mistake," I murmured. "I don't know why, Tariq, but it does."

Like I was standing on the edge again, cold fear in my stomach as I looked down at the drop.

"He trains it in us," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Finding the shadow of our defeat in every action we take. It must be fought, Black Queen, else the war will be lost in our heads long before he wins it on the field."

I breathed in deep of the smoke, blew out a long stream of smoke that the wind curled away into nothingness. Tariq was not wrong. I knew that, agreed with it even.

And still it felt like the damned dreams, right before I fell.

Anomandris

Holed up in city. Facing insurmountable odds. Certain death and destruction.

Who do you think the Rohirrim are going to be here in the story? The Free cities? Amadeus?

NRFTW

Abigail

308924810a

At this point the only unengaged forces are the Elves, Dwarves, and possibly the potential to spare some more Drow from the northern front if they start marching south right this instant.

[Daniel](#)

And Amadeus and Ranger, if Ranger finds the Scourges worth hunting. I don't think the Dwarves will bother losing any of theirs in a battle where a decisive defeat for Keter is off the table. The drow are more likely, through the Twilight Ways. And MAYBE some contingent of tribal Orcs bribed to act as some kind of mercenaries.

Alex Straughan

Don't forget about The Horned Lords, one of them could bring an army to sign up for the Terms.

308924810a

The only mentions I've found of why people don't wake up the Horned Lords more often is that they tend to wake up hungry, being the personification of that trope where someone wakes or unseals an ancient evil, expecting them to be grateful, then has that ancient evil turn on them.

Truth of the matter is that I can't figure out how anyone on our side of the conflict would even contact the Horned Lords, and whether doing so would create a coherent force with any chance of coordinating with any of the other forces in the field.

There's certainly a chance that the right Horned Lord could convince the ratlings to fall on either the rear of the Dead King's position or the rear of the Drow position, but it's uncertain how valuable that would actually be -we're not sure if they can break through the veil of Night(or coordinate with any force that can), and the Dead King can probably just poison his corpses/ outfight the ratlings with the extra forces he might still be holding back/retreat from that front and leave the ratlings to assault the remaining Lycaonese, to counter the whole approach.

Someperson

Also Horned Lords make for very annoying Revenants.

nimelennar

White Knight & co. are the obvious candidates, so let's eliminate them.

It won't be reinforcements from Callow, because Viv already brought those. Ditto for the Firstborn; if Sve Noc were going to summon help, they would have arrived with it.

Akua is definitely being set up for a Han Solo style moment, but I think that's more of a personal turning point and not a story turning point (although it could be both).

If I had to guess, I would say that now is the perfect time for this magnificent bastard to ride in:

"May we meet again, my queen, before the end," [he] said. "For every gift you gave you took fair measure, and I can pay no higher compliment."

"And what will you do?" I asked.

"Whatever we wish, my queen," the one-eyed fox said. "For be it wicked or righteous, it will be entirely ours."

Hitogami

I highly doubt it'll be that tricky bastard, but I'd enjoy seeing what he's done with himself

ninegardens

Meanwhile, it turns out he's spent the last 2 years leading elves to Ranger once per week, so that the crazy bitch is too busy to stab his eyes out.

[Liliet](#)

The fucking elves?

Oh, there ARE dwarves waiting in the wints. Maybe they'll deign.

Tom

TBH I'm not expecting to see the dwarves until next book, if we see them above ground at all. There's been so little mention of them in this book that it would feel kind of out of place, plus what we've seen of them makes them seem better at wrecking cities than breaking sieges (though presumably they have some capacities for the latter too).

Miles

Akua is missing on the eve of battle and also a mentor figure to cat with the magic lessons

RubberBandMan

The fact that everyone is absolutely sure that Akua is going to stick with them in this hell trap when she's weakened and free to leave is starting to make me twitchy.

Sure, they're probably right. But the fact that they're so sure is ... Worrying. There's betting on someone pulling through because you want to believe in them, even if it hurts you when they fail, and there's not even considering that you might not know them entirely. What if Akua was trying to help, but fucked it up somehow? What if she's planning a long game and won't be around for this particular battle?

What if she's lost and alone and confused and scared and hurt and there's no Woe for her to be sardonic to?!?

dadycool

Oh, the fact that there's so much optimism right before such a big battle has been setting me on edge the whole chapter.

edrey

Akua is definily the finger on the scales for below, the story dont fit otherwise

[Liliet](#)

Note that Cat herself isn't, just everyone else in the Woe is. I think the shape's right for Akua to come back in time and prove them right.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's not just that, it's them feeling it coming together. Namely, that the Woe is about to include Akua as a band of five. All three of the other Named Woe probably feel it stronger then Cat, who's name is not fully formed again. She's gonna show up, with some "fangs" as Archer put it. Perhaps at the last second, or even during the fight, but she's there because how would a member of the Woe not be there for a fight that requires the Woe?

Tom

Vampire Akua is so hot right now

Sinead

Akua's appearance will probably make or break my theory on her becoming sponsored by Compassion. Might as well doup in everything here I can think of.

I can argue it either way (Discussion on patronage, the presumption that she is going to look for "fangs" when she may actually become even more limited (though undead are probably a loophole). This means that Akua could possibly be someone that does the last minute arrival for Hanno (thinking of Tariq finding Laurence for example) and then comes back to the siege at it's low point. She could be the final snowflake on the avalanche that causes Hanno's crisis to resolve itself (there has been great discussions by Lillet and others on "Akua may never be able to balance the scales, but there is no reason not to try anyway) which may help resolve Hanno's issues around Judgement and actually draw out Hierarch.

Hell, Akua arriving as a healer that starts at healing Arthur has some awesome Morganna Le Fay similarities as well.

...I think that ties together all of my theories over this past book into one interdependent pile. Let's now see how well it stands.

ByVectron!

What if she went to the DK to become his Chancellor?

Rob

Dead king doesn't share power. Chancellor is the name meant to replace a Dread Emperor/Empress.

So highly doubtful

Turning to DK for a chance of rebirth from her "shade" state is possible though.

Am of the opinion she will stay with the Woe though.

Levi Kalden

I think cat considers her returning not in the matter of her personalty but more of her story. As an ex Named with importance to her name she is bound to the workings of fate and cat doesn't think this to be the right point in time to leave if she ever will

308924810a

So Catherine is developing an intuition that the Twilight Gate is somehow a mistake, even though it's a necessity for their capacity to undertake this campaign and battle plan.

I'm vaguely inclined to trust that intuition, but I don't think it's an insurmountable problem.

They have plenty of opportunity to take on supplies now, so what happens if she DESTROYS that gate, acting at the moment that they successfully divine Keter's plans around the thing and potentially turning the situation into another completely surrounded final stand partway through the siege?

caoimhinh

No, it's the opposite. Her intuition is that Neshamah is making a mistake.

It was Pilgrim who thought it wasn't that, and convinced Cat that it was a gamble, yet Catherine still feels deep in her that Neshamah is making a mistake, somehow. Which is interesting.

Look at their conversation:

"The Dead King's making a mistake," I said.

"Is he?" the Grey Pilgrim mused.

"It's a pivotal battle with our backs up against the wall," I said.

"I am not so certain, Black Queen," Tariq said. "You knocked a gate into the wall we have our backs against."

"You think the gate tips the scales the other way?" I frowned. "It shouldn't."

"It is not as simple as that," the Peregrine murmured. "It is not about what the gate brings as much as its existence. The stands we make, Catherine, they are not... strategic. Measures. That is what brings them power, you see. It is not a scheme, a trick."

That made Catherine worry, as it was an angle she hadn't considered, but the conversation moved on, and then came this:

"And so it is not a mistake, I do not think," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It is a gamble, instead. A roll of the dice. And even in defeat, he loses nothing here he cannot afford to lose."

"It still feels like a mistake," I murmured. "I don't know why, Tariq, but it does."

Like I was standing on the edge again, cold fear in my stomach as I looked down at the drop.

"He trains it in us," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Finding the shadow of our defeat in every action we take. It must be fought, Black Queen, else the war will be lost in our heads long before he wins it on the field."

I breathed in deep of the smoke, blew out a long stream of smoke that the wind curled away into nothingness. Tariq was not wrong. I knew that, agreed with it even.

And still it felt like the damned dreams, right before I fell.

Conclusion: Catherine is not talking about her side making a mistake. It's just that she can actually *feel* that the Dead King is making a mistake, but doesn't know how she knows or what the mistake is.

So I'm guessing there are Name shenanigans at play here. Or maybe whatever it was that she got from the Bard's echo back then.

308924810a

I think that partway through that conversation they switched which side's mistake they were talking about.

[Liliet](#)

Specifically, in between these two statements:

> "And so it is not a mistake, I do not think," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It is a gamble, instead. A roll of the dice. And even in defeat, he loses nothing here he cannot afford to lose."

> "It still feels like a mistake," I murmured. "I don't know why, Tariq, but it does."

caoimnh quoted these together so it's easy to follow: yep, this is not an easy to follow switch from the outside XD but Cat knew Pilgrim would know what she's talking about! The first refers to Neshamah making a mistake (a very "wait, that can't be right" paranoia fuel), the second to Catherine making a mistake by failing to see his REAL angle.

ninegardens

My guess is that *what she can see* looks like a mistake, but also... Dead king doesn't make mistakes. Therefore there must be something she can not see.

That's what's bothering her.

If she can feel Nessie making a mistake, but she knows that isn't true, then it means her intuition is off.

And if I had to guess... the prophecy of "Giants do something critical in the twilight ways" is part of that. a CRITICAL part of that.

... Has Nessie figured out how to send troops through twilight? They keep emphasizing that he can't, and by that logic...

[Liliet](#)

I think it's both. Catherine started talking about Neshamah making a mistake because it seemed implausible to her and made her feel like she was missing something. Pilgrim provided the missing pieces, but Catherine still feels like something's wrong. Might be she's right, might be it's what Pilgrim said – paranoia carefully nurtured to trip her up and rip defeat out of the jaws of victory.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> And still it felt like the damned dreams, right before I fell.

Here is what Neil Gaiman had to say about falling dreams, in "Fear of Falling": "Sometimes you wake up, and sometimes the fall kills you. And sometimes, when you fall, you *fly*."

Burnsy

I have a theory, based on basically no evidence but the general sense that the Dead King is going to pull a fast one:

- 1) Kairos told Cat that the Ways can lead to other places than creation, a gun that's yet to be fired. Places like, possibly, the Serenity.
- 2) We know TDK has living human agents raised in the Serenity, a realm of unknown size.
- 3) the Twilight Ways are the Coalitions' trump card because they actively destroy any of the undead that try to enter them

Theory: The Dead King is going to send a strike force of living soldiers via the Serenity, through the Twilight Ways and hit them in the back in the middle of the battle, simultaneously cutting off their escape route.

Jason Ispwitch

I can see it happening... but could that possibly be the mistake Cat is sensing?

He's the Dead King, after all, not the King of Lots of Undead and Lots of Brainwashed Living People Too. My intuition is that violating his Name like that would have consequences.

On the mundane level, it offers the opportunity for lots of things not in his favor. Morale boost for Good Guys "the Dead King couldn't touch us with all his undead because we're so good, so he had to send living troops". An unmatched chance for more intel, from his living forces. The chance to seed doubt back into Serenity.

He still could do it, but I'm guessing it won't work out well in the end for him if he does.

308924810a

Y'see that would make more sense than my paranoia.

I've been worrying that he was going to draw things out for as long as possible, then ask his ally Malicia to send a force into the Twilight Ways to make a permanent gate from there into one of the more dangerous parts of the Hells.

Then you've got devils bursting out of every permanent gate the Grand Alliance has made, and maybe some of them having the senses to manage sidling getting out at random to terrorize the countryside.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not sure that's how Twilight works. Its relationship with space is not linear.

Crash

Side note, is Malicia even allowed there? I don't recall.

The Ways are finnick against undead because Tariq really didn't want them there. Can't imagine he had a much better option about the Dread Empress.

Or would that be too specific to take effect?

[Liliet](#)

Zombie III was undead and the Ways didn't give as hit. It was specifically Dead King's work.

I suspect covering two opponents like that would be spreading the weight too thin, so Malicia's in the clear.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, Zombie III was Winter undead (that is, actually a fae construct), and Cat's Winter undead weren't affected by Light. But Malicia is just a human Named, no barrier for her, any more than for Amdaeus and Ranger. Obviously, trying to *raise* undead in the Ways would be bad, but I suspect even her extra bodies probably wouldn't have a problem – by all accounts, those are sorcerous constructs but not undead.

[Liliet](#)

Actually IIRC the extra bodies are DEFINITELY undead at the base.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm. If so, then Malicia probably can't send them into Twilight, and she's unlikely to risk her real body.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, but that WOULD turn it into the kind of last stand story Pilgrim is saying the Twilight gate saved him from.

[Mental Mouse](#)

In addition to the other replies – the Alliance **holds** their gate, certainly on the creation side and perhaps even on the Twilight side. Any hostiles coming out of it will be coming through a single portal into the heart of an alert and active army.

erebus42

So Bellow is not a huge fan of the Dead King huh. I wonder if it's because he's been on the board so long that they've grown bored with him.

Insanenoodlyguy

He's stagnation. Unchanging, unlearning. The gods want their creations to DO stuff. And he's really only able to be useful in this way by making others who can still grow and learn do stuff in response to him. So him actually winning, and then making the continent go into effective stasis isn't their preferred outcome.

Frivolous

I believe the DK is a bit of a dead weight as far as Below is concerned. He represents an enormous mass of Evil that does little or nothing to serve the cause of Evil in the wider world. This gives Good an advantage so long as Good doesn't go after Keter, because Good can bestow more heroes to balance out Keter.

Sometimes I think that heroes have an advantage in their capacity to age. Villains are unaging and can stagnate even without becoming undead. Heroes can't, because they die off eventually.

Mental Mouse

> Villains are unaging and can stagnate even without becoming undead. Heroes can't, because they die off eventually.

That is roughly science's best answer to the question of "why do we ("we" being nearly all multicellular life!) get old and die?" If a population doesn't change, then sooner or later, either a changing environment, or a new innovation from another species, will wipe out the whole population. Aging forces turnover and gives new variations a chance to shine.

Frivolous

Mental Mouse: Good thought. Astute, incisive.

Villains don't age, but they do attract violence. So despite their lack of aging, they are forced to evolve, because if they don't they get killed.

In further thought regarding the Dead King: I think one reason Below dislikes him is his primary motive: He's a coward, and everything he does is in service of his cowardice. He isn't curious, and he's not particularly

experimental or exploratory. He took his ball and went home, and now no one can play because he guards his ball ferociously.

Neshamah just sits there like a block of ice that refuses to melt, whereas Below wants him to be water, flowing and pushing.

There have been other undead Named rulers before, like Dread Emperor Revenant, but Revenant wasn't a coward.

I think one reason why Below favors Cat is she is the very opposite of a coward. She's vibrant and active and transformative in ways that further the Great Experiment that is Creation.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> He isn't curious, and he's not particularly experimental or exploratory. Which probably has a lot to do with being undead. I dunno about Below "wants him to be like water", but certainly they have to be getting bored with him. The rest of the continent mostly learned not to open the box on him, and Crusades against Keter had decayed into a routine.

Cat has chained the routine big-time, and indeed is rewriting rules almost across the board... and she even shares the fun with Above's crew. Much more interesting....

Insanenoodlyguy

"And I did good work," she agreed. "But you were all boosting Practical Guide to Evil on topwebfiction,, and I was spending more time on excuses about why I wasn't than figuring out how I could do the same."

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/boost>

[Mental Mouse](#)

I note that we are currently second on their All-Time Favorites list, and not far behind Worm on that.

RoflCat

Something of a hindsight, but I guess Indrani's rather quick approval of Akua's release might be attributed to her past.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani has also been on Cat's case about her personal emotional issues wrt Akua since at least the post-Prince's Graveyard campfire arc, but you're probably very much also right 😡

[Liliet](#)

oh my god when will this emoji stop blindsiding me. :x is not fucking 😡 !!!

[Mental Mouse](#)

And that's why people prefer actual graphic emojis to old-style emoticons. Once you're past the basic three or four, the natural spelling of expressions gets... ideosyncratic. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Wait, what? Who prefers what? What's the distinction between emoji and emoticon here?

My entire problem here is that I want the straightforward keyboard symbol smileys, and evil platforms convert them into whatever stupid images they think line up with them
)=

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Wait, what? Who prefers what?
Okay, fair cop.

"Emoticon" wasas the "fancy name" for text smileys, "emoji" took hold for the graphical form.

The problem with text smilies was and still is, that for all the lists of them that got passed around on USENET, once you got past the first half-dozen at most, people stop agreeing on what they mean. – e.g., does an "x" mouth mean kissing or cursing? Does it matter if it's uppercase? What about an asterisk? That was an issue 40 years ago (well before the Web existed!), and it hasn't gone away.

The little graphical cartoons that are emojis, some of them enshrined by UNICODE, aren't completely without ambiguity, but they're a lot better. And note that a UNICODE character is defined by its numeric value and official description, **not** by its graphical representation.

So, some software tries automatically converting one way or the other. This works okay on, say, Discord where you get rapid feedback. Not so well on WordPress, where you

don't get to see the program's interpretation until after it's too late to edit.

Note that my E-mail client Thunderbird actually mechanizes that disaster, for the worst of both worlds! It lets you choose graphics such as "foot-in-mouth" or "embarrassed", and shows them to *you* as graphics, but it then converts them to text on send. Good luck if your reader is using a different client, that might interpret them differently or not at all.

[Liliet](#)

Valid. And thanks for the explanation!

Anyway, I'm going to keep using emoticons and inventing combinations that platforms I use haven't caught yet. Fuck them, I'm gonna keep running this race.

Holy shit Thunderbird. I'm so glad I haven't used that function in it, I DID wonder how the FUCK it would have worked.

(Note: the reason I use)= and (= and ^^ at all is bc of races long past...)

Juff

Typo Thread:

liked to believed > liked to believe
and no cost > at no cost
deference the > deference to the
and feeding > feeding (or which fed)
be remain > remain
as either some > as some
It's not another (shouldn't this be "just another")
yet the crossroads > yet reached the crossroads
quite good as > quite good at
her ever seeing her > ever seeing her
what the scare > was the scare
reasons follow > reasons I follow
I'd take away > It'd take away
the sole that > the sole one that
"I was considering (extra space at the start)
"The either > "Then either
surprise form > surprise from
likes knives > like knives
we deal him > we dealt him

Big I

I think the giants are going to betray them to the Dead King, so as to repay Procer for screwing them over centuries ago.

Konstantin von Karstein

There's zero chance of that. The DK doesn't make alliances, except with powerful Villains. The Gigantes know he will betray them and kill/raise them. They also know that after Procer they're next.

Burlyraven

Heh, everyone on the same page that bringing the Squire along would be a terrible idea is very satisfying.

I'm with Pilgrim here: this coming fight is not going to be a last stand. This is a grand brawl over a strategic asset. In many ways, that's actually a good thing, as it actually puts more story weight behind the gate if they can secure it (see my prediction of the gate story-locking the area for the Alliance for decades or centuries), but it also means a defeat for the Grand Alliance has weight as a plot device in a more powerful story (see another of my predictions that if Cat didn't have a solid Name by now, she'd earn it amidst the corpses of her army). Neither is certain, and unless there's an angle I'm not seeing, I don't think this story gets a heroic charge from reinforcements.

That said, the shipper in me is totally rooting for Kingfisher deciding to abandon his post in an attempt to woo Cat by being a heroic badass. The high military commander would totally go for that sort of thing, right? (half /s)

Mental Mouse

Eh, he knows better. He was relating to her as one professional soldier and leader to another, quick and discreet fling *not* excepted.

Yunamed

I have a feeling Cat's going to lose big....I'm feeling very uneasy about the upcoming battle...

Thanatoss

Remember that Cat never lost any big/significant battle. It is basically one of the most important parts of her story.

This is why I have strong feeling about her getting some big connection with Trumphant:

- it was hinted few chapters ago that she can "feel" giant's magic and if Trumphant fought vs them what monster she was,
- Cat and Trumphant got the same room in Keter
- Trumphant killed Judgement Angel, and Cat gives pause to

Angels

This is big pattern, i have no idea what comes from it but damn

[Liliet](#)

As has been brought up in their conversation, an actual *defeat* here is endgame, end of story, Neshamah wins. That won't happen.

There are a lot of shades of *costly* victory remaining available though...

Sinead

ALL HAIL DREAD EMPRESS VICTORIOUS!!!

New crack theory: Cat climbs the Tower and becomes the last Dread Empress of Praes, as she literally never dies/holds the reigns long enough that she forces the legend to fade.

(Hey, Callow's based on Great Britain. Of course the last great Queen of an Empire is Queen Victoria....)

Reader in The Night

I wonder what was that with the Fate stuff? Cat seems to be actively anticipating an Akua betrayal because her Fate is inescapable, but I thought she was more the type to say "Fuck Fate, I make my own Destiny".

Also, how does her actively anticipating Akua's Sudden But Inevitable Betrayal equate with her setting up a punishment for Akua? Did she somehow set up a way for Akua to self-destruct when she (inevitably) turn Evil again, just to drive home the point that Akua was never a better person and could never have been a better person, no matter how much she tried? That seems a little... Harsh, and against the themes of the story being told so far.

I suppose I could see something like the ending of Portrait of Dorian Gray, but that doesn't seem all that satisfying.

Sinead

Huh. I read it as the fact that while Akua now has her freedom, she feels bound to stick around, even though everything she has been taught says to flee.

I don't expect a betrayal, I just see that Akua's return won't be a form of overwhelming firepower, but something different,

beleester

Everyone *thinks* they can be like “screw fate, I make my own path”, but not many people actually do. Here’s how I read that exchange, more or less.

Akua: Ha! You were doing that heroic “if you love something, set it free” thing, weren’t you? Well screw that, I make my own fate. I’m leaving.

Cat: I totally knew she’d do that. She’ll be back.

Crash

Honestly I agree with Cat. Akua is leaving, but not now. Doesn’t feel right yet.

[Liliet](#)

Well, it was more like:

Akua: What bullshit! How dare you make me stay willingly!

Cat: I’m not making you stay.

Akua: Oh come on! You want me to stay and are hypnotizing me into it with your evil heroic viles!

Cat: I’m literally giving you my blessing to leave right now.

Akua: ...

Cat: ...I have no idea if she’ll be back.

...I might be a little confused about what Cat’s trying to do here.

Christian Oaks

Cats punishment for akua has always been to show her everything she did was wrong, she could have had friends and happiness and power all along or something along those lines. She does that by being her friend, and the logical step in that is not forcing a friend into something dangerous

Crash

That conversation is now canon.

[Liliet](#)

> Cat seems to be actively anticipating an Akua betrayal because her Fate is inescapable

I don’t think it’s a betrayal she’s anticipating, at least not for good.

Daniel E

Yes yes, drama and tense action, blah blah. You know what could allow breaking that bridge from safe distance while keeping White Knight & company behind to defend? A flying horse 🐎 (never letting this one go)

Darkening

A flying horse dropping mirror knight onto the bridge from a mile up at terminal velocity before it flies off to eat bodies somewhere. Poor horse.

Crash

If Cat said those words near one of their augurs I'm fairly certain they'd just drop dead instantly.

Foresight isn't working, the White Knight has just left on a quest and the Black Queen is saying the Dead King is making a mistake? (Insert obligatory this is all part of Bard's scheme here)

Oh boy.

Frivolous

I believe that this chapter gives new information on Vivienne's past quandary as Thief, and why she eventually lost her Name.

It's interesting, this new anecdote from her perspective, in that she was finding excuses not to learn and improve, in contrast to all the other Woe, and also in contrast to heroes like Hanno and Roland.

The Name of Thief would not, I think, have been so brittle in someone other than Vivienne. Being a hero and Thief, compelled to rob the wicked, to take, should not in itself have prevented Viv from learning and growing. I think another Thief could have been more constructive and creative about it.

Examples in fiction include Roark, the male protagonist of J D Robb aka Nora Roberts' In Death series, who started out a pickpocket and branched out to computer science because he had to defeat sophisticated technological security systems, and eventually became a business billionaire who merely stole art and jewels as a hobby, for fun.

I think Vivienne's problem was she robbed out of anger. She didn't take any real joy in being the Thief. It didn't make her happy. So maybe that caused her to coast along, relying on her Name.

I wonder if and suspect that all this talk about how Vivienne lost or left behind her Name could be important later on, because studying how a Name is lost without that Named dying can be useful in predicting how a Name is gained.

It might also be relevant to the Intercessor. Surely that is someone whom Catherine would like to see lose her Name.

Liliet

Vivienne's problem was that she was playing an RPG while Cat's faction was playing an economic strategy game, and she kept feeling the mismatch without quite knowing what to do about it.

Mental Mouse

> "Is the Dead King trying to take Hainaut to destroy us and blow out the last candles of hope," the Grey Pilgrim said, "or because a twilight gate is a great war prize?"

> I took a moment to let that sink in, reaching for my pipe and stuffing it. I had to turn around, as the wind blew back the first mouthful of smoke into my face, and I leaned against the crenelated rampart as Tariq kept looking below.

Okay, I think we've got a hint that Tariq's just *right* here. Notice how the moment after he comes out with that, Cat's smoke gets blown into her own face? Have we ever seen that in text before?

Sinead

...That is a very solid point. It's a frustrating point, because it runs in the face of strategy. But then again, that final stand is for "after strategy fails".

I wonder if this shows the difference between Above and Below. Above gives a "last stand" boon to it's champions, who sacrifice themselves to overthrow their foes, while Below gives a curse with their dying breath.

In the end, is there a mechanical difference in effects, or is it just the mindset on how they are implemented?

Liliet

Damage vs preservation, I would guess. ~~the thing Amadeus is so mad about~~

Sinead

Exactly! Though the death of all players means you have Preservation and Destruction without oversight on the After. The first leads to rigidity of thought, with no desire to

change, while the second uncaringly strips away the good and the bad. The end result puts them back in the issue of the Garden: cyclical thought that never really changes.

Hence Amadeus' curse on all martyrs of the First Step of Change.

[Liliet](#)

I suddenly feel like I was thrown into Mistborn...

Sinead

Hah! I hadn't noticed the name similarities

I don't know about you, but I sort of wish that the series "growth through the ranks" made a point that Stories are not actually what are at play within the dynamics of the world (they switch so quickly – look at Karios and Saint's interactions) Rather, stories are how mortals track it akin to High Arcana. Perhaps that is what we are building up to with Cat more fully stepping on the level of Bard and Nemeshah. She isn't there yet because she balances so many hats. I suspect that the end of the book sees Cat shedding the Crown of Callow, and mantle of First Under Night, and stepping into her emerging Role. That is her Fall into the Abyss. The Crows do not reject her, she just will have outgrown the Role, and they her. Although I do hope she keeps some relationship with the Sisters. They are so entertaining.

Granted, this might be me reading my own biases into the setting, since "Narrative" as an objective force is something that I find frustrating since you do end up with a lot of the issues that were called out by this series over and over again. But the fact that the system can be "played" to me means that the base premise of "narrative" is fundamentally flawed.

A side note: When Cat abdicates, part of me wants there to be a pomp and circumstance scene between her and Vivienne of passing the torch akin to Cat's and Edward VII. While Callow may ultimately sour on Cat's reign, the scene between Edward and Cat reads to me as the seal of legitimacy of the Crown (independent of Above and Below).

But I am biased there too as I go back and re read that scene every so often.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure it's actually very much about narrative. People's perception and "collective subconscious" actively warps reality, and that's something I absolutely adore as a concept, so there's my bias in the opposite direction from yours 😊

Like, issues? No shit there are issues in how people process things, in how the same event can be interpreted multiple times, in how this interacts with the agency of people it's actually happening to, etc. That's the fun part!

(I mean, we've had WoG explicitly confirm that a particular Name coming into existence or not depends on cultural prerequisites... That's such a fun concept???)

And of course you can play the narrative. Stories are what the storyteller makes them, it's just that in this universe you're telling the story with your entire existence and not just out loud. Of course you get to manipulate other people's perception, that's how other people's perception works 😊

ALSO I VERY MUCH THINK EDWARD VII GAVE CAT'S REIGN A SEAL OF LEGITIMACY AND I KIND OF WANT THAT TO COME UP TBH ALONGSIDE THE SWORD IN THE STONE ANGELIC RESURRECTION THING
there are few legitimate rulers as legitimate as Catherine is ;u;

Matthew Wells

So I've been thinking, what will the titles be when PTGE gets published?

Two possibilities I've thought of:

- 1: Squire
- 2: Adjutant
- 3: Thief
- 4: Archer
- 5: Hierophant
- 6: Shade
- 7: Judge (or whatever Cat is becoming)

Or maybe:

- 1: Squire
- 2: Lady
- 3: Sovereign
- 4: Priestess
- 5: Queen
- 6: Judge (idem)
- 7: Peacemaker?

Chapter 77: Tribulation

"I agree that outliving your enemies is the greatest of revenges, my friend, but we seem to have something of a philosophical difference about how that is to be achieved."

– Dread Empress Maledicta II

There was a pond on the guildhall's grounds.

Like everything else in this cursed city, it was dead. The weeds in the drab water had withered, the grass around the rim blackened. Even the mud at the bottom looked darker than it should. But the water was warm, having soaked in the sunlight of the day, and it was a pleasant sensation when I soaked my bad leg in it. I left my boots in the dead grass and looked up at the sky through dead branches reaching out like fingerbones. Something ghosted across the tripwire of Night I'd woven around the thicket, giving me a name before I ever saw a face. It was a short list, the people who would be able to pass with so light a presence. I clutched my silence tight, staring up at the cloudless blue sky as I waited patiently.

"How very carefree," Akua said. "I am surprised you did not send for a bottle of wine as well."

I chuckled, eyes staying on the blue.

"I still have duties this evening," I said, "and drinking half a bottle would make me want to take a nap."

It was a tempting thought even knowing I did not have the time to spare. Leaning back on the soft ground, my feet in the water and with a belly warmed by wine? It'd be a pleasant way to spend a summer afternoon, even one soon to be shadowed by war. I heard Akua come closer, wondering if the way I'd heard a sound at all was a concession on her part. Back when she'd still had hooks in the Night, her steps had made no sound and left behind no trace. Now, though, who knew?

"Are you done making plans of war, then?" she idly asked.

A little too idly, I decided.

"No," I said. "We want you with us when we go for the Archmage. Masego made paired stones."

"You'd have no use of me," Akua said. "I am without power."

I blinked in surprise. I'd thought for sure that getting fangs of her own was why she'd disappeared. Peeling my eyes away from the endless blue expanse, I turned and found her leaning against a beech tree. It was a long black dress she wore, with elaborate patterns looking like sunflowers across it all the way to the straps that kept it fastened against her collarbone. Her hair was styled in a manner I'd never seen on her before, closely cut on the left and sweeping towards the right. As was often the way when she preferred her thoughts obscured, her face was unreadable. I cocked my head to the side.

"Are you?" I asked.

She smiled viciously, all the more beautiful for the anger she bared.

"Is this when you speak of the powers of love to me?" Akua asked.

"It's not a force to be underestimated," I mildly agreed.

It had kept the Dread Empire of Praes together for forty year, after all, made it the most powerful it had been in centuries. Without Black and Malicia, the genuine trust and affection between them, it would have all collapsed years before the Conquest could begin. And without the Conquest, neither of us would be here under the afternoon sun in faraway Hainaut.

"You do not love me, Catherine," she said. "In any sense of the word. I am not your friend or your companion, I am the woman who *butchered* a hundred thousand of your people. I am the doom of Liesse, the mother of the folly you have hung around my neck."

Her fingers clenched.

"Let us not pretend otherwise," Akua harshly said. "I tire of the game."

I studied her for a long moment, finding the anger boiling in her. The confusion too, or perhaps the shame? Even when sentiment peeked through clearly, she was more nuanced a woman than most.

"You know better," I simply said.

It wouldn't work if I were lying. If there was not a genuine affection, a genuine attraction. I was not skilled enough a liar to be able to fool her for long. She knew this, too, though she did not want to believe it. But this wasn't really about me, I decided. It was about her. *You are afraid*, I thought.

"You made a choice, didn't you?" I mused.

She flinched. My hands clenched, as I tasted the heady brew that was triumph and grief so deeply intertwined as to be indistinguishable. I'd done it. From here to the end, now, it was all writ.

"I sought the fae," Akua quietly said. "Through eerie paths. And I found what I wanted: one of them blinded by story, who would not see the knife until it was too late."

"Power through blood," I murmured.

Masego had firmly rejected the notion of making up for the loss of his magic by acquiring another power, be it Night or something usurped from some lesser god. *It's not power I want*, he'd told me. *It is magic, Catherine, and for that there is no replacement.* Yet it was not in Masego's nature to seek dominion, not the way it was in Akua's. For all that they were both the children of two of some of the most powerful figures in the Wasteland, they had been raised in fundamentally different ways.

"Through murder," Akua thinly smiled. "As much the transgression as what is offered up. It would have been a... beginning. Once I devoured that strength, it would have been easier to gain more."

"And yet you didn't," I said.

Her face closed.

"I still might."

I half-smiled. She was always easiest to grasp when she was similar to me, and when I had I ever been above threatening to cut my nose to spite my face?

"And what would that prove?" I asked.

"That I am not weak," Akua coldly said.

"You say that like there's only ever one way to be strong," I replied.

She hesitated. Once upon a time, she might have dismissed that. It was too late now, though. She'd strayed too far from the invisible fences of the Wasteland, seen the greater world beyond and the myriad strange and terrifying entities that strode it. She had seen powers rivalling the greatest of the Old Tyrants, not a single one having walked down their path.

"There's only one way to claim the Tower," she said.

Praes has failed, I could have said. *Or, why would you want to? Or, why does your mother still rule you?*

"And will that satisfy you?" I asked instead.

She did not answer, looking away. The silence stretched out until it was so taut I feared it might snap.

"Your way," Akua finally said, "it gives nothing. I came back empty-handed."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," I murmured. "You came back after having made a choice, Akua."

"Is failure a choice, then?" she scorned. "What great revelation did I drag back with me, fleeing like a fearful child?"

I thought of a few moments stolen away before dawn, in the Graveyard's wake, of the same woman now before me standing above Kairos Theodosian with burning eyes. Of the words she had spoken then, addressed as much to herself as to the Tyrant.

"That you are more than blood," I said. "That you are more than what they made of you."

I saw something like hate in her golden eyes when she faced me, but for who I could not tell.

"It wasn't you," Akua quietly said. "So do not gloat, even where you think I cannot see. It wasn't you at all, Catherine."

I slowly nodded. Her face fell and she looked down at her hands.

"It's never just power," she said. "In that much at least you were right. I wanted to take from the fae and wield it as I once did sorcery, but in the end..."

She softly laughed, as if appalled at herself.

"All I could think of was those lessons with my father," Akua said. "The joy in him, when he shared magic with me."

She looked away again.

"It would have been ugly, replacing that with a thimble of power earned through cheap murder," Akua quietly said. "Ugly all the way down."

You told me about your cradle-sister, once, I thought as I watched her. A girl called Zain, whose throat your mother made you cut when you were barely eight years old. And you told me, after, that your regret about that day was that you cut her shallow. That she bled out slower than she needed to because your hand hadn't been steady.

"And so now I return to Hainaut, empty-handed and fool," she scoffed.

Deftly, I went rifling through the many pockets of my cloak until I had what I looked for: two small stones, enchanted by Masego's own hand. Her set of paired stones. She went still as I reached out, slowly prying her fingers open and pressing them into her palm.

"You returned to us," I corrected.

And golden eyes searched me, looking for the lie and finding only truth. I had meant every word. And I also thought: *if you had to cut her throat again, right now, your hand would tremble.*

Her fingers closed around the stone. I withdrew my hand.

I looked up at the blue sky, winning and lost.

—

"The city was made to be held," Sapper-General Pickler said. "And if simple force of arms decides this, it will hold. You have my word on that."

I cut into my slice of beef, chewing thoughtfully. I'd not necessarily meant our shared meal to be about our duties, but I honestly couldn't recall ever having a meal with Pickler where business wasn't touched on at some point. I'd never taken it personally, of course. Pickler didn't draw the line between duty and her personal life the way most people did. To her it was the work that was the centerpiece of her existence and all the rest was secondary. I sometimes wondered if that was why Robber's long-lasting affections for her had never been reciprocated: romance just wasn't something she cared enough about to ever put above her tinkering.

Mind you, the goblin ways of romance were alien enough to me that even if they *were* engaged in a torrid affair I'd find it rather hard to tell. For one, their culture typically drew no direct link between being a romantic couple and being physically intimate. Sex was about breeding and arranged by the Matrons to strengthen bloodlines or alliances, nothing else. My understanding of it was that goblins didn't really feel physical desire the way most humans or orcs did, so the... impulse just wasn't there. It was pretty much unheard of for one of their kind to seek a brothel or a fling. It was more of an abstract craving of the other person for them, an itch that didn't require skin to be scratched.

It'd made me rather curious about exactly what it had entailed when Nauk had been courting Pickler, considering he must have known at least as much about goblins as I did, but I'd never quite dared to ask back when we were at the College. And nowadays, what would be the point? He was long dead, and that wound would never heal if I kept picking at it. It wasn't mine

alone, anyway. For all that Robber had once made sport of Nauk at every occasion, considering him a rival for Pickler's affections, I could not recall him ever speaking ill of the other man since he'd died. Enemies or not, they had been Rat Company.

That still meant something, to the few of us left.

"It's different when the enemy doesn't break," I reminded her. "The ramp that gets them to the gate is a beautiful killing floor for your engines, but the dead won't ever flee. It'll not be waves so much as a wave, uninterrupted."

"The skeletons aren't the trouble," Robber said, unusually serious. "We can handle the Bones and the Binds, Catherine. The constructs will be a little trickier, but you finally let my people off the leash for a reason."

He bared needle-like fangs in approval. By that he meant I'd cleared all sappers for use of our last goblin munitions, to their riotous cheering. Goblinfire was still restricted, but officers of the rank of tribune and above were allowed to request its deployment in a limited fashion. We'd set aside part of the stock for that purpose, around a third. The rest we had more interesting plans for than just propping up the defence.

"It's not Hannoven or Rhenia," I sighed. "The Volignacs didn't count on the walls cliffside being scaled, or things like beorns and wyrms coming out to play. It's not the gate I'm worried about so much, it was built expecting a fight. It's the rest."

The city of Hannoven was, tales said, essentially a set of ever-taller walls circling a lone mountain. It was widely considered one of the greatest fortresses in all of Calernia even if it had fallen multiple times to ratlings and the Dead King. Rhenia had fallen to neither and was even more daunting a prospect to take: it'd begun as a fortress carved into a cliff but then become a city almost entirely dug within a mountain of solid rock that could be sealed up at will. Both of those great cities had been built without any great weaknesses because the people who'd built them had learned that Keter always punished weakness. But Hainaut just wasn't built the same, for all its striking presence.

It just hadn't had to withstand the same kind of sustained, brutal warfare the Lycaonese cities had. Most of the time undead invasions that'd crossed the lakes and pierced into southern Procer hadn't even bothered to siege the capital, just gone around the plateau and let the Volignacs hole up in their fortress-city up high. Princess Beatrice had admitted to me that there might actually be some truth to the old unpleasant rumours about some of her ancestors outright letting the dead through when the principalities to the south got too troublesome to deal with. I hoped none of the Lycaonese royals ever heard about that, because it was the sort of thing they would take *very badly*.

"There's not much to be done with walls atop a cliff," Pickler frankly said. "They built with quality stone and saw to the upkeep decently, which passed solid defences on to us. I stand by what I said, Catherine: we can hold this city, so long as Revenants don't pry it away from us."

An expectant gaze followed.

"I won't say the Scourges will be easy meat, or even just the other Revenants," I told her, "but I believe we can win that fight. We prepared, and we have gathered significant Named talent."

I held no illusions that we'd win this without casualties, though. At best we'd lose at least a band of five's worth, but I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if it were more. We were aiming to snap the Dead King's finest blades, that deed wasn't going to come cheap. *And I'll bet one or two of the Scourges will get away whatever we do, I thought, so that they can come back to haunt us if our armies ever make it to Keter.*

"If you say we can, then I expect we will," Pickler said, and I started in surprise.

That was pretty effusive by her standards. She'd never been heavy handed with praise, at least outside her fields of interest.

"I do wish we had Juniper and Aisha with us, however," she wistfully added. "Generals Bagram and Zola are skilled, but it isn't the same."

Preaching to the Choir, there.

"Agreed," I murmured.

"Bagram doesn't even inspect kits personally," Robber told us, like this was a great offence.

Way I heard it Juniper had picked up that habit from her mother, General Istrid Knightsbane, but while Bagram had served as Istrid's right hand for over a decade he did not seem inclined to continue the tradition. Juniper famously had been, and the chewing outs she'd given recruits who got sloppy were still legend among the old crowd from the Fifteenth.

"Juniper's doing better," I volunteered. "Last word I got was that she was now able to go several days without episodes."

By year's end she should be fit for field command again, though I wasn't signing off on that until Aisha agreed regardless of what the healers might say. The Hellhound wasn't above bullying priests or mages into saying what she wanted, but Aisha wasn't

the kind of woman to let herself get forced into saying a damned thing.

"The Peregrine shortchanged us, if it took this long," Pickler coldly said.

"More like Malicia put her back into fucking with her mind," Robber darkly replied. "Another account to settle out before the knife is sheathed, Boss. The old girl bled us a few times too many."

"Praes will be settled," I evenly said. "By treaties if I can, by the sword if I must."

A shiver went up my spine and for an instant I almost felt like someone was looking at us. I pricked my ears with Night, but we were alone. My sudden distraction had been missed by neither of the goblins, Robber having already discreetly bared a knife under the table.

"False alarm," I said, shaking my head. "The wait's driving me mad, I think."

"Won't be long now," Robber said. "It's in the air, yeah?"

Pickler bared pale, sharp teeth.

"They have never fought a proper siege against our sappers before, Catherine," the Sapper-General of Callow said. "And after this, they will never try to again."

We drank to that, and the meal finished on the high note of Pickler showing me her latest improvements on the contraption of leather bands and steel that she'd first made for me years ago, the device that would send a knife up against my palm if I flicked my wrist just right. They helped me try on, and it was with a smile and a flourish that I revealed a sharp little rib-sticker in goblin steel. It would do nicely, I thought, watching my reflection in the side.

Gods knew I'd not lack use for it.

—

The moon was out in full.

It'd been days since anyone had glimpsed a single cloud above the capital, day or night, and this high up the sights bared by that absence were always striking. The rampart where I had gone to stand had become my favourite for the way it gave me a good look at both Hainaut itself, the island of lights and flames that an inhabited city at night turned into, and the vast expanse of sky above. The stars were visible in a way that they rarely were when standing in a city this size, for the valley around us was a ring

of unbroken darkness. The dead saw the same be it night or day, and the forges they used were hidden from our sight. If I let my mind wander I could almost imagine that the city was just an island drifting under the stars, the dark around us nothing but dark and deep waters.

Shadows moved against the darkness, cutting out the lights wherever they passed, but I was not afraid. I knew them too well for that. Two great crows, whose feathers somehow seemed darker than the night sky itself, circled slowly above. They were careful never to leave the sky above the city, where wards made it difficult for the Dead King to attempt anything against them, but that was the only concession to prudence they made. I stayed beneath them, the warmth of the Mantle of Woe pulled tight around me as I pulled at my pipe and let curls of smoke rise up like some fleeting offering to my patronesses. They came to me when they'd had their fill, and in Komana I found vexation at having been denied something to hunt.

The Dead King had robbed the Sisters of any prey they might have sought, killing everything that crawled or swam as far as the eye could see. Their talons had not been red into too long for the Youngest Night's taste. Sve Noc took to the rampart I was leaning against, each landing on one of my sides in a smooth flurry of feathers, and I almost smiled when I heard those sharp talons rake at the stone. There would be marks. They seemed in no hurry to talk, so silence hung between us for some time as I breathed in wakeleaf and spewed it out over the edge of the wall. There was hardly even a breeze, tonight.

"The war does not go well," Andronike said.

My fingers tightened around the dragonbone pipe Masego had gifted me. I forced them to loosen, even though what I had been told was nothing less than deadly serious. It was not the war here in the south that the oldest of the sisters would be speaking of.

"How bad?" I quietly asked.

"We sent Vesena Spear-biter and its sigil into the lands of the dead to ravage and draw attention from your own campaign," Komana said. "All souls were lost."

I softly swore. The Vesena had never particularly impressed me even before their last defeat, but they had been led by the Seventh General and been one of the great assets of the Empire Ever Dark.

"Radhoste and Jutren were lost as well," Andronike said. "The Dreamer to a breach in the Gloom, Jutren to an ambush as it pursued."

That made it the Sixth and Tenth General dead as well. Fuck, the finest of the Firstborn were dropping like flies. I'd thought the northern front halfway under control, what the Hells was happening? The goddesses had never been shy about looking at my thoughts, so I did not need to ask the question to get an answer.

"The Dead King has perfected his answers to Night," Andronike said. "With every battle fewer of the Secrets work unimpeded. The war cannot linger, First Under the Night."

"If it lasts too long, we will die out," Komena harshly said. "Our losses are becoming too great and there are..."

"Concerns," Andronike finished.

Not here, I would have been tasked to address them. That meant up north again, and there were not many who might trouble the Sisters among their kind.

"Kurosiv?" I quietly asked.

"It is now the First General," Komena said.

That wasn't an agreement, not quite, but hardly a denial. I grimaced. Kurosiv the All-Knowing had long been considered a leech by the two Sisters, but not one that it would be easy to remove. It was only going to get worse with time, though. The same stuff of which the apotheosis of Sve Noc was made was what Kurosiv was now hoarding, and though that made the drow powerful it also made the Sisters uniquely vulnerable in some ways. I suspected that swallowing Winter had made them more vulnerable in some ways. That power was not one used to being ruled by the same face for too long, and now that it had been devoured by goddesses of theft and murder expecting *loyalty* out of it would be naive.

"If we win here decisively, then we can have Hainaut secured by winter," I said. "After that, when the snows clear, it is Keter we turn to."

"We are aware," Andronike said. "It is why we have come, Catherine Foundling. This battle has our full attention."

My heart skipped a beat and I set down my pipe, studying the crows closer.

"You're not the same crows that were here before I left for the Arsenal," I finally said. "How much of you is actually here, Sve Noc?"

The great crows laughed, the sound of it eerily like caws.

"Half," Komena said.

I froze.

"Of *everything*?" I hissed out.

"This battle," Andronike mildly repeated, "has our full attention."

They had said what they wanted to say, and so found no need to linger. Without bothering with anything as petty as goodbyes, the Sisters dropped off the edge of the rampart and took flight. With dark wings they rose, cutting out even the insolent silver light of the moon as they passed before it. I found my hands were shaking when I picked up my pipe again. I filled it anew, more to have something to do with my hands than hunger for another packet of wakeleaf. Half, Gods save us all. That was... Well, I didn't have to worry about any of the Firstborn here being raised from the dead at least. The Sisters would nip that right in the bud. And Night taken from the undead would form quickly and smoothly, so there was that as well. It was still a heavy investment on their part, to send half of their divinity so far from their seat of power, and I was not quite sure what had driven them to it.

If Komena alone had come I might have called it recklessness, for she was the more hardheaded of the two, but for Andronike to have committed as well? It meant that they no longer considered the war up north one they might feasibly win alone. They were betting on the Grand Alliance because it was the only good bet left to them, not because they felt a particular fondness for our collection of human realms. I let the smoke calm me, thoughts following down the cascade of consequences that Firstborn reverses implied for the war. It might make the dwarves more reluctant to intervene, I concluded with a grimace. The Kingdom Under wasn't interested in picking a fight with Neshamah on behalf of an alliance that was losing, they'd made that much clear: a clear shot at the Crown of the Dead was their prerequisite for sending in their own armies.

With the drow front facing defeat and our three southern ones varying in degrees of deadlock, we did not look like a good horse to back from the dwarven perspective. Better for them to avoid all-out war with the Dead King and instead concentrate on the strategy of underground containment they'd been implementing for centuries. I breathed out the smoke, eyes closed. Yeah, with that in perspective I could see why Andronike would agree to investing so heavily here in Hainaut. We were highly unlikely to win this war without dwarven involvement, and if we lost the battle over the capital the chances of the Kingdom Under joining the dance were pretty much nonexistent. They'd be rushing to finish their containment, not sparing time for dying human petty kingdoms.

Gods Below, there was even more riding on the Battle of Hainaut than I'd thought.

I stirred myself out of the contemplative daze I'd been falling into. Hakram would still be awake, I figured, and I wanted to

pick his brains about this. Not only would his insight be welcome on the consequences of the drow being driven back, but there might still be time to prepare some last defences for Hainaut. An idea or two were beginning to coalesce in the back of my head, and – and the city light up, flares of red light going up in the sky as trumpets sounded.

Hainaut stirred awake and from the corner of my eye I saw a patrol of fantassins bearing torches run towards me, but it was not them I paid attention to. Hand against the crenellation, I leaned over the edge of the wall and looked down. And there they were, keeping to shadows as they moved: pale skeletons beginning to climb the cliff, like a swarm of ants going up a wall. And beyond them the entire sea of deaths stirred, thousands upon thousands of corpses and monsters all moving as one. Roars shattered the quiet of the night, a chorus of wyrms announcing their presence and their hunger for the destruction to come, and below great ladders of black iron were brought to the fore as Keter began unleashing its preparations.

The battle for Hainaut had begun.

[*ErraticErrata*](#)

And so we start the final stretch of Book VI. As usual, first update of the month means an extra chapter in the eponymous tab. It's "Colossal II", the second and last part of the Antigone POVs.

[*amit27592*](#)

This is going to be one epic battle! Both of the martial kind and mind/story games.

I think this is the first big martial fight since the Everdark arc.

dadycoool

The goblins finally get to go all out, yay!

Also, that "Half" kinda reminds me of the Joker in The Dark Knight.

Sinead

You know, I had had a great conceptual picture of poetic prose to about how the nature of being Named is to take steps on the mountain the separates the mortals from the Immortals, and that the bindings and pressure of the power shapes you the deeper into

it's grip you go, forging your soul into the absolutist mould that bears kinship to the Angelic hosts and Infernal hordes. And that while villains have cast down Angels, have any ever made a Devil Rise?

But **** all that noise!

AKUA IS GONNA BE THE BEST COMPASSION GIRL!

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure PGTE continues to not be a cultivation story, and the point remains down here around mortals where power is just a means to very socialist ends...

But man, Akua swearing to Compassion honestly sounds weirdly less far-fetched than it really should. Cat's estimation that her hand would tremble again 😊

Sinead

I mean, that's an entirely fair point. I was more going that Akua's family has been made out to be extremely irredeemable by the traditions they held, and Akua took that philosophy as the basis of her Name as Diabolist, which had to have left it's mark. It's all hammy exaggeration on the fact that few villains see value in raising up an enemy, even if in doing so, said enemy will be clapped in chains far stronger and cruel than any of their own devising.

Really "Akua sworn to Compassion" boils down to my going theory is that Above's angels appear to "those who need them to exemplify their chosen virtue beyond mortal means". Willie wanted to be Contrite beyond mortal means in response to his own sins. He did not want any reprieve from owning his sins. Hanno was a broken young man who wanted to be an agent of justice in a way that left no room for doubt that his actions were just (note that this is different from systemic justice). I believe the same can be said for Tariq, though the exact details of his story elude me.

Akua clings to story and ideals that made her an absolute terror as a Villain. Could she then embrace those ideals of Compassion (I was shown compassion when I deserved it. Who am I to not do the same for others?)

I won't cry foul if it doesn't pan out, but I will do the hammy hype train until it resolves itself one way or another. Because a) I like Akua's character arc and b) I am _really_ curious as to what Compassion's schtick is.

[Liliet](#)

Well, Akua deciding that killing even a fae is just not her aesthetic now was certainly a step in... that hemisphere 0.0

Sinead

I know!

I'm so excited to see the conclusion!

Tom

I'd guess compassion would be pretty OP vs revenants, because it would be about freeing them from their compulsory service to Nessie.

Sinead

A thought I had that relates to your observation that PGTE is not a cultivation story. While I agree with that, I think where I got the idea from my description is from the Augur's reflection of "the trap built into Creation". I have always read that to be all Named (especially in the context of the climax of the story) rather than just a trap for those like the Wandering Bard. Those best to pursue and answer the Great Question(s) of Creation are granted the power and influence to champion their line of thought, but are also bound more tightly to the world in doing so.

I agree that it isn't a cultivation story because the power is always granted from an external source (regardless of Amadeus' "coronation vs. recognition" distinction of Heroes and Villains).

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus was talking from his ass very much when he said that, desperately dancing around "I don't actually like Below's philosophy and I don't champion it in any meaningful sense, I'm actually trying to do a revolution over here" because he isn't going to just say that.

Anyway.

Yeah.

Sinead

Good point there, although it always sounded to me that the "Coronation vs. seizing power" is how most people seem to view the difference between the factions, which is why I used it.

Amadeus is very much a Hero, in the sense of being a champion of the people. However, his people are Praes. Cat

has made the mental shift of extrapolating this philosophy to the entire continent, even if she holds Callow in her heart.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah lol that's also why Amadeus said that, he was reaching for cliches to get to his point without actually saying anything that would make him look good XD

But I don't think there is a real consistent difference there. Each story is specific, and commonalities between Good stories are generally a different set than commonalities between Evil stories, there isn't a fundamental difference XD

I'm not sure if "external power source" is a meaningful distinction there, though. The way I see it, the power source is the very fabric of the world, the "narrativium" mechanic built into it. I guess that's philosophically different from internal qi that's yours to manipulate on a fundamental level... it just feels like Guideverse could support cultivation, too, if that was the story somewhere XD

Sinead

I mean Laurence and Ranger are right there for one.

Sinead

*Hye Su

(I try to use names over Name personally, since any time I follow the logic of the Name system to any conclusion it's always horrifying)

[Liliet](#)

On the other hand, if there's one character who doesn't DESERVE her given name acknowledged...

[Liliet](#)

FOR ONE, YES LMAO

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Bard also said "... and when the hour is mine, I seek the story that will free Creation".

hakureireimu

"Those touched by Compassion never took another life again, not even those of the worst monsters in Creation." That doesn't sound like Akua.

Sinead

She didn't take a life here, when she was free to do what ever she desired. She is also labelled by many to be one of the greatest monsters in Creation, even though she was granted this second chance at existence. Akua hasn't fully embraced the damage of her Folly in terms of the fact that she annihilated a city. If her looking at binding a fae in a story of false friendship (as someone else pointed out, a simulation of trying to kill Cat), what happens when she extends this line of thought to the rest of her actions?

Besides, others have pointed out that while Cat's plan has worked in the broad strokes, her expectations of the little details are often off. Having Akua turn to Compassion for atonement and not Contrition (in approach, not the Choir) would be a similar thing.

I am not saying it's not a long shot. I'm just saying that it would be a glorious landing if it is true.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I had I > had I
and fool > and a fool
me try on > me try it on
it have me > it gave me
into too > in too
Not here, I > Not here; I
city light up > city lit up
sea of deaths > sea of death

edrey

Akua is just great and way too sad.
So, who was spying cat? The varlet, the bard, the heavens or the Dk, that is very suspicious. There are too many actors in this story who can do it but why this conversation? I feel foreshadowing here.

Frivolous

edrey: I believe that was Cat's approaching Name that she felt looking at her.

Her new Name first sparked when she declared to Tariq and Hanno that she would put the East in order. This new feeling of being looked at echoes the same.

Or it could have been someone scrying on her, maybe Malicia.

In other news: It bothers me that Kurosiv the All-Knowing is ascending. I interpret that he is capable of usurping Sve Noc. This would be bad.

On the other hand, if Cat or someone else can learn to reverse engineer Keter's so-called answers to Night, Kurosiv won't be so much of a problem.

I suspect that with sufficient free time Masego could concoct a final solution to Kurosiv. Anyone who could solve the problem of how to keep the Wandering Bard from disappearing should be able to solve the so-called leech.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except it didn't match how she normally experiences her nascent Name. Her name is a beast at her back, not something spying on her.

[Liliet](#)

Might have been her Name / Creation itself.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Gotta be the Name/Creation. What she said was:
"Praes will be settled," I evenly said. "By treaties if I can, by the sword if I must."
That statement has narrative weight.

[Liliet](#)

Yup, especially when she means every sound.

cremadiscampi

Blood for the Blood God! The war chapters are always fantastic, this is going to be fun.

[Liliet](#)

Om nom nom.

I'll admit I thought this would happen, like, four chapters ago, but HELL IF THIS BATTLE DOESN'T DESERVE AN ARC OF BUILD-UP.

And Akua ♥ ♥ ♥

I love how Cat cannot really predict her. She knows the broad

strokes of what Akua's going through, but she got multiple surprises here at the end for how exactly it went. It wasn't all according to plan so much as... Cat bet on inevitability, and was proven right.

And no, it wasn't for her sake that Akua did this at all. From the start, this was her own struggle. From Book 3, when she asked Fasili if he ever got tired. From when she was eight and first got grievously wounded by the system she was asked to uphold and glorify. From when she went looking for expunged records and found a cautionary story about what happens to those that run away, conveniently leaving out that he had a family and Sahelians never managed to do anything much to it.

Cat provided the environment for Akua to fight this battle in, but if one of them was doing this for love of the other... well, both, either or neither, really. They both had their own reasons, and they both care.

And Cat's a dumbass, but it's okay, because she's not alone and doesn't have to do everything herself. She can just... count on people, and it'll be fine.

And Akua gets to wield Arsenal-grade artifice nasties, I'm guessing 😊

Simpli

They are billions~

[Burlyraven](#)

Hmm... I wonder if Akua's story is going to steady her hand, or play up that deep down, she does have a heart.

The Crows investing Half of themselves in this is concerning. It's a serious gamble, and more than a few stories come to mind in which one or the other halves is lost in some way. Also, the mention of countermeasures to the Night and Keter attacking when Night is strongest is *concerning*.

Frivolous

Burlyraven: I know I'm concerned.

This chapter strongly delineates the limits of Night and of Sve Noc. Sve Noc and the drow don't seem to have any resources besides Night. That's a terrible weakness. No versatility.

I think that, if Sve Noc has any foresight at all, they must mull over the necessity of diversifying their portfolio, so to speak. They need to learn to do other things besides Night. If they don't, sooner or later they're doomed.

I mean, the fact that Keter only took a few years to engineer a strong and reliable counter to all the facets of Night is alarming, considering Keter is mostly dumb and uncreative undead.

Compare that to the Alliance, which took many many living regular and Gifted and especially Named minds to generate the copperstones, the Unravelers, the Severance, and Quartered Seasons in the same span of time, even though living minds are better at learning and innovating.

It could be that Keter's being ruled by the Dead King, who doesn't have to argue or do diplomacy with anyone else, makes Keter's Research and Development more effective than the Alliance, which is made of multiple sovereign nations.

However, my feeling is that Keter has many more legs to its power base than the drow, who make do with Night alone.

[Liliet](#)

Alternatively, Sve Noc can lean into the overspecialization and count on having allies to have their back. Sometimes, weakness IS strength: "you could beat us if you wanted but it'd cost you all the support we can provide with our specialty so y'know do the math" + "well YEAH we arent really a danger to you. We're just really really useful 😊"

caoimhinh

"Keter is mostly dumb and uncreative undead"

No, it isn't.

That's judging a civilization by its armies. Which, while useful in some ways, it's not a way to accurately grasp.

Keter has the most accomplished sorcerer in Calernia's history, Neshamah.

It has countless bound souls and Revenants that have been exploited throughout the centuries, and it has *the Serenity*, which is filled with living people among whom very well might be thousands upon thousands of practitioners of magic who have been tutored in magic by Trismegistus himself through millennia.

Besides, I have been telling this for a while, Catherine and everyone else is so convinced Neshamah can't learn in a meaningful way or change his ways, yet we *consistently see him do that*. He *can* learn, we *have seen him* learn. Even if things like his personality might be stuck forever unchanging, he is constantly learning and improving. He is constantly creating new constructs of undead, new wards, new spells, and new artifacts. How is that not learning? How is

that just a bunch of dumb and uncreative undead? We even have confirmation of him experimenting and making trial runs for new runed artifacts and slowly improve them and developing new ways to fight Night.

It is undeniable that he learns.

Cat is just in denial or too stuck in the ways of what the Bard said about him being unable to grow.

The Dead King is not like any other undead, because he reached *Apotheosis* through his undeath, he is on a league of his own. Cat's thoughts on how Neshamah surely is simply letting the Revenants do the planning and strategizing and thus Keter "learns" through that indirect means, seems like she is oversimplifying things.

[*Liliet*](#)

Cat's splitting a very fine hair wrt Neshamah learning.

He can improve skills he already has. He can pick up tricks and invent schemes.

He cannot gain entirely new skills, cannot master new mindsets. All his gains are on top of his old mindset. Picking up a new profession entirely requires changing how you think in a way that he's not capable of. So he can do anything that "a really powerful and cunning sorcerer" can do, but a war general? He cannot become one, he can only ever be a really powerful and cunning sorcerer acting like one.

medailyfun

the majority of normal adult people can't master new mindsets...

[*Liliet*](#)

they can generally manage one per century im sure

but i mean no-one said it was a condition UNIQUE to undead

[*Liliet*](#)

> deep down, she does have a heart.

I mean, at this point, it's not even deep. The heart has been excavated and sewn to her sleeve, if still on the inside.

caoimhinh

Question 1: how is that Drow so dangerous, exactly?

Cat has been very vague about it, and how it is a leech, but why is it difficult to dispose of? Sve Noc should be able to rip the Night out of it and be done with it. So why aren't they capable of that?

Question 2: Did Akua run a sort of simulation of herself and Catherine through that Fae she found? I don't know if maybe I'm reading too much into it, but hear me out.

"I sought the fae. Through eerie paths. And I found what I wanted: one of them blinded by story, who would not see the knife until it was too late."

What story is that? A story of trust and treason, of course. It would mirror her relationship with Cat to a degree, where she is always walking the line between loyalty and betrayal, always standing on the edge of that moment of treason with a concealed knight, always deciding to not do it. Until she does.

"(Power) Through murder. As much the transgression as what is offered up. It would have been a... beginning. Once I devoured that strength, it would have been easier to gain more."

Yet Akua refused to walk that line, to the point that even in the parallelism and simulation story that the Fae would be walking to fall victim of Akua, she failed to carry on with it.

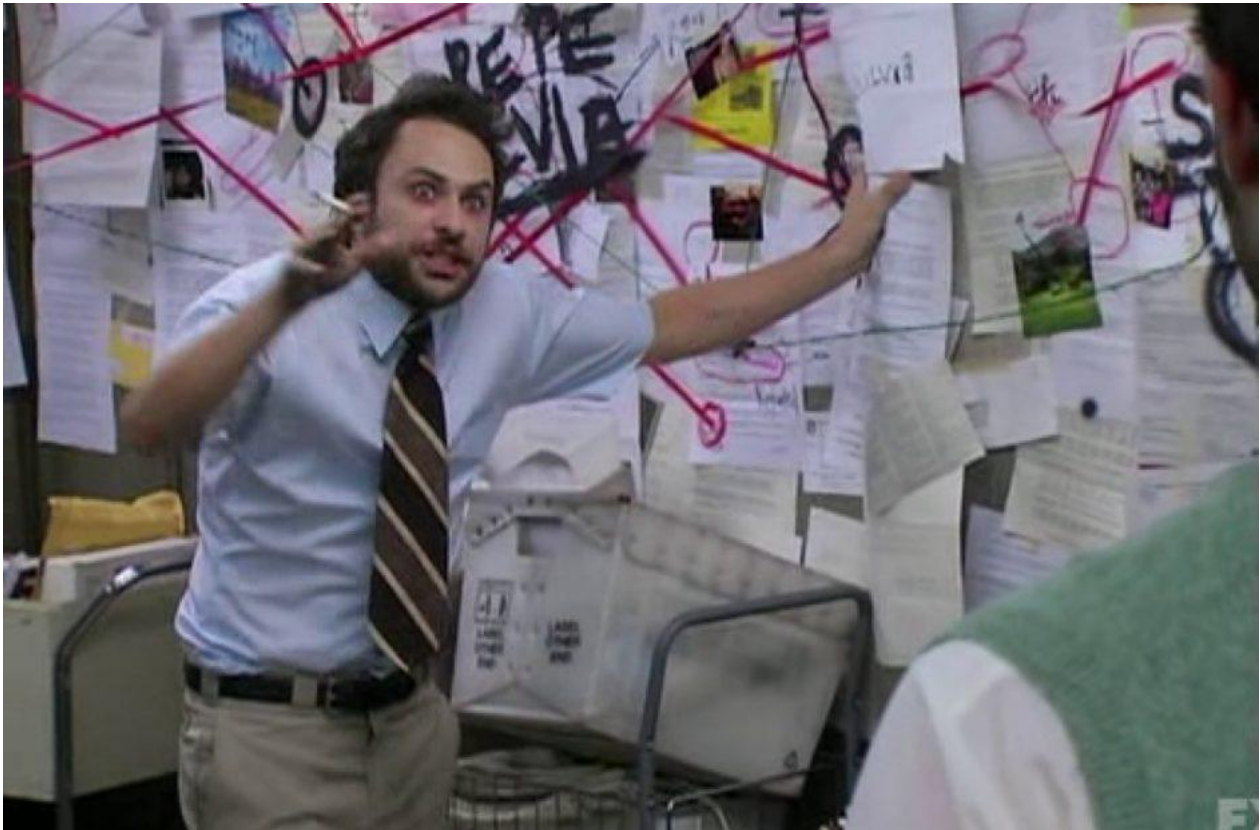
"Your way gives nothing. I came back empty-handed."

She gains nothing from remaining loyal, she obtains no new strength, no sudden source of power. Nothing, except having made the choice. And maybe keeping what she now has.

This phrase picks my interest:

"It wasn't you. So do not gloat, even where you think I cannot see. It wasn't you at all, Catherine."

What exactly is she talking about here?



agumentic

That it wasn't Catherine's teachings or actions that stopped her from killing that fae.

[Liliet](#)

What agumentic said. Akua stepped back from killing because of memories of her father, and Catherine had only the most indirect relation to it – that of encouraging her to rediscover her own emotions and her own self and act on it. She didn't do it for Catherine's sake, to make Catherine like her, because of what Catherine said or anything like that. She would do it to spite Catherine, but her own unrelated sentiment stopped her.

Of course, that was just as planned™ on Catherine's part, but it's still significant for Akua that as far as Power of Love involved goes, hers was her for her family, not for Cat.

[Adrian_V](#)

About the Drow there could be many reasons but my guess is that divinity comes with rules and if they break them they will be in deep shit, for example it may be a case of hoist by their own petard in that he isn't doing anything against their teachings and if they remove him without reason or pretext (and even then it would need to be a good one) there could be consequences.

Plus he could be effective and losing him without a replacement when they already lost 3 generals could be too dangerous.

Andrew Smith

Also like Cat said the Night was already a power of taking from others so more than most other kind of powers it would be able to change the face of the greatest holder of it and then they took in Winter a power that straight up is used to having different faces in charge of it

Big I

I really hope Cat doesn't lose this battle.

Xinci

Hm, so it seems like Cat has gotten Akua to go down the new growth route, which I presume inevitably will be rife with strife and struggle and involve Akua cutting ties/and or being hurt herself to achieve it(much in the same way Cat too has self-mutilated to achieve her goals).

Well unsurprisingly Sve's maladaptive allocation style is getting them exterminated. It isn't adapted in any way for a non-closed system where its the sole methodology. The sigils betting methods may act as a manner of diversification but it is slow forming. A nice thing in peace or for petty raids, but not in a methodological arms race between frameworks. Such organization is nice but the bedrock of information transfer isnt there to improve every group of drow for every iteration. A chance was had to reform the allocation methods of secrets or at least generation of secrets to aid in larger cooperative and aid the Drow in emergently self organizing specialized groups specializing against against specific foes(much in the way the Longstriders were specialized against Mighty). But this wasnt done so now they suffer.

[Liliet](#)

> A chance was had to reform the allocation methods of secrets or at least generation of secrets to aid in larger cooperative and aid the Drow in emergently self organizing specialized groups specializing against against specific foes(much in the way the Longstriders were specialized against Mighty). But this wasnt done so now they suffer.

What do you mean?

Darkening

The drow have all sorts of different specialties, that's the point of the different generals that all have their own combat

styles for their armies and tribes. Sve Noc even says, the secrets weren't all countered at once, it's a process where every battle a few more get more neutralized. The problem is that they don't have traditional magic, just night, so all their power stems from one source. Given time, they could probably develop more mundane tactics that would let them fight without leaning on Night so much, but that's a process that would take experienced commanders and years of training, which is not exactly readily available while fighting an extinction war for a couple years.

Sinead

You should give them the grace then that they never left a =n extinction war since the Sisters struck their bargain with Below.

It was just a civil war then.

I suspect that they used to have sorcery, but Secrets of Night system converts the spells to Night secrets. That's the only way I can think of for Secrets to be wide spread, when most drow are killed for their knowledge instead of teaching and training. The Secrets must have origin from some form of education system, and I don't think Night existed in even the proto form that Cat first encountered during the time of the Twilight Sages.

[Adrian_V](#)

Finally!! Who wants to bet on who's interude we see first and the POV used? In such a big battle they are necessary.

And since a loty has been talked about it i will just add (or re add since it is posible someone mentioned it already) Cat has made a weapon out of Akua, she is firmly in the redemption equals death path i think, if she survives the battle it will be a miracle.

My guess is she dies in a pivotal role/point and Cat gets her name finally

Tom

If EE really wants to troll us, he could do the next chapter with a perspective from someone in the group going north to the bridge XD

[Adrian_V](#)

PD: someone should link the post in reddit if everyone really has moved there...me sad T_T

[Liliet](#)

<https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

Sinead

I wonder if Sve Noc could work around the nature of Winter being "ever changing faces" by just cycling between the two of them as the predominant face of Night? I think as deities, they have enough base archetypes split between them, that an internal cycle would resolve the issue.

Of course, they need to correct for the issue of their First General, and I would think that if Cat pulls through on this, you may see Sve Noc gaining more personal power and influence to deal with their First General. The majority of the Drow is in the North, but Losara (Cat's attempt at a formal priesthood) is all in the south. So a consolidation of power here may also lead to a consolidation of power within her new system. If she cedes the mantle of First Under Night (my guess is that it will go to Ivah) then it could be that the drow will head North over the winter to refortify the Duskwood.

What I wonder is if Sve Noc will diversify in terms of allowing non-Drow Sigils to form. I like Cat wielding Night. It will be a shame if she loses it.

medailyfun

yeah, Sve Noc can accept goblins to the Night, greatly expanding the possibilities

nomedeplume

Cat's comments on Praes recall the old line about the Romans, "they created a wasteland, and called it peace."

Could mean she's headed towards a name like "Peacemaker." Still a name sworn to below, as she's perfectly willing to burn a nation, if it means peace in the future.

[sivarajan](#)

"Ours is the business of empire, and what a peace we will make." (From Ye Mighty.)

Daniel E

This feels like exactly the kind of fight that Juniper could make or break, and yet she remains sidelined. Like the loss of the most brilliant strategic mind of a generation has just been completely shrugged off. At this point, I don't think her making a return will matter in the slightest, given how casually she has been written off.

[Liliet](#)

They have a lot of good strategic minds, and it feels like another brilliant one just wouldn't change a lot on the scale of this battle. It'll be made or broken by Named on both sides, and that really isn't Juniper's song and dance.

Sinead

Also Juniper was behind a lot of this approach, so there could be elements of her work in here.

I think Juniper will be part of "...with a sword if necessary." , since her arc started out with loyalty to the Empire.

[Liliet](#)

More like Juniper was loyal to the Legions and Black 😊 she's not even going anywhere from that!

Sinead

True. I was thinking of Marchford where Juniper has demands from Cat they will not march against the Empire (she didn't want to fight her mother at the time, but I think just the principle mattered to her too).

Now though... she may have plans already available when Cat comes stating that they need to march on Praes.

Cue thought train going fully off the rails, Ozzy Osbourne blazing loudly

I just like the idea of Cat expecting to have another grueling war, and then Juniper slams down a comprehensive invasion plan of Praes because she was left to her own devices and wants to get back at the Tower for one betrayal too many.

Cue an interlude or two for the other factions to reflect on the incoming invasion, and then back to Cat wondering if Amadeus ever found himself utterly terrified by General Grem.

Instead of Cat climbing the Tower, Callow's First Army gains the cognomen "Victorius" as they tear down the Tower, may it never be raised again.

[Liliet](#)

YESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

(Also, let me check that conversation now...)

> "I will not see the Fifteenth turn on the Empire while I breathe," Juniper said and her voice was like bedstone.

...

> "I'm not rebelling," I told her, meeting her eyes. "I'm not asking you to fight your mother, Juniper. Or you your family, Aisha. But things can't continue as they've gone on. Not anymore. Not after all the lines they've crossed."

...right, Catherine was talking about Istrid, Juniper about the Empire. You're right!

...

and then I kept reading because I love that scene

> And just like that, there was only one. Juniper was close, had been this whole time, but she'd not moved in a while. She came closer to me, spine straight but shoulders tight.

>
> "Swear to me, Catherine," she said hoarsely. "Not my mother. Not any of them. That they won't be the enemy."

>
> "I swear," I told her, and offered my arm.

...we were both right lmao

Sinead

Huh, violent agreement.

(If you wonder why I don't just hit like on things, my WordPress account formed via this comment section exists, but I've ended in a Catch 22 trying to resolve it. It's the damndest thing).

[Liliet](#)

I have a principle to not track who ISN'T pressing like or something like that as a principle lmao that sounds like a good way to create drama out of absolutely nothing and some badly working internet or something

Sinead

True. I was more reflecting on the fact that the "like" system is more important in a comment section like WordPress due to the visual space taken up by every comment. It's something I notice

every time I end up chiming in with a two word piece.

Then again, I could just stop viewing this site on mobile and that would solve nearly all my problems...

[Liliet](#)

...I'm not viewing it on mobile, that could be making a difference, yes XD

Lucy Rose

I feel like this is the beginning of a Pattern of 3. If the Dead King unveils a secret weapon and by treachery turns this into a decisive loss, then the Grand Alliance will be hunted and fleeing with no allies to turn to. That sets them up for a direct march into Keter, with no options available but to take the fight to him. If they fight there, they get rebuffed but manage to deal blows to the dead forces as well, for a draw. Then, they sweep into the capital in a last ditch effort, under cover of night. They storm the castle, but become surrounded. As the sun rises, all those allies who previously turned from them, the dwarves, the goblins, etc, flood into the scene and rescue the Grand Alliance, and the fight is taken straight to the Throne where the Dead King is beheaded in a decisive victory.

[Liliet](#)

> I feel like this is the beginning of a Pattern of 3.

It's not.

If they lose there, they'll be wiped out. There is no recovery. They'll lose the army, then they'll lose the defensive lines, then they'll lose the war. Dwarves won't interfere, the drow are losing too. This is legitimately the ONLY chance. If they lose they won't HAVE an army to invade Keter with. Not a sufficiently big one. And they can't do shit there without a sufficiently big one.

This loss will send them into a death spiral. DK knows his shit. He's not setting them up for a victory with any defeat he ever inflicts.

Not to mention, a Pattern of 3 is between two specific people who are rivals. Not between factions. It just doesn't work like that.

Sinead

Since Creation is a giant philosophical question, I always read patterns of 3 as the beats in a specific argument, the fact that it's "loss draw victory" or "victory draw defeat" is more to do

with the fact that the villains that make it through the claimant stage are usually rising a high in a place with little resistance until a Hero arises (the reason that Tariq and Laurence were notable is that they basically did a zero tolerance policy on any villain rising, forcing even those that did survive them to keep on the down low. Hell, one can look at their time as an example of what a form of the Accords could achieve. Similar to Malicia and Amadeus keeping Heroes in line to keep their version of the Peace.)

I would think that “loss draw victory” is more to do with the fact that letting an opponet survive allows them to be shaped into something specifically aimed to defeat you rather than anything specific to “Heroic narrative”. It’s just that Above had it’s argument all laid out in the beginning, while Below keeps chucking stuff at the wall to see what sticks.

aran

She didn’t leave to get more power, but to get a more lesbian haircut; oh my~

aran

Praes has failed, I could have said. Or, why would you want to? Or, why does your mother still rule you?

I like that we see the rejected dialogue options

Interlude: Blood

“Honour is neither reputation nor law. It cannot be borrowed or bought, bent or bargained with, for it comes from a place that is beyond deception. Fidelity to virtue belongs only to yourself and the Gods, and needs no other witness.”

– Extract from the book ‘Reflections’ by Farah Isbili, second Holy Seljun of Levant

The roar shook the sky, trembling through the starlit dark and down the bones of all who heard it. Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder’s Blood, Lord of Malaga, grit his teeth.

“Binders to the bastion,” he shouted over the noise. “That is where the beorns will strike first.”

He met the gazes of the last of the practitioners that had come north with his father, feeling a pang of pain at the absences he saw in their ranks. Razin had never loved the binders, envious of the talent he had been born without, but he'd grown on the same grounds as them. Most he'd known by name, and a few of the younger he'd gone on skirmishes with. Few were left, and fewer with every battle.

"Do not try to destroy them," he reminded his mages. "Sweep them off the walls as quickly as possible, that is all."

Destruction was better left to the Lanterns or warriors trained in the use of pitch and flame, Razin and his captains had learned. The binders were weaker in traditional offensive spellcraft than Callowan and Proceran mages, but their blood-bound spirits were able to physically push back Keter's monsters in ways that other sorcerers could only dream of.

"We will return victorious, lord, or take the short path home," Ganiya Hundred-Ghost, eldest of the remaining binders, solemnly promised.

Razin sharply nodded.

"Honour to Levant," he said.

"Honour to the Blood," Ganiya fervently replied.

They were gone within moments, fleet-footed on the stone as they sped towards the bastion where the first of the enemy dead would reach the top of the walls. Razin's sworn sword kept close around him, and the Lantern that had taken oath to protect him for the battle as well, as he went to the edge of the eastern rampart and looked over. The dead were coming in waves, he thought, eyes narrowing as the moonlight revealed the abominations of bone scaling sheer cliffs. The skeletons were many but also slow and they would not reach the wall for a long time. It was the monsters scaling the cliff that would draw first blood, the massive bear-like abomination called beorns that were clawing their way up. Inside their bellies they held companies of lesser dead which they vomited before rampaging, and for that reason it was the great bastion to Razin's north they would target.

They'd want flat grounds and room to spew out their soldiers, to create a beachhead atop the walls. Keter usually preferred taking ground than lives, early in fight, knowing it could afford the losses to get into a superior position before the fighting became heavy. It also meant that Razin Tanja had been entirely aware, even if many of his captains had not been, that the warriors he had sent to guard the bastion were not being rewarded with hours by fires in a place where the wind did not bite too deep. The warriors in the bastion were going to die. Perhaps not all of them, but most. The Lord of Malaga had made his decision with

that knowledge in the back of his head, whispering. And of the three captains regularly commanded warriors in the bastion, he had chosen one who was of his great supporters and two who were not. His loyal captain he had sent to obscure his intention, should men think on this later, and now that decision was like ash in his mouth for it was that man who now held the bastion. This, he suspected, would follow him in his dreams for months to come.

It had been easier, back when Razin still believed war to be a glorious thing.

A game of daring and cleverness that the sharp stakes only further gilded. That was the way it was, in the old stories, with the victors returning home covered in loot and honour and the defeated slunk away to lick their wounds until a chance to even the score came. Warriors died but they died in honour, proving their worth, and the deeds done in war made them immortal – perhaps not worthy of the distinction of being added to the Rolls, but kept alive past the end of flesh through stories and songs. Razin had believed in this, he'd begun to realize, much like a man dying of thirst would believe that beyond the hill lay a river. Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood had not a speck of the sorcery that had made his line famous: war had been the only way he was ever going to be able to distinguish himself, make up for the lack he'd been born with.

And so Razin had embraced the ways of blood and steel, devoted himself wholeheartedly. He'd practiced with the blade until his palms bled and bones ached, he'd learned to move captains with words and sung the praises of the honourable ways of the Dominion of Levant. Of their inherent savage virtue, born of stripping away all the pretty lies and false righteousness the nations around Levant coated their own ways in.

Then he'd watched Careful Yannu kill his father in an honour duel, and it was like scales had been ripped off of his eyes.

"My lord," one of his men quietly said, shaking him out of his thoughts. "We must move. We have stayed in the same place for too long, Revenants might come for your head."

Razin gave the horrors below one last look, hand resting against the pommel of his sword. They'd be here before too long.

"We will do our part," the Lord of Malaga murmured. "On my honour."

—

The vulture had broken itself forcing its way through the wards that protected the skies above Hainaut, but it had gone through.

Though it was in freefall, the necromantic abomination no longer animated, it had still served the Dead King's purpose with success: on the creature's back, Tariq glimpsed the shape of a Revenant huddling close. It had infiltrated the city, and when it reached the ground would no doubt begin to wreak havoc. The Grey Pilgrim watched the vulture drop like a stone for a heartbeat, then lengthened his stride. The Enemy would not have risked one of the Scourges so carelessly, but there were no Revenants that were not dangerous. Even one whose Bestowal had been weak whilst they lived would still be able to cause a great deal of chaos and death, if left unchecked.

Tariq let the pull of chance guide his path through the city, passing by the orderly ranks of Callowan companies heading for the gates and bands of haphazard fantassins being exhorted to move quicker by their officers. Few saw him, for he did not care to be seen. The old man's face tightened as the Ophanim whispered in his ear, warning him that he would not arrive in time. He'd been close to where the vulture and Revenant were to fall, but not quite close enough. He was two blocks away when the large shape smashed into a house with a thunderous crash, though not so far that he could not discern that the Revenant had nimbly leapt away before the impact. So where had it gone?

"Rooftops, do you think?" he asked his old friends.

The Ophanim murmured their agreement.

"The furtive sort always take to the rooftops," Tariq complained. "It is unkind. My knees aren't what they used to be."

A passage through the Ways would allow him to close the distance, but also reveal his presence – most Revenants could sense the touch of Twilight on Creation. He would have to move the old-fashioned way. Tariq went through the house that had been smashed, using the ruin as a path to the roof, and before long he was on rough tiles and cocking a white eyebrow at his surroundings. He'd found the cloaked silhouette almost instantly, skittering atop another roof as it was, but not only had it yet to notice him it was also... a streak of fire coming from down in the street interrupted his thoughts, and promptly solved the mystery of why the Revenant had been paying closer attention to the streets below than its immediate surroundings.

The Revenant ducked under the flame, proving it had kept exceptional reflexes even in death.

The mage that'd tossed a spell at the cloaked Revenant cursed loudly in High Tyrian, warning the two warriors by her side that they were going to have a fight. Tariq moved silently across rooftops as the Revenant hesitated for a moment then leapt down, moving in a streak of speed. Not so swift that one of the two warriors – boys, he now discerned – did not move between it and

the mage with a raised shield, forcing it back with a measured swing of his sword. The other boy darted forward as the Revenant drew back. A straight-edge sword was swung out, but the dead Bestowed revealed a blade of its own in a glimmer of moonlight on metal and caught it.

"Incise," the Page disdainfully said, adjusting his blow and shattering the Revenant's sword.

It had not been simple strength, Tariq caught, but instead precision. With the point of his blade, the Page had struck at the weakest point of the sword wielded by the undead and struck it with all his might. An adjustment done in a fraction of a moment, too. Impressive, for one his age. But he was still green. Having moved behind the Revenant, hidden by the shadow of a tall chimney, the Pilgrim watched as the Revenant abandoned the blade and simply slugged the young Proceran in the face with inhuman strength. The Page rocked back, and when a knife flicked out in the Revenant's other hand came close to getting his throat cut – the Squire, stepped in once more, taking the blow on his shield and forcing back the Revenant.

The Apprentice, with a triumphant cry, landed a spell on the cloaked figure's side: a streak of blue flame ate up the entire cloak in second, forcing the Revenant to throw it away even as the Squire closed distance and battered him down with strikes of his shield. Though it was a brutal and inelegant method, Tariq noted that it succeeded at putting the Revenant on the ground and keeping it there.

"Come on, Gaetan," the Squire hissed. "I don't have anything that can-"

"Incise," the Page panted out angrily, severing the Revenant's head.

Sharpness and precision, Tariq decided. That was the nature of the aspect. The Ophanim murmured what their own sight revealed, which had him cocking an eyebrow. 'Incise', it seemed, would be significantly stronger when dealing wounds than killing blows. There was a sense of frivolity to it, of defiance. The Page's nose was bloody, and he would likely get a black eye out of this if he wasn't healed. The Pilgrim, after a moment, decided not to reveal himself. A black eye was always a good lesson, for a young Bestowed, and he would not rob them of the pleasure of their victory by revealing he'd watched over them as they won it. He had, after all, been entirely unneeded here.

Providence pulled at Tariq's feet and he slipped away in the dark, feeling a call towards the east. The old man's lips tightened. That was the wall, he knew, that was held by his countrymen.

The Grey Pilgrim took back to the streets, fleet of foot and clad in dusk.

—

He turned aside the skeleton's sword with his buckler, letting it scrabble against the hide-covered wood, and placed his strike: the blade ripped into the bone of the neck, severing the spine after two wild hacks. The skeleton collapsed, necromancy unmade, and Razin Tanja breathed out. He did not have long to rest, as a flicker of movement to the side had him ducking to avoid a well-thrown javelin that bit into the shield of the sworn sword to his right.

"Forward," the Lord of Malaga shouted, "forward for Levant!"

A roar answered as the last of the dead the beorns had spat out were driven back from the bastion by a tightening shield wall, those that weren't smashed instead pushed off the edge so that might be broken by the fall. It was a small, petty victory but the warriors had won it and they shouted themselves hoarse afterwards. Razin raised his blade, claiming his own share of the acclaim, but then praised Captain Alezon – who'd held the bastion until reinforcements could arrive, and died holding to that duty. Razin had liked the man, counted him almost as a friend. And he had sent him here to die. Sometimes he wondered if he was truly better than what he wanted to replace, but when he did the searing clarity of that night after the Graveyard came back to him.

How clear it had been, in that moment, that the Blood were no longer what they had been meant to be. How much difference was there really, between the red-handed sons and daughters of the Blood and the rapacious princes their sacred ancestors had risen in rebellion to drive out? With the Procerans gone the blades had not been sheathed. They'd just turned them on each other instead. Like dogs in a too-small kennel, snapping and snarling. It must end, Razin had realized, or they would ruin their homes and the Dominion with it. Yet for all that he had tried to embrace this truth, the practice of it had been... difficult. Dreams were always prettier before they were dragged to the ground, where all the mud of practicalities sullied them.

Razin Tanja had not become Lord of Malaga – the first ever elected away from ancient Tanja grounds, through a trick of procedure – without incurring debts and troubles, which now both had to be settled. There were captains in his service who would not hear of straying from the old ways, of making pacts of peace and ending raids when they returned home, and he could not yet afford to lose their support. His humiliating defeat had Sarcella, even if dealt by the hand of the Black Queen herself, remained a scar on his reputation. And though some here and at

home had well received the announcement of his betrothal to Aquiline Osená, others were openly dubious.

Tartessos and Malaga had long fought over wealthy territories laying between them, he had been reminded, what was now to be of them? What of the deaths come of the last wars, must they go forever unavenged? There was no honour in these surrenders, warriors grumbled.

Aquiline had admitted to him in private that some of her captains had been mutinous over the notion as well, in no small part because as long as she had been unwed her hand in marriage had been considered the greatest prize that a captain in the service of the Osená might hope to win. Worse, the most ardent supporters of their union tended to be captains who backed the marriage because it would secure the southern border of the Osená and allow them to send their full might to war against the Ifriqui of Vaccei, their old enemies of the Brigand's Blood. Sometimes it felt like every step forward they took was followed by two steps back. Yet Razin knew nothing but rain came from throwing curses at the sky, and so he used what he had at hand: the war. It was ugly work, but Razin and Aquiline traded blood for hope.

The captains that would never bend were granted the honour of leading vanguards, men and women more farsighted raised to replace them. With steel and deeds they bound warriors to them, by oaths and debts and the hard companionship of those sharing battle, and inch by inch they had gained ground. Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei would be an enemy so long as she lived, but she was old and her heir Moro amenable to a peace. Careful Yannu loomed tall over them all, undefeated in honour duels, but for all that the older man was accruing honours like speaking for Levant at the Arsenal, he had no allies beyond his own kin. And though they were all wary of the Holy Seljun, beyond Wazim Isbili lay a greater power still. The Peregrine smiled upon their efforts, his approval as the blessing of the pilgrim's star.

And still it was damned ugly work, trying to move Levant. It cost too much blood, and Razin almost missed the days when the scales had been over his eyes and he'd still believed there had been glory in sending men to die.

"Prepare yourselves," Razin said. "It will be a long night, and there are many victories yet to claim."

Already he could see a beorn attacking positions to the south of the bastion, aiming perhaps not to take the wall but instead to spew out its load of soldiers in the city itself, and he could only hope that Aquiline would send the Lanterns there on time. His binders were resting and the priests from Procer had yet to arrive, save for the healers that were already preparing beds for the wounded in the nearby barracks. As for himself, he would stay here until the next batches of pitch arrived at least. Longer

than that would be risking – a man in shoddy hide armour, barefoot and armed with a great sword, landed in a roll among the warriors nearest to the edge.

“Good evening,” the Drake grinned.

—

The Barrow Sword squinted.

“That’s not the Pale Knight,” he finally said.

“Your wisdom is peerless,” the Vagrant Spear solemnly replied.

Ishaq rolled his eyes. Sidonia was not entirely unpleasant, for one of the Blood, but she seemed to believe it her oathsworn duty to needle him at every opportunity.

“It’s just the Drake,” the Berserker said. “We can take him.”

Of that Ishaq was not so certain, but he would not outright disagree. The three of them were strong in close quarters, and not without talents that would allow them to stem the tide of that Scourge’s healing. More than that, the last two members of his band of five had teeth beyond what mere blades could bring to bear.

“Um,” the Harrowed Witch hesitantly said. “Shouldn’t we... do something? He’s killing soldiers.”

The Drake had wasted no time in beginning to cut up anyone that moved around him, it was true. With that greatsword of his he smashed through shields and blades alike, slaughtering with ease even as warriors kept trying to close around him on all sides so he’d not have room to swing the large blade. Useless, when the Scourge was probably capable of shattering a shield with a kick anyway. It was like ants trying to wrestle a lizard.

“We are meant to handle the Axeman,” the Blessed Artificer regretfully said. “If we spend ourselves against another, there will be a gap in the defences.”

“He’s a Scourge,” Sidonia grunted. “Killing him is still a win. We should strike.”

The Berserker nodded in fervent agreement. Sentiment was in favour, Ishaq decided, but should he give the order? Much as he disliked to admit it, he probably couldn’t afford to let the lordling ruling Malaga get himself killed. It would deal a hard blow to the morale of the Tanja warriors, and the Black Queen would have Ishaq’s hide for it. On the other hand, letting Tanja warriors die would win him favour with the Grave Binder – who the Binder’s Blood despised – and even if he intervened there was no guarantee that the young man would honour him for it. Blood only

ever felt the need to owe debts to Blood, like honour was a drink only they could partake of. *It'd be bad tactics to do nothing*, Ishaq finally decided.

"We strike," the Barrow Sword said. "As was planned."

He half-expected the Artificer to argue with him, but though she looked displeased she refrained. Perhaps she was sensing her opinion was not shared by most. No challenge was offered, though, so Ishaq rose from his crouch and took the lead. Sidonia was quicker on the run, but also a lot more fragile. The ancient armour of bronze around him moved without a sound, smooth as if oiled from enchantments older than he dared to imagine, and the Barrow Sword unsheathed Pinon. The ancient blade hummed, tasting of the death in the air, and without a word Ishaq leapt from the rooftop to the edge of the rampart. From the corner of his eye he saw a warrior thrown in the air, missing an arm as she screamed in pain. The Drake was merciless.

As he began to push his way through the throng of warriors he heard the Spear and the Berserker land behind him, Zoe snarling at the Malagans to get out of her way. Beyond the ring of shields he glimpsed binder-magic at work, creatures of dirt and ash trying to drive back the Scourge, but it was a bad match. The Drake was both strong and difficult to kill, the spirits did little but rip up flesh that healed within a heartbeat and they were failing at pushing him over the edge. Now, though, he was here. Steps measured as he advanced the Barrow Sword breathed deep of the evening air. Ah, opportunity. Was there ever anything that tasted sweeter? A spirit-wyvern was cut in half, the blade that did it biting shallow of the stone beneath them, and the Drake slunk out. Grinning wildly, his hide armour already tatters, the Revenant glance at Ishaq curiously.

"Villain?" he asked.

It must be the beard, Ishaq decided. Surely he did not look *that* villainous?

"You wound me, friend," the Barrow Sword smiled, tapping his ancient blade against his heart.

Pinon hummed at the touch, thirsty beast that she was.

"That's the plan," the Drake agreed, darting forward.

Ishaq raised his sword, but the speed had been enough that the Revenant might have startled him into an unwise parry if this hadn't been what he was after in the first place.

"*Honour to the Blood*," the Vagrant Spear gleefully howled, smashing into the Drake's side.

Light roiled and screamed as she severed an arm, but the Revenant only laughed – abandoning his greatsword, he caught his own limb and threw it at her face as a fresh one grew anew. Ishaq, though was not intending to just stay and watch. Sidonia was forced back by a wild swing of the greatsword, retreating smoothly with both hands on her spear, and before the backswing could return Ishaq closed the distance. The Revenant struck at his armour but the ancient bronze mail took it without flinching, and the mistake allowed him to get a good cut of his own in: across the face, through one eye and the mouth. The Drake was unmoved but Ishaq stayed in close, elbowing the wrist trying to get the greatsword around him and hammering forehead to forehead to drive the Revenant back.

Which he did, eyes wild as he put fingers to his already-healing wound.

“That sword’s not Dominion work,” the Drake coldly said.

Pinon sang, devouring the last bits of soul it’d managed to pull away from the Dead King’s bindings.

“There are all sorts of treasures in barrows, if one has the nerve to take them up,” Ishaq smiled.

Not that he would have been able to put his sword down now, even should he wish to.

“Well,” the Drake said, “it’ll make this a little interesting, at least.”

The Malagan warriors had withdraw, wisely, though more likely it was because to their eyes the affair looked closed enough to an honour duel. Those were not interfered with without incurring great shame, and did Ishaq’s entire homeland not just *quake* at the very shadow of shame? Like hound on a leash, only so enamoured of the prison they sang its praises in song. He glanced at Sidonia, who nodded back, and as one they struck. The Drake howled in laughter, and the dance began anew. The Scourge was fast and strong, nimbler with that monstrous sword than he had any right to be, but they were neither of them unskilled. The Vagrant Spear feigned a low bit only to snake a hit at the throat, forcing the Drake to bat it away, and without batting an eye Ishaq slashed at the undead’s back.

The flesh grew back. The soul did not, and Pinon sang with glee. It liked taking from souls already claimed best, preferring Binds and Revenants to the living.

Ishaq withdrew, though not quite quickly enough for his face to be spared the edge of the returning greatsword. A thick cut across the cheek, dripping blood against the edge of his mouth. He swallow a lick, smiling, and saw fury bloom in the Scourge’s

eyes. It did not like losing parts of itself, no matter how small they might be.

"That'll be enough, children," the Drake said. "I'm being told to stop playing."

And behind him, as if summoned, the hulking shape of a beorn climbed over the ledge and looked down at them through a gaping maw, roaring out.

"You have a bear," the Barrow Sword, conceded. "But we have *her*."

He juttet a thumb behind him, where the Berserker was slowly advancing. Her body was jerking wildly, eyes turned bloodshot and hair looking like it'd been shot through with thorns. Muscles grew, and as her face turned monstrous the Berserker hacked out a breath.

"**Rage**," she snarled.

The beorn swatted at her, but she caught the paw with the flat of her blade. Both wavered, for a moment, before she smashed the great limb into the floor with a triumphant howl. The Drake looked a little unnerved, and Ishaq frankly couldn't blame him. Zoe wasn't particularly able to tell friends from foe in that state and shaking her out of it tended to be... difficult.

"I always get the worst assignment," the Drake sighed. "Would it kill that prick in his fancy armour to take the vanguard, one of these days?"

"I sympathize," Ishaq smiled. "Please, friend, allow me to relieve you of your burdens."

The Barrow Sword moved, and the Vagrant Spear with him.

The dance resumed.

—

It was a good fight, Sidonia thought as she pricked the Drake's neck and send Light howling into his body.

Though bones snapped and flesh burned, the Revenant swatted at her and she was forced to withdraw a few steps until the Barrow Sword commanded their foe's attention. It was a fight worthy of being added to the Rolls, even though Ishaq was one Below's and so sundered from honour. The Berserker was ripping into the beorn that'd come up over the ledge, now with her bare hands since she had used her sword to nail shut the beast's maw, which left the two of them room to handle the Drake properly. The abomination was still far from death, but then they had yet to reveal their own killing strokes. The Scourges always had surprises, and so their opponents must have some as well.

They went another round with death, this time Ishaq taking the lead. The Drake was wary of the Barrow Sword's blade, which though grave-goods and so proscribed seemed particularly suited to slaying Revenants. Ishaq went forward aggressively as Sidonia circled around the back, baiting the Drake into a warning swing, and immediately the Vagrant Spear struck. Three quick steps and extending her body like the spear she wielded, the tip of her steel finding the back of the Revenant's head – only he danced to the side, sword flicking back to bat away her spear before he caught Ishaq by the edge of his mail even as the Barrow Sword carved into his flank.

"That's all we'll get," the Drake said. "Get on with it."

With a heave, he threw the Barrow Sword upwards into the sky and turned to Sidonia with a hard grin. Half a heartbeat later a black-feathered arrow sprouted in Ishaq's throat as he still rose in the air. And as if a veil had been torn down, an undead drake was revealed. Batting its wings half a hundred feet away from the bastion, above the height of the fight. Atop the creature stood a single archer. *The Hawk*, Sidonia thought, and felt a glimmer of fear. She had no time for more, as the Drake was on her and he was not an opponent she could afford to be distracted against. Still, Zoe must be warned as much as she could be in the throes of her rage.

"The Hawk is here, Berserker," Sidonia shouted. "Watch-"

An arrow sprouted in the villainess forehead even as she threw the beorn off the wall, staggering her for a moment. *Ashen Gods*, the Vagrant Spear thought. Mere moments and already two of her band were dead. Only, instead of collapsing the Berserker screamed in utter fury before ripping off one of the crenels and tossing the large stone at the drake.

"Impressive," the Drake complimented even as he struck.

Sidonia let the worries sink away into nothing. She would not survive this, if she let the world command her attention. Eyes on the enemy's blade, she nimbly withdrew two steps and smiled. Yes, this was better. Her and the foe, nothing else. If death came through arrow, let it. She would end her life in honour. Breathing out, she circled again as the Revenant studied her. He feigned with a brusque step forward but she did not bite, choosing her angle. Right behind the shoulder there was a point where the Scourge could not even parry, the arm simply did not bend right. If she could get him to move... She rushed forward, earning a swing, and slid under the horizontal strike.

She rolled around the kick that followed, coming up in a crouch with the point of her spear upwards. At precisely the right angle Sidonia rose, and to the strike she added the secret Creation had bestowed upon her: that so long as you struck with the soul

instead of the hand, there was nothing you could not **Pierce**. The blade of her spear slid through the armpit, shearing through flesh and muscle and bone as blood sprayed and she bisected the Drake. Her spearhead emerged through the other armpit and she ripped it free as she stepped back, blood flecking her face paint. Only, she realized with dim horror, just enough had healed by the time she withdrew the spear that strings of skin had kept the severed parts together.

"Good blow," the Drake praised. "My turn."

The angle was wrong. She knew it even as she struck at the swing coming at her, trying to change how it would strike. Instead the spearhead scraped along the side of the greatsword, changing nothing, and with a swallowed scream she felt her enemy's edge cut halfway through her arm and outright through the shaft of her spear. The Drake snorted, socking her in the stomach and letting her stumble to the ground.

"The Tanja lord, Hawk," the Scourge called out. "I'm not in the mood for pursuit, get him now."

And from the corner of her eye, Sidonia saw the arrow fly. Finding a path through the press of bodies and shields with impossible accuracy, as if eager to snatch out the life of the Lord of Malaga. And it made it but an inch away from the Tanja's throat, before the sour-faced spectre of a young man became visible and unhinged his jaw to swallow it whole. The Harrowed Witch, Sidonia realized with dim relief. She rolled to her feet, bleeding but unbowed, and breathed out. She still had two aspects to use. Only the Drake seemed disinclined to allow her to use them, already on her and swinging. Barren Mercy, Sidonia thought. She would have to cushion the blow and she raised her hand...

The point of the Barrow Sword's eerie blade punched through the Drake's belly, Ishaq looking bloodless but very much alive.

"Gods but I *hate* dying," the Barrow Sword hissed. "Do you have any idea how many souls that sets me back?"

Well, Sidonia thought, rising to her feet with the two halves of her spear. Perhaps today's deeds would not have to be added to the Rolls by another's hand, after all.

—

Razin had known this fear before.

During the battle he had not yet known would be called the Princes' Graveyard, witnessing the Firstborn unleashed under cover of the dark. The way death had just... ensued, and they'd all been powerless to stop it for those few Bestowed with the privilege of doing otherwise by the Ashen Gods. It had stuck in

his throat then, that fear, and it did now even as his life was saved from some Revenant's murderous whim by the whim of some clever Bestowed using a ghost. And he knew, he did, that the intelligent decision made was to leave. To stay behind a shield wall and retreat out of sight, where the archer could not easily pursue beyond the city wards. And yet instead, Razin Tanja felt his jaw clench. *Is this the sum of us? We die in droves while the demigods settle the score, little more than an afterthought for either side.*

No, he thought. Enough.

"Warriors of Malaga," he shouted, "*shield wall.*"

They would not be ghosts before death even bothered to find them, spectators to the end of times. If they were to stand here tonight, it would be sword in hand. A shiver of surprise went through the warriors, of hesitation, but in the end he was the Lord of Malaga and this was war. The shields went up, sword rose.

"Binders, on my word," Razin said. "Knock that drake out of our fucking sky."

An arrow streaked towards him again, but the apparition swallowed it once more. Who did it belong to, he wondered? He would have to find out. Thanks were in order.

"Forward, sons and daughters of Levant," Razin Tanja screamed.

"The Blessed Artificer requests that you unleash the binders right before she acts, your lordship."

Razin almost stabbed the woman who'd just addressed him in surprise, as a heartbeat ago he would have been sure there was absolutely no one standing next to him. Ashen Gods, how long had she been there?

"And when is that?" the Lord of Malaga asked, steadying his breath.

"In..." the young woman addressing him trailed off, cocking her head to the side, "seven heartbeats now."

Cursing, Razin immediately ordered for the binders to strike even as his shield wall advanced. Bound spirits flew out, gathering substance from their surroundings as they did, and struck at the archer and the undead drake in a storm. On the ground the Revenant was carving at the shield wall, slicing through shields like butter, but with the Barrow Sword and the Vagrant Spear striking at him he could not afford more than a few idle blows and he was steadily losing ground. Now there was little but a strip at the edge of the bastion left to fight over, and there the monstrous Bestowed the other had brought was still raging. It

snatched the Revenant by the foot and started wildly smashing him around, the other two Bestowed backing away carefully.

"Gods, let this work," the young witch by his side murmured.

The sky lit up with Light. Streak after streak gathered in a circle, like ceiling made of spears, and every last one was angled down at the storm his binders had made. The spirits, he now grasped, had not been meant by his allies to kill the archer but to blind it.

Light shone until it blinded them all, and like a tide it fell.

—

The Grey Pilgrim's steps stuttered.

It was, Tariq thought, almost like getting a glimpse of years to come. The devastation visited unto the bastion seemed like a small thing, compared to the cheers of his countrymen defending it. The sky was filled with smoke and the Drake was still there, pinned to the ground by sorcery and swords and the bruising grip of the Berserker, but it was the living that had caught his eye. Razin Tanja, the young man that was half the hope he saw for his home rising above itself, reluctantly but honestly clasping arms with the Barrow Sword as he just had with the Vagrant Spear. Warriors roaring in approval. It was a different world, he thought. One he had not been born to.

He'd come here to take care of Levant, but Levant had taken care of itself.

It was pride he now felt welling up in his belly, but grief as well. There was still some aid he could lend, at least, and that much he would offer. The Pilgrim made his way through the crowd, warriors respectfully parting for him, and though offering smiles and nods where appropriate his stride led directly to the Drake. The Berserker had just pulped his stomach, but those eyes were wide open and aware. They also filled with fear, when he approached, as they should.

"Drake," Tariq gently smiled.

"No," the Revenant hissed. "Not you, I was so close I was—"

Light lashing out, the Grey Pilgrim pulled open a gate into Twilight beneath the Scourge. He struggled, but there was no avoiding this while bound. Screaming, convulsing, the Revenant fell into the gate and turned to ash. And this time, when the tooth flew out towards the edge of the rampart, Tariq was ready. He snatched it out of the air and the Ophanim hissed with anger at the abomination, their will joining his as he wove Light and tightened his grip. Dust flowed out from between his fingers,

slipping into the gate before he finally allowed it to close. The Pilgrim opened his mouth to speak into the hushed silence that'd followed, but it was a great roar that broke it instead.

The Berserker spasmed in pain, half a dozen arrows stuck in her body and three through her forehead, but from the monstrous shape she'd turned into she slowly turned back into a woman. The Ophanim whispered and Tariq's hands tightened.

"Is there anything we can do?"

Silence. There was no. The Berserker's rage ended, leaving only a mortal behind, and that mortal did not breathe. Only the wrath had kept her alive.

Keter always had the last word.

SpeckofStardust

One named dead so far
Lets see how many more will go.

[Liliet](#)

One Named for either one or two Scourges, depending on how that had gone for Hawk.

Anomandris

One.

Indrani needs an awesome sniper showdown against the hawk...

shikkarasu

Only on-screen this time >.<

Sinead

I think it would be hilarious to have the second to last Interlude (assuming a series of Interludes between all the national factions) to have Indrani just wandering in the background to just snipe the Hawk and then wander out of scene. Cut back to Cat's view and from her perspective, Indrani is late to arrival and doesn't explain what she was up to.

The scene can be more impressive than just one arrow, but it still makes the general point.

beleester

Two, don't forget the one the young heroes killed. We don't know if it was the Varlet or some other Revenant (the grey cloak fits, but not the part where it pulls a longsword), but definitely a Revenant of some sort.

KageLupus

There is zero chance that the first Revenant was a Scourge, or that the Varlet would have been caught out by three kids after Cat and the Pilgrim spent so much time planning out the exact band of five needed to take out the various Scourges. The power difference is just too vast for Providence to help them overcome.

That said, the shape of that group has very strong echoes to Cat and the early days of the Woe and I am very excited to see where it goes. A Callowan Squire paired up with an Apprentice and a support-themed Named, both from an historically enemy nation, forging bonds while overcoming life-or-death fights against enemy Named? Cat made a big splash in the narrative when she hit the scene and this feels like another ripple caused by it.

Earl of Purple

Apprentice is from Ashur, also known as the Thalassocracy, which is a Greek term for a state that was a major naval power. Callow, meanwhile, is landlocked (well, except the Wasaliti...). Levant and Callow are both known to have fought Procer, as have the Free Cities. Ashur is not known to have warred upon any Calernian nation outside a Crusade or the regular naval engagements with Nicae, who want a share of Ashur's trading income.

agumentic

Ashur probably also fought Procer, since one of their bigger foreign policy goals is ensuring the Principate does not become a maritime nation, which it tried a few times, I am sure.

Downzor

Ditto Praes, pretty sure I saw a reference to Ashurian fleets wrecking the attempts of a Dread Emperor to build a functional navy

jworks17

I think Cat actually took the cloak from the Varlet last time, so I doubt it's them

Anomandris

Ok, that was epic by Ishaq and Sidonia.
Rip Zoe though.

"You have a a bear. But we have her."

If you listen closely, you can hear Shoot to Thrill playing in the background as the Barrow Sword revives....

Levant seems to have lucked out a lot with Razin. Lad is level-headed as hell. He still seems to be focused on some of the wrong issues (the whole section on the duels, et. al.). If the last section isn't a foreboding note on Tariq, I don't know what is.

Matthew Wells

The Pilgrim's favorite hobbies are healing people and collecting death flags, so it'd be weird if we got a non-ominous POV from him.

Henry

That's his secret they can never establish a good dramatic time to kill you if you are constantly foreshadowing your inevitable demise. In that case everyone's expecting you to die constantly so the story has to keep you alive

Burnsy

Cat to the assembled villains in her pre-battle speech: "And remember! You get killed? Walk it off."

Shveiran

It is a true and tested method, after all.

Insanenoodlyguy

Tariq was quite sure when there was only a shape of "Will need to go north" that he and Saint would not survive the passing of the torch to a new generation. He's known for years he wouldn't see the end of this.

imagesbe

I have a feeling that we're going to be seeing a lot of epic deeds and great sacrifices in this battle. Perhaps more than we've ever seen in this story so far.

Villain or Hero, there will be a lot of heroism in this fight.

Sir Nil

Hawk forgot that barbarians only take half damage when Raging.

Itarion

This is older than that. 3.5 Frenzied Berzerker prestige class, 4th level feature Deathless Frenzy. While frenzied (rage+), the frenzied berzerker does not die from anything but death effects (target dies) until the frenzy ends.

Revenant

If only there were a bucket of water handy.

Razorfloss razor

Damn it Berserker this is why you always take Diehard and Raging Vitality to avoid this situation right here.

[Black Spiral Dancer](#)

Yet it would certainly feel even more impossible than things already are if people could take so many arrows (including into their HEADS) and shrug them off like nothing afterwards. I mean, if those two were her 2nd and 3rd aspects, then MAYBE, but even in D&D I have a hard time thinking of berserkers fighting without heads or with tens of arrows in their heads and living afterwards, although by the rules they could be...

Razorfloss razor

It's not about living though it. It's about surviving long enough until a healer can patch you back to the world of the living. If her rage was still up it would have been easy enough to pull everything out and close the holes although pulling them out while under rage would have been a separate thing entirely.

Daniel E

Granted, having an Aspect dedicated entirely to not dying via being shot in the head is incredibly situational, but I will be incredibly grateful the one time I need it.

naturalnuke

The aspect would be called Helmet and fuck all those princes who didn't think of using it

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how much of a hobby antagonizing archers is for you.

Matthew Wells

Pretty popular around here.

j

What happened to the Hawk?

WuseMajor

Hopefully vaporized by Light, but hard to say without the body.

Big I

I doubt it. We didn't see a body, and falling off a wyvern seems pretty much like falling off a cliff to me, we know how effective that is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The "falling off a cliff" thing is heroes only, Revenants don't get to invoke that. But they do have their own survival tropes...

Shveiran

Eh, it has never been mentioned in the novel, you are right about that, but it kinda is a bilateral trope. You think the Villain couldn't have survived X, but you never see the body, then surprise he comes back? It's not specific to cliffs, granted, but... it's kind of a general rule. You don't count your dead Named before beheading the bodies, it's all I'm saying.

Or maybe before throwing them in the Twilight Ways, in this case.

Konstantin von Karstein

And having the body burned. William thought beheading Cat was enough...

[Liliet](#)

William also tried to dismember her to be fair, the rest of the Woe drove him off.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from the fall, there's also that storm of Light, which could quite plausibly have taken her out as well.

ninegardens

Unknown. Sidona might have destroyed her... but I ain't putting bets on it. Drake on the other hand is goneburger.

Cloud_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)

Gone, reduced to atoms.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

He is no more. He has passed on. He is pushing up raises. he is beyond pining for the fjords.
He is dead bird.

[Liliet](#)

(she)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Drake is male, Hawk is female, but is the less certain kill. Both are potentially birds, though in a fantasy context Drake could also apply to a dragon variation (especially with that regeneration/self-res).

Miles

Wonder how this fight looks like on a chessboard

Black sacrifices a pawn, and then trades a Berserker for a Drake.

[doominator10](#)

Only white has a few million more pawns to spare...

Shveiran

Only one Drake thought

Big I

Shame about Berserker. Barrow Sword was awesome, definitely got some Iron Man vibes from him this chapter. I'm assuming his magic sword was made by the giants to kill dragons.

This chapter made me think of what the Tyrant told Cat about the groove she's leaving on Creation, of leaders making hard choices to serve a greater good. Razin sending his political opponents to die, the Iron Prince arresting or killing the fantassin captains. She's definitely having an impact.

And speaking of impacts, the Tanja soldiers reminded me of the Legions of Terror in this chapter, using discipline to counteract Named.

The Drake's last words made me think that the Scourges are fighting for their freedom, makes things more tragic. And it was interesting that he called the Hawk "the Hawk", since that's the name the Alliance gave them.

[Liliet](#)

Why do you think it's to kill dragons? It sounds like an anti-binder weapon to me.

Big I

Two reasons. One, in Colossal II Kreios told the Witch that dragons resurrected if killed, a soul sucking weapon seems to me to be a counter to that. Two, the Dominion is in territory that I assume used to be controlled by the giants, the Eighteen Cities.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but a sword just doesn't seem like it'd be effective against a dragon in any way.

Daniel E

Whatever happened to good old General Catastrophe? I would love to get his input.

[Liliet](#)

Sleeping, apparently.

Sinead

I could see it being a Dragonbane weapon if the sword is meant to make the wielder able to stand toe to toe with the Dragon. I could see this serving as the "Hero (old style term) sword falls from their grasp and they die". The Sword basically makes Ishaq a pseudo Drake.

Granted this theory is in part based on the assumption that instead of straight "souls" the sword cuts out and feeds on "vitality" or soul structure. This means more 'vital' opponent (one way to describe Dragons) feeds the sword a lot for the kill, but necromantic structures (which Binder spirits would fall under) are easier to eat, as they hold on their vitality more loosely.

Granted, this is me spitballing, but it could also be that undead were an issue in the 18 Cities era that required additional tools. (The current thought is that the Drakoi blood cursed Praes/Hungering Sands and that ratlings are descendants of those that ate the carcass, yes?) That puts

that conflict on the other side of the continent from the Levant.

[*Liliet*](#)

Dragons *fly*. Archers have been established as an effective anti-dragon measure in sufficient amounts and with sufficient story beats, but a sword against a dragon sounds *extremely* useless logistically.

naturalnuke

Ah but who really has more to fear between the dragon and the peasant 'with a sword'?

If you remember that epitaph

[*Liliet*](#)

An epitaph indeed.

agumentic

Not if you corner them in their lair they don't. Heroes can also fly themselves. Knights killed their fair share of dragons with lances and swords, I wouldn't count them out.

[*Liliet*](#)

True enough.

And I'm still not sure how "dragonslaying" follows from "loves to drink souls, particularly bound ones".

Sinead

I was about to respond with Sigurd as an example , but Fafnir couldn't fly. And I think that's the main story I could think of regarding sword slaying dragons (I think George generally uses a lance?) I guess my second spitballing theory also works.

I am curious as to what's in the soil of levant that they have the issue of barrows that no one else does, though.

[*Liliet*](#)

huh, yeah

maybe it's a post-triumphant thing? they're directly to the west of the lake she made

Sinead

That could work. It definitely seems to predate the Uprising of Levant, at least given the dates listed for some barrows.

However, Ishaq's armour is also made of bronze, which to my understanding would put it before the War of Chains with the Miezens, so over 300 years pre Triumphant. Since Pinion is so effective against grave spirits, that had to be an issue prior to any curse of hers.

Perhaps it's a relic of the Titan's Fall? They sought to bring back the dead, after all....

[*Liliet*](#)

That was the other option I was thinking about, yeah!

Matthew Wells

It might have something to do with funerary practices- maybe if you don't burn the bodies or sacrifice them they just come back spontaneously sometimes. Callowans wouldn't know about that because they always bury bodies in hallowed ground, which would be why Cat hasn't thought about it.

[*Liliet*](#)

@Matthew Wells: Procer also has random ancient barrows scattered across it, the Prince's Graveyard happened with Catherine's camp on top of one, and those don't come alive.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think the barrow at the Prince's graveyard was more of a place of worship than a tomb.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Um, classic trope? Never mind the armor, the story is "hero slays the dragon", and often features a sword. (Sometimes it's a spear, though.)

[*Liliet*](#)

Are those flying dragons?

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

In-world, I'm not sure it matters in the face of a story.

IRL mythology, almost certainly not, I'm pretty sure that in the West flying dragons were a late development. (And Eastern dragons were a different track altogether, more in the vein of sub-deities). E.g., I recall hearing that St. George's legend started as him slaying an unspecified "great beast", which in context would likely have been a wild boar.

Liliet

In-world, the stories had to have come from somewhere.

And yeah makes sense for IRL mythology 🤔

Mental Mouse

> And it was interesting that he called the Hawk "the Hawk", since that's the name the Alliance gave them.

Which also lends new energy to the thought that the villains "just happened" to dub another of the Scourges the Tumult, same as one of the Horned Lords... and this particular Scourge has made a habit of hiding their own form within a storm, so they don't actually know what it looks like.

Adrian_V

Honestly it almost sounds like a Revenant/undead killing sword, which would make sense outside Nussy seeing how many Barrow undead named Levant appears to have.

daegone823

I think the tactics used by the Iron Prince have been used before. He was raised by the chain of hunger and all of his officers understood the choice he made, even Hano. the only people that seemed surprised were the fantassins, they are usually not involved in these type of end of the world fights.

I think the grove being left is of heroes and villains working together. A world leader being saved by a villain whose shade swallows arrows. Not because they like one another but because of the practicality of survival. Good/Evil don't matter when we are more worried about the good of society.

I think that with the Vagrant Spear's support the Barrow Sword might even be able to get into the rolls.

Letting go of petty struggles might be the crux of the queen's groove in society. Working together to achieve greater goods. I

WuseMajor

"My lord," one of his men quietly said, shaking him out of his thoughts. "We must vote. We have stayed in the same place for too long, Revenants might come for your head."

Razin gave the horrors below one last look, hand resting against the pommel of his sword. They'd be here before too long.

"We will do our part," the Lord of Malaga murmured. "On my honour."

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Juff

Typo Thread:

captains regularly > captains who regularly
slunk away > slinking away
cut – the Squire, stepped > cut, the Squire stepped
had Sarcella > at Sarcella
approval as the blessing (is this right?)
not share > not shared
advanced the > advanced, the
abandoning is greatsword > abandoning his greatsword
Ishaq, though > Ishaq, though,
hound on > a hound on
low bit > low hit
swallow a > swallowed a
one Below's > one of Below's
villainess > villainess's
crenel (it seems this refers to the gap, not the wall)
decision made > decision
steading > steadying
like ceiling > like a ceiling
There was no. (missing word)

Burnsy

Getting big Nightblood energy from Pinon:

"Hello! Would you like to destroy some E-v-i-l- Revenants today?"

[allthesame713](#)

First? Great chapter as always.

[Liliet](#)

LMAO

But yeah it is ♥ ♥ ♥

barlgenawdlezouss

Apprentice and Squire and Page? Called it! Go Teen Titans!

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

They just need a couple of Skillmonkeys.

Burlyraven

I was so expecting the Barrow Squad to move into action but be stopped as Razin came into a Name, able to Aragorn summon his loyal swords, even in death. Something like a no-magic variant of the Binder. What we got was fantastic, though.

Also, yay for Baby Name Squad! The Page being part of the mage/tank/rogue trio was also unexpected but cool.

Black Spiral Dancer

baby name squad actually made me ROFL

Darkening

So, squire, apprentice, page, let's toss in the acolyte to be their healer... That's a pretty good lineup, just need 1 more for a band of five. What other transitory names have we heard of? Heir I guess? Lots of royalty running around, suppose that could happen.

Konstantin von Karstein

The Young Slayer.

pirateddesigns

I was going to comment about the parallels between the Calamities and Woe, but Hanno's original band of five might be a better comparison due to being heroes.

Black Knight (Squire)/Squire/Squire
Captain/Adjutant/Page
Warlock (Apprentice)/Heirophant (Apprentice)/Apprentice
Assassin/Thief/???
Ranger/Archer/???

White Knight/Squire
Valiant Champion/ Page (? – kind of outside the “tank” role of Champion)
Hedge Wizard/Apprentice
Ashen Priestess/ Stalwart Apostle?
Wandering Bard/ OH SH!7?!?

Also fun to note, the (presumably) most recent Page attended the Exiled Prince, who Kauk shot through the neck back at the Battle of Three Hills in Book 2, and was killed by Catherine.

[Black Spiral Dancer](#)

Ishaq apparently feels what everyone that has ever played Dark Souls felt many many times before.

dadycoool

It makes sense that Berserker wouldn't survive that, having pulled a Boromir, fighting through lethal arrows, but I as honestly expecting GP to congratulate the Levantites right before sprouting an arrow, having realized that he wasn't needed. That little inner monologue felt like a Death Flag.

[Liliet](#)

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

So, you're telling me Abigail the Immortal isn't a character? Abigail Blood-drinker? Abigail, General of the Third Army of Callow?

[Liliet](#)

She transcends mere characterdom

[Liliet](#)

...to elaborate on the comment I have left that is currently in moderation because of links,

The Grey Pilgrim had been expecting to die in this war from the very start, he discussed that with Laurence back before the Battle of Camps (yes, that early). "An old guy who thinks he's outlived his time" has been his character the entire time, and it was a pretty dramatic plot/character beat in the Twilight arc when he *actively and literally fought Catherine to be the one to die*. Because he thinks his time is over and the new generation must take over now.

This has gone beyond death flags: he has ALREADY DIED TO THIS. It's not going to happen the second fucking time asdkfskdgjksj if Grey Pilgrim dies it's going to be in a different plot/thematic beat entirely!

So, uh, no. In context, this is not a death flag in any way, shape or form.

Anomandris

What's beyond a death flag? Turned-into-Revanent flag?

[Liliet](#)

A survival flag.

KageLupus

I agree with all of your points except maybe the idea that Grey Pilgrim won't die from his death flags. I think that he is pretty much guaranteed to end up doing a Heroic Sacrifice at this point. The only real question is when and for what. First time it was to break the DK and create the Twilight Ways. This time it has to be for something similar in scope. I don't think killing a Revenant or even a Scourge will be enough, but eventually he will find some situation that will only work if he dies for it. Its pretty much a foregone conclusion since he is pretty actively searching for those situations right now.

[Liliet](#)

It'd be repetitive for him to do a Heroic Sacrifice *because* he considers himself old enough to be expendable. Narrative-wise, both in-universe and from the point of view of PGTE as a story, we've already seen that.

Either there's going to be a different emotional beat to a Heroic Sacrifice entirely, or we're getting a "relic of a bygone era witnessing the rise of a new one" narrative, like his POV on Razin shaking hands with Ishaq, here.

JJR

An interesting theory. One that The Pilgrim himself has not caught on to either, it seems. It would be an interesting character arc, having someone have to come to terms with living when they were sure that they would die.

[Liliet](#)

Incidentally, I want Amadeus's POV so so so badly.

Anonymous

It's definitely a death flag. Just because he has already died once doesn't mean he can't die again, especially when the Pilgrim seems to be looking for a suitably valuable death. This chapter is the Pilgrim taking in all the signs that he is no longer necessary to handle things. If you want to argue that **this** isn't a death flag, I think you're just shutting your eyes and trying very hard not to see the things that are there.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, it is a death flag. It's just a flag for the death that ALREADY HAPPENED.

We've already milked the drama out of it! There's none left!

Now there is quite a bit narrative juice left in the “watching the new era’s dawn as a relic of the old one” narrative, though.

Avenant

I think he will continue to live and maybe get a new Role as a Teacher at Cardinal. I mean he is kind of Gandalf/Dumbledore 😊

Reader in The Night

While them taking out the Drake is a win, it’s also concerning. The dialogue between Drake and Hawk reveals they were specifically trying to bait out Named for assassination, and they successfully managed to bait out the Anti-Pale Knight Squad (plus Tariq) and inflict a significant loss on it, meaning they’re all out of position to contain the Axeman.

Going by Cat’s “a win, a loss, a win” narrative, one band is about to get brutalized by the Pale Knight so that the Woe can overcome the Storm.

[Liliet](#)

I think that pattern applies to individual fights rather than the plan as a whole, that’d be too easy.

[daegone823](#)

I thought that as well, if the “Axe man slaying crew”, is here what is the ill equipped “Drake” slaying crew doing.

Please be a showdown with the black queen who comes into her new name.

[Liliet](#)

There wasn’t a dedicated Drake slaying crew. Drake was expected to act as a bodyguard for one of the other Scourges.

A very wise and blessed person has been keeping track on reddit:

[Adrian_V](#)

He could actually die due to old age, as in while sleeping or after a real tough battle.

[Liliet](#)

That’s the most likely death for him, yeah.

Earl of Purple

If Barrow Sword's sword won't let him die so long as it has souls, I see why he was chosen for Scourge hunting. If Cat knows about that little thing.

Also explains Levant's undead, too.

Frivolous

Getting rid of the Drake was good. Good enough trade for the Berserker. She was competent but he was a nightmare.

Anyone know the provenance or etymology of the name Pinon? I haven't figured it out yet.

Burlyraven: Baby Name Squad is good name for them, yes. Funny.

Big I: Yes, I agree that it was odd the Drake called the Hawk the Hawk, but maybe he was just under orders not to reveal her original Name, lest the Alliance learn her history and original aspects, so he copied the Alliance cognomen.

I don't believe that Razin knows about Scourges. I checked, and every use of the word Scourge in this chapter was in a section whose POV was Named.

Thus Razin cannot properly appreciate the honor given him by Keter, that they sent the Drake and the Hawk after him. I'm guessing that the Scourges are a secret, possibly because it would damage Alliance morale if it became commonly known that Keter has killers of Named.

I guess that was the first time a villain of Levant exchanged handshakes with a lord of the Tanja and received the acclaim of the Tanja warriors. Razin will probably find out in time that his life was saved from arrows by another villain, albeit Proceran. Ishaq's goals became that much more achievable.

I find it odd that I enjoy that Aspasia the Harrowed Witch did hardly anything at all during the battle. She didn't even block the arrows herself, she had her dead brother Julien do it. More mystery = good.

Arthur Foundling the Squire probably doesn't have any aspects at all yet. Bad situation to be in in a battle of this magnitude.

[Liliet](#)

I think Drake and Hawk were sent less after Razin and more to bait out the Pale Knight killing band.

Ben

It's possible he was thought to be a better matchup for folks the Pale Knight is concerned with, and he definitely can have more than one goal at once, but it sure looked like he and the Hawk were initially after Razin. I think folks sometimes get a little carried away with speculation regarding this story, but I'm not sure it's going too far out on a limb to say that if anyone can take a long view and try to shape national international trends, it's the Dead King. He may have a sense as to how important Razin is to Levant getting its shit together. But we've already seen with Hune and in some of the interludes that the Dead King has a penchant for sending Revenants to knock off important military/political leaders, for tactical and morale damaging purposes.

[Liliet](#)

I mean going after Razin is a good way to bait out any Named around, considering he's politically important in the long term.

Tom

And in that regard they succeeded; the Pale Knight killing band is no longer a band of five.

[Liliet](#)

Mm!

They paid a price for that though :3

shikkarasu

Contrariwise, Squire not having Aspects means that he can gain one specifically designed for killing Undead/Revenants. Catherine has complained about heroes doing exactly this many times. Canny opponents also like to bait out a third Aspect. If you don't *have* one, then you can't fall into that trap.

Arthur is going to be fine.

Shveiran

You are not wrong, per se, but let's remember that we've seen a lot of Named die before they got their last aspect, so it's hardly a guarantee

[Mental Mouse](#)

>Anyone know the provenance or etymology of the name Pinon? I haven't figured it out yet.

Unless it's simply a *name* rather than a word, "Pinon" seems to be one way or another a misspelling and mispronunciation.

(Qualifier: The Levantine-analog languages may have their own etymology, which wouldn't show up in my casual search.) Either:

> Definition of piñon

> : any of various small pines (such as *Pinus quadrifolia*, *P. cembroides*, *P. edulis*, and *P. monophylla*) of western North America with edible seeds
[or the seeds thereof, commonly known as "pine nuts"]

> pinion noun (1)

> 1 : the terminal section of a bird's wing including the carpus, metacarpus, and phalanges broadly : wing

> 2 : feather, quill also : flight feathers

> pinion verb

> 1a : to disable or restrain by binding the arms

> b : to bind fast : shackle

> 2 : to restrain (a bird) from flight especially by cutting off the pinion of one wing

The second version certainly seems more apropos to a weapon

braxen1

Its one hundred percent a joke about final fantasy. Some of the games have items called phoenix pinions that resurrect you after killed or ko'd.

Frivolous

Ben: Yeah, I really do think that Razin was a target, if not the target. Reason: The Hawk shot at him. Twice.

Hawk shot at only 3 people that I noticed in this fight: Barrow Sword, Berserker, and Razin Tanja.

Mental Mouse and Cicero: Thanks. Your posts match my own findings. It's nice to have a second opinion.

Cicero

I assumed Pinon was derived from "pinion," which refers to the flight feathers of a bird, and so guessed it was similar to William's angel sword.

Though googling pinon results in references to a pine tree nut so...

[*daegone823*](#)

I mean he could have "Learn" which while useful in practicing with a sword or language comprehension is useless in battle.

Also I think the reason they have not spread the name of the scourges is because that would create a story for them. Legendary status. remember named feed on there fame. The Scourges would be infamous as named killers probably gaining more power. The growing narrative was commented on by The Black Queen in the planning stage of the battle. Hence a whole band of five was necessary instead of two named.

Who knows maybe that was why the Drake was angry he was this close to gaining enough power to break away from the Dead King with his newfound power.

Matthew Wells

Maybe that's how the Pale Knight goes down. He gets sent after Klaus and manages to free himself just long enough to destroy his body before he can end his own line.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I doubt it, but it's a lovely thought.

Christian Oaks

They already acknowledged the scourges have a story

Cap'n Smurfy

This is just Keter's story in a nutshell. Great victories won, a new, hopeful path found and one last tragedy at the end of it all. Just enough to make it bittersweet, maintaining the story of fighting The Dead King: You never get a clean win.

Konstantin von Karstein

And that bittersweet win open the door to a greater loss, with the fact that now the Band supposed to kill the Pale Knight lost its Story momentum.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's not clear that nailing the Drake and maybe even the Hawk is a loss over the Pale Knight, especially if they can take the latter down later. The band does urgently need a replacement for the Berserker, though.

Big I

Headhunter maybe?

Aotrs Commander

Did... Did Ishaq just "we have a Hulk" the Drake?

Damn, I knew I liked him for a reason.

(For a moment there, I was really worried when he got arrowed, out of all the secondary Named, he is the one, turns out, I'm most bothered about surviving.)

Mike E.

Damn, this was good. Razin's internal monologue about having to send good men to all but certain death was heartbreaking.

Clint

Wow. Awesome chapter. Razin, Ishaq, and Tariq!

Tariq's POV on Page-Squire-Apprentice was perfect. We got to see them work together as a party, and got to see what the "last-minute-rescue-by-mentor" aspect looks like to Tariq, even when it turns out not to be needed.

Razin is soooo getting a Name – his fervent desire to change the world and Tariq's picking him out for mentoring make that clear.

Also, starting to platonically ship Barrow Sword and Vagrant Spear – their friendship could lead to everything Ishaq wants: his name added to the Rolls of Honor, despite his villanry.

Axel Rafael

I want to "give weight" to that platonic relationship Narrative
wink wink

Jokes aside, I wasn't expecting Ishaq and Sidonia to have such a pleasant "comfortable" dynamic.

Also, Razin really reminded me of Catherine. The way he's caring about and grieving for his soldiers. That growing realization of what achieving his Dreams is going to entail, and the maturing that inevitably accompanies it. The Overcoming his limiting beliefs about what he can or can not do. And even his understanding of the need for more than violence, bravery and "honour" to Change the World. Almost like his growth was accelerated by being in contact with so many "Great People" around him indirectly guiding him.

Also, I too was totally expecting him to begin the Path to a Name...

Konstantin von Karstein

If he gains a Villainous Name, it would have massive consequences for Levant... And I wonder if he would be subordinated to Cat, a foreign head of state. It would be a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

Christian Oaks

I don't think so, he seems an awful lot like another Cordelia, a person who might earn a name but won't take it. Also he doesn't have magic, can people of a certain blood earn a name outside of it? Are there examples of that happening?

Ragnarok101

Gonna admit, I laughed out loud at Ishaq reviving and immediately bitching about how inconvenient death is.

Axel Rafael

The way he reacted to it, let alone the fact that he revived in itself, reminds me of Catherine for some reason, and I love it.

Actually, I might have seen bits of Catherine in different parts of this Chapter.

Xinci

Hm logical that he could reconstitute himself if he got enough souls. If you have enough souls you they can weigh in on what should be (so good for regeneration also good for patching up soul damage). I think Ishaq would be a very interesting form of undead if he somehow managed to become one with a good stockpile of souls available. Wonder where his weapon came from, perhaps originally a wonder of the Gigantes?

Tanjas dream is nice but any constructed society must always have means to mitigate malefactors if it is to survive. A united Levant while better against external threats must have a unifying internal thread to avoid internal dissension leading to internal destruction. Though Levant seems a possible perfect one for a unitary bond between Named of Below or Above due to their philosophy of strife not being entirely wrong. That is to say regardless of who's side you are on, they both get data for their last dusk. So if both sides can cooperate through strife, then they could achieve a more mixed framework of leadership. Though some reform to the Barrows and other bloodlines would be necessary for such a grand working of purpose.

Liliet

> Hm logical that he could reconstitute himself if he got enough souls. If you have enough souls you they can weigh in on what should be (so good for regeneration also good for patching up soul damage).

I'm sure you mean "souls are a known very potent source of power, and Guideverse is very flexible as to what results can be achieved if you have the power for it".

Shoji

Suddenly I feel like Razin is on the path to a Name...

[daegone823](#)

I doubt it. he explicitly states how he will not stand idly by while gods fight. He grew up without magic and will still fight without a name. He expects normal men to triumph where years of the blood "Names".

[Liliet](#)

In Guideverse, Badass Normals also get Names, if there's a groove for it.

laguz24

Nah, It should be easier to be badass without a name
Cordelia set the groove.

Nicholas Guyett

And Cordelia was offered a name by both above and below

[Liliet](#)

You're ascribing her actions a much more revolutionary quality than they likely have. There will have been plenty of badasses who didn't have Names or refused Names or failed to transition and were left Nameless while still being badass – see Catherine at the end of Book 3.

Stories are still there, waiting for people to trip into them like gopher holes.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Sometimes you play a role, some others a Role, and a few times it's a Name Role.

Crash

And every time they do(or more commonly, people insist they will) I cry a little.

Please. Even Razin was at it this time, not everything needs a Named to solve it. It's fine to have folks who don't have Names. It's neat, even.

Badass Normal is a trope for a reason. Let them be.

Non-benders are neat, fellas. The Cabbage Vender might have his story groove but it need not be a Story Groove for him to be memorable.):

[Liliet](#)

Sokka was Named, no question.

The cabbage vendor though, yes. I expect Abigail the Fox to remain non-Named throughout the story ♥ ♥ ♥

Benjamin Rogers

Amazing chapter

Testing

Wonder if we're going to get an interlude with Team Baby (Squire, Apprentice, Page).

laguz24

I have this theory that names don't matter in the game of the gods. Its the people that they come from, it's meant to stop on powerful individuals conquering the entire chessboard before the question is answered. Villains lose and are slain while heroes die after a happy end, however the people outside of stories are much more tenebrous.

Interlude: Song

"I wrote this work because it is our habit as a people to ignore the worst of our history and gild its mediocrities, and to speak against this practice will see you castigated as unpatriotic. This is more than wrong, it is dangerous. We must not snuff out the lights of our common soul by placating the darkness, else what manner of a world are we laying the foundation for?"

– Extract from the conclusion of 'The Labyrinth Empire, or, A Short History of Procer', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Her lips had gone dry, so Beatrice Volignac made herself drink from her cup so it would not show. The wine was watered, she was not foolish enough to partake while a battle was being waged, but the taste of the stout Cantal red was bracing anyway. The

Princess of Hainaut, or more truthfully the capital and a thin stretch of the old southern borderlands, set down her golden cup after having wet her lips and leaned down to look over the maps she'd had her footpads bring to the war room years ago. This was not a war council, for there was precious little planning left to be made, but given the prominence of the people seated in the salon where Beatrice's ancestors had once received visiting royalty any decision made here had the potential to make or break the defence of the city.

Everyone had a man or a woman at the table, so to speak. The Army of Callow in the city was led by the seniormost of their generals, an aging orc who went by the name of Bagram, but while the general was here his authority was mitigated by another's presence: Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the throne of Callow. That the former heroine only rarely used her authority in military matters only reinforced its weight when she *did* use it, an elegant sort of artifice worthy of a woman with Lady Dartwick's excellent reputation with the Highest Assembly. There was some rejoicing among Beatrice's fellow royals at the notion that Lady Dartwick might be sitting the throne in a few years, though no doubt the prospect of no longer having to deal with someone who could drown an army when cross had played a role as well as Dartwick's personal qualities.

For the Dominion it was Captain Nabila, the stout commander of the Alavan forces within the alliance, who was well-understood to be the least of the three great Levantine commanders. Both Aquiline Osen and Razin Tanja were Blood, it lent a lustre to their authority that the other woman could not hope to match. The Iron Prince himself was here too, having left the command at the southern wall to Princess Mathilda of Neustria, with his empty sleeve folded over the arm he'd lost defending this very city three years back. The sole representative for the Firstborn was a certain Mighty Sagasbord, dark-skinned and quiet with a bent for the sardonic when it did break its silence. Prince Arsene despised it, Beatrice had learned, not that the dark elf particularly seemed to care. Theirs was not a culture that quailed at the thought of making powerful enemies.

It gave her the creeps.

"- eastern wall drove back an assault by Revenants and beorns," Captain Nadila shared. "Lord Razin led the defence, with assistance from a band of five Bestowed under the Vagrant Spear."

Beatrice's eyes sharpened. From what she recalled, that was the band with the Barrow Sword. The same man the Black Queen plainly meant to make her lieutenant. Somehow the princess doubted he'd been put under the command of another. That had the smell of Dominion politics, something she figured she ought to have as little to do with as possible.

"Only assaults on the walls," General Bagram growled. "Like we called it right. They won't touch the front gate until they've drawn out as many as our soldiers as they can."

"They'll keep testing us with Revenants," the Iron Prince said. "To suss out what Chosen we have at hand. Old Bones like to know the face of the opposition before he puts his back into the swing."

"The Revenants will be handled by Named," Lady Dartwick calmly said. "A defence plan was designed by Queen Catherine and the White Knight, before his departure. Our concern is to be the traditional forces."

Beatrice cleared her throat, claiming attention.

"Have our Firstborn friends confirmed our suspicions?" she asked.

Mighty Sagasbord coolly smiled. Its Chantant when it spoke was eerily perfect, and Beatrice knew enough of drow to know such proficiency could only be gained by wholesale slaughter of her countrymen. As always, that serene mask over the madness made her skin crawl.

"We dig for truth still," Mighty Sagasbord said. "But the Tomb-Maker itself leads us, Hainaut Princess. There is no need for... uneasiness."

That it could tell she feared it only made it more unpleasant to deal with.

"There's not much to do but wait," Prince Klaus Papenheim gruffly said. "No dishonour in that, it's the way war is. Some of us should try to get some sleep: the dead will try to run us into the ground, it's one of Keter's favourite tricks."

As all here knew, but when such a renowned veteran spoke the words it gave others the opening to do so without shaming themselves. The Iron Prince was not without his kindnesses, for all that like most Lycaonese he cared little for social graces.

"I may retire for a few hours, then," Princess Beatrice said. "It would be better to be fully rested when I relieve Captain-General Catalina from her command on the western wall."

Captain Nadila snorted, eyeing her with open disdain.

"Will you be returning to your palace for it, Princess Beatrice?" the painted Levantine asked.

The orc on the other side of the table chuckled. General Bagram received a cocked eyebrow from Lady Dartwick for it, but she took no further issue and he looked undaunted. It was the Iron Prince's unsurprised face that stung the most, though. Like he'd

expected her to be the first to retire. Beatrice's fingers closed around her cup. Perhaps he had. It was not disdainful, but even now the Iron Prince thought of Alamans as *soft* – always it was they who balked, who slowed, who mutinied even as others bled to drive the dead out of their lands. And that belief, Beatrice Volignac found it reflected in the eyes of everyone here. She'd had it directed at her before, the look, when people thought that because she was fat it meant she was weak or stupid. But it wasn't about her this time, was it? Not really.

It was all Alamans that were being looked down on. And she could see the shape of it, almost. What great names had come of her people in this war? Cordelia Hasenbach was Lycaonese, Rozala Malanza was Arlesite and even the Kingfisher Prince, Frederic Goethal, preferred the company of northerners to his own kind while openly disdaining the games of the Highest Assembly. And it was unfair, Beatrice thought, for her people were brave. They were gallant and stubborn and love freedom more fiercely than any other under the sun, but what did it matter to these few before her now? All they saw was an Alamans shackle around the Grand Alliance's foot. And this was larger than Beatrice, than House Volignac or perhaps even royalty, but here and now it was her that the looks stung.

"I am not yet sure," Princess Beatrice evenly replied.
"Regardless, I will first go to our rampart and assess the situation there."

It was her home being fought for, she thought. Sleep could wait for a while still.

—

Catalina Ferreiro had become Captain-General of the *Ligera Bandera* a mere two years before the war against Keter began, an appointment that had been like a noose around her neck ever since. She had been a compromise candidate, she knew, that her decent battlefield record and noble lineage had seen her elected by the officers because they have her more respectable standing in the eyes of the rank and file. The powerful banner-captains of the *Ligera* had meant to use her as a figurehead while they privately continued the same infighting that'd paralyzed the greatest fantassin company of the Principate so badly it had been unable to even take a contract for the Tenth Crusade. Catalina had thought herself clever, playing off Vargeras against Capistrant until they'd spent themselves against each other and she had enough support to muzzle Garrido on her own.

The prize she had won, unfortunately, was uncontested command of the largest mercenary company on Calernia just as the first signs of the end times were glimpsed the north. As Old Teresa was fond of saying, the Gods never missed an opportunity to piss in the gruel of fantassins.

"Pitch and torches," the Captain-General bellowed. "Burn that thing or we'll lose the bastion."

Catalina preferred the spear, but it was a useless weapon against the dead so she'd taken to the halberd instead: with a grunt, she smashed the axehead into the flank of the skeleton coming for her and toppled it over the edge of the rampart. Her personal guard swept forward, smashing into the loose formation of undead trying to keep her from reinforcing the bastion where the *Folies Rouges* were being hacked apart by ghouls and the beorn that'd carried them up the cliff. Captain Reinald had done well against the first wave, but the second had caught him by surprise and now the entire western wall was at risk. If they lost that bastion... already the dead were trying to land ladders to solidify the beachhead. Flicking a glance back through the sweaty locks matting her helmet, she caught sight of the approaching torches. No more time to waste.

"*Ligera*," Catalina shouted.

"*Faith kept through fire*," her soldiers shouted back,

They charged against into the dead, whose formation the undead officers had not been quick enough to salvage. The Captain-General paced herself, picking her foes carefully – a thrust of her halberd pushed another corpse over the wall, a sweeping descent shattered another's helmet and broke the foul magics keeping it moving – even as the front ranks of her mercenary company plowed through the enemy line. A clear path to the bastion, she thought.

"Torchmen," she screamed, "with-"

Her words were drowned out by a thunderous roar as the beorn that'd been tearing at the fantassins in the bastion abandoned its playthings there, instead leaping down onto the rampart and casually sweeping half a dozen men off the wall into the city below. Some might survive, Catalina thought, though they might not wish they had.

"Aim for the beorn," the Captain-General of the *Ligera Bandera* calmly said. "On my signal."

Another seven men dead, the great abomination crushing them as easily as a boot would an ant.

"Hold," Catalina Ferreiro said.

Another handful dead, the beast enjoying its rampage. With only a thin stretch of wall to maneuver with and other soldiers behind them, her men could do little but stand and die.

"Hold," she repeated through gritted teeth.

And finally, crushing a young woman like a pulped grape, the beorn came close enough.

"Now," the Captain-General hissed.

Torches were put to the earthen jugs of pitch just before they were thrown, of the ten thrown nine splattering across the monster's large form. Flames burned clear and bright, spreading as they ate at dry dead flesh and the beorn howled.

"Halberds to the front," Catalina ordered, breathing a sigh of relief.

The halberdiers hurried forward, hacking at the creature even as it was destroyed by the flames and ensuring it would not smash into their formation. It toppled into the city below and the fantassins hurried to reinforce the bastion even as Catalina stayed behind long enough to arrange for the wounded to be sent back. Her bodyguards closed in around her as she followed into the bastion, finding the situation there had turned around. Captain Reinald had holed up his men in corners while the beorn rampaged but they'd come out swinging as soon as the beast was gone so the ghouls were already on the backfoot when her reinforcements arrived. She left the clearing out of the stragglers to her soldiers and took off her helmet, seeking out Captain Reinald.

She found the fat man conversing with his wizards, an untended wound on his arm that'd been inflicted through now-ripped mail. The captain of the Folies Rouges dismissed his casters when he saw her approach, offering a grateful nod.

"My thanks for drawing it away," Reinald said. "All our pitch was spent on the first three and we hadn't gotten fresh jugs yet."

"I expect you'll have to return the favour before this is over," Catalina replied. "Have you heard anything from further north?"

"The Bayeux footmen are holding strong," the older man replied. "Prince Arsene made it clear he'll tolerate no retreat."

Catalina breathed out a snort as Reinald smirked. Prince Arsene Odon did not have a particularly inspiring reputation as a military commander, though he wasn't as bad as some other royals. Still, he would never have made it above company-captain in the Ligera.

"We'll need to start bringing in the smaller companies to freshen up bloodied positions," Catalina said. "I don't want to dilute our ranks too much, but..."

"No, I quite agree," Captain Reinald said. "If we bleed our finest soldiers dry too soon there'll be nothing but the dregs left fighting come sunlight."

She nodded in agreement. It might seem callous to dismiss some of her fellow fantassin companies with so contemptuous a term, but some of them were honestly no better than levies. Which brought to mind yet more trouble.

"We'll need to keep a close eye on the Brabant conscripts," she sighed. "They keep breaking."

"Prince Etienne croaking it did a number on them," Reinald sympathetically said. "That man was his principality's backbone. Didn't help that the Iron Prince decided to pick them up by the throat afterwards."

"He did what he needed to," Catalina replied, but her tone was lukewarm.

That Klaus Papenheim was one of the finest generals alive was not in dispute – though the Arlesite in Catalina had her fancying that Rozala Malanza might give him a closer match than most – but that he'd acted like a... Lycaonese wasn't either. The northerners liked their tyrants, glorified them, but their southern cousins had never shared the fascination. Tyrants there got knives, not statues. Had this been another war, another man, many a company would have put coin together to hire assassins over a man who'd arrested so many officers on such spurious grounds. These were desperate times, of course, and the officers *had* been out of line. It was still a bitter pill to swallow for all of them, Catalina thought, that the Iron Prince's heavy-handed actions had not earned so much as a raised eyebrow from any other great name.

Mind you, whoever it was that'd figured appealing to the *Black Queen* over an issue of *military discipline* was a good idea should be sent to Keter for raising in the hopes that the stupid was infectious. Catalina liked the woman more than she figured she would have, being a murderous heretic, and considered her a generally reasonable superior officer. She was also someone who hanged her own soldiers when they got sticky fingers and whose answer to a mutiny was a lot more likely to be crucifixion than sympathy. It had to be the *Joyeux Chevaliers* that'd pushed for that, having some many noble brats within their ranks had them believing they were clever manipulators instead of expendable Highest Assembly catspaws.

"Sure he did," Captain Reinald grunted. "Let's hope he doesn't find it necessary to do it again."

"We wouldn't have so weak a position if we could agree on a representative," Catalina pressed. "I know the Grizzled Fantassin turned us down-"

She'd named an exorbitant price first, then noted that unless the Grand Alliance itself could be outbid there was no point in trying to buy her services. Old Teresa was said to be out in Mercantis these days, that floating pleasure house of a city. Hard terms to beat, admittedly.

"- it can't be you," Captain Reinald frankly said. "The Ligera has too many enemies, you'll never get the votes."

"It has to be *someone*, Reinald," she exasperatedly said. "If not me then another. And quickly. We are..."

Words failed her, for a moment, as the thought was hard to express. It was not a particular indignation that had been weighing on Catalina Ferreiro's mind but a hundred little signs, as if had some unknown prophecy on the tip of her tongue but could not bring herself to speak it.

"We're dying, Reinald," she quietly said. "Fantassins, our trade. You've seen the armies the rest of the world fields, now. Do you think we could handle the Second Army or a few sigils of drow? Gods, even the Levantines are making something of themselves."

We don't have mages and priests, Catalina thought. We don't have sappers or Chosen. War is leaving us behind. And the Principate had been hardened by the war too, she could feel it. See in faces and hear it in words. No one spoke of war as a part of the Ebb and Flow now, as the game of princes where glories and fortune were wagered. Even princes had grown harsher, and the wars they'd wage would grow harsher with them. Would veterans of the war against Keter really hesitate to torch a village? It had been against the unspoken laws of war in Procer, once, but what did those childish things matter to someone who'd spent three years fighting howling corpses as madness twisted the land around them? There would be no return to the old days, after this came to an end.

For better or worse.

"You're not wrong," Reinald muttered. "Some of the things I've heard... But this is a discussion to finish when the enemy is no longer at our gate, perhaps."

Catalina nodded, then smiled.

"Tarry not," she hummed.

The other mercenary snorted, recognizing the words from the old song everyone in their trade, from the greenest of boys to the most grizzled of warwives, had heard at least once.

"Or we'll be dead," Captain Reinald finished.

Over the edge of the rampart, a skeleton dragged itself halfway onto solid ground before a soldier smacked it down. The climbers were beginning to reach the top, she realized with dread.

The skirmishing was over at last, and the battle had begun in truth.

—

Well, Roland thought, this was going to be a problem.

"So *that's* why they kept dropping vultures and Revenants through the wards," the Headhunter said.

He — Roland had asked, as he couldn't discern the differences in her facepaint that heralded either gender — was looking at the same thing that he was: a gate into Arcadia opening in the middle of a city street. Which shouldn't be possible, the Rogue Sorcerer thought, considering this city was thick with wards. *But the dead had years to meddle with the city after taking it*, he reminded himself. The Grand Alliance reclaiming Hainaut and then repairing the old foundations as well as slapping on fresh wards was not a comprehensive fix, despite the frenzied efforts of their mages. At least it did not seem to be without costs for the Dead King: the gate had only opened by subsuming a Revenant and was opening rather slowly. They could not be opened with a snap of one's finger, which was good news tacked on to the bad.

"We need to close it," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "And find out any other gate that might have been opened out of sight."

"The city's bleeding magic everywhere, wizardling," the Headhunter skeptically replied. "We might as well look for a particular needle in a box full of them."

"Keter needs Revenants to make these," Roland replied, shaking his head. "There won't be many, and we'll have seen them falling."

"There could have been more than one Revenant by bird," the Headhunter shrugged. "And they can run anywhere after the fall. We've only caught one so far."

Fair points, but only so long as providence refused to put a finger on the scales. Roland would have to hope otherwise.

"There's another band out there roaming," he reminded the other. "We can only hope they will catch what we don't."

He rose from his crouch before the Headhunter could answer, expecting that otherwise he would be served a sermon on the subject of why the three young souls with transitory Named also assigned to keeping the streets clear were weak and so naturally

doomed to failure. The other man's opinions were more strident than thoughtful, in Roland's opinion, but he saw nothing to be gained by arguing. The Headhunter's ways had paid off for him, and people with full pockets didn't usually tend to abandon the ways that'd filled them. A long casting rod of sculpted ivory in hand, the Rogue Sorcerers leapt off the edge of the roof and landed on the cobblestone street. The gate into Arcadia, a broad rectangle at least twelve feet high and twice that in length, was pulsing. *Still stabilizing*, Roland thought. He brushed a hand close to the surface, mustering his will.

"Confiscate," he murmured.

It took, he found with some relief, but not as much as he would have wanted it to. He was drawing from the active spell, but not the foundations. The light of the portal began flickering wildly. All he was achieving was further destabilizing the gate, not breaking it. Movement from the corner of his eye had him drawing back, but not quite close enough. A javelin, he saw just a heartbeat before it bit into his first defensive enchantment and shattered it. A shell of light became visible for a moment before shattering. A second flew out, but by then the Headhunter was there and he swatted them down with insolent ease.

"Gate's not closed, wizardling," the Headhunter grunted. "Get the Hells on with it."

I'm not sure I can, Roland thought. If he could not confiscate the sorcery, then he had to either overpower or shatter the gate – which would require strength he did not have or for his knowledge to be superior to that of the *Dead King*. He was going to have to improvise. If he couldn't break the gate itself, what were his options? He cast a glance at the Headhunter.

"You have the head of a Damned who could empower magic, correct?"

"Amplify," the Headhunter corrected. "And the heads only give weaker imitations. What are you scheming?"

"I want," the Rogue Sorcerer boyishly grinned, "to make this a much *larger* gate."

He felt like tapping his foot, like humming an old song. He was only a few mistakes away from dying, but wasn't that where he did all his best work?

—

Princess Beatrice Volignac of Hainaut went utterly still, her horse following suit.

Frost spread across the cobblestones like the breath of some wintry beast, steam curling above it like fading stripes of lace

as ghostly lights set the shadows to dancing. It was as if a hole had been cut out in the world, revealing some fantastic winter vista hidden behind the curtains of Creation, and yet what had come out of it was not some strange monster or fair lord. It was an intimately familiar sight. The banner was what Beatrice recognize first, stirring as it was in the wind. A golden griffin on blue, crowned by three daffodils, but it was not the heraldry that made it distinct. It was the long haft of forever unrotting whitewood it hung from, ending in a crown of pure gold set with sapphires. Even streaked with ash and dust, Beatrice would have recognized the royal banner of the House of Volignac anywhere.

Riders streamed out of the pale plains of snow on the other side, ranks upon ranks of silent souls in beautiful enameled armour that rode steeds of the finest coats. Their lances were raised tall, a forest of sharp steel held up by unwavering hands, and at their head rode a beautiful woman. Skin pale as milk could be seen through the open visor of her helm, golden hair in a long braid going down her back. The armour she wore was a gift from Beatrice's father, a family heirloom of blue-painted steel etched with enchantments, and at her side the ornate wooden sheath of the ancient blade of House Volignac, Mordante, rested against her hip. And on her brow, atop her helm, a crown of gold had been inlaid into the steel for her name was Julianne Volignac and she had once rule Hainaut.

There was a gaping, bloody wound where her heart should be.

"Sister," Beatrice softly breathed out. "Gods, what did they do to you?"

She had taken a mere hundred riders with her as an escort when heading for the western rampart, a pittance compared to the thousands Julianne had taken with her on that last doomed charge to delay the dead long enough for their people to escape. *But only a few have crossed*, Beatrice thought. *We can hold them at the gate*. She looked around and found only fear on the faces of her soldiers. As much at the sight of who it was they were fighting as the numbers, the princess thought.

"Bastien," she said, raising her voice as she addressed the captain of her bodyguard. "Go for reinforcements. Hurry."

"Your Grace," the man replied, hesitating, "what is it you intend?"

Beatrice Volignac breathed out, watching her sister's golden hair across the street.

"I have you an order," she harshly said. "Go."

She heard him slink away, chastened. In the distance, Julienne Volignac met her sister's eyes and smiled sadly. She brought down her visor, lowered her lance.

"Look ahead," Princess Beatrice said, voice ringing out. "That is what Keter means to make of you."

The Princess of Hainaut lowered her lance, and after a terrifying heartbeat saw that her retinue followed suit.

"They gave their lives for everyone here," Beatrice said, throat clogged up. "So we could live, crawling through ash and dust to return home another day."

She pressed her knees against her mount, the destrier breaking into a trot. Her retinue followed. The enemy, on the other side, lowered their lances and began to advance.

"We're home now," Beatrice Volignac shouted. "We're home, and tonight *we lay our ghost to rest.*"

Her soldiers roared, the thunder of hooves crashing against cobblestones drowning out battlecries even as the two lines of horsemen rammed into each other.

—

Catalina was not sure who it was that began to sing.

The world had turned black and white, chopped into moments of violence and moments of relief, but through both songs had begun to wind their way. There was nothing, the Captain-General thought with an exhausted smile, that Procerans loved more than a song. Even the ever-cold Lycaonese thawed, when the time came to sing. There were more singers than birds in Procer, it had once been said, and for every season and hour there was a song. Or a poem, or a dance or another gesture of beauty returned to the Creation that had given birth to all of them. And wasn't that, in the end, the most beautiful thing about her home? Even in the dark, they sang.

Perhaps in the dark most of all.

The dead came over the rampart, silent and relentless. Catalina battered them over the edge, hacked and split and felt cold iron sink into her arm when tiredness slowed her, but the tide would not end so neither would she. And all around her, the Captain-General saw only bastards. Mud nobles and cutthroats, peasants and shopkeepers, the leftovers of a great realm with blades in hand. And still they held, her thousands of brothers and sisters who too bore the name of *fantassin*, her fellow fools who traded life and limb for coin and a few boasts. And so when the song poured out of her throat, she did not fight. What else was there

to do, when the world was so ugly, but to bring a sliver of beauty in it?

"My father wept for a prince

And died with a spear in hand."

The man by her side, covered in sweat and filth, shot her an incredulous look and began laughing before cracking a skeleton's skull. He joined his voice to hers.

"My mother hasn't wept since

Or left a god un-damned."

It spread like a fire, snaking along the rampart and the bastion until a thousand throats sang it, that old bastard song, the *Sun In the West*.

—

Beatrice Volignac was in the heart of the whirlwind, dancing with many smiling deaths.

They fought desperately against the honoured dead, trading lances with corpses until all were spent and furious melee with sword and shield swept across the cobblestone. There was something burning in all their bellies tonight that had devoured whole the fear, replaced it with clenched teeth and hard eyes. Before them was the mockery Keter had made of the finest gesture any of them had known, and what could they do but quell it? Nothing less could be tolerated. So Beatrice traded blows with a corpse in armour, ramming her blade into the throat and throwing it down its undead mount before pushing forward. A blow glanced off her shield and she answered with a hard cut, but it found no purchase in the enemy's armour.

They were losing, the Princess of Hainaut knew. The charge had not been enough. They had slowed the enemy's outpouring through the gate but not cut it, and now they were being drowned. Yet she found, queerly, that the thought did not move her to fear. It would be a worthy death, Beatrice decided, and such a thing was not to be feared. She was a princess of the blood, a Volignac: what did she have to fear in this world or any other, save for dishonour? So when the song came on the wind, drifting like curl of smoke, the Princess of Hainaut laughed. She, too, had once dreamed of being the one who would once again bring the sun to west. A good song, she decided, to die singing.

"Maybe I'll go east, they say

Swords there can win a crown."

Voices joined hers, as the dead hemmed them in and the last of them gathered around the banner. The enemy were coming for them, for the killing stroke. Through her visor, Beatrice met her sister's eyes as Julienne approached with the ancient sword of their shared blood.

"Rule king a year and a day

Be buried with great renown."

—

Roland hummed under his breath, one hand on a desiccated human head and the other on a portal through which a great many people were trying to kill him.

It was just going to be one of those nights, he figured.

"Is it working?" the Headhunter asked with a grunt.

He carved through another skeleton's neck, kicking it into another's path as it tried to cross. The villain had, impressively enough, been holding the gate single-handedly all this time.

"Well," the Rogue Sorcerer mused, "if it is, then—"

There was a deafening keening noise and the gate double in height before beginning to shake.

"Wonderful," Roland grinned.

The Headhunter turned around, throwing an axe at him that cut through the javelin someone had very unkindly thrown at Roland's chest. Keterans, a people truly without manners.

"It's gotten bigger," the Headhunter noted, unimpressed. "Is that it? I thought it was—"

What looked like the maw of a beorn began to pass through the gate, roaring angrily and cutting off the conversation. Rudeness upon rudeness, truly. The other Named pulsed with a stolen aspect coming from a head and tried to force the construct back, but Roland kept pushing sorcery into the gate and amplifying the flow with the human head. Soon, soon it would be ready. Mind you, he'd best not tarry long. How did the song go again?

"Long ago, the tale goes,

The sun rose in the west

It might be it will again:

Tarry not, or we'll be dead."

The Headhunter was thrown back into the street, hitting the wall of a house and breaking through it, but Roland only smiled even as the beorn turned towards him.

—

Beatrice's horse had died on the third pass, but she'd knocked her sister down from hers so it had evened out the affair.

They had sparred on occasion, while they both lived, though in those days Beatrice had not taken the blade all that seriously — it had been the horse and lance she preferred, finding bladework to be an ungainly and sweaty affair. The spars had been measured, almost fond, more shared time than any genuine test of each other. *This* was nothing like it. Beatrice desperately brought up her shield as the family sword, Mordante, bit at the painted steel and let out a flash of light and frost. She swung at Julianne's head, but her sister's shield was already in place and they collided with each other as each tried to make the other trip on the blood-strewn ground

"I will free you," Beatrice gasped through her helm. "Gods, Julianne, I swear. *I will not leave you like this.*"

The enchanted sword kissed the top of her helm, freezing the visor shut, but the Princess of Hainaut began hammering at her sister with her shield. Julianne had the strength of undeath to her, the tirelessness, but Beatrice was *fat*. She was heavy, and muscled, and when she struck her sister shook from the impact. Once, twice, thrice until Julianne slipped on blood and bone and Beatrice followed her down. A lance passed above her head, forced away by one of her last men at the last moment, but the Princess of Hainaut's eyes were only for her sister. Mordante bit into her side, frostburn creeping through her mail, but Beatrice ripped off her sister's helm and met those blue eyes with her own as she drew back.

"The fire turns to ember,

I wake from a sorry dream

Morning rides in pale splendour

Chasing down a fading gleam."

"We will meet again," Beatrice whispered, "in a better place."

And down her sword went.

—

Roland of Beaumaraais, nothing but a — borrowed — human head in hand, smiled at the monster forcing its way out of the gate into Arcadia.

"This should do the trick," he announced, removing his hand from the portal at last.

The magic he'd been drawing on stuttered, the bundle nearly empty, and the Rogue Sorcerer offered the beorn as deep a bow as he could without making the head dangle. The construct swatted at him, but he stepped away even as the Headhunter rose from rubble and the clawed limb came well short. The beorn seemed confused, as well it might be.

"The gate's frozen," the Rogue Sorcerer told it. "Brilliant man, Masego. His work his *comprehensive*."

Roland hadn't even noticed when that derivation had been added to the ward schematics, but then that didn't matter. What did matter was that the Dead King was not the only brilliant Trismegistan sorcerer in these parts, which meant that what had been used here to make the gates was a technicality and not a flaw. The last of the magic he'd fed the portal was absorbed at last, and with a loud keen the portal's length began to extend. It managed to grown another five feet, before the blind spot in the wards laid down by the Hierophant was entirely outgrown and they triggered with a vengeance.

"To borrow from a friend," Roland smiled, then raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

The portal exploded in a pillar of power and light, the city wards crushing it into nonexistence without mercy, and Roland de Beaumaraais was once more left to wonder at just how much he *loved* magic. There was always something new, wasn't there? The Headhunter caught up, looking at him warily.

"Come on," the Rogue Sorcerer idly said. "There will be other portals."

And, hands in pockets, he began to make his way down the street as he sang the song that'd been on his mind all evening.

"The road is long and winding,

Though I did it love it once

And tread it still, searching

The bottom of many cups."

Sometimes, even charlatans got to have a good turn.

—

Gods, but they were holding.

The Captain-General watched as ladders were brought to the walls and undead scaled the cliffs. Stones and logs were thrown at them, burning oil poured on ladders and Light filled the air as priests began turning the wrath of Above on the dead. It was a narrow, wavering thing but they were holding. And now the reinforcements were pouring in, lesser companies freshening the ranks of the greater and bringing with them well-rested hands. Mages were beginning to rotate in, cadres trained in the Arsenal, and though their magics were simple when turned on a single great monster in concert they were also often successful. Catalina withdrew from the rampart, exhausted enough her vision swam, but after a tonic and rest she would return.

She sat by a fire, her bodyguards close around her, and drank deeply from a waterskin. She smiled as she heard the chorus of the song rise again, perhaps the tenth time it had been sung tonight. The Sun In the West was often sung as wistful or angry – there was a reason it was familiar to taverns but rare in courts – but tonight it was, instead, almost defiant.

“Long ago, the tale goes,

The sun rose in the west

It might be it will again:

Tarry not, or we’ll be dead.”

Our sun has faded, Catalina thought, but it has not yet set.

There was still blood in the veins of the lumbering beast known as the Principate, and perhaps after the war... Lightning struck at the bastion and a howling gale swept over it, hundreds dying in the blink of an eye as Catalina was thrown against a wall and bit her lip as she felt her collarbone break. The storm screamed, and two silhouettes landed on the stone.

The Scourges had arrived.

SpeckofStardust

Catalina, I wish you well and that you don’t get raised after the next set of events to come.

Big Brother

Catalina is a friggin Badass, and so is Beatrice. Despite what others might think, I wish those two specifically to find greater successes and survival in the Keteran War

Sir Nil

It seems that the winning strategy in war is just to have a good song in your head.

[Liliet](#)

Fun fact: it really is!

Most battles are won/lost by people running away, not by slaughter to the last.

Doesn't work that way with Keter, but the Grand Alliance? Holding means "standing there and continuing to fight", as opposed to "no longer standing there".

And a song, well, it makes it easier to stand than to run.

Miles

I'm gonna pop some tags, only got \$20 in my pocket. I'm I'm I'm huntin'. Looking for a come up. This is fucking awesome.

Crash

New hit by the Rapacious Troubador!

miles

Or the dead king

Morgenstern

Seems they did it. The DK actually went for the trap that is the Crown of Winter... Arcadia portals and too well preserved, faerie-like corpses coming out of wintry scenes... what else could it be?

Let's hope the limitations and new rules that come with his new powers are worth it.

Morgenstern

Gah... this wasn't meant to be a reply *sigh

Someperson

Pretty sure that Quartered Seasons has not been implemented yet.

The Winter Crown is already spoken for, and I'm pretty sure the Fall Crown is the one they were gonna use for Quartered Seasons. Also, I kinda don't think a strategy with this much foreshadowing would just happen off-screen.

Anyone with enough magical knowhow can rip a gate into Arcadia, and that certainly includes Neshamah and co. They just can't do it on nearly the same scale that the Twilight Ways facilitate.

dadycoool

This was fun. Interesting to see the war from the perspective of the fantassins, watching their world fade away around them. And she's right. After a war with a tireless enemy that you have to destroy utterly in order to sleep at night, sharpening your sword against the very best that recorded history has to offer, would the princes go back to their little squabble skirmishes where no one really died and it was basically a money war? Would anyone take them up on it if they did?

lol, Roland.

And poor Beatrice, having to put her sister to rest. At least she'll have earned the family sword?

LarsBlitzer

I'm reminded of the difference war was waged before and after the American Civil War. How it started as regimented and formalized Napoleonic volleys and charges, and ended with cities in flames. I don't think any noble will at least publicly admit to being bloodthirsty, aside from perhaps the Blood since ritualized combat is so ingrained into their identity.

I suspect Roland will be downright insufferable towards the end of the siege. His character seems well suited to rolling with the punches and improvising. I think we'll see his best work to come; his winning the Kobayashi Maru the only way he knows how: by cheating.

And lastly, Beatrice. There's a certain finality to that fight. I don't think anyone will look down upon her nation once this is all over and she's got her family's sword in hand.

jamesc9

Will it be same to hold Beatrice's family sword, or will it have been whammied by the DK to possess the holder?

laguz24

That's keter's strategy, hit them when they are exchanging companies. Just when it looks like they will make it through the night. Also bets on who the two on the wall are, my guess is the tumult due to the lightning and the wolfhound to guard him.

[Liliet](#)

Well, if it's Tumult – Woe time? 😊

Sparsebeard

Pretty sure it was said that Tumult is a long range fighter that stay's far from harm's way.

caoimhinh

Yeah, but it still has to come within the city to attack, otherwise the wards would get in the way, no?

agumentic

No. We've seen how long the wards last against the mages on the level of Witch of the Woods during the Waltz of Wroth, and the answer is "Not". And the Warlock was both an expert in wards and had more time to prepare them – Masego might be a genius, but he is not going to surpass his father in this particular situation.

Darkening

Yeah, but trying to target anything at the top of the cliff from the ground would be difficult. Vulture mounts would just be asking to get shot down, and scrying doesn't work around priests, which are sure to be around any important target and seeded in amongst the troops besides. So better to just clear a patch of wall and start throwing lightning around, with the ability to just hop off the cliff to retreat if necessary. Not like anyone's gonna pursue into the horde below.

agumentic

It can just use the storm to fly, the same way it sent two of the Scourges up the wall. Mobility spells are not hard to find at higher levels of magic, it looks like. Also, inside the storm, even Archer using See can't hit it.

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

Boost the vote and vote for the boost!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

This chapter is GREAT.

[Burlyraven](#)

The Dead King sacrificing Revenants to make gates is one of those moves that seems kind of cool but basic, but might even be a meta attack on the Named bands. They probably aren't even meant to succeed, but they tie up the Baby Name Squad and some of the other roaming pairs, because the story dictates that some will *almost* succeed (as happened here). That means that the already thinly stretched Named aren't in position to meet the Scourges when they strike, like they literally did in lightning form here. Considering this conflict is weighted as a Pitched Battle and not a Desperate Defense, a Scourge blitz might actually work out in Keter's favor.

[Liliet](#)

It's not even meta in the story sense, it's "meta" in the same sense that assaulting the walls is not meant to actually take them but to draw away soldiers and exhaust them. Throwing resources that are expendable to you but that the enemy has to meaningfully commit to count? It's basic in the sense that it's a very basic strategy... not in the sense that it's easily countered.

[Burlyraven](#)

It's still meta in the sense that it relies on the good ol' story fu, rather than anything physical and concrete. There's no reason that any of the Revenants should absolutely make it through and that any of the ones that make it through should absolutely require Named to put them down, except for the fact that the story will require it. All things being equal, one of the lesser Revenants should be killable by a skilled enough group of mundane soldiers (as even a lesser Named would be) but this is a story that will require Named to put them down.

[Liliet](#)

Are you aware of statistics as a science

Crash

He knows Story Fu, apparently

[Mental Mouse](#)

Evidence to date is that statistics is a creational law in the Guideverse. 😊

[Liliet](#)

statistics isn't a law
statistics is a method of data processing

"99.99% heroes survive being pushed off a cliff. Plan accordingly"

TeK

Fun fact: repeatedly pushing someone off a cliff consecutively lowers their chance of survival.

[Liliet](#)

It lowers their overall chance of survival of the whole sequence, but not of each individual fall :3

(At least so long as surviving the fall isn't a matter of using up a resource the total amount of which is finite. Parachutes, providence (if it works that way), audience's goodwill, etc)

Matthew Wells

Unbroken bones...

[Liliet](#)

for example!

Frivolous

If I understand correctly, Roland the Rogue Sorcerer used the Headhunter's head's stolen aspect to make the Keteran portal so large it provoked Masego the Hierophant's wards into attacking it.

Also: the Headhunter actually collects and keeps physical heads. They don't steal and keep powers the way Catherine does at all.

I wonder how and where they keep the stolen heads, of which they must have many. Personal pocket dimension the way Thief kept her loot, perhaps?

Poor Beatrice. Fighting your own more beautiful sister raised as a Bind has to be horrific.

caoimhinh

Yeah.

It was said before that what the Headhunter did was "to take the head and a shadow of their power". Although it is similar to Catherine's power, it's not the same. Headhunter keeps a weakened Aspect and can use it constantly and even lend it to other people who can return it afterwards, whereas Catherine creates a one-use-only artifact with the full power of the looted Aspect. Although she can give the artifact to other

people too and if other skilled people lend their talent, create a permanent artifact like the Severance.

Pocket dimension seems likely, or maybe bags of holding (those bags that are bigger on the inside), since Headhunter was shown having some heads on display, hanging around their neck and belt, but also many bags.

Fighting your own *anything* raised as a Bind has to be horrific.

Frivolous

caoimhinh: Julianne was Beatrice's predecessor as well as elder sister. Julianne died trying and failing to stop Keter from conquering Hainaut, their principality.

With Julianne raised as a Bind, Beatrice is facing the undead embodiment of the collective failure of Hainaut in general and House Volignac in particular. It is like staring defeat in the face, perhaps even literally.

The psychological wounding to Beatrice must be staggering. A comparable horror would be if Prince Otto Redcrown's father and two sisters came back and tried to kill him, too.

Thorium

I would argue that their single-use nature make the aspects Cathrine steals more powerful than the original. The idea of an aspect being able to literally destroy another is so broken that we haven't even heard of it outside of Cat's artifacts, which have done so twice. The Pilgrim also remarked that his Forgive couldn't undo natural or story-based death, which giving his life to stabilise Twilight certainly was.

Sinead

Expanding on this thought process:

Catherine's ability is the theft of power, but it is also a sacrifice of power, and it represents an offering of power for an effect. All her artifacts work at peak capacity.

Headhunter uses their skill to steal power, but they are not willing to let any of it go, so they get the usability (and perhaps it runs out over time), without anything as flashy.

shikkarasu

I agree. HH's ability is halfway between Catherine's old **Take** Aspect and the Harvesting ability she got as Winter! Cat. Head Hunter probably keeps all the limitations of an Aspect, like with **Take**, but doesn't have a limit of 1

Aspect at a time. In exchange for that flexibility they probably get used up permanently instead of refilling for free.

The question on my mind is how this compares to Roland's **Confiscate**.

[Liliet](#)

The impression I got is that they do not in fact get used up permanently. The price is that they are much weaker than in the original, unlike all of Cat's variations on this theme and also **Confiscate**.

shikkarasu

That would make sense. I'm not on the Discord, but is there some consensus on how **Confiscate** likely works? I know it takes a 2nd Aspect to **Use** and it just about kills him in protracted fights, so it really seems like RS got the short end of the Aspect stick compared to Headhunter's method or Zeze's **Wrest**.

[Liliet](#)

i havent been on the discord since before **Confiscate** was revealed and clarified

but we do know that he needs "probable cause" for confiscation (backstory extra chapters), that it's stored as a "lump of power" that he can use up little by little (that one interlude), and that he does in fact need to broadly know HOW to use it to use it, or at the very least it helps (backstory extra chapters). We also know he can use magic of the most incompatible disciplines in a way people with the Gift cannot without incurring mental disorders (masego in interlude terms) and that he's v dangerous/crafty with how well he uses it (strategic assessment of him as a threat by cat back in book 5).

We do know the stealing is permanent until used up – he's never tried to give it back, even if it were possible. It's not clear how that compares against **Wrest** since we've never seen Masego use it against a hostile spellcaster rather than by borrowing his allies' power and then returning it, but it's likely **Wrest** does not allow you to store power indefinitely in the way **Confiscate** does.

Miles

Still waiting for the moment Masego decides to do magic with Roland and no other spellcasters around. Is he gonna recognize his own magic? And if so, will Roland live to become an arch nemesis, die, or become a pseudo woe where Masego just pranks him all the time and steals his game pieces?

Insanenoodlyguy

Forgive was more of a story problem though. That is to say, it should be able to undo a story-based death, but it never will be used that way because of who Pilgrim is. Using it such is so anathema to who Pilgrim is that it's not doable in practice; Pilgrim the Name would be sufficiently weakened trying that it ultimately couldn't use Forgive the Aspect in that manner. Same way that his Dawn could not have fought Akua's fall after the surrender was offered; he had every confidence that it could match it right up till that point.

Cat, however, has a very different roll in the story. Doing things that are not meant to be done, stealing aspects and using them for things their original owners never would? Both parts of her deal. So the penalties he'd have had were not in play this time.

[Liliet](#)

> Pilgrim the Name would be sufficiently weakened trying that it ultimately couldn't use Forgive the Aspect in that manner.

I got the impression it was more of a direct limitation than something that would come through the weakening like Shine at Princes' Graveyard. He just cannot, it won't work. It's a limitation of the Choir of Mercy as a whole, apparently, judging from what Catherine said to them, and this Aspect of his is tied to them.

But Catherine could use it in an untied way, somehow, because rules are bullshit and arbitrary and everything ultimately is subject to the Rule of Drama before anything else, because bless this book ♥

miles

Pilgrim didn't die a story death. He got sacrificed for the party but he wasn't anyone's mentor or anything like that, and wasn't even the first.

[Liliet](#)

Pilgrim died such a story death, the resurrection wouldn't have worked if he was the one using it.

And he didn't just "get sacrificed for the party". He got into an extensive argument with Catherine about which of them should die – I'll remind you that half a day earlier he'd been trying to kill Catherine himself. His argument was that the world will go on fine without him so long as Catherine's there to steer it. He'd been trying to low key tap into a mentor role with Catherine the entire time he'd been talking to her – Indrani called him out on how that was a bad habit, with the Woe being what they are – and this was very much a "passing of the torch" death.

Morgenstern

Far as I remember they were arguing about who _has to give up ruling_, not who has to die. The dying only come in when the Saint tried to friggin _destroy_ the Crown.

Liliet

Nope, the giving up ruling thing was without an argument – Cat'd made an agreement with Tariq that in exchange for her not killing Saint should she attack her – and then later also in exchange for her not killing Tyrant – he would give up his rule and she wouldn't.

The arguing was very specifically about who dies, afterwards.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/06/19/chapter-50-sunset/>

> "There is no choice to make," Tariq evenly said.

>

> And already I could see the lay of that, how it'd unfold. A band of five assembled before the eyes of princes and princesses of Procer had gone into broken Arcadia at the urging of the Black Queen, among them perhaps the two most famous heroes alive. Neither the Regicide nor the Peregrine would return from that journey. The treacherous Tyrant of Helike would escape with but a curse, and from the heroes the only survivor would be the Rogue Sorcerer – a hero little known, and a mage to boot. Sorcery was not well-trusted, in Procer, and seemingly rare in Levant.

>

> We'd be at war again before Morning Bell, bargain or not.

>

> "Agreed," I said. "It'll have to be me."

It came to a fight:

> The illusion broke, now that I knew it was there, and so did the one the Rogue Sorcerer had woven around the Peregrine. The Grey Pilgrim took the wounded crown, set with his own star, and placed it upon his brow.

>

> "No," I shouted.

>

> Like it was the most natural thing in the world, the Grey Pilgrim leaned down and gently pried the Saint of Swords' blade from her cold hands.

>

> And, just as gently, rammed it through his own heart.

The argument had gotten pretty heated on principles:

> "So you're just going to lie down and die?" I said.

>

> There was a heartbeat of silence.

>

> "The Saint of Swords is dead," I said. "We all had a hand in that, mine looming largest by far. But that's it, Pilgrim? Your friend is dead and you feel tired, so you're choosing death when Calernia is facing its harshest test since the reign of Triumphant?"

>

> "Queen Catherine," the Sorcerer hissed. "There is no need for-"

>

> "You've done some real nasty things over the years, haven't you Tariq?" I said. "We both know you have."

>

> The old man's blue eyes, limpid as a cloudless summer sky, met mine.

>

> "You don't get to roll over for death, after crossing those lines," I said. "After taking on that responsibility."

>

> "Which of us are you truly haranguing, Black Queen?" the Grey Pilgrim chided me, not unkindly.

(she was talking about Black, these are arguments prepared for specifically him) (note how the "you cannot just die after making all those nasty

choices" thing rests on the flimsy premise here of her ASSUMING he had, but would fit like a glove on Black. This was a mentor death parallel allll the way)

Mike E.

More or less..Keter found a blind spot in Zeze's warding scheme that they could open a tiny gate in...Roland made the gate big enough to cross the boundary of the blind spot and then the warding scheme defenses took over.

I love how it was emphasized he was holding a "borrowed" human head...

[origamiflame](#)

I'm a bit confused, cause a gate large enough for a beorn to get through sounds pretty damn big, and its a huge oversight on Masego's part if so, which I'm disinclined to believe.

Maybe there's something more than physical size to it?

[Liliet](#)

I'm thinking of that moment in Book 4 when a creation of Dead King's found its way to Cat through all the wards without ever getting spotted by the Observatory – iirc it was because it was so minimalistic, there was basically no magical "footprint" to it. It had nothing but a pathfinding algorithm, an identification algorithm and a message.

It's likely DK managed to "compress" his gates so they fit within what for any other spellcaster would be a very daunting limit.

Xinci

Hm, the Alalamans are feeling the weight of souls gazes on them, as always their societal constructs will need to hold up to the pressure of time, or be crushed under the wheel. It is...bad, truly rather bad, that the rules of honor somewhat enforced by the house of light will be weak, and that those who may take advantage of this may not balk at breaking them now. I do wonder if Cordelia has plans for counter measures to mitigate this, as this feature threatens a very large amount of what she wants Procer to become after she dies. You cannot have a functioning republic if every member becomes a petty warlord. Such things drive centralization rather than decentralization.

Still it is pleasant in some ways to see the groove being made by this war. Dancing on the edge of oblivion, diving dauntlessly forward, for what else is there to do other than die? A decent

bit of potential lies in such a thing if they can remediate the parts of themselves that would tear each other apart once they no longer face a foe capable of forging them like the Dead King(unsurprisingly they are similar to Praes in this way).

caoimhinh

I wonder about it too, but remember that Cordelia is the same person that thought a Crusade was what she needed to secure her reign over Procer (which is even on the summary of the story on the front page).

Then again, Cordelia has matured a lot since then, and Procer is not the same anymore. In the years after the Great War that put Cordelia on the throne of Salia, Procer had a weary peace, but they had too many fantassins that were becoming bandits because there wasn't a war where they could work, hence Cordelia's brilliant idea of having a Crusade where they would fight abroad and hopefully have their numbers diminished.

The current war against Keter is sort of a mixture of the two (Great War and Crusade) as it is bleeding the Principate, ravaging its people, and expending the lives of the fantassins while the madness of that war will probably divide the people into two: those who will grow mad and enamored with slaughter, and those who will be so weary of the horrors that they will advocate peace for the rest of their lives.

agumentic

> In the years after the Great War that put Cordelia on the throne of Salia, Procer had a weary peace

From what I gather, there weren't "years" after Cordelia got the throne. The civil war ended something like months before the beginning of the series. Kingfisher Prince was about sixteen and a half when Cordelia was crowned and "barely twenty" when the Dead King's invasion has begun.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I don't have exact dates, though I think there are *at least* 3 to 5 years between Cordelia's election as First Prince and the start of the series.

But even if you are right, there would still be like 3 years between the start of the series and the Tenth Crusade.

[Liliet](#)

I also think I remember the news about the First Prince's election being quite new at the start of Book 1.

Oshi

The Accords will likely help in that matter. Establishing rules for Named will trickle into nations. You ask demi gods to play nice but then burn villages? Not to mention those very rules bind the names away from such horrors.

All this established is that the world is moving away from late stage medieval warfare into what our world would call the beginnings of modern warfare (long range communications, logistics and established armies).

Víctor

Great job, as always

mamm0nn

Hm, the song felt kind of cheap. Callow and Praesi soldiers have songs, and they've done them well. For the Principality to suddenly go 'Oh we sing a lot too, more than you guys in fact because it's our lifeblood or something.' just solicits a shrug from me.

Also, not a great call, using lancers against lancers. Same weight, same momentum and same reach but the undead are a lot more sturdy against this kind of damage. Should've left the undead to troops more expendable or better suited, and reap through Bones like wheat.

Konstantin von Karstein

From what I understand, the princess and her escort where the only troops close enough to intervene and try to contain the gate, so they didn't have the choice.

[Liliet](#)

Tbf only one language on Calernia, as far as we know, is literally called "Sung"

Sparsebeard

Well, "sung" would translate to "chanté", "chantant" is more like "melodious" (adjective)... but close enough.

KiltedBastich

"Chantant" literally translates as "singing", for example, "the army passed by singing" would translate as "l'armée passait en chantant".

Sparsebeard

Also true.

[Liliet](#)

Thanks!!!!

DoOd

Actually, chantant translates directly to singing.

Sinead

Honestly, just restructuring the framing to be that the _common folk_ have a song for everything, since it ties back to both being a means to keep spirit during the Ebb and Flow, along with all the other wars would work. Heck, it also may be a relic from the fact that the Fair Folk would probably ask for a song they never heard of in order to spare your life. Or some combination.

There is a way to reframe this chapter that highlights the people without making them just "the singers", since as you point out, everyone has songs/poetry.

[Mental Mouse](#)

On the flip side, everyone thinks *their* songs are best....

Sinead

True. I guess that story thread runs a bit too close to "Here They Come Again" without quite as much lustre.

I genuinely like the idea of cknstantly churning out art as a survival mechanism against the Fae so much the language becomes the language of singers (Chantant).

Miles

Should have just dropped a lake on em. There's even a basin and waterfalls, really easy compared to pulling one out of Arcadia or creating one out of a river.

Really, these slackers are slacking.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Excellent, as always.

RoflCat

Fantassin's Creed: Against the Black Tide.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Blood, it lent > Blood, which lent
Like we called it right (should be one or the other)
Old Bones like to > Old Bones likes to
love freedom > loved freedom
they have her > they gave her
charged against > charged again
took of her > took off her
that, having some > that; having so
as if had > as if she had
transitory Named > transitory Names
Rogue Sorcerers > Rogue Sorcerer
recognize first, > recognized first,
in a grown > in a crown
once rule Hainaut > once ruled Hainaut
"I have you > "I gave you
beauty in it > beauty into it
mover her > move her
the sun to west > the sun to the west
gate double in height > gate doubled in height
shook form > shook from
His work his > His work is
did it love it > did love it

Sinead

Another note: at the start of Roland's section

"differences in her" should be "their" if you were trying to have Roland reflect on the why he had to ask. As is, it comes across as being a dismissive, which I wouldn't think is the intent.

RoflCat

I think the implication was that he thought Headhunter was a she initially, then became unsure and thus asked.

Sinead

I see your point. I am wary of any retention of previous assumptions like that. Compare to Cat's use of "they" when discussing Headhunter with Klaus, since it is more encompassing when talking about people in general. I would easily concede the point if it's genuinely a non-issue.

To me, that may be a point to go back and reconsider. For my reading, it really jumped out the first time.

However, since I seem to be the only person who noticed/ commented on it, it may not be as big a deal.

LD1977

Nabila vs Nadila too

folros

"... the maps she'd had her FOOTPADS being to the war room..." A footpad is a highwayman, I'm guessing you ment footman?

Darkening

Maybe she stole them from someone lol.

Sugar Roll

Did the Archmage finally make an appearance? I feel like either the Pale Knight or the Wolfhound is accompanying him.

Daniel E

Could also be the Hawk looking for payback, having lost her own mount.

KageLupus

This whole chapter felt like it was building up to Catalina and Beatrice coming into Names. They both had a desperation to them due to the situations they were in. They both have a need to Do More (Beatrice to save Alaman honor in the Grand Alliance and Catalina wanting to save fantassins as a concept).

Add in the structure of the chapter itself, where their stories are linked with an established Named. Catalina starts a song while fighting a hard battle, which moves on to both Roland and Beatrice during their hard battles. The whole setup made me feel like it would lead to all three of their stories ending with an Aspect being used. Catalina even has a role she can step into as Captain-General. Beatrice is a little harder to Name, but something related to regaining lost honor and leading her people out of darkness wouldn't be impossible.

Darkening

Yeah, Beatrice's comment about how there's no notable Alamans in the alliance really seemed like it was a prelude to her proving herself some kind of hero and coming into a Name to be a representative of her people or something. And really, the exiled princess that returned and fought a great battle to reclaim her despoiled lands from the hands of darkness is a story that could have some real weight to it.

Liliet

Beatrice, maybe. Catalina, probably not. IMHO.

Captain Amazing

I've got a theory and will share it now! So Foundling has been doing a friendship is magic theme recently with the campfire and "don't do it alone" conversation. Also, most of her friends are dead. Clearly, this is a setup for necromancy. I think she gets her Name and a "Recall" aspect, ie to recall people from the dead. The catch is it only works on people in a hell and only if Judgement doesn't interfere, which it can't. I'm a die-hard Scorched Apostate fan and think he's coming back with a true resurrection from Sve Noc for his holy Night laser beams. The Repentant Magister is probably Contrition, as well as the Lone Swordsman and those are canonically hellbound right? There are no potential problems with this. Not unless dead Contrition heroes are holding back Triumphant or something. 😊

Unrelatedly, Foundling will adopt her friends' goblin baby if she lives through this all because Foundling, and start a tradition where the heir to her House is always adopted.

Axel Rafael

Captain Amazing: I can't express how, for some weird reason, the tradition would be epic, and the thought that she'd start it with a Goblin Baby sounds that much more epic 🥰🥰

[Mental Mouse](#)

The epicness may be coming from the shadow of David Byrne. But it's a Labyrinth of possibilities...

Phillip

*while David Byrne is awesome, I think you mean David Bowie

[Mental Mouse](#)

Indeed you are right.

Crash

At the risk of becoming Interlude Flow 2.0, I'm looking forward for the Callowan and Drow army interludes, if this keeps going.

Praneeth Kolichala

Taking the same risk, I also predict having an interlude dedicated to the bridge team, since it seems the nationalities interludes are only focusing on the battles occurring within the city.

Daniel E

I'm also happy to see that Edgar is still kicking, though my top pick here is the White Knight's crew.

It's not over until the fat lady sings. She has sung, and then a pair of Scourges arrive.

Interlude: Woeful

"Hardship does not create valour any more than rivers create fish. It is simply a circumstance where the valorous reveal themselves, and it would be a mistake to believe that what misery or ruin unveil could not also be brought into the light by love or duty."

– King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

Guillaume screamed in terror as he scraped desperately at the floor, trying to keep the winds from snatching him up in their like they had Leonie. His fingers were raw and bloody, the cut on his face was aching something fierce, he'd dropped his sword and Heavens it just wasn't going to be *enough*. He could feel the wind pulling at his feet, as if trying to drag him into the sky. The gales were thick with ash and dust, hard to peer through, but Guillaume had seen his friends go up into the whirlwind and never seen any of them return. It would be death if he went up. So he kept crawling forward as the cacophony of wind blotted out the rest of the world, like a fish fighting the current, but he was feeling a tug on his legs as the strength of the storm grew and – and, somehow, his hands had reached into a bubble of calm.

He did not waste time questioning the miracle, only dragging himself forward along the floor with the last of his strength as he panted and grunted and half-wept in relief. A hand grabbed him by the collar and he started in surprise, but he did not resist after realizing he was being dragged further into the bubble. There was not a trace of the winds here, he realized, and even the screams of the storm were muted. Guillaume looked up, his face covered in cold sweat and his arms still trembling, following the sight of a bracer-clad arm over a black gambeson up to a steel cuirass and then something that was impossible to mistake: a great black cloak with a patchwork of many colours stitched on, banners and stranger things.

The Mantle of Woe, he'd heard Callowans call it. And so it was the Black Queen's brown eyes considering him, set in a hard and angular face that seemed like it had been shaped to keep a frown. Guillaume shivered. They said the Queen of Callow was kind to the

commons, but she was still one of the Damned and who would tell if she decided to take his soul now?

"Your Majesty," he stammered, "I-"

Idly she flicked a finger at his forehead, the lights dimming around them, and Guillaume felt something cold slither through his veins and all the way up his face. Like a coiled snake, it waited under his cheek near his wound.

"That'll stop the bleeding," the Black Queen said, in slightly accented Chantant. "But you'll still need to get it healed or it'll infect."

Guillaume dragged himself up halfway to sitting, gingerly touching the edges of the deep cut on his cheek and finding that it no longer bled or stung. There was a cool, pleasant numbness instead when he prodded. Thanks stumbled out of his mouth and she offered half a nod before rising from her crouch, leaning heavily on a long staff of dead wood that gave off a sense of... solidity that one did not often find in dead things. The queen suddenly cocked her head to the side, as if she'd heard something he had not. He pricked his ear even as he pushed himself further away from the edge of the bubble, but he heard nothing aside from the distant screaming of the winds.

"Good, the Drake was overdue," the Black Queen said, speaking to thin air. "And Ishaq said they got the Hawk as well?"

There was a silence, then the queen grimaced.

"I don't care what the Artificer says, Hakram," she said. "Even if the Hashamallim themselves came down from the Heavens and personally pissed that Light, unless we see that body burn with our own eyes then the Hawk isn't dead. Pass the word to keep an eye out for her."

Merciful Heavens, Guillaume shivered. Were they all doomed, had the Black Queen had gone mad and now spoke to the wind? Or had her powers grown so fearful that she could speak to others who were far away? He was not sure which thought scared him more.

"Your Majesty," he tried. "I do not-"

Dark eyes turned to him.

"Be silent for a bit," the Black Queen said. "No, not you. There's this-"

She cocked an eyebrow.

"What's your name?"

"Guillaume," he slowly said.

She cast a glance at his equipment, the worried gambeson and dull cuirass that looked so shoddy compared to her own.

"Brabantine?" she guessed.

"I am," he said.

"A conscript named Guillaume stumbled into my stillness bubble," she told the air. "But never mind that. Does Archer have eyes on them?"

After a moment, she blinked in surprise.

"The Archmage came up himself?" she said. "Shit. They're going for a major breach, then, he wouldn't come personally unless he expected to have room to cast in. Who's the other one?"

Guillaume had, without even noticing it, lowered his guard. He must have, or else why would he feel his entire body clenching at the sight before him? The easy expression on the Black Queen's face went up in smoke, revealing a face that was all hard iron. Starlight dimmed around them, as if shying away in fear.

"Meant for Ishaq's band to get him, but we'll do," the Queen of Callow evenly said. "'Drani knows?"

A heartbeat, then she nodded.

"Good," the Black Queen said. "She can take the vanguard."

—

"Sahelian confirmed it," Hakram's voice spoke into her ear. "It's the Pale Knight with the Archmage. Catherine leaves the vanguard to you."

Indrani hadn't needed Flighty Fantom's say-so to be sure of what it was she was looking at, but Cat letting her start off the waltz was good news. So long as that damned storm was swirling about, she couldn't do much with her bow anyway. After the first and only time she'd been able to put an arrow in the Archmage by seeing a weak point in the winds, the Revenant had rebuilt his usual storm defence from the ground up so there would be no repeat. The most irritating part seemed that the Archmage was now seemingly able to bring other Revenants into its storm to protect them, which he hadn't been able to a few months back. The defences had improved again.

She was going to have to carve an opening with her swordarm.

"Got it," Indrani quietly replied, letting the paired stone carry her words.

She unstrung her bow, as it'd make for too easy a target otherwise, and slid it against her back in the leather sheath she'd made. Crouched atop the bastion to the north of the one that'd fallen to the assault of the Scourges, Archer studied the grounds she was going to have to assault once last time. The ramparts of Hainaut had fewer bastions than most walls, though she wasn't Cat or Hakram so she had no real idea why, but the way they were made was pretty straightforward. Two levels: the lower one accessible from the rampart themselves through gates on each side and the upper one accessible through stairs leading up from inside. Easy grounds to defend.

Trouble was that the dead had come from above, directly on the flat grounds of the upper level, so it was them that were defending. Might still be some soldiers huddled up below, since the Revenants seemed more interested in allowing iron ladders to land on the wall than pushing their advantage, but they wouldn't last long once the dead got to clearing them out. Indrani wasn't worried about the skeletons coming up the ladders, but she didn't like the look of that storm: not only was it spreading out from the bastion on which it was centered, the winds seemed to be getting stronger. If she tried to walk her way to the lower bastion, she risked getting caught up in that.

She narrowed her eyes, trying out a **Stride** along the path. The feeling wasn't as clear as when she used the aspect when journeying, but it still tended to give a hint – and this time, the sensation was that of a broken path. Yeah, like she'd thought those winds were going to be a headache. Fortunately, just because she had to go on foot didn't mean she had to take *this* particular. Between **See** and **Stride**, finding the thin places between Creation and the Ways had always been staggeringly easy to her and tonight was no exception: a little below her perch, two feet forward and five feet off the ground, there was a weakness. Someone must have used powerful magic there earlier, it had that kind of a taste.

Would it get her where she needed to go? Indrani listened to the pulse of her aspects carefully, then nodded in satisfaction. Close enough.

"Going," Archer told Hakram through the stones. "I'm using the Ways, and tell them to be careful with those winds. I think the storm is growing."

She did not wait for an answer before leaping down, tumbling through the thin veil on the Pattern even as she reached for her longknives. The Pale Knight was at hand, finally.

Time to teach the Scourge that killing Lysander had been a very fatal mistake.

The connection severed itself before he could sever it, which Adjutant took to mean Archer had entered the Twilight Ways.

It wouldn't be long before she popped out in the middle of the enemy then, as had been her wont since she'd learned she had a knack for 'sidling'. Unlike using gates it wouldn't forewarn the Revenants, another reason that Indrani was best suited among them to taking the vanguard. Even if he'd still had both his legs, he wouldn't have been able to... Hakram forced himself to concentrate on the here and now. Too often these days did his thoughts take him down fruitless paths. Fingers pressing on another stone, the orc linked to Catherine.

"Indrani is moving, using the Ways," he told her. "You need to prepare."

"I hear you," she replied. "Is Masego ready as well?"

That was the essence of their striking plan, after all. Indrani was to interrupt the Archmage's casting of the storm, freeing Catherine and Masego to hammer both Scourges immediately with strong workings. From there the plan grew... fluid, as things grew harder to anticipate, but there were ideas that'd been discussed.

"All he needs is my signal," Hakram replied.

"Then let's get this going," Catherine replied, severing the link.

From her tone, the orc decided, she'd be smiling. He found he was as well. Grim as the circumstances were, it had been too long since the Woe had fought as one. That Vivienne's skulking would be replaced by Akua Sahelian's was not an improvement to his eyes, but these days Vivienne had duties of her own and – and it seemed that Sahelian wanted to speak. He touched the corresponding tone, and immediately her smooth speaking voice resonated in his ear.

"I have eyes on the undead climbing the ladders," the shade said. *"Most are unarmoured, not shock troops, and they appear to be bringing up barrels. Should I risk a closer look?"*

In most battles, it was Catherine that would have made such a call. Weighed the risks and benefits, then send out another to see her will through. Tonight, though, the burden fell on him. With the Woe being split among so many places, there could be no easy coordination save through the artefact Hierophant had crafted for that very purpose. That also meant that the one handling the artefact would make decision that would, typically, belong to the leader of their band. Hakram had been unsure of his own feelings, when Catherine had pressed the duty onto him. On one hand, it was a mark of great trust on her part. On the other,

it seemed like an assignment perfectly tailored to keep him away from the fighting.

"Do it," Adjutant gravelled. "Archer's going in, we need no surprises."

"As you say," Sahelian replied.

It had been the delayed realization that someone would have to take up this task even if he refused it that settled the matter for him, in truth. And that anybody but him would either understand the Woe less, be distrusted by Catherine to see this done properly or be Vivienne Dartwick, who was needed to keep an eye on the Army of Callow in their stead. That the work existed beyond him, that it was not simply made to tuck him aside safely, had soothed the ugly assumptions that had been lurking in the back of his mind. He was shaken out of his thoughts by footsteps, one of his goblin attendants scuttling up the ladder leading up to the belfry overlooking the western rampart where he'd set up.

"Word from the streets," Lieutenant Tweaker called out, popping her head over the edge. "All invading gates are closed but two, and Beatrice Volignac is wounded but alive."

Hakram nodded.

"Time estimate for the last two?" he asked.

"The Rogue Sorcerer is headed for the first one, so not long," the goblin replied. "The other is still disgorging soldiers, though, so only when the Levantines get to-"

The head popped away and there was some chatter further down before it popped back up.

"The Peregrine took care of it," Lieutenant Tweaker corrected. "Only the Sorcerer's left now, a half hour at most."

"Keep me informed," Adjutant simply replied.

"That's the aim, sir," the goblin grinned.

He snorted, eyes returning to the rampart where a storm still raged, but the calm was not to last.

"Ah," Akua Sahelian suddenly breathed into his ear. "*There appears to be something of a complication, Adjutant.*"

"Define complication," Hakram warily said.

"*I have obtained one of the barrels in question,*" the shade said, "*and just opened it. While I've no alchemical kit at hand, I do believe this is highly concentrated poison gas.*"

It fell into place a moment later. The storm growing, how the Scourges had been remarkably defensive in stance after their initial overwhelming strike. The Archmage had not begun to unleash offensive magics because he was about to turn his storm into one, by making the winds poisonous.

"Can you delay this?" Hakram asked.

The fingers of his dead hand, one of two, drummed against the end of the arm of his wheelchair – a small sculpted skull that Masego had been kind enough to add at his request.

"Unlikely," Akua Sahelian replied. "My acquisition of the barrel did not go unremarked, and I am now pursued by an entire flock of _"

There was a loud screech on the other side, followed by some very unflattering comments about vultures and baldness in Mthethwa that he suspected the shade had not actually meant for him to hear. Either way, it was now clear who the information needed to be passed on to.

Hakram's fingers found the stone and the dance began anew.

—

Guillaume would, in the safety of his own mind, admit to being curious as to why the Black Queen was just standing there and waiting. He wasn't fool enough to ask, though, or to look in the mouth the horse that was her continued presence here warding danger away. Guillaume had been born in a proper town, been taught some letters by the House of Light, so he wasn't some countryside yokel. Most of the stories about the Black Queen had to be guff. Tales swapped around camp fires, getting bigger with time or just invented wholesale – for some reason, some of the easterners kept insisting the queen had castrated an ogre in single combat. There had to be some truth to them, though, and Gods knew there weren't a lot of monsters out there that the Queen of Callow wouldn't make think twice.

That was reassuring, in a grim sort of way, which had Guillaume wondering if he had not ferreted out the quintessence of what it meant to be Callowan.

"You'll need to run when we lift the storm."

Jolted out of his philosophical musings, Guillaume started and turned to look at the Damned that'd addressed him. The queen looked tense, face set in that frown again, but not otherwise particularly concerned. It was kind of soothing, to have someone around looking at the end times like they were some sort of irritating inconvenience instead of the end of the world.

"You don't need to tell me twice," Guillaume feelingly said, then bit his lip. "I didn't ask, Your Majesty, but my company..."

"If they were on the rampart, they're dead," the Black Queen replied, not unkindly, suddenly then raised a finger to silence him. "I'm listening."

There was a long pause.

"And Akua thinks the winds will carry it?" the queen quietly asked.

Guillaume blinked in confusion. He'd never heard of anyone of that name, though he then reminded himself it was exceedingly unwise to eavesdrop too hard here. Boys from proper little towns like him weren't meant to hear royal conversations.

"We'll only get one clear shot at the two of them," the Black Queen reluctantly said. "What's the risk it could spread into the city?"

A grimace ensued.

"Archer should be able to burn out a single breath's worth," the queen muttered. "And she's got the scarf to filter, afterwards. Shit. How many survivors left from that first strike, do you think?"

Even as she leaned against her staff, the Black Queen – *Merciful Heavens*, Guillaume thought as he realized with a start that he was probably taller than her – worried her lip. One of her hands was twitching, he noticed, fingers curling into claws as they clenched against her palm and then slowly unclenched. Brown eyes swept across the winds, and then moved to him. He looked away hurriedly, and three long breaths passed.

"Fuck it," the Black Queen sighed. "We'll improvise. I'm going in, let Hierophant know."

Somehow dimly relieved, Guillaume risked a glance at the villainess. She offered her him a wild smile, for a heartbeat turning that dour tanned face into one that had him blushing.

"Hang on tight, Guillaume of Brabant," she said. "This is going to get *rough*."

—

"Why even bother making a plan, if she was going to discard it?" Masego complained.

"*We hadn't accounted for the gas,*" Hakram replied. "*If it gets into the city, this battle's over.*"

"As our defeat," Hierophant hazarded.

It seemed a reasonable guess, considering.

"Yes, Masego, as our defeat," Hakram amiably agreed. "Catherine's striking, are you-"

The connection between the two paired stones fizzled for a moment, dimming the last of his words as in the distance Hierophant's glass eyes glimpsed Night rising up in a great tide of darkness. Catherine was putting her back into it, if the reverberations from her working affected even active spellcraft in the area. An interesting phenomenon, and he itched to have a closer look at that in more contained conditions where the extraneous factors could be filtered out, but alas it would have to wait. Glints of a faded summer sun lighting up every dark, Masego studied his friend's attack curiously. It seemed a brutish thing, at first glance, a mere tide of shadow slammed into the Tumult's storm.

That the Scourge immediately answered with light magics, cutting beams of glowing power that tore into the darkness, was yet another reason why the Revenant was utterly underserving of being called an *archmage*. The effrontery was galling, truly. Someone with proper master of the higher mysteries would have noticed that Catherine, ever clever behind her pretence of thuggishness, hadn't just gathered Night and tossed it at an enemy working. The light cut through so easily not only because of its properties as one of the classical elements but also because that wave of Night was *meant* to be broken. It shook the storm some, when impacting it, but when the winds unmade it the darkness allowed itself to be carried by the gales like smoke.

Within thirty heartbeats, the entire storm was filled with a thick haze of Night. Masego felt a sliver of pride had how well she'd learned the foundational principles of Trismegistan sorcery: the essence of magic was, after all, usurpation. Akua Sahelian was to be commended.

"-are you ready?"

"I am," Hierophant replied. "You may tend to the others. My attack is at hand."

Surrounded by three dozen barrels of bronze rods positively dripping with invested sorcery, Masego had not held back in Wrestling what he required for a fitting admonishment. The magic was thick and pure, its tint strangely similar to that of a thin layer of oil atop water, and it was slowly circling around him according to his will. In the distance, his eyes piercing through the veil of Night surrounding Catherine, he found her silhouette raising her staff into the air. Good, she was about done then. The moment it struck down, to Masego's unspoken glee, the Night

spread out within the storm roiled for one moment as the Tumult had his own spell stolen away from his control. Just long enough for Catherine Foundling to disperse it, abruptly breaking the storm into fading wisps of wind.

"And now my turn," Masego murmured, robes stirring in the evening wind.

Like a streak of lightning the sorcery shot forward through the sky. Hierophant's concentration stumbled when he saw Indrani walk out of thin air – she must have sidled through the Ways – behind the Tumult, who did not notice. The Pale Knight did, however, and before a heartbeat had passed the Scourge had his great axe in hand and was moving towards her as he shouted a warning.

"Too slow," Hierophant spoke through clenched teeth.

The filaments of magic snaked forward, sliding between them, and with a curt gesture of the wrist Masego shaped the sorcery into one of the first formulas he'd ever learned: out of the end of the filament a textbook prefect magic missile erupted, splashing harmless against the Revenant's armoured helm but blinding it for a moment. Archer ducked under the burning flame unleashed by the Tumult before he even turned completely, circling to stay behind his back, even as Hierophant began shaping the sorcery again. That missile had cost him, he estimated, one part out of a thousand.

Time to see what he might achieve with some halfway decent spellwork instead.

—

Of course Cat had gotten it into her head that was Indrani *clearly needed* was for her cover to be snuffed out just before she came out of the Twilight Ways. You know, just so she could be extra visible for the fucking Pale Knight and all. Gods, what a wench. Archer caught the axe between the edge of two knives, struggling against the Scourge for a moment before hastily stepping back when it became clear she wasn't going to win on strength alone. The bastard was even stronger than she'd come to believe from their first tangle at Lauzon's Hollow.

"This was unwise," the Pale Knight said.

"So was that second bottle of red last night, but that's life for you," Indrani agreeably replied.

He might have continued the conversation, but instead a streak of colourful magic darted in behind his head and seven wisps of hellflame shot out. The Revenant batted at them with the side of his axe, smothering a few, but more snuck around and slithered into the gap of his armour where they burst. With the Pale Knight

distracted, Indrani went back on the offensive and moved to put him between her and the Archmage – which wasn't enough, damn it, the seventeen arrows of silver light that shot out from the top of the Scourge's staff curved around his ally. Shit, she was going to have to- and a gate into Twilight shivered to life right in their way, swallowing them all up. Archer grinned. Good, Cat was finally back in the fight.

She stepped around the gate, ducking under a swing of the Pale Knight's axe and darting forward. The undead in his pale plate tried to knee her at the junction of the shoulder and neck but Indrani tumbled forward and under him. Her longknives cut at the back of the knees as she rose, where most armours had a weakness, but she found no purchase as her blades scratched only steel. That they scratched at all was an improvement on her previous record against the armour, so- ah, she'd been right. There had been a weak point in the armour dead, it was just that the Revenant had had melted steel poured into the back of his knee. Still a weakness with the right tool, then.

And one more strike for Cat's theory that the Pale Knight's strange immunity was related specifically to his armour.

Archer kept moving forward, letting her enemy's backswing pass less than an inch behind her quiver, and got to the Archmage's flank. The Revenant was struggled with Zeze's latest bout of cleverness, a pool of raw magic he'd Wrested and was using to pump out spells from a distance by giving shape to parts of the pool – at the moment it was shooting out small tendrils of darkness that Indrani's Name screamed at her to avoid, so probably some kind of nasty Wasteland curse. The Archmage was frontloading a shield to deal with it, a pane of transparent light, and while its attention was there... ah, not so much of a sucker. Her attempt to sneak a blade into its back was met by a rippling circle of space that almost blew the longknife out of her hand.

And now the Pale Knight was on her again, only for a gate to open in front of him. Indrani went around, putting the gate between herself and the Archmage, which allowed her to see Catherine come out with a bare sword and sock the bastard in the side of the head with her pommel.

"Took you long enough," Archer said.

Cat snorted, the two of them eyeing the Pale Knight as he steadied his footing and the gate closed behind them.

"Took the scenic route," Catherine Foundling idly said. "It's such a nice night out."

And behind them there was a scream as the wind began spinning above the Archmage, who never did like fighting without a storm to cover his –

–

Hierophant cocked an eyebrow. Did the Tumult take him for an utter fool? Certainly he could not **Wrest** to separate entities at the same time, but what kind of a second-rate conjurer would he be if he'd not accounted for such a weakness in his chosen strategy? He set the magic he'd gathered to spinning around itself, slowly feeding a spell that made it rotate as a globe to insignificant costs, and dug into his aspect with relish as he reached for the dawning storm and-

–

A column of condensed lightning struck the Archmage three times, and Indrani's heart skipped a beat. It simply could not be denied she had good – nay, exquisite – taste in men. The Pale Knight suddenly went stiff, turning towards, Catherine and in a strange voice spoke a single word to her in a language that Archer did not recognize.

Catherine went still.

–

"I can't stop them any longer," Akua Sahelian said. "They have enough casters concentrating on me that should I linger capture is certain."

Hakram grimaced. The shade had done well at keeping anyone from climbing the ladders and joining the melee atop the bastion, but it'd only been a matter of time until Keter put together a force capable of dealing with her. He'd honestly not expected her to last so long. Much as he disliked the woman, Adjutant would still acknowledge the skillful performance she had offered tonight given her... reduced capabilities.

"Retreat," Adjutant gravelled. "Are Revenant coming up?"

"At least two, neither Scourges," Sahelian replied.

"I'll pass it along," Hakram said. "You know what to do."

She did not acknowledge his words, only severing the connection, a sure sign she was being attacked by enemies but trying not to show it too obviously. Hearing someone come up the ladder, Adjutant turned to see Lieutenant Tweaker's head pop over the edge.

"Movement at the front gate," she told him. "At least three wyrms seen, and it's looking like an all-out assault."

Hakram, idly, touched his prosthetic. A beautiful piece of work by Masego, that. He laid a finger against a groove in the wood, as if to scratch at a phantom itch.

"Sir," Lieutenant Tweaker began, "should we-"

Skeletal fingers closing against the length of wood, Hakram whipped out the wand and pressed his thumb against the rune sculpted into the side. There was a ripple of kinetic force as the enchantment was unleashed, the lieutenant's shape fading and turning into a misshapen Revenant halfway into a leap at him. Adjutant dropped the wand, hand finding the skull on the arm of his wheelchair and drawing out the axe it was the pommel of. He rose with the movement, Name pulsing with joy, and the blade split the skull in half as the undead's iron claws failed to pierce his chain mail. The Revenant dropped to the ground twitching as the necromancy tried to assert control of the limbs again. Half his body felt aflame, but he steeled himself through the pain.

"You got a goblin's speed right," Adjutant clinically assessed, "but not the weight. Sloppy."

The axe went up, the Revenant's eyes going wide, and Hakram of the Howling Wolves bared his fangs.

"Next time, Dead King? Send a Scourge."

The axe went down.

—

It was the aptness of the counters that allowed Hierophant to understand what he had been dealing with all this time. It was obvious, in retrospect.

The Tumult had answered the Liessen Chisel with a perfect shield in the Pelagian school, hellflame with a Stygian dry dousing developed during Maleficent the Second's wars against the League, used Jaquinite uncertainty principles to disrupt the magic he'd wrested halfway through a spell. The uninitiated among the heroes had insisted on calling the Revenant the 'Archmage' because of its broad variety of masteries in magic, but they'd never noticed that the masteries were *impossibly* broad. The only individual Masego had ever seen use so many different magics was the Rogue Sorcerer, and if he had never met Roland he might have dismissed this interpretation as him misreading the enemy's spellcraft. His eyes opened at the possibility, though, it was impossible to miss the telltale marks. This should not, however, be possible. Roland used a great variety of principles, but he had the protection of an aspect and though knowledgeable he was not a *master*.

The Tumult, however distasteful an entity, was.

Which was absurd, because those masteries could not have been acquired after death: the dictate that undead could not learn was not as absolute as some seemed to believe, but understanding the mysteries of an entirely new school of magic definitely qualified. And it was highly unlikely to have been achieved by living, as Hierophant was rather skeptical that someone capable of mastering multiple schools of magic, whether it drove them made or not, would not have made it into the pages of history. Which meant he was missing something. On a hunch, he tried a repeat: sending both a Liessen Chisel and a spurt of hellfire at the enemy from opposite ends of the massed sorcery. And he got his answer, at last.

The Tumult did parry both, but when it did it used Pelagian shields for both instead of the apter answer he had shown himself capable of using. Moreover, the Tumult had already shown he could cast two spells simultaneously so there was no reason for it not to. Unless it could not. *He can only use one school of magic at a time*, Masego deduced. And there was an obvious explanation as to why. He reached for his paired stone.

"Hakram," Hierophant said. "I have a theory about the Tumult."

"I'm listening," Adjutant replied.

He sounded a little out of breath, strangely enough.

"It is not a single Revenant," Masego said. "It is a multitude of dead spellcaster souls stitched onto the same corpse, likely with an oversoul – perhaps the body's original one – handling matters of control."

There was a moment of silence.

"If we target that oversoul?" Hakram asked.

"The King of Death is a skillful necromancer," Hierophant reluctantly replied. "It will not destroy the Revenant. It should, however, make it highly erratic as different souls struggle for control."

The orc chuckled.

"Well, let's see what we can do about that."

—

They'd taken too long to put down the Scourges, so now it was all going south. Indrani backpedaled, letting the axe pass half an inch away from her chin as behind her a blue-tinted shield took the impact from the four black streaks of sorcery that'd been aimed at her back. She flicked a feint at the Pale Knight's face that the Revenant didn't even bother to parry, ending up touching

his helm, but the shaft of his axe was smashed into her elbow and she was forced to abort her actual blow and scuttle away as she swallowed a scream. Fuck, was it broken or just sprained? Either way, it strung like a bitch. She spared a glance for Cat, who'd just set a Revenant aflame and blown a few skeletons off the bastion but had just been forced to coat herself in a bubble of Night as a pack of undead mages tossed fireballs at her.

Indrani's straying eyes were not, to her surprise, rewarded by the Pale Knight pursuing. Instead the Revenant was going for... shit, barrels? As in those things full of poison Hakram had mentioned? One, two, three, strokes and three were split open as grey fog came billowing out. She hastily pulled up her scarf, trusting the enchanted weave to filter to toxins, which was long enough for the Archmage to attempt birthing another storm and Masego to shut him down. Unfortunately, the figure in grey and purple robes seemed indifferent to the lightning that was cast down on it. It flickered down the robes, grounding itself into the stone floor, and the Archmage began casting again. *Keeping Hierophant tied up*, Archer decided.

On the bright side, Indrani had just been given a moment to breathe so she reached for the pouch at her side and carefully unfolded the green cloth folded within before sliding it down the length of both her blades and tossing it to the side. It left them coated in a heavy transparent film, as she'd been told it would. Breathing deep, she went for the fog even as Cat wove some kind of bubble of darkness to suck it out and keep it from spreading too far. As she'd expected, the Pale Knight came out of the smoke aiming at Catherine's flank. Indrani sped forward, leaning into **Stride** to quicken her steps, and had to leap when just before she got into range the Revenant turned and swung at her. Catherine hammered at the Pale Knight's knee to hinder him, but a lesser Revenant was going after her again with a spear so...

Flow, Indrani thought, letting the aspect fill her up.

The axeblood went up, but she slapped it aside with a longknife and spun on herself. She landed on the Pale Knight's shoulder, tempted to attack but knowing that if she ended movement the aspect would end with it. She slid down the Revenant's back as it tried to catch her foot, landing behind it in a crouch and smoothly stabbing into the back of both knees. She found only a little bite, but it would be enough. The Pale Knight turned and struck at the same time, sweeping along the ground but she rolled between his legs and emerged in front of him. His extended arm was an opening, and she swiped the flat of a blade against the armoured elbow. The kick caught her in the ribs and one broke, but it was with a smile of triumph that she rolled against the ground and drew herself into a crouch.

The Pale Knight froze for a moment, before dropping his axe and pawing at his elbow as her aspect flickered out.

"Bad choice," Archer said. "The doses on the knees have had longer to spread."

Idly, she reached in the pouch and picked out a white cloth she used to wipe her blades clean with.

"What did you *do*?" the Pale Knight asked.

He stumbled, finding his footing hard to maintain.

"Delivered to you with the Concocter's regards," Indrani coldly said. "An alchemical acid that devour only bone and steel, repelled by all other substances."

The Pale Knight collapse to the ground, the only think keeping his upper legs connected to his thighs the stretch of pale plate covering them.

It was, Indrani thought with a hard smile, just the start.

—

Hierophant Wrested control of the storm again, jaw clenched, and shattered the spell.

How very irritating. Having grasped that he was facing a superior practitioner, the Tumult no longer even tried to do more than toss the occasional spell the way of Catherine and Indrani: instead he now repeatedly spent his power trying to birth another storm, not in hope of success but because doing so would command Masego's attentions. Hierophant himself rarely had long enough to do more than to form the occasional second-rate spell and send it flying before he must focus his attentions on the spell again, and the repeated struggle of wills against the Revenant was starting to tire him. Unlike the magic taken from inert objects, the Scourge's own must be forcefully usurped.

Masego felt sweat beading his forehead and going down his back. No, this stalemate was not to his advantage or that of his companions. The Tumult indicated the rhythm of their clashes, which meant he had an easier time sending spells at Catherine and Indrani than Hierophant had of defending them. The last three times it'd begun using increasingly obscure curses, and for the last Masego would admit that he'd been largely guessing when he'd used Sisi's Sphere as a defence — he'd not been certain it would actually work. He must regain the momentum, and that meant one thing: when the storm next began to form, Hierophant let it.

Instead he gathered all the sorcery he had left in a spinning globe, shaping it in one great working.

"Seven pillars hold up the sky," he began.

The world shuddered, seven wooden pillars forming out of raw magic around the Tumult. The Revenant tried to abandon the spell hastily, but Masego smiled. *It is too large*, he thought. *And it takes you a moment to change between schools*. Four runes formed above the Revenant's head, linked by a circle of pale light.

"Four cardinals, one meridian," he continued. "The wheel unbroken, spokes that are not. Thou shall not leave the circle."

And *that*, Hierophant decided, was a stalemate he could live with.

—

"Funny thing," Catherine Foundling said. "It was actually the Mirror Knight that helped me figure out how to kill you."

The Mantle of Woe fluttering around her Cat — no, in that moment Indrani could only think of her as the *Black Queen* — parried the last lesser Revenant's spear blow and severed its head with a brutal riposte, ripping out the blade and kicking the body over the edge of the bastion and onto a skeleton trying to climb up. The Pale Knight tried to push itself up with its axe, but Indrani kicked it away. The Revenant fell to his knees. She stepped away, sheathing her blades and reaching for her quiver.

"It's the Named you avoided in Cleves," the Black Queen idly continued. "The Red Knight and the Myrmidon. The Red Knight I understand — Devour is a headache and a half to deal with, but the *Myrmidon*? I couldn't figure out why."

The Pale Knight brought out another axe but Indrani had an Unraveller in hand — a great javelin artefact, one she'd adjusted so it could be fired from her bow but still very much a javelin. A swipe had that axe clattering away again and Archer added a smack against the helm so he would fall down on his back.

"But then I remembered that I never struck at you without adding Night to the blow," Catherine added, Night gathering to her like rivers to the sea. "And it fell into place. It's strength you have trouble with. Of that front, aside from the Mirror Knight who's damned slow those two are the physically strongest Named."

It was kind of hot, Indrani admitted to herself, when she monologued. She got that gleam in her eye, like she... well, maybe after this if they could spare the time. Probably counted as a form of healing, if you squinted a bit. Night caught her by the shoulders and tendrils began hoist her up into the sky. Higher and higher and higher, until the Pale Knight was barely more than a silhouette trying to get up, and then the darkness seized her tight.

"And down we go," Archer manically grinned.

She angled the unraveller downwards and the tendrils of Night drew back a bit before *throwing* her down. Eyes wide open, silent as she went down, she watched as the Pale Knight hacked away at the tendrils of shadow tripping him and slowly began to rise just in time to look up and see her. She met his eyes a heartbeat before the impact, too late for him to swing at her, and she slammed the unraveller through his throat through the gorget of pale steel. The Scourge gasped and she leaned in, ignoring the tremors of pain going down her legs from the landing.

"His name was Lysander," Indrani whispered. "Where you end up, carry that with you."

And with a final wrench she severed the head clean. Panting, Archer tried to get up but stumbled only for Cat to reach her side and help her stand. She also, bless her petty soul, kicked the Revenant's head. Indrani cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Fucker killed my horse," Catherine said, unrepentant.

Indrani saw that already undead were coming over the wall, the iron ladders steadily disgorging their lot, but it was the Archmage her gaze strayed to. Though bound by Masego's miracle, the Scourge had barely scuffed his robes throughout the fighting. For a bastard who preferred to fight at range, he'd proved remarkably resilient up close.

"Still need to finish that before we retreat for healing," Catherine muttered, "though at least he's still-"

A wooden pillar loudly cracked.

"Fuck," Cat said, "I really ought to know better by now."

Three of them blew and the Archmage's hand swept out, but no magic ensued. Indrani pushed away and reached for her longknives even as Cat struck out with a spear of Night, but a shape moved in the way before it could hit the Revenant. Akua Sahelian, dressed in threads of shadow, moved stiffly so stand between the Archmage and the Night. Cat pulled the blow at the last moment.

"Go through," Akua said through gritted teeth. "I'll-"

Her mouth shut. The last pillars shattered one after another and the Archmage shook free. Masego struck from a distance with brilliant blue flames but they splashed harmlessly on a shield, and when Cat threw a few threads of shadow they were carved through with arrows of silver light. Archer cautiously approached, keeping an eye on Akua as she did. They couldn't let the Revenant flee, as it was obviously ramping up to. The Wastelander must have been sneaking up on the Archmage and gotten

caught, she thought, only that didn't seem like Akua at all. Weapon-wise, if the Archmage put her in the way it shouldn't be an issue. She had only a silver dagger in hand, enchanted by the looks of it, but wait wasn't that a –

A flock of yellow bee-like spurts of flame from Masego had the Scourge putting up a swirling ball of power to suck them up, while Catherine's curving arrows of darkness were met with matches in silver light. And with both hands occupied, the Archmage had nothing left to spare when Akua Sahelian thrust a ritual dagger into his left eye.

"Please," the shade amicably smiled. "As if I would allow myself to be snatched like some petty errant soul. For that presumption, allow me to take one of yours."

The Revenant screamed with a dozen different voices as she ripped out the knife, its blade glinting with eerie light, and the Wastelander smiled in triumph. Indrani hurried forward. If they could finish the Archmage here and now... All Indrani saw was a flicker, but she was the Archer and so she knew what she'd glimpsed. An arrow. And, heart clenching, she knew where it'd been aimed. She turned, watching a circle of Night flare around Catherine but failing to stop the black-feathered arrow that punched into the side of her face. Cat fell the floor, spurting blood, and even as Akua let out a scream of dismay the Archmage leapt off the edge of the bastion.

In the distance, two crows screeched in agony.

In the sky above Hainaut there were great rumbling sounds as power gathered, thousands of mages in the plains below unleashing their rituals at least. One after the other, three great gates above the city.

And water began pouring out of them.

kitebroken1

In the sky above Hainaut there were great rumbling sounds as power gathered, thousands of readers in the plains below unleashing their rituals at least. One after the other, three great gates opened above the city.

And votes began pouring out of them.

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>
Vote!

ruduen

So, we have a gap in which Cat wasn't visible (while going through the gate), and Cat getting killed by someone who explicitly told others to anticipate as still living.

How many 'deaths' does that make it for her now? It really isn't one of her best habits.

[Adrian_V](#)

And we just stoped seeing the POV from Guillaume, and not even a comment about him like if he fled or Indrani seeing him dead or fleeing or something.

[Adrian_V](#)

Forgot ton say how suspicios that is.....

[Liliet](#)

Catherine went from where Guillaume was to where Indrani was, Indrani was never in position to see his position.

[Adrian_V](#)

I meant that normally we get some closure on why the narrative changes, here it just stopped without even his take on how she put her game face on or a comment from her to take cover, i just feel is weird and suspicious.

New theory: that thing Cat did to him wasn't healing or just healing, she did something to have a failsafe to come back or take him over (a little too villaounous but who knows)

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the last thing we heard from him was Cat putting on her game face, so,

hakureireimu

She also took longer than usual to go through.

Tenthyr

And through the Pale Knight, did the dead king say:

Mistake.

nick012000

He says, as he makes the mistake that gives Cat her Name. LOL. I guess he didn't know that Black gave her the name of Squire by stabbing her through the chest.

ruduen

And Cat's eventual retort:

"I don't speak that."

Big I

Hahaha, Cat taught the Dead King Lakeomancy. Which is a horrible twist for our guys, but still pretty funny.

Also, Cat keeps being heroic. Saving Guillame, then throwing out her plan to stop the gas. And I wonder if Akua gets to keep the soul of the Tumult, and what she might be able to do with it.

AndromedaStar

I'm mostly surprised that it's described as water. Why not pour nasty poison/acid/etc out of the gates? Though it's more difficult to get a lake's worth of those I suppose.

[Liliet](#)

There probably aren't acid lakees in Arcadia, no.

The threat of the lakeomancy gates is that even if you close them instantly, that's still several tons of water crashing down into your army. It doesn't matter that it's water, it's the "several tons" part that's crucial.

KageLupus

I'm sure Cat would say she is being practical with both decisions. Saving Guillaume didn't cost her anything, and stopping the poison is more important tactically than sticking to their plan.

If that poison got in the storm and blew over the city it would kill every non Named. There would be no army and the Dead King would have won. He doesn't need the Scourges to survive at that point, since all he wants is to break the army anyway.

btnerb

Oh no! The dead king has learned Lakeomancy!

To be fair, the essence of (Trismegistan) sorcery is usurpation – using your enemies ideas is just that same principle in a different arena. Still, that is going to be a bad, bad day for the defenders. If only the Saint of Swords was there to counter it.

Darkening

It was pilgrim that broke it first time, though she did block some of it coming through.

[308924810a](#)

Well at least he didn't improve on it.

Wasn't there a magical girl fic which used portals and differences in the rotational speed of the earth at the equator compared to the poles to let the magical girl launch kinetic attacks consisting of gigantic piles of rocks, dirt and water travelling at a very high speed?

PS I think it was this one <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Literature/SagaOfSoul>

At least he isn't hitting them with accelerated lakes that hit hard enough to carve into the mountain the city is on.

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, so Cat's Name was solidifying in this chapter, and she has story weight when it comes to deaths actually strengthening her, but she is a villain, so there's going to be some side effects, to say the least. I have to wonder how much the Crows anchored themselves in Cat, and how many thousands of soldiers are going to die before Cat returns in a dark miracle.

SpeckofStardust

Losing cat against 3 reverents? not worth demand refund,
Also goodbye city.

TeK

It's like when your friend defeats you again and again by spamming the same unblockable move, so you learn this move and spam it on him.

shadw21

EE, please! We need to know! Is this leading to some sort of crossover plot with The Wandering Inn?

[ftaku](#)

Ikr, everyone killing main characters right now

noth

3 stories im reading had their main character "killed" in some way, is there a writer challenge that we dont know about?

Daltos

What 3 stories if I may ask?

Miles

Please, Cat has come back from worse with less.

MagnaMalusLupus

Hey, it's not Saturday yet; no spoilers!

TinfoilHat

My theory: its the same author writing both stories. Have they ever been photographed together? No?

I rest my case

MagnaMalusLupus

Hey, it's not Saturday yet; no spoilers!

Raivshard

Oi! Spoilers!

[ErraticErrata](#)

I've not read the Wandering Inn, it's purely coincidental.

Tom

To be fair, this wouldn't be a serious battle if Cat didn't die.

Captain Amazing

Good story, nice ending. Everyone dies so no loose ends. What's your next project EE?

[ErraticErrata](#)

It's called Pale Lights. Will keep you posted.

Sinead

At last, the Fall.

Crack theory: She has to petition the Gods themselves. The Angels were just a warm up act.

I hope Cat's return (as I presume we are not getting a full book without her perspective) is in the form of getting her body back (or at least a constant form). The Wandering Bard's "sentient Name" style is horrifying, and I would think is antithesis to what Cat's goals are.

[Adrian_V](#)

Either we are about to see some really dramatic come back or something much simpler: it was a grazing hit as in enough to knock her out a bit but not kill her (it happens even to bullets, sometimes it even looks like a clean shot)

Also did Nessie just copy Cat? This is plagiarism!! I knew he was bad but this is just horrible, can't believe he is willing to go to such low ways, shame on him!! xD

[Liliet](#)

It's definitely not a grazing hit.

Not because of whatever it said in this chapter (though the crows and Akua screaming is a bit of a hint), but because that's what happened the previous time. The Arsenal arc already had a cliffhanger of "is Cat dead???" drawn out across several chapters even, only to reveal that It Was Just A Flesh Wound.

Now everyone expects that, so... it wouldn't really carry the drama and tension that it did the first time. Nah, we're going to find out next chapter that yes she is in fact actually dead, that's a dead body, not alive, the arrow worked, the Hawk's Aspect struck true.

What also happened during the Arsenal arc was that we had multiple POVs that were utterly unaware that anything had happened with Catherine. So what I'm predicting is that this time, we're going to go across POVs that are very much aware / find out before our own eyes that Catherine died, and we're going to see the ensuing reaction / panic.

Someone on discord also wisely pointed out that this might be the disaster Vivienne was summoned to prevent: she can rally people in Cat's absence in a way no-one else can.

Cat's dead, but she has a history of not STAYING that way... 😊

That Other Guy

But if she does stay that way, I vote Tyrion Lannister for Black Queen... in drag.

[Liliet](#)

Sinead

I like the idea that after Cat's return as Peacemaker/ Arbiter/whatever her name will be, she fully embraces the Mantle of Woe's colour scheme with a a coloured dress under the Mantle of Woe and just spends an entire chapter enjoying the fact that she is no longer the freaking Black Queen and can actually wear something nice once in a while.

Also RIP Black Queen Name. It's twice it's almost come to being and then broken at the pivotal moment. Hell Indrani started thinking of her as Black Queen.

I'd say Cat dodged the bullet there, but that's not in the best of tastes at the moment is it?

Sinead

Would it be premature for Cat to add the Dead King's purple banner to her cloak for coming back from Death? That would just make her missing Orange and Red for a complete Pride Flag, yes?

[Liliet](#)

Catherine wears exclusively rainbow colored clothes including skirts for a while.

Vivienne has to urgently dig up a tailor / designer who can make that look good.

Sinead

Will she be Cat the Many Coloured, or Cat with the Technicolored Dream-Cloak?

I mean, I think everyone should wear kilts, so I wouldn't complain if she does wear vibrant colours.

[Liliet](#)

Cat has been whining about overly dark clothing since Book 2. I say let her live out her jewel and pastel colored dress dreams

Sinead

I would genuinely love it if she did make that switch. If she's one of those few villains that lives a long long time, it would be great to see how the Black Queen (which I suspect will live on as a Name that used to exist, even if that never was the case, and I suspect that it will never arise now) legend exists in the future, and will Cat the Arbiter/Peacekeeper be remembered as being the same person.

This works especially with a complete wardrobe change, as one would never associate it with the Black Queen (which is kinda the point).

[Liliet](#)

YES

Crash

The Pastel Queen

agumentic

On the other hand, we might get a clear statement from the beginning that Cat is not dead, merely in a coma or something.

[Liliet](#)

Ain't going to happen <= my prediction. Wrong narrative beats for that.

agumentic

Well, I agree that we certainly won't have another set of chapters where Cat's state is unknown. The story will promptly answer whether she is "really" dead or merely deeply injured.

[Liliet](#)

Won't be "merely deeply injured" because the crows wouldn't react like that to a mere deep injury – Cat can stem blood loss with Night and is currently surrounded by allies. She's instadead, from evidence.

(Also from narrative beats – we did "merely deeply injured" last time, the audience is expecting it now. Which I suppose you are (as well as I), so valid,)

agumentic

I think Crows' reaction is entirely unrelated to Cat's "death" – they were hit with something else. The text structure indicates that to me, at least – that reaction is its own paragraph, not the continuation of the one where Cat was shot. And Cat can't do anything herself if she is in a coma, not to mention the possibility of Night being lost. Healing from allies is exactly what can bring her to "won't die right now, we don't know whether she wakes up" state.

In the Arsenal, we had "state unknown, perhaps even dead??? (jk)", which, while resolved with Cat merely being injured, wouldn't be the same story as "Cat is grievously injured and out of commission". We did have something similar during the Battle of the Camps, but even then that story didn't play out completely – no getting up in the darkest hour there.

Liliet

considering how strong the suggestion that this is Cat being dead is, showing that it is not so in the next chapter would be a tension-breaking fakeout (and drawing it out further would be a copy of the Arsenal arc)

agumentic

Is it a particularly strong suggestion? Sure, arrows to the head tend to be pretty lethal, but not as much as, say, decapitation, and we have already seen someone surviving an arrow from Hawk, Cat is also surrounded by allies that can stabilize her condition.

As for tension, there is precisely zero tension involved in Catherine “dying” here. I think literally no one believes it’ll really stick. Cat being injured instead of “dead” creates practically the same situation on meta-level – “Black Queen is incapacitated and there will probably be some desperate measures involved in her coming back”. Sure, the characters might express more despair in text, but I am not really seeing the virtue of it – anything that additional despair could provide can be provided from other sources. Like the situation on the battlefield growing worse and/or Sve Noc getting their asses kicked.

308924810a

She could dead, just about to end up undead again.

shikkarasu

I broadly agree, but I have to point out that Cat wouldn’t move without preparing for Hawk. She knew that there is a 100% chance that Hawk would be alive since she was given the ol’ “no-one could survive that!” report from an underling. I’m thinking decoy zombie. I know, I know; what kind of idiot uses undead against the Dead King? Catherine would. The only proper Necromancer within Raising distance is the Temult, who is *heavily* occupied and no rational person would expect such a strategy. It’s also low-risk. If anyone takes control of her puppet then she just shreds it since it isn’t even Bind-level.

Long story short I refuse to believe that Catherine wasn’t in control of this encounter. Not when we aren’t seeing it from her POV. That’s when she has her best Mastermind plans.

Liliet

I agree Catherine was in control.

I also think she died for real.

I think it was part of the plan.

Wouldn't be the first, or even the second time.

agumentic

God, I feel like that would be just the fucking worst. I do think that Cat "really" dying is a possibility, but if it happens, I strongly believe it shouldn't be a part of some plan from her. That way we can have a plotline where everyone (and Viv in particular) can be hit with a realization that yes, Cat really dropped the ball and now they have to handle the situation on their own, with whatever desperate actions on their side providing Cat with the way back. But if it was her plan all along, it would all be so cheap and repeated that I am honestly disgusted by the mere thoughts of it.

Sinead

How would you feel if "it's part of her plan" in the fashion of "Fuck it, we'll improvise" is the moment she had the plan? And that her priorities would mean that her dying would be less of a cost than having any of her key subordinates die instead?

Cat's entire goal is build systems that do not require her, and thus can survive her and protect what she values.

Think back to her reflection on if she hadn't gotten a resurrection, but everything else worked out, it still would have been a steal. She has built up systems to take care of what she values without her needing to oversee it. From her perspective, as soon as she has all these lines of succession sorted out (which she does because Vivienne is available to oversee Callow, the Woe can take care of themselves, and the Firstborn are at the point where they just have her as a liaison with humans, but can handle themselves).

Combine this with Cat always wanting to protect what is her, that scene with Guillaume stating "this is going to get rough" is her committing to

secure the victory of the walls and thus take the arrow from the Hawk (Keter always gets the last word).

Cat's way back is her taking the dream as a warning: You are going to Fall regardless. Do you let it come to you, or do you take a leap of faith?

Or to rephrase the above a bit: Cat's juggling so many glass balls, and when she misses a step, she instead trusts those around her to grab and take control of those balls that are closest to them and does a swan dive for the one that she can recover?

[Liliet](#)

hm. also a valid point. i guess that depends on whether you find tension and drama in the idea of catherine dying on purpose 😡

[Mental Mouse](#)

"It Was Just A Flesh Wound" – maybe in the Monty Python fashion! In the Arsenal Cat remarks that she came pretty close to bleeding out, and the fae *did* think she was dead.

Yeah, this is going to be nasty – obviously it's not going to take Cat out for good, but she may yet need a true resurrection from Sve Noc, perhaps with Masego's help. And in the meantime, everybody else has problems, especially with DK pulling that "see how you like it!" move.

[Liliet](#)

Sve can't do true resurrections, their power is of Below's variety 😊

sureisashametherearentanyheroesaroundandcatdoesntfitanyheroicnarrativ

[Mental Mouse](#)

Villains don't get resurrection aspects. Sven Noc has *already* recreated Cat's mortal body after destroying the fae construct she'd replaced it with.

[Liliet](#)

Everyone knows villains don't get true resurrected and can't true resurrect people. Cat has defied both of those, too.

Just saying 😊

(this is wild speculation, I know it contradicts stuff)

Crash

Oh since we're doing wild speculation.

EE pulls the plot twist of the century and she is truly dead, comes back as a Revenant.

Final Book is Cat planning and executing the undoing of everything she has built. Or, seeing that everything she has built works and she is beaten back.

[Liliet](#)

...wild speculation about stuff i actually want to see happen ._.

Sinead

I guess my only issue with that is that I hate "trapped in my own mind" perspective for first person narratives.

Even if Cat's own systems prevent her from breaking them, that method of making the point would be a really rough read.

Then again, I don't even like the idea of Sve Noc losing here, so I like my stories potentially a bit more on the lighter side than you do.

[Liliet](#)

> I guess my only issue with that is that I hate "trapped in my own mind" perspective for first person narratives.

yeah i fucking hate those too

to clarify, i hate that scenario on every level

Crash

Instructions unclear.

Akua gets a Name. It's Wandering Bard: it was her plan all along, this is a stable time loop.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm. My usual proposition is that it's Cat who becomes WB in a stable time loop, but this is an interestnig variation.

That Other Guy

This is step 23 of her plan into infiltrate Keter. She just needed the right way to knock on the door. The successor to Trismegistus sorcery is Quatmegistus/Catmegistus sorcery.

The twins subvert the throne and take over the brood stock in Keter so there is a socially acceptable pool for the first born to draw night from. Unbeknownst to the surface, Keter undergoes a great innovation in schooling sorcery and other knowledge based skills, deeply increasing the skill pool for the firstborn.

Then Cat is made honorary princess of the Kingdom Under

[Adrian V](#)

Actually hasn't it been mentioned a lot of times that Mighty can revive? In the chapter where Cat saw a vision of the northern front (drow one) she made a point to note the dead king countered this by eating the corpses before they could revive or have the night harvested i think.

[Liliet](#)

yea but Cat's not made of Night the way drow kind of are (they cannot survive without it, it's their lifeblood literally)

and in the Arsenal it's been established through her neck wound that she cannot use the Night to restore herself this way

Miley

It's pretty simple the first time she died on screen she was facing the big bad after a victory against his minion and on the cusp of a name, so she got a name dream.

Now she's facing a bigger, badder big bad, only on a battlefield this time; she just had a victory against HIS minions, two at once this time and she actually helped in all stages of the fight, and she's on the cusp of a more powerful Name. She's obviously about to just ascend to kratoshood.

Hitogami

It takes more than a little death to keep Cat down!
If she gets her new name here I'll be so excited!

Joel DELETED

Fantastic

Xinci

Ah so I may have been correct in it being the bindings on the soul that limited one to a school. Presumably apotheosis could let one get beyond this but the calcification would instead push one towards a differing rule set. A gestalt is a excellent solution, I wonder if you could make enough proper bindings to enough matter from a Hell /Arcadia/other dimension to mimic this artificially? Really glad to see more frameworks of souls and how they can be used.

Only one framework of effect/behavior for a specific variable or I suppose entity does seem to be a general rule for everything so I suppose its not surprising it has to switch out souls or that Masego cannot Wrest multiple entities at once.

Also great to have Lights uncertainty principle be noted for Jaquinities. It makes sense that they learned it and formatted it from miracles now. If it can be anything then specific patterns of stimuli would be needed to be used to get a specific result out of a possibly endless list of alternatives. Perhaps it works by them mimicking the faithful prayers probably "keyed" to useful patterns of effect(given the words of the book of all things definitely have actual effects on the world when uttered,transcribed, etc)Its kind of shortcutting what a trismigestian sorcerer does with a "automatic calculator" but its possibly rather slap dash and may not actually give you that much understanding of what happened. So a Trismigestian sorcerer may prefer to be able to do similar things with better mastery down the line(thus Wekesa and Masegos disdain)

Other things of interest being, Idrani seeming to copy the Lady when sidling. Creation cant make a counter-balance to sidling since it works specifically by finding weaknesses and holes in it, perhaps?

[Liliet](#)

> Other things of interest being, Idrani seeming to copy the Lady when sidling

Huh?

shikkarasu

Yeah, I don't remember Ranger using that trick, either. Not saying she couldn't, that's how you get I-Told-You-So stabbed, just that I'm sure the Lady hasn't done it on screen.

The normal method to getting in/out of Arcadia seems to be kidnapping fae (Used by Warlock when he and Black came to Marchford, also mentioned as a plan B for Masego if Cat

refused to open a gate for him just before Underdark) so I would guess that is how she normally does it.

[Liliet](#)

i mean there's a permanent gate to Arcadia in the Waning Woods, William asked her for access to it way back when

Xinci

Ranger was noted to be able to cut her way into Arcadia and able to find such weak spots naturally. So similar to Flow, Idrani seemed to be using See to find the spots and Stride to aid in her getting through. As has been a theme with her she kind of copies stuff Ranger can do naturally.

Xinci

To clarify I mean, Idrani seems to be using See and Stride to attain a level of skill and level of understanding similar to how Flow allows her attain a level of understanding similar to Ranger's.

Miles

Flow doesn't give her any part of Ranger's learning aspects or anything like them. Flow helps her focus to a neuro-extraordinary way.

[Liliet](#)

It's a reference to Ranger being a half-elf I think. She doesn't need Aspects for what Idrani does.

[Liliet](#)

Ranger lived on top of a gate to Arcadia

Burnsy

Nessie has a nasty sense of humour

Juff

Typo Thread:

in their like (missing word)
gone made > gone mad
last long one > last long once
make decision > make decisions
suddenly then > then suddenly
clear short > clear shot
her him > him
underserving > undeserving

proper master > proper mastery
pride had how > pride at how
prefect > perfect
that was Indrani > that what Indrani
armour dead (something wrong here)
was struggled > was struggling
to separate > two separate
towards, Catherine > towards Catherine,
by living > by the living
made or not > mad or not
hellfame > hellflame
three, strokes > three strokes
filer to > filter the
at is tried > as it tried
that devour > that devours
collapse > collapsed
think keeping > thing keeping
he must focus > he had to focus
must be > had to be
indicated > dictated
He must regain > He had to regain
began hoist > began hoisting
through his throat through (might want to reword this)
stiffly so stand > stiffly to stand
Cat fell > Cat fell to
rituals at least > rituals at last

mamm0nn

This is Orc radio, sending you smooooth jazz over the airways.
Dum, dum, dumdidum~

Cat: Damn it Hakram, stop clogging the airways with this stuff.
Doesn't matter if no one's saying anything anyway.

Archer: No! I like it!

Zeze: This station helps me concentrate when I study...

Dead King: Love this show.

...

Cat: Wait, you-

Dead King: Whoops.

tithin

Between this and TWI, I am very upset.

Frivolous

Akua let out a scream of dismay – Akua showed more reaction to Cat getting shot with an arrow from the Hawk than she did from seeing her own father getting killed by goblins.

I feel good for Hakram, killing a Revenant in single combat.

I curse EE for making me wait until Tuesday to find out what happened, if even that quickly. We may have to wait until next Friday to find out, if EE is sadistic enough.

[Liliet](#)

> Akua showed more reaction to Cat getting shot with an arrow from the Hawk than she did from seeing her own father getting killed by goblins.

TBF that's an emotional repression thing – I don't doubt Akua's emotions were stronger the first time, she was just not exactly in tune with them 😊

Frivolous

On further thought and after some brooding, it occurred to me to be thankful for my blessings.

If anyone else, anyone else in the Woe, had been shot in the head by the Hawk, I might consider that death to be permanent. I would be devastated, which is really bad for me.

But, since Catherine is the protagonist and main POV of the entire story, then I must assume something will happen to ameliorate that. I hope so anyway.

Vlatko

Cat's coming back for sure. Probably through her connection with the Crows. Still, her death here is pretty significant. Expect the new Cat to be different in some fundamental way.

[Liliet](#)

The Crows don't seem to think so.

Christian Oaks

I think what happened is the arrow had the same anti night poison on it as seen earlier with the varlet. I think the crows screamed cause they have. To sever themselves from their priest lest both be consumed

[Liliet](#)

huh, interesting and likely! though I think varlet's poison might have been produced by their Aspect, it

would be very much like neshamah to reverse engineer something like that and give it to hawk

aurikdomi

well I guessed on the night being consumed bit though for the wrong reason 😊

[Liliet](#)

lol yeah

agumentic

Yeah, when Indrani used all her Aspects I became really worried for her for a moment.

Velrix

Cat go to battle without helmet then get shot by the foe she warned was not dead and to keep a lookout for ? Seriously ? Nice baiting. Foundation of a new aspect, Reveal, Learn, Know, Improve ?

[Liliet](#)

Helmets famously have visors, I doubt a helmet would have prevented this.

Do0d

She's been mocking the Shiny Prince for years for not wearing his and made a point of wearing one multiple times in the story.

Makes you wonder: Why wasn't she wearing one this time ?

SpeckofStardust

The artifact she was using for communication might not work with a helmet on.

shikkarasu

Not to mention her Winter Wights: Surprisingly A Bleeder, Should Have Ducked, and my personal favourite A Dress Is Not Armour.

[Liliet](#)

she also wasn't wearing one on her raid with Broken Bells back before Maillac's Boot! she also sat and wondered why the fuck she wasn't wearing a helmet that time

Sinead

That always seemed a bit odd to me, because she could have a "Black Queen" visor or even a shaped helmet inspired by the Crows depending on what she wanted to lean into (probably the second, since her martial side is more in line with the Firstborn this arc, and potentially a revision of the masks of the Twilight Sages as a revitilisation of the Firstborn culture) and still work as both additional protection, and still have her get shot in the eye at the end of this chapter.

Then again, Cat's restructuring of the sigils and the creation of the priesthood of Losara was some of my favourite parts of the series, so I would love it if there was more coming out of the Firstborn that we see in the field.

And you can have her remove her helmet to prevent terrorising poor Guillaume, so he still reacts to reading her face.

[Liliet](#)

Open faced helmets also exist!

Honestly, my opinion on the Broken Bells raid is "Catherine is swamped with WAYYY too many things to handle, consider and coordinate all at once, and is therefore occasionally a HUGE dumbass in random places that are lower priority than others. That Catherine considers making sure she doesn't die in a fight a lower priority than the REALLY critical stuff is just Catherine for you"

Sinead

That is true, but I also want "tasteful and effective face protection" in my fantasy war stories.

Huh....maybe that's why I like Akua so much. She also agrees with tasteful and effective armour.

[Liliet](#)

>tasteful

Cat has a long list of problems with your claim about Akua's armor

Sinead

snort Fair. I'd argue that she's walking around with a bright multicoloured cloak. Functional armour can still be a statement.

I have literally heard “tasteful” and “elegant” used interchangeably with fashion, so I was not meaning anything crude by it.

But that’s on me, if that is a possible point of ambiguity

[Liliet](#)

I didn’t think you meant anything crude, I’m just deeply amused by remembering how Cat had 1001 problem with Akua’s armor XD

Also, well, Cat never said her cloak was tasteful either lol

[Casey Glick](#)

Ironnicize

Earl of Purple

Great fight, Guilherme was lucky. Pretty sure he wasn’t being puppeted by Cat, either. Were she planning that, he’d not live to overhear. Also, it worked with Tancred because they were the same height and she burnt the body.

Hakram still has it, pleased to say. Pity about Lieutenant Tweaker, though.

Wonder what the one word Neshamah passed to Cat was, via the Pale Knight.

Vlatko

“Mistake”, the Dead King said in Ashkaran.

medailyfun

the word was “Liliet”, obviously

[Liliet](#)

SLANDER I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS

-shfits away keeping her hands behind her back-

[Cold Cyberia](#)

So, three more interludes from different perspectives and maybe five chapters of will she/won’t she. I predict we’ll find out Cat’s actual status towards the end of January.

Anyway, an enjoyable chapter though I’ve found Guillaume’s inclusion unnecessary unless Cat had some grander plan and EE

didn't want us seeing her thoughts or he was used as a body double. There's been enough common folk marvelling at how awesome she is that it's treading old ground and I'd rather see her thoughts in a chapter names after her band.

Do0d

Interludes don't have Cat's POV.
Guillaume was essentially acting as a camera for EE.

[Liliet](#)

> unless Cat had some grander plan and EE didn't want us seeing her thoughts

oh most def

"i took the scenic route" huh cat

> There's been enough common folk marvelling at how awesome she is

NEVER

[Decius](#)

It seems somewhat weak to bind a bunch of skilled magi together in one body but only allow one at a time to use it for spellcasting.

Is there some kind of interference that would prevent dozens of mages from being sewn together and be capable of all casting at the same time?

beleester

I'm guessing it's only one really skilled mage, and the other souls are just "expansion packs" to add on more types of spells. If Keter had a dozen Archmage-tier casters in different schools there would be no reason to glue them all together.

Andrew Smith

Thinking on it, I would say either it is one powerful caster with a bunch of souls that did whatever part of learning a magic system that is beyond a Undead and just added on. Though it seems unlikely to me since in that case any damage to that caster soul will completely remove the ability to cast(or reduce if the other souls have weak gifts).

I think most likely I see that each soul has at least a decently strong Gift for magic or the strength of the gifts were made to pool together to make the archmage with each one

focused on a school, that way there is not as much of a single point of failure in a villain's minion.

Mental Mouse

It was previously said that spells can't use the same bit of Creation twice at the same time. Presumably that's a lot of how shields and counters work.

imagesbe

Oh my god I have to sit on this for how long now.

I fully believe that if Cat's actually dead she will not stay that way, but it may be several chapters before we find out for certain which pisses me off. Yeah this updates regularly, but while it could be next update, it could be weeks as well.

I can see Cat doing a Heroic Sacrifice in the last book, I don't see her going away before the last book has even begun.

superkeaton

Yep, that's about right. Typical Distraction Carnifex.

Aston Whiteman

Cat needs a reset. Crows are pissed off they lost their claim on Cat.

Entering Hero mode.

Spoilers not allowed to be...

ethericsentinel

It's the return of Lakeomancy!

Sinead

My guess is that the remaining chapters are all of Cat's successors stepping up into new Roles:

Vivienne: Sun Queen (The Queen is dead! Long live the Queen).
Supreme commander of all Callowan forces.

Ivah: First Under Night (assuming First Under Night and head of Losara are the same thing. Drow are not particularly sentimental creatures, so it may be that Losara becomes the Ivah (or who ever takes over the sigil) and First Under Night is a different role)

Ishaq: Head of the Villains and supreme commander of Named forces in Hanauit.

Any other roles/"hats" I am missing?

[Liliet](#)

we have a book remaining

Sinead

Oh, this is me being unclear in writing again. Sorry about that.

My theory is that Cat will come back with a different purpose. However the last book will not have her juggling all her different roles, and instead have a very specific goal. Think of how Amadeus has his breath of relief at the epilogue before striking out with Hye.

However, much like her father, Cat made a point now to build up systems that mean that the parts of the Alliance that she has personally built up will continue on without her. All the "crowns" she wears will fall to other heads, and she will take up a new Role.

[Liliet](#)

ooo nice

Sinead

Thanks!

Granted, I could be wrong, but I think that it works well to have Cat basically leave a lot of the current structure behind in a lot of ways. It's a completion of Nemeshah's prediction, but in a way that he couldn't foresee as he is.

I don't know if it works to have the organisation around the Truce and Terms have a thing for the biggest monsters (thinking what Cat's becoming, Hye, all quasi deity powers) where it's the case of they still need to abide by the Accords, but no one really wants them to be moving around mortals too much, with Cat's current arc as the establishment of the precedent.

Not sure if I'm getting the idea out properly, but Cat's level of Named are not just fish in the stream of the Story able to swim against the current. They are the ones that can jump the waterfalls and thus dictate where the stream goes. Hye doesn't have that to the same degree as Cat is going, but she did change the curse of Summer into an acknowledgment, so she is not without her own weight, even if it's of an old monster recognising baby monsters.

beleester

I think Akua would be a better pick for Head Villain. Not technically a Named, but she knows story-fu better and she's got better social skills. And it's the one job where being the Doom of Liesse is more of a benefit than a detriment.

Sinead

You have a point, even if it runs counter to my own personal crack theory of the end of Akua's arc.

[Liliet](#)

Akua is a bad pick for Head Villain, because her incentives and priorities have nothing in common with those needed for that position. She's not interested in leading others, she's not interested in establishing a stable society on Calernia, she's not interested in acquiring influence among villains (and if she were, it would not be a good sign). She's barely recovering from her childhood trauma, don't make her jump on a broken leg.

Frivolous

Sinead: Agree with this. Also agree with your following posts on this issue.

Cat's death or semi-death is why the Augur and the Wise Astrologer sent Vivienne and her Army to Hainaut.

Cat's death might trigger Vivienne into receiving the Name, not of Shining Princess as some of us originally thought, but of Good Queen.

The other role/hat you may be missing is that of supreme commander of the Alliance military, at least in the field. No one ever seems to gainsay her when it comes to making a decision.

Because one of Cat's Stories is that she has never lost a battle. Except perhaps until now.

I think at some level this was always going to happen. The Hawk was Keter's one-shot unavoidable kill, and Cat was a major, perhaps primary, resource for Neshamah's enemies.

I mean, even the Mirror Knight almost died from an arrow from the Hawk, and Cat's nowhere near as invulnerable.

So this feels a little like destiny.

Sinead

Thanks!

I'm hoping Vivienne becomes the Sun Queen personally. Starts out by chucking a ball of sunshine at someone. Current theory is that she uses "sunlight" (not Light) to break the hiding aspect of Varlet and deals with them.

As for Cat being "supreme commander of Alliance forces", I think that that role was mostly hers in part for being someone who wears so many hats. Her successors sitting in council and not being a disaster about things works just as well as having her at the head of the organisation.

As far as Cat having lost that battle, I remind you that Cat does not see her death as meaning that she has lost the battle, so long as her objectives are achieved. I suspect she will have a Lord Nelson at Trafalgar moment here, but that the battle will not actually be lost.

Will Cat then take a Gandalf the White moment of spending some time as a wanderer tying up loose ends?

Perhaps she settles the East the hard way as part of the winter break before the push on Keter.

laguz24

I have a theory, you know how the twilight ways can kill revenants, what if they can resurrect cat, or mercy decides to repay the favor and resurrect cat. Also, I was half right with the revenants.

[Liliet](#)

NICE

Sinead

It would be interesting if her "scenic route" is revealed in flashback to be her setting up the possibility. At least, I would rather Cat pulling a Magnificent Bastard moment where it was her thinking as soon as Hawk wasn't killed that they were going to get a victory cut short.

Cue Cat's reasoning of "I have both built up systems such that I am not required to make things function (all her successors are gathered to take up her roles), and I may have 1 more trick up my sleeve...."

I wonder if Twilight's "anti Nemeshah" defense will evolve into something more nuanced in the Age of Order? say "against those that are antithesis of the Accords (Revenants would definitely apply). Hell, Since Light kills demons, Twilight gates may be a way to dispose of Hell Eggs.

TheCount

Im not saying Cat survived this.... BUT
I belive its another undead goat filled with munitions. with a
illusion over it.

Sinead

New thought just occured to me: I wonder if Rumena Tomb-Maker
uses the falling water to flood out the lower tunnels and drive
out undead assault.

Not so much because I suspect Cat to have predicted the Dead King
to have flood them out, but that Rumena has taken the time to
think out counters to allies as well as enemy tactics and thus
the Firstborn minimise their personal assault. Besides, the drow
probably have ways to deal with lakes like this since floods in
the Everdark would be extremely dangerous.

Miles

They say the Dead King is supposed to be some kind of genius who
leaves no chance for his enemies' victory. Then he drops a lake
on the inventors of lakeomancy and a bunch of heroes who've seen
it all before and survived, and have been working on how to stop
it.

This is almost as bad a move as attacking Keter with only a bunch
of Trismegistan sorcerers andno experts

Praneeth Kolichala

Nah, you have to remember that at least some of Cat's
legitimacy rests on the fact that she's "never lost a battle."
By using lakeomancy, Cat's "signature" in some sense, you not
only cause immense damage (remember at the Battle of the Camps
~10,000 soldiers died despite the Grey Pilgrim shutting it down
quickly), but you also draw attention to the fact that Cat was
taken out. This will hurt morale, especially among the Army of
Callow, and hurt Cat's legitimacy I think.

Sinead

I don't see how the fact that the Alliance wins this battle
that Cat dies in (they kind of have to win this or else the
Grand Alliance will just fail on so many different fronts)
breaks Cat's legitimacy?

Yes she is a warlord, but she has spent the last few years
building up the legitimacy of her own that at the very least
others can take over those roles.

Lord Nelson died in the Battle on Trafalgar, but is still
venerated in British military history.

The risk of the lakeomancy is the crush of water and the underground flooding unless some work was done to allow the city to drain better.

Konstantin von Karstein

I don't think so. Even if the 3 gates are closed immediately, the damages done will be massive, and I doubt it will be the case.

It's difficult to prepare against hundreds of tons of water falling from hundreds of meter. At this point it's just physics, and they don't have the WotW, Cat or Akua to stop it. Maybe Hierophant could destroy the gates, but before he does the city will be devastated.

Sinead

True. I was just thinking of the flooding effect as well as the water hammer.

Also, I am sort of surprised that they would not have anything prepared against this since Cat used it with great effect and we already know Nemeshah learns from his enemies.

I'm not saying this isn't bad. I'm more saying that this isn't "breaking open the city" bad since I really cannot see where this becomes recoverable if the city is lost. That's why I am wondering about having allies having made a practise to planning deal with lakeomancy effects.

It could be that this is instead a fighting retreat through the gate with the gate broken behind them, but we have in text that Procer will fall in a year.

Unless the idea is that the city is broken and everyone flees, while Hanno is successful, which results in Cat coming back to the living surrounded by the dead and then doing her own thing with out a support network while the rest of the Woe come into their own dealing with war.

That would also be something interesting. I just don't see how they withdraw from the city without massive, massive losses that just starts a death spiral. It was clearly spelt out that "If this battle fails, the Drow front fails, the dwarves withdraw, and Procer falls". I really cannot see how we can then have them fail the battle, but still win the war. Unless that sending Hanno away meant that he survives which means he is the White Knight riding back to be the deliverer of victory, which kinda leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

That's why what I expect is that there is a means to deal with the lakeomancy, even if it's just all these systems reacting to the aftermath.

(Sorry for this being a bit jumbled. It's hard when you have a thought intertwined with other thoughts).

Daniel E

The Hawk is certainly earning his pay today. 1 kill (Bezerker), 1 setback (Barrow Sword), and 1 incapacitated (Catherine).

Goibnu

I think everyone seems to be forgetting me forgiveness is jaunting around the battlefield right now and with all she has done I doubt that mercy would leave her gone

Sean

Grey Pilgrim does not have Forgive anymore. Cat tore it out of him to use to restore him back to life.

[MadeThisAccountJustForYou \(@MadeThi54U\)](#)

Only in the face? We've seen what she can shrug off in the Arsenal. Cat's gonna be fine. Beyond that, although DK's seen Cat use the lake trick, does he know breaking that trick is old hat for the Pilgrim? We've little reason to believe so. DK thinks he's played Cat but it could be he just lined up thousands of his own binds' heads to go pop

Crash

EE I swear to all the gods if the next chapter is called Epilogue there will be a fucking riot.

Sinead

I am pretty sure that we will see the reactions and responses of the Grand Alliance to this chapter and then the Epilogue will be the set up for the last book.

The last chapter will likely be Flow, as Malicia gets her claws in elsewhere.

Crash

Oh, another Interlude: Flow fella!

Yeah, really want some continuation to this ASAP. Would hate to sit on this absolutely wonderful mess for 2 months haha

Sinead

Think of how Book 4 ended with everything starting to get ready for Book 5, and then it cuts to Cat appearing out going "Ok let's try this again".

That's why I expect Flow to happen as everyone thinks that they have a measure of the events (that is Grand Alliance, Dread Empire, and Mercantis), then have Cat enter stage left. Perhaps she gets a greeting from Nemeshah or Bard, but I would like it they just assume that Cat is gone and don't look for her. This allows Cat to be the knife in the dark for really the first time on this scale.

ByVectron!

I don't think she's dead- multiple times, it was written that "arrows sprouted from their forehead..." when a kill shot is delivered, and the one that hit Cat "...punched through the side of her face."

[Liliet](#)

Crows and Akua though?

ByVectron!

I think the theory that the arrow was enchanted, and cut Cats ties to the Darkness, holds water. Side-effect of that would be the severing of the connection to Akua (though she is no longer bound, so this had a little less likelihood?) but the Shades reaction could also have been to the Archmage getting away, and unrelated to the injury.

[Liliet](#)

I strongly doubt Akua would SCREAM at the Archmate getting away.

ByVectron!

A scream of dismay is a specific thing, though. And again- Akua is no longer bound to Cat, so she would have no psychic impact from the attack.

Thinking more critically, would she necessarily even have witnessed it? Archer did because she is Named and could not only see the flicker but also identify the arrow for what it was. Akua is neither and she would have been focused on the Archmage.

Great discussion, though.

[Liliet](#)

Akua was right next to Cat as I understand.

And it's not about psychic blowback no 😊

plot armor presumption

Does this story actually need Cat? Several readers are pointing out she laid a groundwork for success without her. What if Book 5 is all Interlude? We are assuming she has plot armor and I think that's sloppy. The more creative direction would be for a deconstructed novel where the protagonist died and it didn't really matter, long denouement, 3rd Letter ends Keter and everyone else.

[Liliet](#)

Book 7 you mean lol

And no, "this is unusual" does not mean "this is a good idea". The audience is invested in the fate of Catherine Foundling more than in the things she cares about, there'd be a massive reader dropoff should she die.

aran

... wow! I admit I didn't see this one coming.

It looks like Neshamah has taken lessons from how she dealt with the Exiled Prince and gone for Why Don't You Just Shoot Her.

[Spirituality Awakening](#)

Amazing Story ... 😊♥

Interlude: Sigil

"Peace is death, stagnation of the soul. Peace is a child closing their eyes to the truth of the world: the great will partake of the small, until they falter and they too are partaken of. Strife is life and death, and there can be no more evil in embracing it than in the act of breathing."

– Extract from the 'Tenets of Night', ancient Firstborn religious text

Rumena waited, patient.

Many of the Mighty were growing restless, eager to seek excellence through strife as the... cattle around them did, but the once-and-again general knew better. The Enemy had sent hordes to batter the walls and the gates, but the Pale Crown was not one to seek triumph through brute strength. The killing knives had yet to be bared. The Mighty studied another of its kind, Mighty Borislava, as it sat on the bare stone of the street with its eyes closed. Night pulsed from it in weak waves, a feat of control considering the strength of the Secret being used. Borislava suddenly breathed out, its silver-pierced face twisting into a smile.

"They are found," Mighty Borislava rasped out. "The tunnels expand too quickly to be dug by hand or pick. The Enemy has brought acid-worms."

Rumena nodded, expressing no displeasure. That worms were not unexpected, though this marked the first instance they were used on any front but Serolen or the Pass. This cattle-city of Hainaut was as jaws of steel, the general had come to suspect, a trap laid for any unwary foot willing to step into it. Soon enough they would begin to feel the bite of those teeth,

"How many breaches?" Rumena asked.

"I have found seven, General," Borislava said. "Five of these along the western shore of the basin."

Reluctantly, it added that it might have missed a few tunnels whilst looking. Good, Rumena would not need to discipline it again. Borislava usually required such a firm hand only every half century or so, and had earned that raspy voice the first time it had allowed its pride to delude it into thinking it might replace Rumena as sigil-holder, but its usefulness in the southern expedition was feeding the pride again. Perhaps the old Firstborn would not need to end it before they reached their fourth century together.

"Zarkan," the general called out, without turning

The rylleh had been still and silent, knowing that even though bearing the title it was the weakest of its rank among the Rumena and should be wary of giving offence. Wise, though lacking in audacity. The mark of one who was to be slain and harvested before it could reach any significant measure of power. Night rewarded the knife that struck, not the knife that waited for the opening.

"Whisper into the Night," Rumena ordered its messenger. "Tell Mighty Jindrich that it is to begin attac-"

The wave rage that roared through the Night staggered them all for a heartbeat. Sve Noc were *furious*, their earthly forms in the

sky above cawing in pain and anger. The general knelt, mastering the feelings not its own, and sent its humble regards above. Its goddesses deigned to answer, sending a flicker of thought: the First Under the Night. face ripped apart by an unnatural arrow. Near dead, though not quite. Already Sve Noc had sent had servant to see to the matter, moving with swift and silent steps, and the Eldest went with it. It was the Youngest, who had ever favoured Rumena and commanded its own affections in return, that bade the old drow to turn its eyes to the sky. Where sorcery made the firmament creak and groan, opening three great gates above the city.

Strike, Komena ordered.

The old drow breathed out, and Night flooded its veins. It filled it to the brim, seeping into the flesh and the organs as Rumena drew on a power it had not deemed worth using in seven hundred years. The Secret of Tolling Wrath was but a mimicry of something the Firstborn had been able to craft at will, ancient engines of destruction that the general had once turned on the unbreakable ranks of the *nerezim* as their relentless advance broke one city after another, but in the old nights it had taken a company of sorcerers and a Sage to guide them for the ritual-engine to be used. The Tomb-Maker could now do the same with but an exertion of will and power, as if a company of one. The Night vanished from it without warning, as the Secret took its final shape, and Rumena shivered.

It would not be able to call on the Secret twice tonight, it decided. Once had already set its bones to aching.

In the sky above, water had begun to pour from the gates. The Youngest cared not to suffer this affront, so see the wiles of her First Under the Night turned against a city under its protection, and so it had struck as well. The great crow had was growing, turning from a small blot of darkness in the sky to a great nightmare blotting out the stars themselves. It was, Rumena thought, beautiful to behold. And at last the Secret of Tolling Wrath finished shuddering its way through the air, striking the side of one of the gates with a sound like a bell. Power tore at power, tearing at the edge of the sorcerous gate, and it was with amusement that Rumena saw a long beam of Hateful Light spear upwards from somewhere in the city, cutting at the edge of another gate. The Peregrine was a reliable foe even as an ally.

It was after the Light faded that the Youngest Night struck, the great crow's wrath covering the sky as its wingspan streamed with the sea of water she had flown in the way of. Bending under the weight of the water's strength, the great crow raked her talons against the third gate and there was an immediate eruption of power. Rumena's crooked fingers tightened as it saw the Youngest Night tumbled downwards, her shape diminishing until she was

simply a crow once more and she began circling above the city once more. There had been something in the gate that had hurt its goddess, the general thought. At least all of the gates were now – another one blinked into existence, Rumena's sharp eyes catching the side where the Peregrine's Light had cut it.

The same gate, not completely destroyed?

Whatever the truth of it, it began pouring water again and the old drow watched as the torrent fell like sea of stones on the Fourth Army of Callow. The shields made by sorcery were not enough, breaking instantly under the impact. Soldiers died, engines were shattered and the repaired gate shuddered. Before the annihilation could be complete, however, the side cut by Light snapped and the gate exploded in burst of sorcery that lit up the sky.

"Mighty One," Zarkan quietly said. "Mighty Jindrich has claimed the right of vanguard and begun assault the tunnels. I have word from other sigils of dead erupting from other places within the city."

"Then whisper this order to all sigils, Mighty Zarkan," Rumena said. "Strike now at the dead, and hold nothing back."

"Chno Sve Noc," Zarkan fervently replied, and others with it.

Rumena the Tomb-Maker did not say more. Instead it walked to a stretch of starlight on stone and softly spoke a word of power, its will reaching for the deepest depths of its shadow where it kept only things it had not meant to see Creation while it still drew breath. Yet it would make an exception, tonight. It would have been arrogance to refrain when its goddesses took the field.

It would put on, one last time, the armaments it had once worn as a general of the Empire Ever Dark.

—

Ivah of the Losara Sigil, Lord of Silent Steps, moved with purpose.

The Eldest Night had sent it to seek its mistress' side with all haste, and so it skimmed along the edges of the Pattern to quicken its pace. It was not a fortress or a fight Ivah found when its steps slowed but instead a house. Masses of water falling from the firmament had devastated swaths of the city, including most of this street, but though Ivah saw fighting on the ramparts to the west there seemed to be no immediate threat here. Instead a fire had been lit inside the house, and Night whispered to the Lord of Silent steps that Losara Queen was within. It rapped knuckles against the door, as was the human way, and only then opened it.

This was no great palace or library, simply a hovel of humans, and so within there was only one room. The lit hearth did not catch its attention, not when instead it saw Losara Queen wan and bloodied on a mattress of straw. By her side sat the shade it knew as the Mighty Akua, though no longer did she have the scent of one who could draw on Night. Curious. The shade did not turn and so Ivah took a step forward, closing the door only to then turn to the sensation of a blade resting against its neck.

"Don't move," the Mighty Archer said, eyes hard. "There'll be no vulture's meal tonight, Ivah."

The Mighty would strike him down without batting an eye, for though human she was admirably ruthless even with long acquaintances, but Ivah shook his head. The edge bit into the throat of its skin, but only shallowly.

"This is not my purpose," Ivah said. "I have been sent by Sve Noc."

The Mighty Akua finally turned towards it, her eyes like golden flames. Its face was not composed as the Lord of Silent Steps had always seen it before. It was... drawn.

"This one's not looking to wet its beak red, Archer," the shade said. "It enjoys its place too much."

The blade moved away slightly and Ivah nodded, pleased to have been properly understood by such a dangerous creature.

"Service to Losara Queen is pleasant and I could not sit her throne," Ivah told the Mighty Archer, slightly embarrassed as it was rather forward of it to speak so plainly. "I seek not Night in this house."

"I would hope not," Mighty Archer smiled. "You wouldn't live through an attempt at harvesting it."

It was always rewarding for Ivah to see others proclaim such loyalty for Losara Queen. To serve an accomplished sigil-holder was rewarding, for who should the Firstborn learn from save the great?

"Can you help?" the Mighty Akua asked. "Hierophant did what he could and I have further slowed the spread, but we've not turned the tide."

"We sent for healers," Mighty Archer quietly said, "but she's in no state to be moved. We can't do shit but wait, at the moment."

"I have no such talent," Ivah of the Losara Sigil said. "This matters not, for I am the tool in the hand of a greater power."

The blade was sheathed, a tacit permission, and Ivah approached the bedside. It unwove the bandages delicately, revealing the deep wound below, and unexpectedly found its heart clenching. Losara had... done much, for Ivah. Opened its eyes to paths that could be tread, raised it to a position of trust and power. It did not please the Lord of Silent Steps to see the sovereign it had once sworn oaths too so harshly hurt. The left side of Losara Queen's face had been torn through by an arrow, ripping through her eye and cheek as well as shattering the chin bone. Not a mortal wound, perhaps, save if the arrow were invested with power. It must have been, for someone had clearly tried to heal the wound with sorcery and it had opened anew since.

"Poison," Mighty Akua said. "It got into the blood. And something more, too. An aspect."

It nodded, closing its eyes and breathing deep.

"I know nothing," Ivah murmured in Crepuscular. "I am nothing. I am a vessel, filled with Night."

Power surged, power beyond Ivah's understanding. The Lord of Silent Steps felt the house around it shudder as the Sve Noc herself came upon it, flowing through the cracks and forming anew on the drow's back as a great crow. Her talons dug into its skin, drawing black blood, and it breathed out raggedly.

"Fuck," Mighty Archer muttered, voice shaken.

The golden-eyed shade stared at the goddess, unmoved.

"Your intentions, godling?" Mighty Akua asked.

"I will see to my chosen," Sve Noc said, voice like the cawing of crows. "Do not think to interfere in this, shade."

"We will trust in your intentions," Mighty Akua smiled, a cold thing. "Trust in ours, Sve Noc, should you *overstep*."

Ivah swallowed a gasp as talons sunk deeper into its skin, tearing at flesh as a mind infinitely greater than its own moved its hand to rest against Losara Queen's forehead. Night flared, moving into the First Under the Night's body, and knowledge came to the rylleh.

"It is a poison that resist sorcery," Ivah spoke for its goddess. "And it was empowered, as was the arrow, by an aspect."

Night slithered down the veins of the unconscious queen, feeling out the transcendent nature of the wound, and Ivah cocked its head to the side.

"Murder," the Lord of Silent Steps conveyed. "That is the essence of the trouble, the concept that seeks to kill her even now. This

'Hawk' was no servant of the Pale Gods when she still drew breath."

"But you can fix it?" Mighty Archer pressed.

"It can be done," Ivah agreed, bowing to the pressure in its mind. "But it will not be a panacea. The eye is gone for good, and a scar will remain."

"Fuck," Mighty Archer cursed. "Would the Pilgrim do better? He said he couldn't, when he came to pick up Masego, but if we lean on the Ophanim through him..."

"It will make no difference," Ivah regretfully said. "An aspect is an aspect. Sve Noc must see to it now, before the wound worsens, and you are given warning that it will be hours before Losara Queen wakes."

The two humans traded glances, Mighty Archer hesitating.

"Go," Mighty Akua said. "I will stay."

"You sure?" Mighty Archer asked.

"Trust me," the shade replied, wryly smiling.

There was a heartbeat of silence between them, until Mighty Archer nodded.

"I do," she said, sounding almost surprised. "Take care of her, Akua."

The shade went still, and somehow looked pained. Mighty Archer offered them all a hard smile.

"Meanwhile, I'm going to go *express my displeasure* to the Hawk."

—

Mighty Jindrich picked up the corpse by the throat, idly tossing it down the tunnel.

Its armour clattered as it toppled another few skeletons, the lot of them ending up in a writhing pile. Jindrich advanced on two legs, head slightly bent for the height of the tunnel, and fell upon the pack. One strike was enough to plaster a skeleton into the stone of the wall, another was stomped to dust and out of bored disgust the sigil-holder smashed the last two's heads into each other until both broke.

"Disappointing," Mighty Jindrich said. "There has not been worthy strife since we slew the worms."

"We could head back," Mighty Lasmir said. "Head down another breach, see if there is stiffer resistance there."

Lasmir was still growing back the arm it had lost to the acid spit, having not found enough dead flesh to devour for the Secret of Consumption to truly show its worth. There was a reason Jindrich had never bothered to kill Lasmir for it even before the First Under the Night had decreed that Firstborn of the southern expedition could not slay each other.

"No," the sigil-holder decided. "The Tomb-Maker implied there would be worthy strife, should we push far enough. We will quicken the pace instead."

The rylleh bowed, passing the order down to the rest of the sigil as it had been meant to. The breach they'd forced had been a pleasant fight, but below the cattle-city the dead had seemingly dug a maze of tunnels. Jindrich found the feeling of treading underground stone once more sweet, yet it had found little opposition aside from a continuous flow of skeletons. Even splitting the sigil down several tunnels had not yielded greater prey, but the sigil-holder was wise to the Enemy's ways. Once, a very long time ago, Jindrich of Great Strycht had wielded a pick and dug tunnels for souls it had believed to be wise. Sve Noc had shown it a better path, the *true* path, but it had not forgot. These tunnels were for moving around, but there would be somewhere further below where the broken stone would be dragged so it could be thrown away instead of clog up tunnels.

There, Mighty Jindrich decided, there would be enemies worth destroying.

Its sigil moved swiftly after the order was given. They ran into undead, a larger battalion standing together – forty dead, armoured and armed – which was a good sign and decent entertainment. Mighty Draha was allowed to use the Secret of Impalement to stick them all in a line before they were smashed into the walls until destroyed. Always good for a laugh. Until then the tunnels had been a slope, but after this they were a sheer drop with an iron ladder going down. *Promising*, Mighty Jindrich decided, and leapt. It landed atop the helm of a skeleton, crushing it with its weight, and let out an approving noise at what it beheld: a great cavern that was a hive of tunnels, swarming with corpses and dead stitched-up monsters. Even a few of the Greater Dead, these who had been Named in life, if its eyes were not being fooled.

The sigil-holder smiled, power thrumming in its flesh as it began to let it loose.

"You will be Night," Mighty Jindrich promised.

"You trespass on the realm of the dead," a voice replied. "And so will join them."

A tall silhouette, in heavy armour and bearing a large morningstar, strode forward.

"You are the one they call Mantle, yes?" Jindrich grinned.

The Greater Dead spoke not a word, but the sudden darkness not even Mighty could see through was answer enough. Mighty Jindrich laughed, letting Night rip through it and rent its body asunder before reforming it with a shell of Night.

Finally, strife worth having.

—

The lamellar of steel and obsidian still fit as it had when Rumema had been young, tightened at the hip with a belt, and the red-plumed helmet was still comfortable around its long pale hair. The marks of the ancient honours bestowed on it under the Empire Ever Dark, that of Great General Who Shook The World and Victorious Commander of the South, each claimed a shoulder with twisted braids of gold and iron. And at General Rumena's hip, the long single-edged sword of steel it had once borne into battle rested comfortably. Waiting, eager to be used at last after all this time. Sighing, the old drow straightened its back and heard it crack as if someone were treading on twigs. It popped its shoulders, loosening them, and only then did it lay a hand on the pommel of its sword.

"Mighty Borislava," the general said.

"I listen, Mighty One," Borislava cautiously said.

None of Rumena's sigil had ever seen it wear the armour. It had even the strongest of its rylleh feeling... cautious. A refreshing feeling, it would admit.

"You are to command the sigil in my absence," Rumena said. "Look for breaches and settle them, ensure the cattle are not overwhelmed."

"It will be done, Mighty One," the other drow replied. "If this one may enquire, what is it the Mighty One intends?"

Rumena's fingers tightened around its sword, and slowly it unsheathed the blade.

"Do you know why they call me the Tomb-Maker, child?" the general said.

"The tale is well-known, Mighty One," the Mighty said. "You slew many a sigil, in your pursuit of Mighty Kurosiv's end."

"The truth is older than that," Rumena chuckled. "Ysengral, I am told, meant it as a compliment."

And it flicked the blade downward, not to cut but as the focus of its will as it called on the Secret of Stone. The stone below its feet parted like a receding tide, and General Rumena walked into the earth. It closed behind its footsteps, a sealed tomb, and with a hunter's smile the Tomb-Maker burrowed deep into the earth. It felt the first tunnel within moments, moving to emerge into it and stumbling into a heated strife between dzulu and corpses. Rumena wasted no time, heading to the fore and closing the tunnel behind it with a glance. Slapping the head off the nearest skeleton, it walked back into the earth after closing the rest of the visible tunnel on the dead with a flick of its sword. The dead had dug beneath the city like ants, and now were crawling like them.

Rumena was not above stepping on the likes of them.

It wove between tunnels, closing them and burying the dead wherever it passed, until it reached a tunnel where some enchanted spikes digging into the earth resisted its will and kept it from moving the nearby stone. Unimpressed, Rumena seized the stone at the edge of the sorcery's range and moved the spikes close to the surface by indirect pressure before collapsing the tunnel. It took the time to clear the western side of the shore before moving further down, finding sheer drops leading into a large cavern where a sigil had already arrived. The fighting was heavy and the general recognized the enraged roars, having shared a city with Mighty Jindrich for some years once upon a time. It was far gone, to be this loud.

Rumena landed softly on the floor, knees creaking, and eyes the deep darkness around it with irritation. Some Greater Dead was playing a trick. The Mantle, yes? Losara had spoken of her. This war would be well rid of her continued presence. The general sped forward, knowing the darkness would be fixed in range, yet it died before the old drow even reached the edge. Unimpressed, it leapt over Jindrich – now the size of a house, half an insect and killing even its own sigil when it strayed too close – and swept a wave of blackflame through the throng of corpses on the upper floors where javelineers were massing. They went up like dried leaves, though the use of Night caught Jindrich's attention. It struck out with a long, articulated leg but Rumena only sighed and caught the end of it. It shifted its footing, tossing the other Mighty deeper into the enemy ranks.

That ought to keep it busy for a while.

Streaks of black smoke snaked along the ground towards the general, leading back to an armoured silhouette it decided must be the Mantle. Some middling thing with a helmet looking like a hound charged at it as well, a sword and shield in hand.

Disinclined to play, Rumena sunk into the stone instead of moving out of the way. Cursed spike went into the floor not long after, but it was already moving and too deep below besides. The cavern seemed to a major outpost for the dead, the source feeding all the breaches to the west of the city's great basin. Clearing it out in a single stroke ought to end the better part of that offensive in its tracks. Slowing its heartbeat the old general sunk deep into the Night and let the Secret of Stone settle at the heart of its soul.

Slowly, carefully, it began to sink Night into the bedrock beneath this city of Hainaut. As it did, extending fingers outwards, a greater force reached out and clasped its hand. The Youngest Night, talons puncturing skin even when the touch was meant to be tender, touched the general's soul. She was wroth, and her anger was cold ruin inflicted unto the world: her hands guided its own, her eyes seeing beyond the reach of what any mortal might, and together they made for the Enemy an answer. Tunnels moved, closing and then weaving themselves anew as an intricate web leading to the five great caverns dug far beneath the city. And then, one by one, the two of them bound the ends of the web to the bottom of *le Bassin Gris*, the great water basin at the heart of Hainaut.

Water began to pour, and with panting breath Rumena leaned against stone as it felt Komena begin to withdraw from it. Begin and then stop. No, the Tomb-Maker realized with dread, not stop.

Fail.

—

Ivah of the Losara Sigil went still, as two goddesses screamed and the city shook.

It had found the waterside, returning to its sigil after the Eldest Night had ended her use of its body for the mending of Losara Queen, but the once-still waters were now as a sea taken by a violent storm. And the ground shaking had not ceased, as if some titan was hammering at the city from below with desperate strength. It turned to the terrified drow looking at it for answers, knowing it had none save for the furious howling of the goddesses in its mind.

"Disperse," Ivah ordered the sigil. "Survive."

They scattered to the winds. The Lord of Silent Steps could afford to spare them no more thought, for now the attention of its goddess was once more hammering at its mind. The rylleh stumbled forward, ending up on its knees by the shore of the basin. The waters were not only roiling, it realized with distant horror, but lowering. As if emptying. Before the revelation could sink in, talons punctured Ivah's shoulders once more and the

Eldest Night screeched in its ears. The wrath that bled into its mind made the world go white and brought it to the brink of unconsciousness, until those sharp talons brought it back with sharp pain. *Service is required of you, Ivah of the Losara*, a voice whispered into its soul. And though the talons were sharp, the voice was... cool. Soothing. A companion that Ivah had kept all its life without ever knowing it.

"We are born under Night," Ivah murmured. "We die under the Night. All that I am belongs to it."

The answer pleased the goddess. The pain of talons was fading, replaced with a pleasant coolness instead. Power intertwined with Ivah's own, like a sea pouring into a lake. And the binding was deep, so deep that the Lord of Silent Steps... glimpsed. There was another crow, trapped deep below in a cage of curses and spells. Bound to the Tomb-Maker, the Youngest Night was striking at her surroundings with impotent fury. And though the plateau shook, it did not shatter. And looking closer, Ivah saw... hooks. Someone was binding the crow, containing it. Its mind was wrenched away from the sight forcefully, made to look upon the power being poured into its frame. Veiled Gods, so much Night. More than a hundred lifetimes would have let it win.

"Why?" Ivah croaked out. "It is... it is *too much*."

Footsteps sounded behind it, but it was too exhausted to move. It felt as if eve twitching a finger would be enough to kill it, and still the Night would not cease pouring into it. A shape formed before it, a drow with silver eyes and ornate robes. It – no, she – bore a silver mask at her hip.

"You come at an inauspicious time," Andronike said. "Return when we are less occupied."

"One of you was caught."

The voice of an old man. The Peregrine.

"It will be dealt with," the Eldest Night said.

"Then why are you cramming your godhead into this one?"

A younger voice, calm but curious. The Hierophant. The Eldest Night did not answer.

"The Dead King is usurping the Night," the Peregrine said. "Of that, the Ophanim are certain. You are losing."

"If our First Under the Night was awake, it would not be so," the Eldest Night furiously replied.

"Your weakness exists regardless of Catherine," the Hierophant evenly said. "Do not blame others for your shortcomings."

Ivah felt a sudden surge of mind-shattering pain, the Night's flow into its body flowing, and it let out a hoarse scream. It was... Night was being pulled at from another side, through the other crow.

"He has his hooks in you," the Peregrine harshly said. "This can no longer be allowed. If he devours your power whole, it means our annihilation."

"We are," the Eldest Night said, sounding pained, "still fighting. The strife has not yet come to an end."

"We cannot allow him to devour you," the Peregrine said, voice gone eerily calm. "You know this. Better to end Night than that."

"You would kill them all," Andronike hissed.

"No," the Hierophant said. "There is another way. One that leaves enough they will live, if only as mortals. And with what you have put aside in this one, you will still be goddesses as well."

"Paltry things," the Eldest Night said. "Remnants."

"Time," the Peregrine softly said, "is running out."

There was a long silence, and in its soul Ivah of the Losara felt goddesses speak words only they could understand. Eyes closed, it saw the truth of things: a crown of obsidian, skeletal fingers wrapping around it.

"Do it," Sve Noc spoke as one, and offered up a hand.

A dark-skinned finger was laid against it.

"**Ruin**," the Hierophant said, and Creation obeyed.

Night broke, and the city broke with it.

TeK

Peace death...

Unrecovered

Your bunny wrote...

ruduen

Oof. In the grand scope of things, that's going to be costly. Still, that's what happens when you bring out the bigger weapons – you grant the story and the enemy permission to use bigger retaliations.

At least the fact that they were decisive about the act should reduce the fallout to something costly but bearable, rather than something completely catastrophic.

It's also good to have confirmation that Cat's not completely out of the game yet. Being wounded and in a rough state does mean story-wise, she's in a good position to get back up when things get to their worst. Still, the city itself is more and more subject to problems. I wonder how much of a city there'll be by the time everything's done, and if what's left can be reasonably defended. By now, it's looking like there'll be a need for something beyond mundane rebuilding to keep things intact.

Finally, go boost/vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Tenthyr

Oh wow this actually managed to get worse. I didn't expect the dead king to break the night to his will so quickly.

tithin

from what I'm gathering, he's not breaking it to his will, he's draining them of their power source completely.

basically, they'd still be gods when he's done, they'd just have absolutely no juice left to them at all

[Liliet](#)

Same thing: draining isn't that easy. Sve Noc did not manage to easily and quickly digest Winter when they shook it out of Cat.

[Adrian_V](#)

All this talk of swallow and diges....now i have the image of they sh!tting winter away or the parts not wanted xD

Morgenstern

So, did the other Crown enable him to try and usurp this one as well? That's an unforeseen consequence then, a costly mistake it would seem, of the Woe giving him the Crown as a trap... Hmmm... Gonna be interesting.

Morgenstern

Oh, right... the Crown was empty of a pool of power... he's now just trying to get back the power pool from Winter that was stolen by Night... oh dear.

That Other Guy

When does Neshamah bust out what Skein stole from Masego when he was the Apprentice?

[Liliet](#)

> what Skein stole from Masego when he was the Apprentice?

.....Masego had not met Skein when he was the Apprentice

WuseMajor

I mean, he's presumably been working on that for several years now. I wouldn't call it quick.

NerfContessa

Well,. That was entirely unexpected this early.
I thought he would pull out the big urwupation once they were closer to. Keter...
And fuck, they will be less than a 10th of what they were,.
And. The firstborn will become entirely mortal.

Shiittee....

Tom Thompson

Anyone else really hope that Cat leans into the grizzled veteran mold and gets an eyepatch after this?

DJ

Between the birds and the eye, I feel like she'll have a permanent Odin cosplay going.

[Liliet](#)

Cosplay?

-suggestive eyebrow wiggle-

Sinead

I had a really neat thought of wondering if she buried Zombie III in Twilight.

Odinn used Slepnir to travel across all of the 9 Worlds.

What do you use a faerie hourse that is native to the plane of travellers for?

Basically, I want Cat to have her horse back with the ability to literally run into Twilight.

Also complete crack theory on Odinn parallels....

My understanding of the general reason for Ragnorok and the fall of the Aesir is that promises were broken by the gods, which allowed for all bonds to fail.

If Cat is trying to bind the continent/Game of the Gods under such a rule, she may have Nemeshah and/or the Elves playing Fenrir to her own role as forces that are bound away, but will retaliate if her own balanced system ever destabilises. I could see that her putting this much effort into the system will bind her to it, as I do not expect her to die, just go dormant. Less a sentient Name of the Wandering Bard and more just a battered woman ever bound by her own desire to maintain the peace and keep people safe putting out the bigger fires.

The reason I chuck the Elves in here is because I suspect that their own play for the Spring Crown, and their general aloofness from everything is going to bite them in the ass, and they will write themselves out of this new world that Cat is building simply by not engaging with the system. And I could see that the same way that Nemeshah is one of Below's biggest players while Below doesn't care for him anymore (he doesn't do what he is supposed to do) that the Elves are like that for Above.

naturalnuke

Even if not intentional it just proves nothing is original. History rhymes, as they say.

Lord Reginald

Let's not forget the staff, cloak & penchant for insulting people who take themselves too seriously. Really all she needs is a beard and to graft a couple extral legs onto her next Zombie to complete the look.

Sinead

Hmmmm....I'm going to have to see how this unfolds before I decide how I feel about this. I don't like the idea of breaking a cultural ziegst like this, especially if it will actually kill people.

I get that this is a war on Death, but there are things about breaking icons that matter in terms of symbols in wars like this that would be much more literal here.

If loyalty matters in the current Firstborn metaphysics, and the shift in the sigil system to encourage such loyalty matters, than perhaps Sve Noc can outgrow this weakness that has arisen.

It doesn't make this moment easier.

Here's hoping that Runmera can collect interest and make good on its promise to tear down the walls of Keter. That will be it's finest work: crafting the tomb of Nemeshah as repayment for this.

Hitogami

It's not easy, but have you noticed that a lot of what happens in this story is that great power gets discarded or used up and it leads to something better. At the moment Cat and Vivienne both discarded their Names and are doing more now than when they had them.

ruduen

Amusingly enough, in the grand scheme of things, Night's actually been hitting its limits. Remember, the war's going poorly for the drow because of Night-specific counters. While it's still a hit to their overall power, they're losing something that was losing effectiveness in the context of the war.

The overall shift that might result will really depend on what replaces it, if anything. And even if they're brought down to the level of the other races... Well, the other races have managed so far. It's just a matter of how quickly they can rally and adapt.

beleester

"If your powers are lost, they will always come back stronger than before upon learning the appropriate moral lesson."

DoccuDesu

That only works for Heroes and those aligned with Above though, not anyone with ties to Below

matesbe

I mean, it's worked for Cat... like 3 times by now.

NerfContessa

See above.

^^

Sinead

That's true, and I do keep that in mind. I am hopeful about the evolution of the Tenents of Night meaning that there is a rebirth for the drow.

I think part of my issue is that the drow front was failing with the Night under constant onslaught, and the dwarves were looking at abandoning their part in this war.

What will give the drow their respite here? That's what I have a hard time seeing.

I also just liked Night as a concept, and hope that perhaps it can return in some form.

Aston Whiteman

Cat loses night, regains new power. No longer evil..

All according to plan...

erebus42

I hope she doesn't end up with some heroic name or some shit. I know it seems unlikely given who she is and the ideological/philosophical temperament usually required, not to mention that it would fuck shit up much more royally than it already is. I just always hated it that Wildbow did that.

shikkarasu

I feel like the Gods Above giving Cat any power would work like that time Rumena gave her a literal lift to Sve Noc: she'd try to strangle them at every opportunity. Even if she has less than no hope of succeeding, even if it means dying powerless in a cave forgotten by the world. It's the principle, you understand.

[Liliet](#)

Cat has gone on an inner monologue before about how that's a losing approach and you gotta breathe in breathe out and go for a victory for EVERYONE, and how Amadeus was wrong in just this way (even though Amadeus thinks this way now too rip)

[Liliet](#)

Everyone's going to close their eyes and pretend that's some very Evil Light Cat's slinging about. They still need a villainous representative!...

Matthew Wells

"Oh no! She's conned a Choir again! Do her nefarious plans know no end?!"

Crash

watch catherine get a villainous game and pull this shit anyway lmao

TeK

So she finally went full Odin mode, it's been a long time coming.

Big Brother

He did give up his left eye for wisdom, didn't he?

Necarion

Half the Night of the world, to save the world.

tithin

She does share certain characteristics with Mat.

Juff

Typo Thread:

bare stone > bare stone
That worms > The worms
those teeth, > those teeth.
wave rage > wave of rage
had servant > a servant
crow had was > crow was
tumbled downwards > tumble downwards
fell like sea > fell like a sea
in burst > in a burst
begun assault > begun assaulting
Silent steps that > Silent Steps that
strike him down > strike it down
Ivah shook his head > Ivah shook its head
dust and out > dust, and out
rent its body > rend its body
eyes the deep > eyed the deep
Cursed spike went > Cursed spikes went
eve twitching > even twitching

tithin

I kinda saw this coming a long time ago. It's grim that it came to this.

I hope they pull a victory through this, but at this point, there's not a lot out there that will save them.

Anyway, here's the white knight

Insanenoodlyguy

That's why they are going to win. The darkest out, her trump card played, near mortally wounded... Cat's about to get her name.

Hitogami

Wow! That's crazy! This whole chapter is totally crazy! So I'm assuming that it's possible for them to regain the Night by harvesting it from defeated foes, but it will take ages to restock.

mamm0nn

I think the act of harvesting is an extension of Sve Noc's deal turned godhood, so I don't think they'll have that ability either after this.

[Liliet](#)

They'll still be goddesses though, Masego says so.

shikkarasu

I think they lose Night and Winter as Domains/Demesnes. Hence the whole "existing as remnants" thing. They would be gods, but they might even be below Winter! Cat in raw power.

[Liliet](#)

as I understand they will still have... what's left of Night (there's no Winter as a separate domain, it was subsumed by Night). It just won't be a lot.

agumentic

To borrow from Masego's terminology, I imagine they will have the "crown/pool" of their godhood left, but the "water" of power in it is going to be almost entirely drained. I guess it's as good chance as any to fill it with something other than murder and Winter, which is almost a tautology.

[Liliet](#)

I got the impression it's also going to be somewhat, ah... damaged itself. It might not be able to HOLD as much power as it used to. And there's no guarantee it's even capable of accepting power that is not its own – Winter was pretty close to Night in many properties, and it was still a tough swallow.

agumentic

Hard to say right now, really. As I think was mentioned here before, in Catherine's view Ruin brings things to the very edge of breaking, but not over it. How exactly that translates into the use of Ruin now and the exact consequences of it is anyone's guess.

Sinead

If godhood is the trick of perspective, and the power is through what is offered to them (think of prayer and sacrifice giving them power), then perhaps this may be where you start to see the Tenants of Night evolve into something adaptable to all converts, such that the Crows actually gain power and influence from the small offerings of the Callowans and the goblins as well.

Sacrifice willingly give, especially in many small offerings could probably be absorbed easily, and probably prompt some expansion of role.

It's a gradual change though. So less a thing easily seen in the current war, but perhaps a means for Sve Noc to heal in the time after this war.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I'm still not seeing why anyone thinks Tenets of Night are ever going to stop being an ethnoreligion. Their entire point is being the drow thing, the thing about the drow, for drow and to let drow survive.

Xinci

Hm yeah this was rather inevitable given the DK's progress and Sve Noc's framework. Usurpation was their weakness and they were maladaptive for a environment where they had to contest multiple competitors due to their lack of safeguards.

This will possibly have rather costly impacts on their organizational structure, though perhaps it will be positive in the end for getting out bad actors like Kurosiv. As while the Drow's reduced lifespan may mean while they hold even less direct influence, this also means more cooperative behaviors may be incentivized due to murder being less useful and malefactors not living as long due to lifespan. Not without a greater cost to themselves anyway, it is also entirely possible that due to them being weakened like this and Iva being the strongest font they have now, that Kurosiv will try and usurp them either after the war or relatively soon.

Frivolous

Xinci: I'm afraid that usurpation by Kurosiv is no longer the worst case scenario where the Empire Ever Dark is concerned.

Note that drow have to be aware that Keter has perfected its answers to Night. The drow also have to be aware that Sve Noc nearly got usurped by Keter.

They must conclude that Keter is greater, mightier, than Sve Noc, yes?

The greatest danger therefore is that drow will attempt to betray the Empire Ever Dark and go over to Keter's side.

Kurosiv is only the Mighty most likely to do so. There will probably be others who also decide that treason and betrayal (and living) are better than continuing to fight on behalf of a losing side, especially when the enemy, Keter, has demonstrated its ability to kill drow very efficiently.

Konstantin von Karstein

The Drow will never betray Sve Noc for Keter, even Kurosiv. They are not stupid and know perfectly well that the DK doesn't want living servants (except for the Serenity) when he can have dead ones. He would usurp the Night instead of subjugating the Drow, killing them.

I can perfectly see Kurosiv betraying his goddess, but not to someone who will assuredly kill him. No one is going to betray the GA for the DK.

Frivolous

Konstantin: What about discreet neutrality aka running away then?

I'm not sure I agree with you that Kurosiv et al won't actively betray the Empire Ever Dark, but he might passively do so by scampering away from the war.

Now that Sve Noc has diminished, I am not sure they are still omniscient as far as the drow are concerned, or that they can still effectively punish Kurosiv.

[Liliet](#)

Where the fuck would drow run? Their entire problem was that they were boxed in and needed to win territory from the DK in order to have somewhere to live.

At the moment in the north they're defending their home.

Shveiran

Eh. Could the Langevins have afforded the drow taking offence at their plotted backstabbing? not really, but some people are just myopic assholes.

I'm not sure it will happen, but I think it's very possible Kurosiv will walk away from the battlefield and Sve Noc's oversight and just take his chances that he can deal with the rest.

With a bird eye's view, it doesn't work, but that is always not apparent to those in the thick of it.

[Liliet](#)

True enough RIP

Konstantin von Karstein

I don't know. Kurosiv (as a general) has to be aware that without the GA the EED can't win, and that fleeing en masse from the front is a temporary salvation.

edrey

did winter and night got divided? or komena is dead, i am open to options

so its too much to ask that cat return at the darkest hour. that story would fit here.

Jason Ispwitch

Night has been **Ruined** by Masego, along with most of Sve Noc's godhood. Exactly what that means... I don't think we know. What knowledge and power individual drow will retain doesn't seem clear to me. But if it's not at least a good part of what they were Rumena and others are toast, unless Sve Noc can still miracle some rescue up.

Miley

Drow will finally be able to watch the sun rise.

[Adrian_V](#)

I KNEW IT!!!

It was a grazing hit (i know its not the right word but it was really late at night and i couldn't think straight xD), like when a person receives a bullet to the head and survives or even has something large trust into, like an accidental lobotomy.....

Mmm so Cat has/had 2 crows on her shoulders, and now lost 1 eye..... anyone can think of an Odin related title that could be her name?

Also that ending: HOLY SHIT!!!

Maybe her nae will manifest as a way to save the Drfow too, she has come to like them a lot.

Matthew Wells

All-Mother.

Black Spiral Dancer

The drow will eventually become vikings, with gods that hunger for blood (and that have abandoned them, so to speak), while Cat shall become their All-mother. Fitting.

[Burlyraven](#)

Well, I didn't think it'd be the whole damn thing, but I did call that the Sister's were gambling like mad risking half of the Night. That's just asking for punishment.

Weirdly, though, this might even be a best case scenario. The Night is a massive loss, yes, but it's such a massive loss that it might have eaten up most of the consequences of Cat going into her Story perscribed inconvenient incapacitation. Probably a few thousand more soldiers die (which Cat is going to flog herself over), but I think the only major characters that are at risk from this point on are the ones that aren't Named.

Typing that did make me realize that the 4th got the brunt of the water, and I'm now dreading the thought that Pickler and/or Robber might be dead, though.

TeK

Nay, no important characters death, not yet. Pickler has a lease on life at least until she can rry her mind on Keter walls, and Robber is supposed to die in the pyre of glory and stabbing and fire and corpses, which I guess also means Keter. The point is, they don't have narrative reason to die as of yet. You are probably right that most of the consequences had been nullified by the loss of Night. In fact, it just made the situation dire, as Saint once put it "the enemy on the gates, her people in peril, in the direst moment she will rise from her slumber and save them. It's not a Villain's story and I don't like it."

[Liliet](#)

Actually now that you're saying that, that's a little like saying lke "no, he cannot die yet, he needs to see his family after this when he retires the next day". I'm not saying DEATH FLAGS DOOM AND GLOOM but it wouldn't completely miss the mark tonally for Pickler and Robber to die here.

Insanenoodlyguy

I think one or the other has a good chance of being dead, but not both. Probably Pickler, Robber is already acting like he has a death wish at times so naturally he'll survive.

[Liliet](#)

Both or neither, otherwise it's too sad)=

Frivolous

So very glad Catherine lives. Such a relief.

I feel smug over my comment in Tribulation. I predicted this or something like this would happen. I didn't expect it to happen so soon, though.

=====

This chapter strongly delineates the limits of Night and of Sve Noc. Sve Noc and the drow don't seem to have any resources besides Night. That's a terrible weakness. No versatility.

I think that, if Sve Noc has any foresight at all, they must mull over the necessity of diversifying their portfolio, so to speak. They need to learn to do other things besides Night. If they don't, sooner or later they're doomed.

=====

I think there is huge favorable coincidence in that Catherine released Akua from all bindings, including connection to Night, right before Night got itself half-usurped.

I don't know what that means yet, but I think it's important.

mamm0nn

Night is the Below version of Light and it's very versatile in what it is both intrinsically and in options, so it was hardly too limited. It's like saying that only using steel is too limited, ignoring in how many forms of armour and weapons it comes.

It is more theme than others, sure, but it was hardly too much a singular gimmick. The issue lied in that it was too potent yet one-note.

Frivolous

mamm0nn: I'm not sure I can really agree that Night is the Below version of Light, at least not in the context you are using.

Night belongs solely to Sve Noc and the drow and Catherine; no other entity of Evil uses it.

Keter almost succeeded in usurping Night, and that brought down Sve Noc and the drow.

In contrast, Light and steel are ubiquitous. The only person I've seen who usurped Light was the Fallen Monk, and that imperfectly, in that Catherine believed that a Choir would easily destroy the Fallen Monk.

mamm0nn

We've been told several times by several people that Night seems to be a mirror or evil mimicry of Light, though. Sure, it's not the intrinsic cornerstone that Light is, but it's still a mirror copy, it seems.

Konstantin von Karstein

Below has no equivalent to Light. Night was created by Sve Noc and can only be used by Drows except for exceptions like the FUN. It also is an integral part of the Drow body/soul.

Light was created by Above, and only priests and Heroes can wield it. It's not a part of every human's soul.

There's similarities between the 2, but in a direct fight Light **always** win against Night. If it was created by Below, I think it would be equal.

[Liliet](#)

It was technically created by Below, though by Komena and Andronike's blueprints. Below wasn't producing it as an answer to Light though, only as an answer to their plea.

caoimhinh

To be fair, Night is one of the most versatile things shown as of yet. It's a lot like sorcery and a bit like Light. The Drown can do practically anything with Night.

Messing with Night is like creating a field where no magic or no Light is usable, it's extremely hard to do, and it's only because it is Neshamah that such a thing is possible.

It's still weird how the Dead King pulled this off, since it was a trap laid underground in a grand array, which means that he must have needed to predict one of the Sisters to go underground in person in order to set this. This working must have required preparations, materials, and so on for the ritual to be carried out and Neshamah's attempt at usurping Night to be done.

If this was done in the northern front, where Sve Noc is actively fighting, it would make more sense than in Hainaut, and it seems like too complex a trap to have been set only by mere chance.

Insanenoodlyguy

Which is why he put it in the big invasion hub. Shutting this place down would be a good strategic move, that'd also need a lot of mojo behind it, meaning cat or one of the mighty would need to be down there with some serious mojo. I don't think it had to be the goddess herself in person so much as enough night saturating the area, since all of it connects to her.. Dead King meticulously arranged this trap..

Shveiran

I think the set-up was elegantly simple: he brought in the acid worms, a powerful asset that could create breaches in the defenses and lead to collapse. A legitimate threat that was underground in nature.

What was the GA going to check it with, surface Fantassins or underground Firstborn?

After that, it was just a matter of making the threat big enough that Sve Noch herself was going to be personally involved.

As I was reading, I'll admit this seemed a bit far-fetched. Like, "how could Neshamah have predicted that" or "this all rests on teh Sisters getting mad someone almost killed Cat and I refuse to believe Keter can accomplish that with any reliability, or they would have already crossed her off". But now that I'm thinking about it... the Dead King didn't really need that, did he? He just read the forces in motion the right way.

Big underground threat, the underground response team will come in. If they are facing annihilation, which can feasibly be organized, the Sisters will get involved.

[Liliet](#)

Note that every single step of the setup was a good move on its own. Offing Cat would be best, but if he can't temporarily incapacitating her is excellent too. An underground invasion is an obvious move that loses him nothing and can potentially win him a lot. Etc. Anti-Night trap might have worked against a lesser amount of Night too, if not quite as effectively, and even if it couldn't – for all we know DK has been mounting that at every major battlefield that he's had enough time to prepare for, this is just the first time it triggered.

ByVectron!

I should have read Liliet before posting my reply...

[Liliet](#)

Meh, the power of the hivemind is amplified if everyone posts the same thing 9.9

ByVectron!

To add to this- there is no reason Nessie couldn't have been setting these traps for a while, and it just happens that this is the one we saw because it finally got sprung. He's got the time and resources, presumably, so he could have a number of these scattered assertions that we've never seen because the conditions to the weren't right.

Miley

Is every chapter going to have yet another reason why cutting the shade loose is the pivot that made them survive this battle? I assume the crowd are shielding Cat but Ubuah wouldn't have been so lucky.

Miley

Crows

erebus42

That's a shame, I rather enjoyed the inclusion of Night and the Mighty into the dynamics of things.

Insanenoodlyguy

Just because they no longer have night doesn't mean they will be impotent. They'll just be taking their evolution in a new direction.

WealthyAardvark

If Rumena doesn't die of old age immediately (perhaps unlikely considering Black's condition after losing his Name), it's still in a Tomb of its own making. Hopefully Sve Noc can still provide it with the power to get out before it suffocates in there.

Frivolous

I think Keter baited Sve Noc into a trap. My reasons:

The spell or whatever that drove hooks into Komana and permitted Night to be usurped could not, I think, have been used as effectively on any regular drow, or at a significant distance. It had to be used on either Andronike and/or Komana in person for it to be useful.

I think if the method could have been used on a regular drow, but then Sve Noc would have stopped it by killing the drow subject, and then Sve Noc would have been forewarned.

To that end, I believe it was made clear to Sve Noc that Keter had perfected its answers to Night. This caused Sve Noc to put half their eggs, invest half of their godhood, in the current Battle of Hainaut. Which in turn led to this chapter.

Basically it was an ambush and kidnap scheme, on a divine level.

In other news: More Woe mutilation shenanigans. Masego lost his sorcery. Vivienne lost her Name but is otherwise pristine. Hakram is at around 1/3rd the orc he used to be. Indrani got her brains exploded, though she got better.

Catherine of course is the worst, dying over and over again, and now she's lost an eye Odin-style.

Oh well. She can probably get a prosthetic eye to replace it. Masego already has 2 prosthetic eyes. He'll probably design an eye that allows her to see magic and shoot laser beams.

Matthew Wells

Nah, it'll have auto-scry to complete the Odin parallels.

[roseocean2012](#)

Mad-Eye Foundling?

mamm0nn

Okay, laser-eye actually sounds pretty neat. Let's do it.

TeK

Hasta la vista, Keter

Thanatoss

I would prefer eye like Masego, see through solid stuff all around.

But well lasers are nice too I guess.

What if her empty eye socket will be some kind of conduit for her new aspect? Hmm, no, probably prosthetic

caoimhinh

Damn.

[Liliet](#)

ikr??????

SO GOOD

mamm0nn

Cat, the moment she wakes up: "Okay, who said that this couldn't possibly get any worse!?! WHO DID IT?"

[Liliet](#)

asdjfhaskdjfhak;sdfhlakjsdfhslk Cat is Odin confirmed

hmmm I called 1 out of 2

Cat is not dead, but we DID find out immediately

Black Spiral Dancer

LOL, did anyone truly said Cat WAS dead?

[Liliet](#)

I did

Sinead

Eh. Old One Eye sacrificed himself to himself, and based on descriptions it's hard to tell if it's actually a death or near death experience. There isn't a huge different between comatose like this and being dead as far as "journey to the underworld" themes go. It's It's all wibbly wobblily deathy-wethy jumble of concepts.

I was wondering if this was going to put Cat back as a manifestation aspect binding her to rules like the Wandering Bard with teleportation to Nowhere. That would make her out Gandalf Tariq.

[Liliet](#)

n i c e

Sinead

Fortunately, Cat will end up with a different reflection of the Wandering Bard, which is fine. Intercessor seems overly bound for what would be interesting to have as a character perspective anyways.

I hope she gets her horse back though and just has the dash out into the Twilight.

SpeckofStardust

I thought your other statement was that cat planned for an arrow to the head, not that it was a death.

[Liliet](#)

oh we still don't know about whether she planned for it

Sinead

You might be thinking of my comments.

I was thinking Cat had figured that she was actually the less needed individual as far as the systems she has built were concerned, so she made herself a big glowing target for Keter to shoot.

laguz24

Crap, the drow front is about to go to shit at this point, also, what's left of the city at this point? It has been lakeomancied, tunneled under, and assaulted by the scourges. Exactly how many people are left at this point?

Insanenoodlyguy

That assumes cat doesn't wake up with a new mojo. Remember how Black could use an aspect that affected the entire group he led? I wouldn't be shocked if, still having a connection to the goddess of a race, that Cat wakes up with something that keeps the Drow fighting.

Unrecovered

It's getting worse and worse. Waiting for Hanno to save the day.

Sinead

That would legitimately piss me off and actually drive me to embrace Amadeus' Madman speech.

Let Cat have this dammit!

Matthew Wells

Team Hanno should, however, show up an hour later out of breath.

Frivolous

Sve Noc should count themselves lucky that Tariq and the Ophanim didn't decide to just kill them all at their moment of weakness.

I mean, if not for the Alliance and war on Keter and their desire to retain the goodwill of Catherine, who still lives, this would be doubtless be a great time for Mercy to ease suffering by murdering the goddesses of theft and murder, yes?

Also, I'm blackly amused by this chapter being a dark mirror to Melancholy. In Melancholy, Sve Noc offered Night to Masego to compensate for his loss of sorcery, and Masego refused.

In Interlude: Sigil, Masego offered Ruin to Sve Noc to prevent them from completing losing both Night and godhood, and Sve Noc accepted.

I bet the Gods Below are laughing their Evil guts out at this reversal.

[Liliet](#)

> a great time for Mercy to ease suffering by murdering the goddesses of theft and murder, yes?

I actually honestly don't think so? They're important to their people, their destruction would cause far more suffering (for drow) than it would ease overall unless you count genocide as easing suffering because now all these unborn children will never live to ever experience suffering at all (and that is not how Mercy counts, no).

Insanenoodlyguy

Total sum reduction. The drow certainly wouldn't be happy. But everybody now safe from the god of murder and theft's followers and their tendency to "collect" from others, probably a lot happier.

It's the path that Sve Noc would have gone down if she hadn't gotten herself a First Under the Night, her original plan was to just start eating other large power sources and I really doubt she'd have introduced a lot of reforms in her people. Killing all the drow with their Goddess becomes a feature of defeating the load bearing boss at that point, not an unwanted consequence.

[Liliet](#)

if she hadnt gotten herself a First Under The Night she would have never left the Everdark
drow's presence on this front in the first place is a function of Catherine introducing them to positive sum games

Insanenoodlyguy

I was thinking more like the path where she just killed Cat after taking Winter.

[Liliet](#)

oh I mean in that scenario lmao yes

Praneeth Kolichala

Yeah, I think you have a wrong read on what Mercy/Tariq likes to do. They aren't really in the business of genociding large groups of people; when they kill for a greater good, it is always one person or a small village. (For example, Tariq smothering his nephew). You can't just name some weird, slightly-plausible benefit that might come from the genocide and conclude that because they do things for the "greater good," this means that they would commit that genocide. If Mercy does an evil for a greater good, the good has to actually be greater than the evil, and when the evil is genocide, it's hard to overstate how high the bar for the good is. Saying, "They were a fundamentally evil race based on theft and murder," would definitely not cut it.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ this

pyrohawk21

You know, an interesting thing is that I think we're seeing the ways of the world to come here. It is a world of Mortals. For here we see that one of the Immortal races that inhabit this continent have had their immortality shattered, with Night being Ruined. We've learned that the Gigantes aren't actually immortal, the way that the Titans that were their ancestors seem to have been. But rather their life is tied to their power. So they have the choice of living long, or being able to affect the world.

We have the Elves, who are basically removing themselves from the continent, which is likely to have dire repercussions for them later on. Either losing their kingdom or finding that they can't fully return to the world I suspect.

And then we have the war that is being fought, with the Mortal Realms banding together to once and for all shatter the Immortal Kingdom of the Undead... Or be shattered in turn.

So it seems to be that the era, and world to come, is very much going to be defined by the actions of Mortals. The agents of the Immortal will have a role in defining what paths the mortals travel, but the Immortal beings themselves are likely to have their own actions extremely restricted... Unless they discard that Immortality.

As a side note, I don't count the endless life of Villains as Immortality, because it is very susceptible to 'sword to the heart' ending them from even the weakest of beings if they get unlucky. It's similar to how the GIGantes are technically immortal in that they have a path to not dying of old age... But it's much harder for them to actually exploit that or it comes with steep costs.

TeK

Pretty much all immortals are actually mortals as in susceptible to the stabbing, but I don't think that somehow inviolates their immortality. Immortality is first and foremost imperviousness to age, not necessarily death. Otherwise aside from big G Gods there never were and never will be immortals.

Konstantin von Karstein

Immortality is like invulnerability. You have it until you don't.

[Liliet](#)

When your immortality statistically doesn't last longer than a regular lifespan, that IS a meaningful distinction from enduring immortals.

pyrohawk21

What I'm doing here is saying that there is a crucial difference between being immortal, and being an Immortal. Villains, the Gigantes if they conduct the rituals and don't spend the power, and possibly the Drow even after the Ruin of Night renders them Mortals, are all immortal as they don't die, and aren't even really affected, by the passing of time.

But it's a lower-case i immortal because said immortality comes with a big cost. For the Gigantes it is the fact that their lifespan and the power are tied to each other, so if they want to be immortal then they can't use their power and they must dedicate their life to conducting the rituals needed to accumulate more. For Villains it comes with the fact that if you want to retain that immortality, you need to keep doing the deeds that earned you the Name that gave you the immortality as a side benefit. And that tends to drastically increase their mortality rate. If the Drow retain a form of immortality, I suspect it'll probably be something like stealing the life of others, which means it has a constant cost.

But for True Undead such as the Revenants and the King of the Dead, they don't need to ever worry about keeping their immortality active. For the Elves, they have it naturally and the older they are, the more powerful their ability to manipulate Creation becomes, again making it so they don't have to pay a cost to stay immune to the ravages of age and they in fact purely benefit from living longer.

That's why I use Immortals to describe those two groups of beings, because they don't have a lesser form of immortality that requires you keep doing something to have it. But rather

once you obtain it, you have it forever and don't need to do anything to preserve it.

So you aren't a Mortal Being that has gained extended life. You are an Immortal Being, immune to time's ravages.

Insanenoodlyguy

I like the lore of Last Unicorn for things like this, in that it's a mentality and fundamental difference in outlook that also makes up an Immortal. (in that story/movie everybody should experience, magic turns a Unicorn into a Human Woman in order to save her from a malevolent creature hunting unicorns. Unconscious from the experience, it's recognized by a character who knows lore that this is going to be horrible for the Unicorn, who may go mad. The Unicorn wakes up HORRIFIED, immediately aware she is no longer an eternal constant "I can feel this body dying all around me!" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5rGhVhQaLk>

Other better people have expanded on all of this whom deserve credit I'm not willing to spend time looking up right now, but essentially, big I Immortals are BUILT to live forever. A mortal with an expanded lifespan might well end up regretting their state and seek an end. An Immortal is meant to be eternal, and so their outlook embraces it with a sort of stubborn optimism: Even on their worst day, at their most horrible moment, they know they have enough time for things to get better. It's why some of the strongest passions of mortals eludes them (and so makes the short-lived things so fascinating), but it's also how they can stay as they are so long. The Genie who's been in a bottle for decades, the Demon sealed for Centuries, they leave their confines and they are fine, ready to resume acting on the world. A mortal trapped for that long in the same condition, even if their life was preserved, would be completely insane from the process. Because they aren't built for that long-view mentality, and part of the process of a mortal becoming a true Immortal is gaining it, as Neshy refers to a bit in this story. It is, as many things that are of stories, both a weakness and a strength. There is a power in that inherent longevity, in the lack of need to change because of how little change can affect you, but of course, there's also the stories of mortals time and again defeating such things despite how impossible that should be, especially because of how easy it can be for an Immortal to forget that anything but another Immortal could ever be a threat to them.

Matthew Wells

I wonder how Elves are at learning? The undead seemingly being unable to learn big things is probably a result of

all that, but Elves must presumably have some ability to radically change. Maybe they ossify at 80 or something, and then just accumulate magic.

Ranger seems to be both Immortal and flexible in her mind, but she's powered by three separate aspects related to learning, and is half-human.

Liliet

Ranger has also had the same personality for several centuries as far as we know.

There seems to be a clear distinction to be made here between "assimilating information and drawing conclusions" and "restructuring your information processing framework". The immortals are perfectly capable of the former at any age, but the framework ossifies with time – the longer you live, the less flexible your mindset is, and the less capable you are of mastering entire new skillsets / professions / philosophies that can't be processed as a subset of your pre-existing ones.

LostRaven

Oh nice to see Ivah gaining a partial Godhead by accident (more or less) same as Cat, an entity cramming the power in it shortly before that entity gaining new powers (King of Winter > King of Arcadia Resplendent)

We see a lot of echoes here, by stories created before by Cat herself. She originated the unknowing apotheosis. AND it's a former holder of Winter Power and still Lord of silent Steps who gains it.

Crash

My child Ivah is too pure for this world.

About to have some life changing after effects from having a decent amount of godhead crammed on it, too I'd bet. Unlike Catherine, it didn't have anything to help this along at all.

Andronike just panicked and started pouring all that Night into it.

Frivolous

ErraticErrata – Forgot to put in a Thank You for this phrase in Interlude: Woeful:

=====

the dictate that undead could not learn was not as absolute as some seemed to believe

=====

It was nice of you to give an answer to the topic we'd been debating about, whether the undead could learn. I appreciate it and I'm sure others do, too.

Dome Zasrekh

The Drow used sorcery before, will they do so again?

LoSS is best boi, rushing to Cat when she needs him, and Akua getting some love gold!

jak

I knew it.

As soon as he took Cathrine out and the crows retaliated, I knew he'd make a move against them.

No, even before that. As soon as it became clear that they were investing their godhood in this battle, i knew he'd make a play for it.

[Adrian_V](#)

Ok new thought: DK could do this because Cat is out of it, the sister said word for word if she was awake they could fight it better or something, so in tipical name fashion she could come back at a pivotal moment to save the day, it wouldn't be the first tiem she take a hero trope and make it work for her even when a villain.

[308924810a](#)

So I'm pretty sure they've just lost the war.

Without the general OPness of the Drow pinning down two thirds of the Dead King's armies they've got pretty much no chance of gathering a force capable enough of fighting the Dead King above that the Dwarves feel inclined to intervene.

If many of the Drow lose access to Night the Grand alliance is losing something like two thirds of its combat force and many of those who can make gates into Twilight, unless they can come up with replacements for that somewhere they're going to start losing.

[Liliet](#)

We know from epigraphs that Guide doesn't end with the Dead King devouring Calernia, so there's SOME X-factor waiting in the wings to spring out and turn the tide right back ^^

Trebar

So... is nobody commenting on the bard appearance?

Trebar

"silver eyes and ornate robes. It – no, she – bore a silver mask at her hip."

Wait, nevermind. I read that as silver flask

Matthew Wells

So did I, until you pointed it out. I just figured Masego blasted her.

hoser2

I think that was the pre-goddess form of the sister and not the bard.

Daniel E

Thus did the Mighty Jindrich get thoroughly yeeted by General Rumena, and it was good. On a more serious note; Cat has been developing a striking resemblance to Odin for some time now (Crows, war & wisdom in equal measure), but the addition of an eye patch makes it a certainty. I'm now wondering if perhaps she won't obtain a Bard-ish Name, but rather ascend to Godhood in her own right.

nipi

So Sve Noc is about to have its power halved? I mean they left half of themselves back in the Gloom.

[*Liliet*](#)

They wouldn't be panicking like this at losing HALF. No, this snared all of it.

[*Liliet*](#)

(if you only fell into quicksand to your waist, bisection is not how you can get out of it)

Crash

If only. They way Hierophant spoke, they're about to become the Watch 2.0

This is big trouble.

[*Liliet*](#)

What do you mean?

jamesc9

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/11/29/chapter-48-interrogation/>

'changes were observed' is probably a good place to start reading.

[Liliet](#)

I remember the worldbuilding, I'm confused by the sentiment.

superkeaton

I'll give this to the Dead King, he really knows how to get two birds with one stone.

Daniel E

Booo, boo on you sir. Your puns are bad and you should feel bad :p Also, you may recall that puns are illegal under Queen Catherine, along with being taller than her.

superkeaton

Given that I'm pretty sure we're of near-similar heights, I'm sure we'd see eye to eyes on the matter.

[sengachi](#)

I love how Zarkan has been with Rumena for almost four centuries now. Like, a looong time. And sure it thought it could take room at a once upon a time when it was young and stupid, but now paperwork together for a while, and Zarkan probably has the impression that it's seen most of what Rumena can do. Enough that every half century it starts thinking maybe it has a shot.

And then Rumena pulls out a freaking Secret it hasn't used in so long that Zarkan has probably not even heard rumors of it, the Secret predates it by so much. A Secret which outperforms both the Grey Pilgrim's Shine and a Goddess (Rumena wasn't injured by backlash after all) and casually unmakes one of the Dead King's greater workings.

What do you think is going on in Zarkan's head in this moment, and why is it "Hahahahaha, oh fucking gods I tried to kill that how could I have ever been so stupid?"

SaveOurSquirrels

Awh yeah cat with an eyepatch gonna be the coolest teacher?/ headmaster? at Cardinal

Crash

Rumena had the secrete of Earth Bending all along!

Darkening

Y'know, I find it odd that the Dead King is able to counter Night so thoroughly. Like, it's portrayed as being equivalent to sorcery or Light, but he's able to create perfect antimagic for it and ensnare and drain a goddess like this? You'd think over the centuries he'd have figured out similar counters for magic and light, yet we've seen no indication of that, but he was able to counter Night almost completely after just a couple of years. Sve Noc have been compared in might to a choir of angels, and yet we've never seen any suggestion that Keter's been able to bind one of those and turn it into a power source or something. I guess there might be some story aspects to the second part, since Keter chaining an angel would be an opening for a hero to come free it, whereas attacking Night is just Evil vs Evil, but still. It just feels a bit cheap for him to be able to fuck them over this hard with like, a day of prepping wards in a cave that he had no guarantee they'd even show up at.

Xinci

Well two key things. Night has less source purity than Light which means in a clash it comes down to sorcerous skill more than just power. The Night was only protected from usurpation by the skill of its wielder and in this Sve is lesser. She had a glaring weakness for exactly this kind of issue and wasn't getting countermeasures as the DK learned more and more about the Night as the war progressed. And secondly the DK has been accelerating his understanding of Night for years as we saw as his artifacts that could affect it got more streamlined.

Liliet

Night is not equivalent to sorcery and Light is equivalent to neither. Light has "source purity", as Xinci has pointed out, which basically means it trumps anything you throw at it. Sorcery cannot beat it, demons cannot beat it, if you throw something at Light the something gets destroyed and Light stays.

Night and sorcery seem to be competitive with one another: Night can disrupt sorcery and sorcery can disrupt Night, depending on configuration. Now sorcery can disrupt sorcery as well, so this is an eternal arms race, but Neshamah cannot make straight up antimagic field generators because they'll disrupt his own undead. I mean, he CAN, he just can't USE them when he also wants his undead in the area. They would give him a straight disadvantage compared to the living. Night though, he

doesn't use it, so he can make disruptors and use them with impunity without losing anything.

Now this does mean that theoretically everyone could come up with ways to disrupt his shit right back, but we're back to the arms race problem here – the disruptor technology, the anti-disruptor technology, the anti-anti-disruptor technology etc. We're seeing this play out: the Unravellers, the copperstones, etc.

Darkening

I mean, we've directly seen Masego do anti-Light countermeasures back at the battle of camps, but sure, I can dismiss that as Name specific shenanigans that can't be lightly replicated by others. I still feel like a two year war is exceedingly rapid for him to have been this successful at countering it, but maybe he'd encountered it before. The drow *did* have a fairly strong reaction to the idea of facing him at first, so they probably did try raiding Keter at some point in the past.

Darkening

Though it occurs to me that that effect from Masego was based off an Order demon and Keter probably has those when he's willing to break out the big guns. So that should get interesting.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, good point, he'd probably encountered Night before.

Mike E.

Ivah is the best bud. How far he has come since we first saw him and his band exiled from the underdark.

Also, his faith in the First Under the Night and in SveNoc is blindingly idolic.

[Liliet](#)

Its/theirs. Typos aren't legitimate pronouns.

Mike E.

So I just caught this re-reading the chapter...was the Mantle killed by Mighty Jindrich? I read this as Romena was on his way to take care of the Mantle, only for Jindrich to snuff it out before he got there, leaving Romena to believe the Mantle was overrated as a threat if Jindrich was able to kill it, hence his 'unimpressed' thought.

"The Mantle, yes? Losara had spoken of her. This war would be well rid of her continued presence. The general sped forward, knowing the darkness would be fixed in range, yet it died before the old drow even reached the edge. Unimpressed, it leapt over Jindrich..."

Crash

Well shit. I sure am glad I decided to read this on Thursday and only have to wait till tomorrow.

Holy fuck, Masego.

ByVectron!

Re-reads can be so fun. Did you know the Cat already has a fancy glass eye? Book 5: Chapter 65

"...that vicious little wretch Robber even threw something at me over the fire. I didn't quite manage to catch it but it slid into a fold of my cloak and I picked it up there. I blinked, finding a rather fancy glass eye looking back at me. Where had he even – no, I didn't want to know. It had to be someone of stature, though, part of it was painted but there was also coloured glass and that'd expensive as all... No, if I asked then he won. I'd get Hakram to find out later. Still, I pocketed the eye without any qualms."

Crash

Kinda hoping she doesn't put a glass eye in or gets an eyepatch or anything of the sort.

Just kinda... leave it as is. If nothing else, that's even better intimidation tactics. Especially since the Night has gone kaput.

[Liliet](#)

Tbf a glass eye can be a good option for wearing UNDER an eyepatch for structural integrity of the eyesocket.

Also, I want Catherine to have a Masego-style magic eye that isn't impeded by the eyepatch so she gets badass looks and utility all in one 0.0

Frivolous

Can't help but notice the parallel between this situation and the Battle of the Camps. Both times the situation was desperate and Catherine was injured and unconscious.

Feels very much the same way as this quote from Kaleidoscope II:

"She may rise," the Pilgrim said. "The shape of it is there. Wounded or unconscious, those she loves besieged, she may return to offer salvation at the darkest hour."

"And that's not a villain's story, Tariq," the woman grunted. "She's hard to predict, and that'll get people killed. You're sure about what you saw?"

The Grey Pilgrim let out a tired breath.

"What Catherine Foundling craves above all is peace," he murmured. "On chosen terms, perhaps, but peace nonetheless."

[Liliet](#)

Yup 😊

aran

A villain with the literal aspect **Murder** feels a little on the nose 😏

goliath1303

I don't remember which chapter it was in, but it was definitely mentioned in an earlier chapter that the Aspect isn't ****murder****, it's ****kill****. I think it was started when the decisions were being made as to which Named would be best used to counter which Revenant, but I definitely wouldn't put money on that guess.

aran

So Catherine is now one-eyed and has two corvid companions? That sounds familiar.

aran

Wonder how that happened. Maybe the link got established through the arrow in Catherine's skull?

ninegardens

Tariq and Zeze is the buddy cop duo I never knew I needed.

[Spirituality Awakening](#)

Nice story. 😊

Interlude: Kingdom

"Fifty-seven: the greatest of powers is not an enchanted sword or cataclysmic spell, it is simply to be in the right place at precisely the right time."

– *"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown*

The Black Queen's own favourite trick had been turned against the Fourth Army, and the results were a bloody ruin.

At least two thousand dead in less time than it took to boil a cup of water, that much again in wounded and even worse: siege engines, as well as the sappers who manned and built them, had been pulped by the great sheets of waters that had fell like a wave of stone from the Heavens. The Dead King's sorceries had been aimed foremost at the positions above the rebuilt gates of Hainaut, the siege platforms Sapper-General Pickler had ordered built before the enemy came, and there was not a soul left alive there. The results of that were immediately disastrous, for though the Fourth Army was hastening to reinforce the lost grounds the enemy had not missed the opening: beorns were already there and emptying their bellyfuls of soldiers, as great snakes of dead flesh bit into the wet stone and opened their maws to make themselves into siege ladders.

Worse, a pair of wyrms had landed atop the siege platforms and was terrorizing the attempted reinforcements. They monstrous dragons of flesh and bones, magnificent examples of what the greatest necromancer to ever live could achieve at the peak of his skill, were shrugging off Light and sorcery alike. It would take concentrated volleys of either to drive them back, and the Fourth was still on the backfoot: with so many officers dead, it was struggling to move priests and mages where they needed to be. It was a miracle, General Zola Osei thought, that the Fourth Army hadn't outright routed. Nearly every other army on Calernia would have, after seeing nearly half its number killed or wounded in so short a span. But the soldiers, first hardened on the grounds of Arcadia and then against the horrors of the Folly, held.

For now, at least. How long would that last? General Zola Osei of the Second Army of Callow let the urge to wince pass through her, refusing to indulge, for it would not do to show weakness to her staff when disaster loomed so tall. She set down the Baalite eye, choosing her words carefully as her staff tribune and senior mage awaited her opinion.

"If we do not immediately reinforce, the gate is lost," General Zola said.

"If fully commit, we risk losing the gate anyway and being swept away entirely in its wake," Staff Tribune Adnan frankly said. "I

would argue in favour of ordering the Fourth to retreat while we fortify the entrance to the city and prepare for battle there."

"Should the Dead King hold the gate, the city's wards are at risk of collapsing entirely," Senior Mage Jendayi replied, shaking her head. "I won't pretend that it will not be bloody to take back the gate, but even on purely tactical grounds it is the superior decision."

They were disagreeing, Zola considered, because they were starting from entirely different premises even if neither had stated as much: Adnan considered this battle lost, and was now looking to mitigate, while Jendayi still believed victory achievable and so was willing to spend lives to reach that end. General Zola herself was not yet certain which way she leaned, though she was aware a decision needed to be made urgently. Already she had sent her two senior legates to prepare the grounds behind the city gates in case of a breach but now she either needed to send companies into the stairs leading up to the siege platforms, which the dead were certain to turn into a meat grinder of brutal proportions, or send messengers to the Fourth before it overcommitted. And the truth was that, even beyond tactical considerations, Zola was not certain if the Second had the stomach for the kind of fight taking the gates back would mean. Not since Maillac's Boot.

The general had always admired the Black Queen's almost alchemical knack for transmuting battles into loyalty, but the Boot had left scars in the Second. Losing General Hune had been a blow, even for Zola herself, but the casualties taken that day... Many still had nightmares of the hordes that never ceased coming, of the things crawling out of the much and in those dreams the gates into Twilight always closed too early. If Her Majesty had been there with them, perhaps, but now? The rumours had spread. The Black Queen was wounded, unconscious, and now her armies were wavering. Catherine Foundling had never been defeated on the field, but that legend did not apply to the Army of Callow when it stood without her. *If I don't give the order to take back the gate, General Zola thought with cold clarity, then I have declared this battle a defeat. It will not be possible to win, afterwards.*

Before she could speak, however, she caught sight of strange movement atop the gates. An eddy in the flow of the dead. Zola's grandmother had been a Mosa, and though the blood had since thinned she could still perceive motion uncannily well even in the dark. She pressed the Baalite eye against her face again, the enchantment lending her better sight through the dark, and started in surprise.

"General?" her staff tribune worriedly asked.

"Mad," Zola Osei softly said. "Utterly mad."

Goblins, it was goblins. At least a cohort's worth of them, maybe more, but it was not a battle they had come from. Zola saw as they climbed atop the great necromantic constructs – the beorns and the snakes and even one of the wyrms – as lesser dead clumsily tried to pursue. Nimble and utterly fearless the sappers, for those bags they bore could not be mistaken, spread out and every heartbeat a few more of them died from being shaken off monsters or caught by undead. And still they went, until a horn was sounded and like candles in the darks the monsters lit up. One after the other, matches struck and devices triggered as jets of green flames burst and Keter's great beasts screamed.

Robber's Marauders were not a legend without reason.

"We go forward," General Zola Osei said, throat tightening. "The Second will take back the gate."

The Army of Callow had not yet bent the knee to even odds overwhelming. It would not break that custom on her watch.

—

Like most great catastrophes, Adjutant thought, it had not been neatly done. The Grey Basin – le Bassin Gris, to the locals – had occupied maybe a fourth of surface of the plateau on which the city of Hainaut had been built, an uneven oval that began south where it ended on a waterfall over the edge and went up the middle of the capital until it ended at the beginning of the great district facing the city gates. The basin had been a major boon to the city, for both sanitation and drinking water purposes, and it'd been kept full by both underground aquifers in the rock below and regular rainfall. It was also, as of a half hour ago, entirely *gone*.

It had been expected that the undead would dig under the city, for it was one of Keter's favourite tactics and one of the few weaknesses of the city-fortress, and the Firstborn had been the natural answer to such an assault. They too were familiar with fighting underground, Night was well suited to such skirmishes and unlike humans they could see perfectly in the dark. And as far as Hakram could tell, when the dead had finally dug their way up into the city the fight had gone overwhelmingly in the favour of the drow. On all fronts they'd either held or outright beaten back the dead, in some cases even counterattacking deep below where the dead were massing for their offensive. And then it had all gone horribly wrong, somehow.

Sve Noc had been caught in a trap, of which the nature and purpose was still unclear, and it seemed that to free themselves from it the Crows had made sacrifices. Swaths of dzulu had suddenly fallen unconscious, and even Mighty had seen their powers suddenly falter. Worse, the angry throes of the goddesses had shattered the bottom of the Grey Basin and the water had

poured into the tunnels dug by Keter. They too had broken, in some places too fragile, and it had begun a disastrous chain of collapses that'd essentially hollowed out the heart of the city. Now where the Grey Basin had once stood there was a sheer drop of at least a hundred feet instead, with massive rubble and the corpses of both drow and broken undead strewn everywhere.

"Hard to tell how many died," Secretary Amelia said. "The Firstborn are shit at coordinating with other forces, they never told us how many they sent down into the tunnels."

"Concentrate on finding the Losara," Hakram said, leaning on his crutches. "They are most likely to have numbers for us."

"The curves of the cliff seems to curve inwards," Secretary Prattler noted, crouching at the edge with an interested look. "Dangerous. The plateau's structure became unstable."

"And the tunnels?" Hakram asked.

"They didn't go anywhere," Prattler, once a lieutenant in the sappers, replied. "If the dead climb the side of the drop, they'll be able to access them and enter the city by other paths than the edge. We need to close them as soon as possible."

"Send word to the sappers," Adjutant ordered. "Save for the situation at the gates, this is the highest priority."

"Won't be many left of us, but I'll see what I can do," Secretary Prattler saluted.

The reports from his phalanges were increasingly staggered, but the flow had not yet been impeded. The difficulty at the moment was keeping the Alliance high command informed, and Vivienne in particular. Irritatingly, the situation with the Firstborn remained unclear. The nature of the consequences of what had happened save for a fourth of the plateau shattering were still to be determined. Night had weakened, observably, but was that it? Answers came when his picket informed him that Masego and the Pilgrim had strolled out of the dark, that overly ambitious creature Ivah with them. Hierophant looked invigorated, the Pilgrim wearied, and neither wasted time on niceties as the 'Lord of Silent Steps' stood in the distance and seemingly entranced.

"The Dead King laid a trap for Sve Noc in a cavern below the city," Hierophant said. "And through the sister he captured, he attempted to siphon the Night."

Hakram's jaw tightened. That would have been too disastrous for words.

"Did he succeed?"

Hierophant shook his head.

"I was invited to use one of my aspects onto the Night through one of the sisters," Masego said. "What Trimegistus seized, I ruined."

"Along with most of the Night itself," the Peregrine quietly added. "The Crows hid away a portion of their power in a mortal receptacle beforehand, but most of the Night itself was unmade."

"It was a measured action," Hierophant calmly said. "It will have hit dzulu the worst, as they had reserves of Night but none of the protections of the Mighty. Nisi will have gone entirely unharmed."

"And Mighty?" Hakram asked, licking his chops.

"Weakened," the Pilgrim said. "Significantly so."

Then the Gloom that defended Serolen was likely gone as well, Adjutant thought. Dark news.

"When will the Sisters return to the field?" he asked.

"That is why we are here," the Pilgrim admitted. "You are, as always, the man who can find the needle in the haystack. The Sisters cannot reclaim their power, Hierophant tells me, until their imprisoned half is freed. Else we risk simply resuming the disaster on a smaller scale."

Hakram blinked.

"One of them's still trapped?" he flatly said.

"Yes," Masego said. "The ritual was quite comprehensive, though I expect it was primarily meant for a godhead shard and not the possession the net caught. It allowed the halves of Sve Noc to keep communicating."

"It is," the Grey Pilgrim said with grim face, "still down there."

He pointed down below, into the field of soaked rubble, and for a moment Adjutant's mind went blank. Saving someone down there? Impossible. Not, he adjusted, merely impractical. Which meant... mhm, perhaps he would be able to **Find** a solution after all.

—

"The Second Army has engaged at the gates," General Bagram grimly announced. "It is gaining steadily, but there is no telling the outcome of the engagement."

"And your Fourth?" Prince Klaus Papenheim asked.

"We've stabilized the flanks and are focusing on evacuating the wounded," the orc replied. "The situation is stable."

Vivienne let out a long breath and spoke the truth no one else seemed to want to.

"It has been confirmed that the Grey Legion is approaching the gates, the defences of which are still in enemy hands," she flatly said. "I am the least seasoned military leader at this table, but it seems to me that those gates are about to be smashed open."

Just a few soldiers of the Grey Legion, hulking masses of moving steel that they were, were enough to serve as a battering ram. The entire frontline of that silent army hitting the seven gates as once would be worse by an order of magnitude.

"We can still hold," General Bagram insisted. "So long as the walls do not fall, the enemy can be bottlenecked in that district."

"The east holds," Captain Nabila said. "No beachheads remain and we have mastery of both rampart and bastions."

Proud as Vivienne was of the Army of Callow, she had to admit that in the battle for Hainaut the Dominion that had distinguished itself. Almost half the western rampart, held by Alamans troops, had collapsed after being struck by Scourges until Catherine had led the Woe – and Akua Sahelian – to slay one and drive away the other. Unfortunately, the reinforcements led by Princess Beatrice had never materialized as instead they'd run into enemies in the streets of the city. They'd won that clash decisively, at the price of the Princess of Hainaut being wounded, and at the moment it was Prince Arsene of Bayeux that was theoretically the commander of that flank.

The man was not here, however, having instead sent his niece Lady Marceline to speak for him.

"The Brabant levies broke and ran," Lady Marcelline frankly said, "but we've contained the breach to a single bastion. Captain-General Catalina survived the attentions of the Archmage and she's leading the local effort while my uncle oversees the norther stretch of the rampart."

"Anyone would have buckled, hit by that kind of magic," General Bagram said with rough sympathy. "But can the mercenaries clear the enemy's foothold? If they'd don't, this all falls apart."

"Perhaps if Chosen were to lend their strength the matter could be settled more easily," Lady Marceline leadingly said, turning her eyes towards Vivienne.

It rather amused the heiress that even though she had not held a Name in years, by simple virtue of having once been the Thief people believed she still had influence over Named. As if even Catherine – Vivienne’s heart clenched, but Indrani had *promised* she would survive – Catherine, with all her strength, did not struggle to keep their kind in even a semblance of order. The privileged information that Vivienne Dartwick did hold in regard to their kind was not a consequence of her thieving past at all, but of Hakram Deadhand being fiercely meticulous even when calamity was at the gate.

It was not sorcery but regular messengers, which admittedly some might argue were harder to arrange in a city besieged.

“They’ve had heavy casualties,” Vivienne said. “On the Silver Huntress survived out of her band after they were caught in that ambush, and only barely. It might be possible to request the Headhunter and the Rogue Sorcerer lend a hand, but they have been highly mobile so mustering them may take time.”

It’d been a slaughter, according to the report she’d gotten. A well-crafted ambush by what had appeared to be a half a dozen Revenants in a narrow street had taken a lethal turn when the Prince of Bones had torn through a wall and pulped the Young Slayer’s head with a single blow. A black-feathered arrow had taken the Summoner in the throat almost simultaneously, and the rest had been overwhelmed. The Grey Pilgrim and Masego had arrived in time to save the Silver Huntress’ life, but both the Silent Guardian and the Rapacious Troubadour had been lost.

All that with nothing to show for it, aside from a few destroyed lesser Revenants. The Prince of Bones had managed to retreat into Arcadia under fire by both the Peregrine and the Hierophant, indifferent to even their harshest attacks, while the Hawk had been long gone by the time those two arrived. The gate the Prince of Bones had used had been found and closed by the pair, but it was expected by everyone in this room that the Scourge would be back to lead his Grey Legion when it breached the city. Lady Marceline made a moue at Vivienne’s answer, displeased.

“Perhaps the band of the Barrow Sword instead?” she asked. “The Blessed Artificer alone-”

“The survivors of that band are already tasked, by order of the Adjutant himself,” Vivienne mildly said.

The mildness was not one that invited further argument, and with ill-grace Lady Marceline accepted the help on offer instead of the one she’d wished for. Vivienne sent out the messenger promptly, even as argument resumed as to whether or not the battle for Hainaut could still be salvaged. There was some optimism that it still could, so long as the drow managed to rally and help the Lycaonese keep walls of the pit created by the

collapse of the Bassin Gris from being climbed by the dead. For now the sheer quantity of rubble and water was making it effectively impassable, but it would not last forever.

"The Neustrians could reinforce," Lady Marceline said, "at the moment they are not-"

It was like an itch, Vivienne thought. Or perhaps simply the slightest of pressures, tickling like a feather. Not the first trick of the sort she had learned, back when she was the Thief, but the first she had been *taught*. That was almost nostalgic, in a terribly dangerous kind of way. Vivienne Dartwick kept her breathing steady, concentrating as the talk of the commanders washed over her, and listened to nothing save the sound of her own breath. In, out. In, out. There, the itch again. The... weight. She had not been wrong. Idly, the heiress-designate to Callow pushed back her chair seemingly to make room for her legs as she reached for a carafe of water. Leaning covered one of her arms from sight, gave her free hand, and a heartbeat later she was moving.

The knife flew, perfectly thrown, and would have caught the hooded figure in the throat if it'd not been parried by a serrated dagger.

Prince Klaus, who'd been about to get his throat slit, was the first to draw his sword. General Bagram was but a heartbeat behind, and even as Lady Marceline backed away so she'd have room to draw her rapier Captain Nabila palmed a throwing axe. Vivienne, though, had already leapt atop the table with a fresh knife in hand. The Revenant flickered, as if made of heat mirage, and for a moment her eyes stung but she focused through the pain and flicked a second knife. It was parried, but the flickering ceased.

"Varlet," the Iron Prince hissed, striking hard.

The Revenant turned the blow aside, punching the old man in the stomach hard enough it emptied his lungs, but Bagram hacked at its shoulder and it was forced to step back. The orc's blade bit into the Prince of Hannover's shoulder but only shallowly, and Vivienne reached for the back of her belt where she kept a pouch even as she finished crossing the table. Captain Nabila's throwing axe was swatted aside and General Bagram's charge ended badly, the Varlet sweeping his legs and tossing him at the table. Vivienne's fingers closed around a handful even as she leapt, the table flipping below her as Bagram stumbled into it, and she watched as the Iron Prince's swing was not only parried but riposted with a vicious cut that ripped across his face.

And the Varlet turned to her, even as she flew through the air, but Vivienne Dartwick smiled unpleasantly and threw a handful of golden dust into her face.

The Scourge hastily retreated but it caught her anyway, the Revenant screaming as the Concocter-made compound burned at the dead flesh and glowed brightly. Let her try to disappear with *that*. Vivienne tumbled into the animated corpse, the two of them landing in a sprawl, and as she slid out a third knife the other tried to slice open her throat. She caught the wrist in time with her free hand, struggling to keep the blade from going into flesh, but she was losing in strength and she had to abandon her knife to help with her second hand. She was losing anyway. Fortunately, the Iron Prince then kicked the Varlet in the head.

She fell to the side and Vivienne snatched up her knife, stabbing into her foe's wrist even as the Revenant tried to punch through the back of Klaus Papenheim's knee. She nailed the dead flesh, preventing the blow, and by then Captain Nabila had joined the fray with a war axe. Vivienne backed way so they'd have freer hand, getting back to her feet as General Bagram brushed past her to lend his sword to the cause of keeping the Revenant from rising. Lady Marceline, though armed, was staying far away from the foe. Vivienne threw her a scornful glance, passing the fallen table to snatch first a magelight globe from the wall and then a candle from a candlestick. She deftly turned back just in time to see Bagram rip through a wrist and then hold down the limb.

"Keep her from moving," Vivienne ordered.

"She-" Captain Nadila began.

"Do it," the Iron Prince grunted, hacking at the hood.

They managed, barely, and even then Vivienne had to dodge a kick as she approached.

"You will-" the Varlet began, but the words were interrupted by someone shoving magelight in her mouth.

"I could sneak better than that at eighteen," Vivienne Dartwick scathingly said, pressing the candle's open flame against the magelight globe. "You ought to be *embarrassed*."

And after five heartbeats exposed to fire, exactly as Masego had shown her it would, the Jaquinite magelight exploded with a loud *pop*. The tongues of flame exploded outwards, incinerating the Revenant from the inside as a jet shot out from her mouth and Vivienne avoided it by reclining her head to the right. The heat licked at her face, but she did not close her eyes. The Revenant, head mostly consumed save for charred bones, stopped moving.

"Decapitate it to be sure," Vivienne said, drawing back.

Captain Nabila did, rather eagerly, and the corpse fell listlessly. Feeling the eyes of everyone in the room on her, Vivienne cocked an eyebrow. Had they believed her harmless

because these days she wore dresses instead of leather? She was able to fit more knives in a gown than she'd even been able to in trousers. *I spent my fighting years as one of the Woe*, Vivienne thought, matching their gazes. *Does even a single one of you grasp what that actually means?* She picked up one of the knives she'd thrown, carefully placing it back against the hidden strap.

"General Bagram, I leave this in your hands," she said. "I'll be heading out."

The orc slowly nodded.

"Where to, my lady?" Bagram asked.

"Where the hammer will fall," Vivienne replied. "The gates."

—

Amusingly enough, the Barrow Sword was the only member of his band who turned out to be useless to the purposes for which it had been sent for.

Ishaq took it in good humour, proving to be in a rather amenable mood overall. His successes before members of the Blood, his usual foes, had put him in a fine mood. Hakram spent little time speaking with the man, instead guiding the efforts of the rest of the band. No one was inclined to climb down, especially now that dead from the plains below had begin to crawl all over the rubble, but the Harrowed Witch was the solution to that: the bound soul of her brother, which she could sometimes force to obey her commands, had been sent instead. With the help of Hakram's own aspect the place where General Rumena was buried had been found, which had been when the Vagrant Spear moved out.

Passing through Twilight, as she was a fair hand at sidling, she emerged even as the Blessed Artificer began raining down Light on the dead in a hail of javelins. Striking with Light and the power of her Name she'd quickly pierced through the mass of stone, allowing a haggard Mighty Rumena to stumble out. The first stumble was an appearance by the Hawk, who from her high perch atop a vulture let loose an arrow. Aimed at Mighty Rumena, Hakram discerned, but it was not to be. Another arrow hit it mid-trajectory, Archer having finally found trace of her prey, and before a second could be loosed both the drow and the Vagrant Spear disappeared into Twilight.

The Firstborn could see to themselves, then. He had done what he could. An opinion seemingly shared by Masego and the Grey Pilgrim, who had lingered talking to each other quietly but were not clearly intent on leaving. Hierophant absent-mindedly bade his goodbyes, mentioning he was headed towards the gates, but the Peregrine stayed for a longer conversation.

"The Firstborn situation seems as settled as it can be," Adjutant said.

"We but tied a bandage over a gaping wound, but it is better than nothing," the Peregrine quietly replied. "I am simply glad that we were able to free Sve Noc."

The tired-look old man, Hakram considered, had been fully prepared to kill the two goddesses rather than let them fall in the hands of the Dead King. Soberingly, he seemed to believe he would have been capable of the act.

"Losing the Firstborn entirely might have lost us the battle," Hakram warily agreed.

There was a long pause as the old man studied him, those rheumy blue eyes piercing in ways that were beyond simple sight.

"The Ophanim believe the battle is lost regardless," the Grey Pilgrim murmured.

The orc's pulsed quickened.

"And do they care to share their reasons why?" Adjutant calmly asked.

The situation was not favourable, to his knowledge, but it was not yet disastrous. The walls largely held, and though the gates were threatened they were yet to fall. In the longer view the great pit that had replaced the Grey Basin was a liability, but salvaged sigils and the still-fresh Lycaonese should be able to hold them. The battle had certainly grown more arduous, but it seemed to early to write if off.

"There is a Crab," Tariq Fleetfoot said. "It nears. They can feel it approaching."

Hakram froze. The massive necromantic creatures were as moving small cities that the Dead King used to keep the armaments of his armies in fighting fit. They were a massive resource investment, and so jealously guarded that few had even been seen, but one had been seen earlier in this campaign. The Rogue Sorcerer, when scouting Lauzon's Hollow, had believed he'd glimpsed the spells keeping one invisible to the naked eye. And though it was not the purpose of that construct, given its sheer size it would represent not so much a siege tower as a siege *fortress*.

"Masego and yourself are both capable of destroying constructs of that scale," Hakram finally said.

And perhaps the Blessed Artificer as well, or Catherine were she awake, but there were not certainties with either.

"A monster, yes," the Pilgrim sadly smiled, "but a city, with wards and protections as this Crab will have? No. Already the Ophanim tell me their influence is being restricted by some working of the Enemy's. The battle is lost, Adjutant."

His bone hand clenched.

"You want us to begin a retreat," he said.

"That I leave to military minds," the Peregrine said. "But I say this: we cannot leave a twilight gate in the hands of the Dead King."

"We can't afford to lose this battle either," Adjutant growled. "If we do, Hainaut collapses. Perhaps all of Procer with it."

And if Procer fell, the rest of Calernia would not be far behind.

"There is a way," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It would be ruinous, but there is a way."

Adjutant's brows knotted.

"What is it you want of me, Peregrine?"

"We need to wake up Catherine Foundling," the Pilgrim said. "And for that I require your help."

—

They had taken the gates, inch by inch.

General Zola had watched as the army already bloodied at Maillac's Boot bloodied itself anew taking the same wide stairs that Callowan sappers had built but days earlier, tight ranks of legionaries heaving and screaming and they drove back the howling dead. Nothing was held back. Sharpers were thrown freely, shredding the enemy's tightly packed hordes, and fireballs struck in volleys as spears of Light tore into the side of massive monsters. And the Second Army, living up to the excellence for which the Black Queen had honoured it, bled and won. The bodies fell, until all that was left was green flames and corpses no longer moving. Zola gave her orders, connecting her lines with the Fourth Army's and evacuating the wounded through the twilight gate. There were no longer mages to spare to send them back into the fight, as too few healers.

Then the gates broke.

The Grey Legion strode through the wreckage, ranks and ranks of silent steel bearing thick shields and great weapons. Light barely bit into them, sorcery was useless, but munitions made a dent. Goblinfire most of all, though the dead simply made some of the legionaries lie over the flames so they would not spread and

walked on. Through traps and pits, through caltrops and spikes, lumbering but indifferent. And when the Grey Legion reached the barricades, the lines wavered. Thousands of pounds of stone and wood were shattered in moments, and then great swords and hammers scythed through the frontline of the Second, but still the Second Army *held*. Zola Osei rode up and down the line, sending heavies into the gaps and ordering concentrated fire from the priests. Ineffective as they were, they still fared better than swords.

It tightened her stomach, watching orcs and humans and goblins pile themselves on the steel-clad dead to topple them and die and drove to destroy even a single one. Spells and Light came down in volleys from the ramparts and even the burning gatehouse, lines from the Fourth having dared to venture there, but it was not enough. The Grey Legion was pushing them back, slowly but surely. Blood and guts flowed down the street until the pavestones were so slick her men tripped on the entrails of their comrades, until smoke and ash stung their eyes to weeping and munitions slowly began to run out. A barricade collapsed entirely, a street routed, the shield wall collapse and then as if by a spell the breach was closed.

The Mirror Knight had come.

General Zola had heard the man called a fool by people high and low, but in that moment she felt only awe. That sole silhouette, marred by smoke and dust, smashed into the Grey Legion as if a cliff had decided to turn back the tide. He shone brightly, glimmer of Light, and as he advanced the enemy bent around him. Steel shells cracked, armoured dead went flying and an army of one sent the darkness howling back. Zola shouted herself hoarse organizing volleys to support him, sending in heavies to hold the ground taken back. Gods, they could still win this. They could still turn this around. Slowly, one at a time, the numbers of the Grey Legion were dwindling. The Second Army would not bend before they did. And forward the soldiers went, screaming their songs in defiance.

Then the Crab came, and the hope went out of them like a candle snuffed out.

Every gain made over hours of fighting gone, just like that. The monster-fortress stood above the ramparts, ramps coming down with iron hooks to disgorge undead atop the gate wherever the goblinfire had not spread. The shape blotted out even the sky, a tall shadow belching out acrid smoke the mage lines of the Fourth fled but not always quickly enough. The spell volleys sputtered out, and below the Grey Legion smashed into the ranks with fresh ferocity. The Mirror Knight was, before too long, a sole island of resistance in a sea of steel. And he fought on, but he could not win the war alone. Perhaps before Maillac's Boot they would

have been braver, Zola thought. Perhaps if the Black Queen had stood with them, as she had through the last nightmare.

But Maillac had happened, and the Black Queen was not there. The Second Army broke.

It was a retreat, at first. Almost controlled, soldiers edging away from the enemy. But the panic spread like a stain on lace, and steps turned into a run. And once a few had begun to run, thousands did. The Grey Legion were terrifying even as part of a shield wall, who wanted to fight them *without* it? The streets and barricades clogged with soldiers trying to flee, and in the wake of the Second breaking the remains of the Fourth Army broke as well. The only saving grace was that the Grey Legion were too slow to capitalize and that the streets were too narrow for the rout to make it far. The same barricades meant to be held against the dead instead bottlenecked fleeing soldiers, the blind panicked stampede killing hundreds.

General Zola had ordered spells fired into the broken ranks to turn them around, at first, but it changed nothing and she would not be party to butchering her own soldiers like animals. She tried to organize two fresh lines of defence but both buckled under the sheer mass of the routing soldiers who were in no mood to listen to shouting officers. There was, she bitterly realized, little she could actually do. She'd lost control over her army. They might as well be utter strangers now, for all the sway she had over them. Should she arrange for a more orderly retreat? The battle was good as lost now, but perhaps she could still salvage an army out of this. The sun shook her out of her thoughts, absurdly enough. The *sun*, in the middle of the night.

And still there it was, hanging in the sky above them, red and burning and casting golden light. A miracle, Zola thought, and remembered the strange lights that burned under the eyecloth of the Hierophant. They were, she thought, eerily similar to what now shone above her army. Which slowed in its flight, confused and worried. And slowly, as General Zola watched, something changed. One of the barricades being toppled calmed, and when she sought the sight with a Baalite eye she found that a banner had been raised. The Crown and Sword, the Black Queens own, but it was not the Black Queen flying it. Lady Vivienne Dartwick, armed and armoured and mounted as the Order of Broken Bells rode around her, headed into the fray.

And wherever she went, under that burning sun that somehow had the Grey Legion buckling, the terror turned to shame. And shame turned into determination, soldiers streaming behind her.

The tide slowed.

The tide halted.

At last the tide turned around, and as the broken armies headed back into the fight General Zola Osei thought that while Callow might only have one queen this night it had gained a princess.

kitebroken1

At last the tide turned around, and as the broken readers headed back into the fight General Zola Osei thought that while Callow might only have one author this night it had gained a voter.

Vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Miles

Boo lame.

Any other line in the chapter would have been better for it wouldn't **ruin** the best part a literal second after getting to it.

nimelennar

Yeah! Go Vivienne! Yoink a victory from the jaws of this defeat!

Unrecovered

From bad to worse huh

ruduen

Huh. Well, I guess it's a good thing they never pawned that off.

hakureireimu

They did pawned it back to the summer queen. But Hierophant already made a false sun in book 4.

ruduen

I had to double check.

In Book 3 Chapter 45, that's the last time the sun is on screen, with Cat threatening to destroy it, and stating that it would be returned if there's agreement.

There's a blank spot in what we know of the immediate aftermath. That being said, it's mentioned in the extra chapter Ye Mighty that summer did get it back as a result.

So, we'll have to see what details get revealed as we continue.

Darkening

I suppose it could just be Masego echoing a miracle, as he's wont to do.

Vyran

could it be an adaptation of the banners Viv stole from the imortals (Summers elite guards that were ultra hard to kill until their glowing banners got taken) back during the arcadia campain?

it would fit with the glowing sun over a raised banner, used to rally and buff their soldiers.

Jack

They couldn't fence it.
It was too hot.

Sam

Boooooo!

Frivolous

Hope Pickler and Robber survived, but I'm almost sure one or both of them died. First the Lakeomancy, and then the suicidal charge by sappers – one or both of them would have been involved in that.

=====

EE – possible discrepancy: The orc's blade bit into the Prince of Hannover's shoulder but only shallowly...

Is that correct? It makes it sound like General Bagram attacked Klaus, though I guess that could have happened accidentally.

=====

Yes! Vivienne rules! I love that she led the others in slaying Varlet.

Agree that Vivienne got a Name again, what with the last word being princess? That Shining or Sun effect seems to indicate that, although it could have been Masego's.

=====

Losing Berserker earlier and now Rapacious Troubadour and Summoner means 3 villains have died so far.

So far only 2 heroes have died, and one a transitional – Young Slayer and Silent Guardian, and we know almost nothing about SG since she doesn't talk, haha.

=====

This situation strongly resembles the Battle of the Camps, what with Catherine being unconscious and those she loves besieged and in peril both times.

And once again the important goal is getting her to wake up.

Tom

> Is that correct? It makes it sound like General Bagram attacked Klaus, though I guess that could have happened accidentally.

> The Revenant turned the blow aside, punching the old man in the stomach hard enough it emptied his lungs, but Bagram hacked at its shoulder and it was forced to step back. The orc's blade bit into the Prince of Hannover's shoulder but only shallowly

Varlet punches Klaus and then steps away from Klaus when Bagram comes in swinging a sword, which means Klaus is still easily close enough to get more sword from Bagram than was intended.

But was it Klaus's functional shoulder or the shoulder for his missing arm? 😊

danh3107

The sun is the Sun of Summer she stole from Arcadia and the Summer Queen.

Konstantin von Karstein

No, it was given back. It's probably Masego doing something. At the Camps he already used a reproduction of the Sun.

Jed

Hey, if it works once, then the literal laws of the universe decree it'll work better the second time.

Mennolt van Alten

> Agree that Vivienne got a Name again, what with the last word being princess?

Disagree. Why? Because Cat specifically has her as heiress-designate because she does not have a name and she is 'less important' than her so people won't go for her as much. If she gains a name that will jeopardize all that they worked for in the last years to make other leaders know here etc. If she was forming a name she would probably try to snuff it out and murder it like the name of the leader of the principate a while ago.

Mental Mouse

It's been heavily foreshadowed that Cat might not get her way with regard to ruling Names.

agumentic

>Because Cat specifically has her as heiress-designate because she does not have a name

No, Cat has her as an heiress-designate because Vivienne is a good fit, Name doesn't come into it. Cat is not going to revoke that status if Vivienne does get a Name here.

Snappy

Yes because her desire is the accords, which state that none of the named will rule a country. Which is why she was regretting Cordelia getting a name. It would put her in an awkward position if her heir got a name

agesbe

As has been stated on multiple occasions, preventing Named from ruling is likely just not going to happen. Catherine desires that no Named be rulers in a vacuum, but she doesn't like in a vacuum. At the very least the Dominion will completely refuse to sign them unless that clause is taken out.

Liliet

That clause is dead in the water, it has already been said this book.

Miles

I don't think Viv *can* get a Name at this point. Above holds grudges and she doesn't have the temperament to get power from Below.

Matthew Wells

Heroes don't need direct sponsorship. The first time Viv got a name was because she fit the role, not because the Gods had a place for her.

RoflCat

She was a Callowan doing thievery as 'revenge' against the occupying Praes, that's pretty much a free ticket to Heroic Name.

Hell Catherine herself probably was on the list of consideration until Black intervened, much like how Assassin went to recruit Viv at one point.

[Adrian V](#)

I guess that was Viv and Masego working together at the end right? Otherwise Vivienne gained a new name probably, maybe even if Masego was helping (gained a princess, sounds too fitting to not be a name).

Plus how she discovered the Valet, i mean that was a sign of her emerging name or a vestige from her old one, the former is more likely since she has aged a lot and too much time has passed.

And just what does Pilgrim plan to sacrifice to get Cat back? His live comes to mind but i am not sure how that would work....

Will need to reread the chapter tomorrow xD

Big Brother

Viv never returned the Sun she yonked from the Summer Princess. Where do you think it's been this entire time?

[Dresden 67](#)

She did return it. It was one of the conditions of Cat's bargain with the Summer Queen.

Even if she hadn't, Vivienne is no longer the Thief and so doesn't have access to her old aspect of Hold.

[Adrian V](#)

Huh i had forgotten that, my train of thought was that she couldn't access anything from her vault/space/whatever thief stash after losing the name, like if there was anything it was released at a certain location, lost forever or slowly released into creation at random (i imagine a % of maggufins found in lost ruins are created like that xD)

[Mental Mouse](#)

More likely just permanently stranded in a dimensional pocket. Though with the artifact they claimed from Diabolist, Masego could be able to access and loot that.

shikkarasu

I love the idea, though, of some Thief gaining **Hold** 20 years from now and being all “WTF is in my Name-pocket? A Callowan barge, 2000 old Praesi Denarii, a similar amount in the oldest Callowan coinage since the revolution, an empty coin purse with the name ‘William’ on it, IS THAT THE ACTUAL SUN!?!?!”

[Mental Mouse](#)

She gave Arcadia’s sun back! That was part of the deal for Summer to yield, leading to the Resplendent marriage. She probably didn’t keep any of the barges either. On the other hand, there’s certainly quite a bit of the palace silver, and probably stuff she stole earlier from the nobles and Praesi that she was robbing in the beginning.

That Other Guy

The barges were used to block up a gate Cat was trying to punch through before Thief joined the Woe

[Mental Mouse](#)

Right, and I’m saying she surely dumped all of them.

shikkarasu

Oh, to be clear I doubt any of these were actually kept, canonically, and I know that the sun was given back. The mental image just tickles me.

Miles

It’s a freebie for the next Thief.

mamm0nn

The prickling in the back of her neck isn’t a Name or power, it’s what Cat always used to notice Thief when she was trying to sneak up on her. She taught Viv how she kept noticing her, and thus how to sneak up on her unnoticed, and Viv thus also learned how to notice other rogues sneaking about.

beleester

That was a Name trick. Cat describes it as part of the instincts that come with being Named.

"You know how when you came into your Name there was this set of instincts just under your skin?"

The brown-haired woman cocked her head to the side.

"It felt more like a hand guiding mine," she said.

"Close enough," I said. "When you're about to get wounded or killed, you're going to get a tingle just like it."

She nodded slowly.

"I had no intention of striking you," she pointed out.

Miles

Doesn't say you need the name to sense it. There's no expenditure of power with it either. She learned it from the instincts but once she knows there's no reason to forget.

Pretty sure Black used nonbold "name tricks" too after he lost his.

Frivolous

beleester: Thank you! Very much appreciate your finding the relevant quote.

If Catherine is any authority and if she was speaking correctly, then the sense-invisible trick only works for Named, as only Named have those instincts.

But that means Vivienne had a Name even in the tent, fighting the Varlet. In fact, the Varlet may have triggered the Name.

Drunken Dwarf

I think it is Viv and Masego working together. Masego has done stuff with Summer before and the whole banner holding Viv is doing seems eerily similar to those Summer Elites that buffed themselves with banners. Then again Viv could have also just taken that one Calloween Name, Shining Princess.

As for Pilgrim's plan, another form of ruinous I'm thinking of is...what if the Pilgrim and Mercy helps Cat become a representative of one of the Choirs? Giving a Villain (especially Cat) access to a Choir and Light would certainly be considered 'ruinous' by the Grey Pilgrim.

TigerQuoll

Sounds like its the Shining Princess (or Shining Prince for a man), the traditional name of the crown prince/princess of Callow.

dadycoool

Wow, what a big chapter. It's a little overwhelming, so I'll focus on the last part. Vivienne never gave the sun back to Arcadia, did she? And where the Woe go, their enemy Breaks. Especially when they take advantage of a Trope, like the "First light on the fifth day" she just did.

'Ladi Williams

I legit cried after reading this chapter.
Thank you EE

Konstantin von Karstein

She gave it back, it was part of the bargain to force the marriage between the Queen of Summer and the King of Winter. But Masego **Witnessed** it, and so can imitate it.

limwanya

Where are the Dead King's devils and demon's?

Big Brother

In Keter, waiting for the Grand Alliance to knock on his doors

Cmxy

But if they win at Hainaut, the dwarves will join the front (probably)

Zggt

I believe there's an underground front where the Dwarves are already doing their damage. Their plan from the start was to use the rest of the sapients to tie up as much of the army as possible. It's been working swimmingly so far.

Bitan

J

[Adrian_V](#)

They led the demon of absentia or forgetness lead the way...and so got lost xD

mamm0nn

Escalation gains a return favour. If Below aids their champion, so can Above. And generally, whomever escalates first will see the opposite reaction being greater and more devastating.

It's like a Named battle. You never use your Aspects right away, you try to bait out their Aspects and use yours to counter theirs or if at all possible bait out and counter them with power and skill. Especially for Villains, you only use Aspects to counter the enemy's Aspect or when you really need to use it to survive. One of Black's basic lessons.

The Dead King too would know this basic lesson, and not use demons and all his other nightmares until the situation warrants it. If he escalates, then the sum of it all will lessen and aid and surprise reinforcements will be greater. Grey Pilgrim even said as much before. For example a surprise reinforcement of the elves might halt the Crab, but had DK sent in a legion of devils and demons then that same force could've been the tide-turner against this much greater foe.

Snappy

He wouldn't use them cause that would probably push the "good" side to get loads of buffs and get angels involved. So he is waiting till he has to use it.

Them winning her isn't game over. A crusade once got to keter and was turned away.

The crows are weakened till they can live without night so that front is open.

Dwarfs are still undecided weather or not to continue the fight .

And rest will be so bloodied after this fight that it will take time to get into shape.

JediJuliet

It's been mentioned that he can't escalate like that without suffering consequences in his opposition, that sort of nigh-permanent endless warfare (especially since demons permanently impact creation) basically mean that the opposition WILL be given further tools to permanently and negatively impact him, possibly even allowing his defeat by some hero shouting platitudes down the road.

Matthew Wells

Definitely the return of the Shining Princess name. She's been unable to access her hammerspace without a name, and Masego hasn't replicated the Sun miracle that we know of. Also the whole

'routing soldiers turn into a charge' has been mentioned a couple times to be a standard ability of martial Heroes.

Matthew Wells

And also Amadeus, but he has an aspect for that.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, it's the heir to the throne of Callow leading a charge of knights against the Enemy, and we know the Shining Prince(ss) led the charge against Black. And you're right, giving hope and courage back to fleeing soldiers is definitely Heroic. Guess we know why the seers were sure Hainault would fall without Vivienne.

[Dresden 67](#)

Masego has mimicked the Summer Sun before, at the Battle of the Camps. The Sun itself was returned to Summer as part of forcing the Summer Queen to marry the Winter King.

Matthew Wells

Just reread that- he did indeed, but this doesn't appear to be the same miracle- he wielded it offensively, generating it directly in the enemies' path, while here it's being used to empower allies.

Crash

Listen buddy, if you're in a rout in the middle of the night and the Sun suddenly comes out on your side... Yeah, that does wonders for morale.

hakureireimu

It's also being used offensively:

Matthew Wells

'Somehow buckling' is a pretty big leap from 'ball of fire spawned on top of me'.

Matthew Wells

And Masego has to ration magic now, so there's no way he's pulling out the big stuff without aiming properly.

[Mental Mouse](#)

On the contrary – remember that part of *why* Thief stole Arcadia's sun, was that the Queen of Summer could never be

defeated under the Summer Sun. Masego has used that to give Vivienne a similar buff for her troops.

Juff

Typo Thread:

worse: siege engines, > worse – siege engines –
had fell > had fallen
They monstrous > The monstrous
out of the much > out of the muck,
of surface > of the surface
of a at > of at
gates as once > gates at once
the Dominion that had > it was the Dominion that had
norther stretch > northern stretch
On the Silver Huntress > Only the Silver Huntress
backed way > backed away
had begin > had begun
orc's pulsed > orc's pulse
screaming and they > screaming as they
as too few healers > as well as too few healers
die and drove (should this be "die in droves")
glimmer of Light > glimmering of Light
Black Queens > Black Queen's
The tide slowed. (extra space)

nakam

that much again > that many again, i think

WuseMajor

Yoink!

'Ladi Williams

I'm scared of what the Grey Pilgrim regards as ruinous.
Because what are they going to sacrifice to wake Cat up if not GP himself?
And Cat without an eye and scarred!
Why...? EE...why?

Liliet

As to the latter part: 1) because Cat is Odin, 2) because badass.

Reader in The Night

Well, to any of us losing an eye would be a horrifically crippling wound. To a Named Villain... It's actually pretty much a power-up?

Cat already had a Red Right Hand in the form of her limp, but that was mild and could go away at will. A distinctive facial scar and an eyepatch, though? That is Tier One in terms of Villain Recognition Value, and in the Guideverse, with Recognition comes Power.

Even more, a Villain that is physically disabled is 200% more likely to be a dangerous plotter, and so Cat's various schemes are a bit more likely to stick. It seems weird to plot better because you've lost an eye, but that's the story beats.

In an unrelated note, I think the Peregrine is going to force Catherine's Name to consolidate, thus damaging it or crippling it's potential. Catherine having her Name fucked with is a common theme by this point.

Tom

> In an unrelated note, I think the Peregrine is going to force Catherine's Name to consolidate, thus damaging it or crippling it's potential. Catherine having her Name fucked with is a common theme by this point.

I had completely forgotten about the way her Name got messed with previously, but you're 100% right.

Alternatively Cat might already be in the middle of a Name dream brought on by her injury, and Pilgrim's going to screw it up because they need her to be awake more than they need her to have a Name.

Or maybe Pilgrim's choir has informed him that Cat's having a Tankred style dream. TWINS they were.

Insanenoodlyguy

The thing is, Pilgrim says whatever it is he's going to need Hakram's help. If the ruin is specifically on Catherine, It doesn't seem like he'd be willing to give that help unless it's literally "this or Cat dies" last second stuff. I feel like it has to be a broader ruin, though probably something Cat herself will be really, really unhappy about.

[Burlyraven](#)

Okay, so it wasn't a full destruction of the Night. Still pretty bad, but it didn't turn the shock troopers into tribal conscripts.

I know it's inaccurate to say a goblin did something heroic, but Robber just did something damn heroic. Leading his Marauders in that suicide attack on the constructs was essentially identical to what really sparked Kingfisher's Name. I seriously doubt he

earned a Name himself from that because of goblin culture, but if he could become Sapper Jesus and spawn an aspect for unlimited ammo, that would be really useful right about now.

And Vivienne has to have gained a new Name in this chapter. The story beats are just too perfect for it, and if Cat did come into her new Name, it would mean the Woe being back to full strength just in time for the final arc. My only hesitation there is that Hakram may have just sacrificed himself to jumpstart Cat. It's not an absolute, but it's definitely not an outside possibility.

laguz24

Nah, the whole sacrifice bit has already been done. It's kind of like death flags, once you reach a certain point they stop becoming relevant.

That Other Guy

One of Robbers Aspects will be to produce goblin fire at will.

And turn livestock into munitions

Morgenstern

I'm not sure "bad" revenge does always count as "good" vengeance, especially when it comes to a pseudo-romance of two goblins. Pickler was probably with her precious machines =/ Forget about the Troubadour, why did *she* not get a death scene? Or are we to presume instead of yet another off-screen death (hidden in an on-screen wave of death), she somehow escaped _that_, as a Non-Named?

Matthew Wells

She has a habit of finding someplace to watch from, and without a new toy to set up she doesn't have a reason to be on the front lines.

Insanenoodlyguy

Robber already had a Name. It was Robber. Goblin named, unlike most of creation, are intentionally kept secret. He did a very good job.

NerfGlaistigUaine

NO not the Troubadour! I liked that one 😞 Hoping he's somehow still alive, his power's got something to do with souls so its possible, but I doubt it.

Wish he'd at least gotten a death scene.

mamm0nn

Yeah, it's odd that this silent figure standing menacingly in the corner never even got around to causing the problems that he was destined to cause.

[Liliet](#)

Don't figure he had the scale to cause problems here. He ain't no Wandering Bard and dealing with minor bardic assholes after her is like shooting fish in a barrel, probably, for Cat.

AceOfSword

Barrow Sword's power also has to do with souls and he was able to use those to cheat death... But he's a martial name. The Rapacious Troubadour is a killer, but I'm not sure if that's enough to warrant him having such a trick...

Though Assassin seemed to have a "come back from being killed" trick too..

laguz24

Hmm, interesting. But what is the ruin of the sun that the grey legion has. But also, I think that ordinary people can sense a pivot, it just comes so rarely that they don't know what it is. Viv has merely been attuned by her time as a named, plus she still somewhat matters story wise. But I am voting for shining princess.

Thanatoss

No, Vivienne will probably not get Name. Remember we are witnessing END of Age of Wonders and start of new age, probably Age of Mortal, so yes it was VERY fitting that Generals just killed Scourge without any Named backup.

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne sensed that through a trick that Cat had taught her, to detect someone looking at you.

And with that said, it's beautiful that Vivienne says specifically that she could sneak better than that at eighteen – before eighteen, she got caught by Cat every time the same way XD

Sinead

I loved that detail so much!

laguz24

Another theory on what the pressure is, providence.

Anomandris

I've used the term before and I will again – this chapter was sheer Malazanesque writing. Those descriptive yet short paragraphs. A roller coaster of emotions – you go up and down often. A bird's eye sort of view of everything. Punchy, short sentences with the full weight of the plot behind them.

I have not been this awed by fantasy battle writing at least since The Crippled God.

Crash

Oh boy. That's one hell of a Chekhov's gun you got there, buddy.

There goes Hakram Deadhand, off to try and get dismembered again. This time, with incentive from a Choir. What a guy.

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

Man, he's probably got a thousand orc brides waiting in the orc afterlife.

Matthew Wells

Not to worry, if he loses any more body parts, he'll be immortal! Nothing to hit!

hakureireimu

Wait Bagram hit Klaus's side? Is Varlet an orc?

agumentic

What I think happened is that Bagram hacked at Varlet, she stepped back, and as result, Bagram hit Klaus accidentally.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

His weapon is big enough to hit two people simultaneously and the angle was wrong for avoiding that outcome.

ninegardens

So... that Sun Vivi has....

She no longer has her bag of ****HOLD****ing, so it probably not that (and got returned).

It... may be the Pilgrims star? He does have ****SHINE**** as an aspect, and we haven't seen that deployed yet.

Or it could be Masego doing Sun Fae mimicary?

Matthew Wells

The Shining Princes of Callow weren't called that for nothing, methinks. And now Callow has a Princess again.

Zachary A Sloan

I feel like EE would have used capital-P Princess at the end of this were the case.

Also, Vivienne getting a name seems to sort of cheapen the whole idea Catherine is going for, with making Named less relevant to the ideal post-War Calernia.

That being said, the evidence someone else posted of the "feeling an itch when someone is looking at you/about to attack you" being a Name trick is fairly persuasive, unless Catherine was just wrong and it was a trick mortals could also learn (or ex-Named could use).

Sinead

It could be that this isn't the moment she gets her Name, but rather in the moments after this sortie. This is only the start of her final arc to a Name. She is a "p"rincess on route to become a "P"rincess.

Cat doesn't want Named rulers because she wants to deescalate conflicts to individual level, rather than a national level. It was already sounded as it was something that isn't possible even without Cat's own succession plan being complicated by it.

However, if Vivienne responds to this by creating a set of laws in Callow that bind the crown of Callow itself (think Great Britain's Magna Carta), that can be a compromise that resolves this issue for the best way possible.

Frivolous

Zachary: Pardon me, but the end of Charlatan IV ends with Roland describing himself as a lower-case rogue sorcerer, not capitalized Rogue Sorcerer.

TeK

It is the one she stole, but she accessed it through a different name. I wonder if it's literally Shine. Pilgrim's star is, er, Pilgrim's star, so the sun is out of question. And while Masego could probably manifest the sun, this sounds like an abhorrent waste of power for some superfluous reason. So not him.

Tycanor

Viv won't get a name back, if she does she cannot rule by Catherine's terms right? Same reason she was happy Cordelia didn't take the Warden name when it came along.

Liliet

Vivienne getting a Name or not is not something her or Catherine are likely to have a say in, alas (where by alas i mean fucking best).

But also the Accords have thrown out the "no Named rulers" clause, it was never workable.

Crash

Not so much thrown out as Cat has been very strongly told it's not happening due to it being the literal foundation of the Dominion lmao

She'd go for it, given the chance it's just that the others are currently refusing.

Liliet

It's not just the Dominion. Like, the Dominion is just an illustration of a more general principle.

Rulership and Names are inevitably intertwined. You can have non-Named rulers, but it might change any moment either due to a charismatic leader taking over (imagine if Accords said Kairos cannot be Tyrant of Helike. Poor Accords...) or due to a ruler growing into their competence and importance during a crisis to the point of getting a Name (and not everyone has an Augur to story-fight for them).

When a new nation forms, it has a Named or a band of Named forming it more often than not. When a nation throws of a foreign yoke, it has a Named or a band of Named leading that more often than not.

It's just HOW ROLES WORK.

The idea was always stupid. Cat's ideas are usually pretty good, but this? This was not one of those.

That she still wants it is... not a sign that there was ever a chance that it would work -_-

Crash

Oh I'm not saying it's a good idea or that it will work.

Just that she will fight for it becomes absolutely, completely impossible. Like if her heiress became Named.

That'd fuck everything up because there's no substitute for Vivienne.

Until then, Cat will continue to be stubborn about it. It's what she does haha

Mental Mouse

Back when she showed the Accords to Amadeus, he as much as told her "you aren't going to get that in the end, but you can trade it for some concession or other along the way".

Frivolous

I'm a little surprised that Andronike and Komena are not embodied again. I figured that was what it meant when Andronike invested most of the remaining Night into Ivah and also appeared to Masego as a woman with a silver mask.

I mean, she was prepared to lose most of Sve Noc's godly power, and Masego was able to touch her. I figured she'd retreated to her meat body.

But what with Andronike not reappearing in this Interlude, and only Rumena being Found by Hakram, I guess that means Andronike had only been an apparition, not a flesh and blood woman.

=====

Could someone please help me out by showing me where it says or does not say that you need a Name to detect an invisible person the way Lone Swordsman did and the way Vivienne does now?

I can't find any reference to it except in Heroic Interlude: Attaque au Fer. It's really bugging me that I don't know and can't find where Vivienne learned Willy's technique.

Matthew Wells

William didn't have that trick; Cat taught it to her after she joined the Woe. Sometime between the Battle of Four Armies and One and Second Liesse, if I recall correctly.

Frivolous

Matthew: Oh. Thank you.

Crash

William did have the trick, Thief used to get deeply annoyed that he always knew she was skulking about. He just never taught her.

Matthew Wells

Thought that was a Choir boy thing; he was also able to detect liars, which we've only seen GP use without an aspect.

[Liliet](#)

Andronike and Komena don't have meat bodies at this point as best I can tell. They ARE Night. They can create avatars to embody themselves, like the crows or the apparition Ivah saw, and that's as close to a "true body" as it comes for them.

Cicero

I don't think it requires a Name. It's just much like other instincts that are heightened by generic Name powers. It's not that ordinary people can't have those instincts, just that it takes a lot more effort and experience to train those instincts to work. I mean, Cat says she got her skill of noticing assassins by being followed around in secret for a couple weeks. I'd guess that for an ordinary person it would be more like a decade or two being at war, or in constant danger.

Of course, retired Named folk probably are able to retain the experience of using those instincts even if they don't have Name powers juicing them anymore.

Frivolous

Cicero: I've been reading from the start trying to isolate when and from whom (if she did not learn it on her own) Catherine learned to detect invisible people.

My guess, you see, is that the trick Cat learned can only be used by Named. If someone reliable like Lord Black claimed the same, then it may be Vivienne used a Name trick, which means she was the Shining Princess even in the tent fighting Varlet.

But it's just a guess. Still reading through old chapters.

Raven

"It rather amused the heiress"

are we getting a hint at something here?

Morgenstern

Viv has been called heiress (though not Heiress) for a very long time...

mamm0nn

Mirror Knight: Don't worry, everyone! I'm here to save the day!

Random 4th Legion soldier: You suck!

2nd and 4th immediately rout

Robber: I'm one of those random goblins that fought the Vultures before and rallied you all to fight with courage again, wanna fight with me?

2nd and 4th stop routing

Viv: Also I'm here, and I brought the sun! Look how silly that Crab looks when you can actually see it! That thing can only scare someone when it's a large looming shadow!

2nd and 4th rally and fight back!

Viv: You're in the way, Mirror Knight! Get lost!

Zeze: I too am here, to remind you guys that there is goblinfire over there. We might want to not go back into that direction.

2nd and 4th immediately stop running towards the undead to kick their ass, to start orderly retreating. Thanks, Masego.

Yunamed

There's always beauty at the end...Thank you EE

Magicturtle

Im kinda starting to find this war a bit stale... While the writing is top notch as usual, you can only take so much of the same before it gets a bit boring. The alliance wanna do something?

Kether fucks it up. The battles just starts to feel the same after a while. I might just be salty cause i have been waiting so long for cats name to come though 😊

Burdi

same here, been waiting for cats Name since 2018

TeK

That is the point though. The war with Keter is, fundamentally, a gruelling, repetitive slug. If it evoked those feelings from you – good. Cause that's what it is.

Rohit Ramesh

That said, it's a bit of a low point in the *serial*. When we get a few chapters a week it's harder to stay attached to this book because of the pacing.

There's more than enough goodness to keep someone engaged when reading it through, but right now it's a slog. I can't see why others are getting annoyed.

Honestly, I expect it to read much better as part of complete book series or binged than it does right now.

Morgenstern

I can attest to that, as I binged the chapters of the last week. I'm not annoyed in the slightest, but only sad that I reached the end of the binge right now.

Daniel E

I know you meant to say 'slog', but I like yours better.

Captain Amazing

RIP Summoner. You were an asshole with Eridan Ampora levels of oblivious overconfidence and more ambition than sense, but I never got the impression you were a sociopath, which is saying a lot by villainous standards. Cross my fingers for necromancy solutions.

The Troubadour won't be missed, and the Silent Guardian was almost set up as tragedy fodder, no offence. Dunno about the Slayer as there wasn't enough screen time.

beleester

Yeah, the Summoner was personally annoying but actually had the skills to back it up. A real shame we won't get to see him grow out of that.

Frivolous

Captain Amazing: Is it possible that his name being Cedric was a sign he was going to die?

Cedrics aren't known for their longevity, are they? At least since Harry Potter.

[origamiflame](#)

Just as a thought, someone on reddit was mentioning the link between Cat and Odin, and now that she's lost an eye it's getting even closer...

Thanatoss

Epick, absolutely epic. I love it... Please more

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I think Grey Pilgrim is going to force Cat into a Name dream, like what Black did at the very beginning and what Masego helped with in Marchford. He's an old hand at Namelore and as a mentor figure he'll know how to jumpstart Names. Especially since conventional sorcerous and divine means of waking her up didn't work. Leaning on the narrative is the last option remaining. Anyway, I'm glad we're not stuck in a limbo with regards to her status.

Not sure what to think about Vivi getting a Name. It fits culturally and narratively, what with the last charge, but it spits in the face of the overall themes of not needing Named to save everyone, new world order, etc. Either way the development is pretty interesting.

My crazy prediction is this: the story of the battle of Hainaut is not the last stand against the Dead King. Instead, it's a story about who will fill in the Role of the Choir of Judgement. Sort of how the First Llesse was a story about Callow's soul and Cat was the synthesis of the new (Praes) and the old (Callow). This battle will be reframed as a story about the nature of judgement, with Cat being the synthesis of the divine (the Tribunal) and the strictly human (Anaxares).

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think if Judgement comes back into play that will be happening over at the bridge with Hanno's party.

Nicholas Koenig

I really like the idea of Cat becoming a replacement for the Choir of Judgement but I think she will do it as a villain. What have we heard again and again about the Gods Below. They Listen. They Remember. They Pay Their Debts in Full! What is that if not a concern for justice. I can see Cat replacing the Choir of Justice as a villain with the authority to ensure that everyone gets their due.

[Liliet](#)

I hate to break this to you, but capitalism isn't the essence of justice.

Not to be all political or anything.

Nicholas Koenig

I agree capitalism isn't the essence of justice. But what the Choir of Judgement was doing wasn't either. Replacing one incomplete vision of justice with another is not unreasonable.

Miles

We may not have justice but we do have Just Ice. Which is what's left of Sve Noc after the Night got **ruined**.

[Liliet](#)

The Choir of Judgement was at least fucking trying.

Sinead

To m, the issue with Judgement is the fact that mortals cannot access laws like that and consistently apply them to their actions even if they wanted to. Same with Mercy, but for the opposite, utilitarian view. And as has been pointed out, most people would be spared under Judgement rather than executed. Also, considering that Hanno gets a compulsion to flip a coin when around certain people, and he has never mentioned having such a compulsion around Cat, makes me curious if Cat has been deemed successful so far in threading the needle since Book 4 (thinking of her talk with Edward about "abdicate once you are no longer needed, lest you spoil everything you have bled to bring about.")

I think my issue with Judgement is more the fact that they never advise, they only judge. Mercy is the opposite in that they only advise, but never judge. If the Choirs took a role that brought their mandates into a less heavy handed role, they wouldn't be this often maligned force that they are often portrayed as. Perhaps that would come in time through the nature of the Accords.

This may also mean that the Ashuran mystery cult becomes the dominant face (hah) of Above's practise, if the idea of accessing the various facets of the Mandate of Heaven becomes a thing.

[Liliet](#)

> the fact that mortals cannot access laws like that and consistently apply them to their actions even if they wanted to. Same with Mercy, but for the opposite, utilitarian view.

I get the impression Judgement is also somewhat utilitarian in its "laws" – it applies only the most basic criteria of "will the world be better without this person based on their actions so far".

I think Hanno gets not so much a compulsion as an... itch? It's his personal thing, not externally opposed. He *wants* to get an answer, it bugs him. It's a curiosity/uncertainty/anxiety thing, not angels nudging him. Note that that guy (Arnaud of Cantal) turned out to be "on his side" – supporting Cordelia in her campaign to get people to actually work together and stop being a crab bucket.

Sinead

> I get the impression Judgement is also somewhat utilitarian in its "laws" – it applies only the most

basic criteria of “will the world be better without this person based on their actions so far”.

Fair point! I think I was making the distinction between the two because I have understood Mercy “flexibility” to be the nature of utilitarianism compared to the more common deontological approach of the other Choirs. It’s the basis to how most Choirs impose a structure, while Mercy advises Tariq but he still makes the decision.

Then again, I see mortal approach to both of these systems ultimately converging, since perfect application of both should bring you to similar places (“The Right Thing”)

> I think Hanno gets not so much a compulsion as an... itch? It’s his personal thing, not externally opposed. He wants to get an answer, it bugs him. It’s a curiosity/uncertainty/anxiety thing, not angels nudging him. Note that that guy (Arnaud of Cantal) turned out to be “on his side” – supporting Cordelia in her campaign to get people to actually work together and stop being a crab bucket.

Also a good point. I have always read Arnaud as someone with a pretty dark past who is working to get out under the shadow of it, which may be the bias I am picking up from other people observing him.

[Liliet](#)

Arnaud is CURRENTLY known as a rapist, and appears to have deliberately adopted that as part of his reputation for what he does RIGHT NOW (well, at the time before he blew the cover, anyway). Now it can be argued whether he really did the thing or pretended he did without actually doing it, but “getting out from the shadow of a dark past” is high key NOT the vibe he’s giving off to me. More like “hiding in the shadow of a dark present”.

Sinead

That’s fair. I had understood that there was more to the rumours than may have actually be present in the text.

It doesn’t help that Arnaud just rubs the wrong way in most interactions on screen. I recognise that it’s an act (and an effective one), but it still makes him not my favourite character. That then bleeds into the rumour mill effect.

hakureireimu

> overall themes of not needing Named to save everyone

Is that even a theme? Do you think Cat will reject her new Name? Do you think Arthur should have rejected his?

Shveiran

Ok.

Ok.

1) This was awesome.

2) No, I mean it, this was fucking awesome.

3) ... With that said, what the fuck? Vivienne still has Summer's sun?

... Since when?

That... I want to say "that makes no sense", but by this point I know better. This series is absurdly good at being consistent. Still, this need explaining. How did Vivienne store it without being the Thief?

And why oh why did she never use it before? She went through a lot of dire situations while also struggling with immense feelings of inadequacy; and all the while, she was sitting on something like this and didn't use it?

Why didn't she bring it out in Keter, when Catherine was bound and the Empress was in sight? She had no way to know that Catherine was going to bring in the Wild Hunt with Call, and her plan was to shoot dozens of Sentinels with a crossbow she was no good at using.

Why didn't she use it during the Battle of the Camps, when Catherine was unconscious and she was struggling to come up with any possible alternative to unshackling Akua Murderhobo Sahelian?

This was so, so awesome. I want it to make sense so badly. Someone please make it make sense again.

[Liliet](#)

I have a whole TWO answers for you, either of which could work independently but it's probably both together!

(No, Vivienne does not still have the sun, it was returned to Summer when Cat bargained with them at Dormer. But)

1. Masego had Witnessed the sun, it was the birth of the Aspect and everything as you remember, it's what he got his eyes from.

Given a sufficient amount of power to draw on, he can therefore replicate it at need.

2. Vivienne has long been speculated to be destined for the Shining Princess Name, and a sun sure is a shining thing 9u9

agumentic

> Masego had Witnessed the sun, it was the birth of the Aspect

It wasn't, actually. He got Witness during Woe's travel to Keter when he and Akua were working on accessing echoes of the Bard and the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

Did he?

Alright, Witness is not mentioned in the High Noon -> Close sequence...

> "You demand the miraculous on the schedule of the shoddy," Masego muttered, then paused.

>

> His saw his glass eyes turn to peer behind him while the rest of his body remained still.

>

> "Could it be that simple?" he said.

>

> "You've dealt with miracles before," I encouraged.

>

> "I've vivisected and employed parts of them," he corrected absent-mindedly. "But the gap is one of understanding, and I have a mechanism at hand to correct that failing."

>

> I felt him gather power without ever chanting or drawing a rune. Not shaping it for a spell, I thought. Drawing it into himself. I opened my mouth to ask, but Akua discretely shook her head.

>

> "A mystery," Hierophant muttered to himself. "In the technical sense. Foolish, foolish. I saw, when in transitioned. Quantification is anathema to higher sorceries."

>

> His hand shot out and he clasped my wrist.

>

> "Yes," he grinned. "They will not deny me, be they Gods or fathers. I will Witness."

>

> A ripple passed across the world, and what it left behind was no longer an echo.

...yeah, you're right, he did THAT without even the Aspect. In my defense, he does reference his transition here, there are related themes ._.

thanks ♥

TeK

I feel that the sun was hidden in the space of narrative potential. Not unlike a Thief of Stars, a Thief who stole the Sun is a significant enough event to be part of Vivienne's legend, for a lack of a better world. As for sun being returned, well, given it wasn't an actual celestial body (and we aren't going to touch whether or not celestial bodies do even exist in the Guideverse) but a metaphorical representation of one. While it was "returned" the connection still remains. So when a Shining Prince needed to, well, shine, the Aspect replicated both the most shining thing Vivi had seen AND did.

[*Liliet*](#)

The narrative kind of glossed over it burning her hands to char back then, but that sure happened.

Matthew Wells

Vivienne just kinda ignored a lot of permanent injuries when she was the Thief.

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean, she kind of had Masego right there. He's an excellent healer.

I will note Vivienne got extreme burns, specifically, approximately every time she was in a major engagement with the Woe. Five Armies: the hand(s). Dormer: got caught stealing sun banners. Liesse II: Cat set the palace on goblinfire. Keter: got lightning-fried by Malicia's mages... Like holy shit. Vivi.

Matthew Wells

She also took two direct hits from Masego during the attack on Warlock's Tower, although those were just 'fling target like a ragdoll', not fire.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah, I'm amazed by the sheer specificity of the kind of damage, despite the disparity of sources. Summer twice, goblinfire, lightning...

Sinead

I assumed that Vivienne is associated with the Sun after being the Thief of the Sun. So while they released it, holding it however briefly left it's mark. Think of how Cat can still have influence on the Fae even after Winter has been devoured by Sve Noc. As such she can invoke an echo of it in this rising power as a Shining Princess (though I am hoping for a Dawn Princess - > Sun Queen personally).

Callow has already had the Shining Prince(ss) Name, so this can be a reimagining of that Name in line with the rest of Vivienne's legend as the Queen of Thieves. So she couldn't do this before because she wasn't the person she needed to be to do this before now.

Crash

That is not quite comparable I don't think. Winter was devoured yeah but also Catherine became First Under Night, the exact thing that devoured Winter. Plus it's not like Winter had no effect in the Night, Cat mentions the effects it had. It's not a stretch to believe that this is a two-way street.

The fact she used to be the Sovereign of Moonless Nights, a fae title is also probably helping out a lot.

This legend as a Queen of Thieves is also quite a big stretch. She was queen of the thief's guild yes, but it wasn't a big part of her. If anything, the fact she broke the Dark Guilds and folded them into her Jacks is much more important to her character; less thief, more spymistress.

Her story here is not as a thief of any kind either. She is literally coming to raise the morale of her army at their darkest hour because there is nobody else who can right now, this is more Shining Princess, yes; but no thieving in sight. Unless you want to say she is 'stealing the victory' but that feels... weak.

This may turn to be an Aspect of hers, if indeed she has gained a Name but I don't know, still think it's more likely to be Hierophant's doing. The Sun isn't really the important aspect of that Yoink, it's that she delivered when she had to; that at the moment of extremely high pressure, when all her friends were depending on her she came through. It might easily have been a storm of fire that she stole, the attack wasn't the point.

Sinead

Fair enough on all counts. My reason for a Sun related Name is more of an dualism to Cat's own reign shaping the culture of Callow as it emerges from the Conquest and into the Age

of Order. So a Black Queen/Crown followed by a Dawn/Sun would be an interesting motif. Basically a similar relationship as the Helike Kings and Tyrants.

At the point I wrote that, I had missed that Hierophant had headed to the gate, so Vivienne was the only other source I could see.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Dawn Princess who follows after the First Under the Night?

Sinead

I presume that while the Name of Black Queen never manifested fully here, it still will exist in the Callowan cultural fabric to be the flip side of the Good Crown. I also just like the contrast between Cat's main time ruling Callow as the last Queen of Winter (even if she never held that much metaphysical power) as Moonless Nights contrasted with her successor being an embodiment of an "enlightened era". Callow now has refined this mindset of "hard monarchs who get the job done" through Cat, and this idea of it being followed by a restorative monarch.

Whether it actually becomes the case that Black Queen->Dawn Princess->Sun Queen remains to be seen, or if this is just a once off. I just think the slight shift from the original Callowan tradition of Good Queen/King would be interesting considering the changes of the last ~25 years since the Conquest.

[Liliet](#)

At a guess: Vivienne is doing the sun thing with Masego's support... AND getting a Name out of it.

So. Fucking. Cool.

And really hope I was wrong about both Robber and Pickler dying here :x

Crash

Sure seems possible, with the goblins dying in droves.

Your Shining Princess theory is looking real good right now. (still hoping for Heiress though)

[Liliet](#)

Heiress is a plausible villain name, so it's not as funny for a member of the Woe, to me -\(/-_-)\/-

Crash

I've no idea what that emoji is supposed to convey haha is it a shrug?

It's a traditionally Praesi Name yeah but that's why I find it interesting. Vivienne is very Callowan so that'd be kinda neat. It's also one of the transitional Names which is why it being usually villainous isn't that big a deal since she might well go into Shining Princess later and that'd be even cooler.

That said I'm not convinced the Name itself is villainous, think it's more like Squire, could go either way. It's just that Praesi were, traditionally, the ones with a legacy they wanted to go into. Or, more likely, the usual heirs to the throne of Callow went straight into Shining Princess > Good Queen. They were never quite in the groove of the Heir to something entirely new, but more in the tried and true martially capable prince rides into battle one. Which doesn't fit Viv, even though she is doing it this very chapter it's not because this is her forte; it's because someone has to. She's not a general in that way, she is an heiress to Catherine's new rules of engagement and do what we must mentality.

Fuck I feel like that was rambly and still didn't get my point accross. Ah well.

[Liliet](#)

yes, it is

I said though that it's PLAUSIBLY villainous, which is to say, unless she outright wields Light, everyone can say "of course, another villain of the Woe". While Shining Princess is definitely 100% guaranteed or your money back heroic.

Crash

Would that help any? Didn't they have all kinds of weird stories floating about on how the Thief(which was apparently a heroic name, go figure) was overtaken by the ~evil wiles~ of the Squire? and corrupted by the Woe/had always been a villain anyway?

Her having a clearly heroic Name won't stop people from being all like "of course the Woe is evil!"

[Liliet](#)

Sure, but it'll make the contortions much more entertaining!

TeK

Holy shit. While I cannot shame anyone for running at that point, it does kinda lessen the cognomen Second Army had been given, if they broke ranks literally in the next fight.

Sinead

The cognomen was based around the speech of "I am asking more of you than I have any right to ask, and I will continue to do that because you are all I have to see this done."

The story of the Second is the fact that they held without breaking, but also acknowledged that they have paid their dues. I think that they will be fine.

There couldn't be a Battle of Hainaut without a Battle for Malac's Boot. And they buckled, yes, but those in leadership backed their faith and so they shall hold one more time.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

They broke rank due to Catherine's absence, and rallied to Viv's presence.

Evgeny Permyakov

>> "There is a way," the Grey Pilgrim said. "It would be ruinous, but there is a way."

OK, that's not ominous at all.

Pilgrim, what the fuck?

hoser2

Yes. What will be ruined? How? And to what end?

The ruin seems related to either waking Catherine or what Catherine will do when she wakes. I infer from the context that the ruin applies to an effect on the alliance, as ruining the Dead King's stuff would seem to be a benefit.

If the ruin is something Catherine does after she wakes, it could be her one time use of a stolen aspect. However, I am not aware of a relevant aspect on cooldown that could be looted and thereby ruined that way.

Otherwise, her known tricks seem to be Speaking, use of Night, one-time use of stolen aspects and Gate-making.

The thing that has to be dealt with seems to be the Crab, unless Vivienne has an answer for it. Gate-making seems like it could help with the Crab. Do you drop something from a gate onto it or have it fall into Twilight through a gate? Or is there a more elegant solution? Lakeomancy is such a cliché at

this point that it becomes dangerous because it is expected and the DK could trap the attempt.

Sinead

I think it's that it will cost a lot of resources that could be used elsewhere to get Cat to rise, and it might not work. Say using Tariq, Hakram and Masego as anchors in this ritual (though it might be that Masego is helping Vivienne with this Sun banner)

[Liliet](#)

Masego said that he went to the gates.

Sinead

I had forgotten that.

I feel my general point still stands.

I hope this isn't Cat's Name gets it's spine broken again". One, we have already seen that happen. And two, Cat has really anthropomorphised her Name to the point that I like the idea of a Name that has "learned" not to be hindered the same way again.

In this case, I would find it interesting if it's more that Tariq doesn't want Cat to become Named, because he has dedicated his life to smothering out villains before they would have reached the heights she did. Tariq doesn't actually believe that the Accords will succeed. He just thinks it's better than the alternative and will at least by Calernia a few decades of reprieve.

I just hoe we just get one last "Cat Name Dream" hurrah with her talking to Dread Empress Victorious and Good Queen Catherine the Great in terms of the fact that with her carving this new groove, she is standing at a momentous pivot.

[Liliet](#)

(And she socks them both in the face and takes the third road, again)

Sinead

If her new Name is Neutral in Role (thinking of how Indrani and Hye are described as sometimes fulfilling Heroic Roles), it might be interesting if instead of murder, she binds them instead. A spritual manifestation of a personal Accord

hoser2

Maybe. I know nothing.

For me, "ruinous" implies harmful destruction, sacrifice or loss beyond opportunity cost, although opportunity cost could indeed be heavy. Someone suggested above forcing Cat's name prematurely and losing some potency. That fit for me as a possibility.

Xinci

Well, under the Sun, Summer knows no defeat. What Cat saw was a overall pattern so I suppose the Name Shining Princess makes sense, even if it wasn't exactly like this in its previous iterations. Doesn't even need the Name if the pattern is that deep and recurring I suppose.

As a side-note I wonder about how well the Army of Callow can make up for its losses in skilled personnel, in casualties, and in experience. The Night would be useful as a sort of last chance, method to save information and experience and transfer it to a part of ones societal construct but with what has happened to it, it is likely too fragmented for such use at the moment. The general also brought up the mental aspects of war and I wonder what techniques they have for processing and healing wounds of the mind as well as those of the body. In a environment of ever-coming conflict, societal constructs like Callow and Praes would have a lot of pressure to innovate methods that aid both the body and the mind not crack under the pressure of war. And with their current mingled interactions, its pretty likely a good bit of that trickled down to the army of Callow. Light with whats been shown so far may or may not be able to do it? It can be soothing but miraculous healing doesn't harm what isnt natural, so its a question of time perhaps? A good amount of such mental injuries do legitimately have physical issues in the brain that can be healed naturally over time so I suppose there is a angle there. Sorcery could also do the same things as Light for some of that but that's a question of knowledge. Admittedly I would assume the Praesi to have a pretty good understanding of biology in such things so the Army of Callow may actually have a pretty good level of skill in its mage corps for such things. Though given how badly their numbers have been butchered, that level of skill may drop rather shortly. Hopefully Cat and Vivien work on some contingencies to save, improve, and reiterate the methodologies that worked into Callow as a institution.

With the Night as it is, the Drow and indirectly Cat, have potentially lost much of their ability to save and transmit information. Though I am still unsure, it was notable that they worked the Night together in the Everdark, so separated as they are and embodied in physical Drow, the efficiency of much of the Night may lower. They have lost a lot of the contained

information I presume, though the notion of reclamation, and Ruin being a aspect of study does perhaps mean a good bit could be salvaged. Still the amount of new Night and how it will be processed, may result in a good bit of degradation for the Drow as a functional group, kind of like a weakening cardiovascular system impacting the rest of the bodies functioning. It is interesting to note that the Mighty had protections against such things, so hypothetically if Sve had a proper network of loyal Mighty like the Longstriders, she may have been able to better salvage herself this time. Perhaps almost like nodes of ranvier but made of a full on biological entity? It is in part rather lucky and somewhat understandable that the Dead King didnt craft the ritual with the thought of getting a full half of the Night.

Mental Mouse

> Well, under the Sun, Summer knows no defeat. ... Doesn't even need the Name if the pattern is that deep and recurring I suppose.

Ohhh! I think you may have something there, even if it's Masego providing the "sun".

nipi

Hmmm... We have not seen Cat drop a fortress out of a gate jet. Wonder if its an appropriate occasion to drop it on the Crab or near/around the gate to allow for a safe retreat?

onedollargum

"Where to, my lady?" Bagram asked.

"Where the hammer will fall," Vivienne replied. "The gates."

It's moments of dramatic tension like this that I'm really glad the response wasn't "To war".

Sinead

I literally cackled as Vivienne came into her own glory there.

I call that 2/3 so far, with the 3rd to be confirmed.

Great chapter, though I am curious as to what resources they will have to take on Keter.

Cat may have to bring everyone else in line beford heading to Keter.

'Ladi Williams

Awesome

Nicholas Koenig

I agree that we are witnessing the end of the Age of Wonders, which was really the age of the lone hero/heroine. Triumphant (may she never return) is probably the ideal type for the age, we don't know the name of a single person who worked with or under her, unless you count the Dead King and he is more god than person.

More recently though the decisive thing has always been groups, either long term bands of five like the Calamities and the Woe or nations under their leaders. The change we are seeing is not the end of the Named but the strengthening of society and the norms that make it work well. Named aren't going away they are being placed under the law.

As a result I think Vivian is getting a Name and she is going to end up being the model of what it means to be a Named in the new world that is coming into being.

Sinead

I wonder if this becomes both an ideal for getting the White Knight out of the picture both because he does have the power to lead a charge to break the bridge and also because he would be the wrong sort to rally the front. His presence would be similar to that of Mirror Knight, and they just need someone to help bring the Broken Bells to the fore and rally forces that Hanno would not have had the pull to do so. Named are still key, but they are not the improbable forces that Hanno represents, even if he also believes in empowering others.

I wonder if we will see a scene between Squire and Vivienne in the aftermath. That would be neat, since he may see Vivienne as someone who would be key to bringing about the "spirit of Callow" as he sees it.

Further rambling here.

If Vivienne is coming into some form of Shining Princess, this basically means that she has been anointed by the Heavens as Callow's spiritual guardian (and this isn't Above's knife at Cat. It's the tradition of Callow prior to the Conquest). I kind of want to see Cat pass the crown to Vivienne in the denouement of this book. Then again, as stated before, I loved Cat's moments with Edward, so it would be cool to see Cat on the other side.

Nicholas Koenig

You mentioned both Squire and Callow's traditions prior to the Conquest and that gives me a place to put what I have been thinking about what comes next. I don't think Vivienne's

charge will be enough to rout the Dead. I expect the Dead King still has more tricks up his sleeve. What Vivienne's charge does do (assuming we are correct that she has gotten one of Callow's traditional heroic royal names) is make the fight for the gate into the classic Callowean story of the heroic stand to turn turn back evil at the gates. Vivienne has herself and the Army of Callow but to win she will also need a band with the traditional Callowean names.

Isn't it convenient that there are three transitional names wondering around in a group that we haven't heard anything about in a while. I think it is time for them to show up and take their place with Vivienne. We have heard the name Wizard of the West dozens of times but never met anyone with that Name, I think apprentice is getting it. Arthur Foundling cannot get a Royal name if Vivienne is holding one but he is devoted to the Light and the Gods Above and is a Knight, I expect he will be either Paladin or Crusader (since White Knight is taken). When we saw the name Page in the past it was as support for the Exiled Prince, Page may keep his name or switch to an adult name that supports Vivienne. That leave Vivienne one short of a band of five, I expect the fifth will be a foreigner to represent Callow's allies. If Page or Squire are killed then the fifth will be General Abigail possibly with a name like Stonewall.

hakureireimu

Vivienne already has a band of 5—the Woe. Cat specifically refused to kick her out last book even though she didn't have a Name anymore.

Hitogami

The problem with Names is that technically it takes time to grow into them, even if it's from a transitional Name. It's never an instantaneous power up so much as a steady upgrade with a few thresholds for power increase.

Even if those guys get a hold of powerful names, they still need time to properly grow into the aspects.

Cicero

While that is somewhat true, the act of gaining a name usually does provide some immediate power boost that then fades back to a lower level, after which the progression you talk about begins.

Hitogami

As I understand it that applies more to unnamed to Named conversions rather than progressing from a transitional Name. There's a small boost in power if they get a

combat-related name but they lose versatility from their previous aspects

Mental Mouse

No way would Abigail get Stonewall – that's just not what she does! She might well get "the Fox" or some variation, people are already calling her that.

Liliet

I would argue Dead King IS the perfect icon of the Age of Wonders – everyone else during it was trying to *be him*. Well, all the villains I mean, heroes were more reactive though so it's still about his influence.

SpeckofStardust

I mean the fact that the age of wonders is dead really fits for the you know Dead king after all the tyrant did slay it.

Cicero

Although it's possible that this is just signalling Viv finally gaining the respect she needs as the heiress of Callow, the ending does strongly imply that Viv might have gained a Name again: Something Princess.

Of course, the traditional Callowan name would be Shining Princess. But I don't know how that flows with the Black Queen, First under the Night, and all the other night and darkness imagery around Cat and Callow right now.

I guess Dark Princess is possible, or maybe something on the boundary of night and day, Dawn Princess?

Of course, there is nothing preventing her from having more than one way of saying her Name. Just as the Grey Pilgrim is also the Peregrine.

John

Pilgrim says you can send a hero to kill a monster and have the narrative backing you up, but not a city. That crab is also described as a mobile fortress. What DO you send?

Sappers crack open fortresses; Robber and Pickler are unaccounted for. Akua has far more personal expertise specific to mobile cities full of undead than anyone in the Grand Alliance.

Cicero

A villain. A villain can have a narrative about destroying a city.

Frivolous

Cicero: I think I agree. Akua and Catherine and Masego and each been awesomely destructive at times.

Akua killed a city once. Catherine did that trick in the Underdark where she dropped a whole room into Arcadia. Masego nearly destroyed all of Iserre.

superkeaton

Rip Summoner and Troubadour.

hoser2

The Crab is a moving city. That much mass could never be lifted. Nor could it move faster than a glacier, change direction or stop. Magic has to be doing those things. Attack (or ruin?) that magic and it could self destruct.

The fact that they have been so zealously guarded implies vulnerability.

hoser2

It's a cliché at this point, but don't you have to throw the Mirror Knight at it?

[sengachi](#)

Ohhh, now I see why Vivienne had to be here.

If she hadn't, high command would have been slaughtered by the Varlet and this rout would have just kept cascading. And in the absence of Catherine and with all the Named engaged elsewhere, there was no one else who could have stopped a Revenant assassin and rallied the fleeing Callowans.

Frivolous

sengachi: True. Agree.

Hmm. It just occurred to me now that it was awfully coincidental that Prince Arsene of Bayeux was absent.

I now suspect that Arsene knew that the Varlet would attack the command tent, and he sent his niece Marceline there and told her not to interfere when the Varlet slaughtered everyone else.

[Tohron](#)

One thing I remembered: they have Gigantes with the army, since they helped open the gate, but they haven't gotten involved yet. Seems like Ligurian sorcery would be a good counter to the Crab.

Rabblrouser

Reading that the heroes get crushed is so disheartening. This whole chapter made me nervous and sad.

Interlude: Lost & Found

"To sacrifice is to embrace end for the sake of beginning."

– Daphne of the Homilies, best known for ending hereditary rule in Atalante

Special Tribune Robber of the Rock Breaker tribe threw himself to the side, landing in sprawl as the dead scrabbled at him. No point in even stabbing at those, he figured, there were too many for a knife to do any good. Nails ripped at his face before he bit the fingers off and spat out the fouled blood, wriggling through the hands and blades of the writhing mass of undead. A sharper went off close, biting thunder in a ball, and it was an opening. Tripping through shredded flesh and iron, sucking deep of the smoke, the goblin crawled beneath some Bind in bronze armour and tumbled down the stairs. He reached for a sharper of his own but found his bag ripped open – half his munitions were gone, and he'd spent most of the other half.

Cackling out a curse, Robber ducked under some skeleton's axe swing and pushed the dead down onto the corpse on the stair below it. A blade rang against his back, biting at the mail, but he scuttled down the corpse he'd pushed and leapt off the makeshift ramp. He landed among a pack of ghouls, all of them turning like bloodhounds with bared fangs, but there was a flash of heat as a streak of flame coming from above cut through a few. Claws ripped at his side, but these creatures he could wound. He stabbed the ghoul's eyes twice, moving so it shielded him from the others as it screamed, and made a run for it down the cobblestone road as a volley of shining spears began to fall from above.

There were still a few skeletons in the way, but Robber slipped by after hamstringing one from behind with a laugh. The barricade was covered in soot and blood, but the legionaries manning it seemed in a decent enough mood as they opened their shields to let him through. Catching a few whispers of his name, Robber took a moment to preen under their gazes before getting to business.

"I'm looking for Poulain street," the Special Tribune said, dusting off his shoulders. "Happened to get lost on the way. Don't suppose any of you have directions to offer?"

"We're two blocs west, sir," a young lass answered. "It's the next barricade, can't miss it. We had to collapse the street in between when the lines buckled."

When the lines had broken, more like, but that wasn't the kind of talk the officers would be encouraging. Robber had been extracting himself from enemy lines while that disaster had come home to roost, but he's still been able to spare a glance or two for the sight of the Second and Fourth legging it. Someone – probably one of the Woe, it was usually a safe bet when it came to shit like this – had since hung a sun in the sky and what was probably Vivienne had led a countercharge that'd ended the rout. How long that would last, though, was a question digging at him. It'd take more than a lightshow and a banner to turn this around.

"Good, I was already getting bored," Robber grinned. "Do finish that Bone I stabbed earlier, would you? I hate to leave the work half-done."

A few laughs, some solemn vows, but some of them wanted more. Aside from a few stray attacks at their barricade they must not have seen much action tonight, considering they were too far to the east of the where the Grey Legion had struck.

"Preparing another spot of goblinfire, sir?" a sergeant asked. "Most the city saw your last one, it'll be hard to beat."

Not exactly. The barricade on Poulain street was where his cohort was meant to rally after it had scattered during their deep strike on the constructs. It was where the goblin would learn how many of his marauders had made it out – one in five, one in ten? For all he knew, he might be the only survivor. There'd been close calls, making his way back to safe grounds. Borer at least ought to have made it back, he decided. The good captain was already dead inside, Keter's boys wouldn't even notice he wasn't on their side.

"Half the fun's in the surprise," Robber chided. "Any of you lot heard where Lady Vivienne would be at?"

"Word is the princess is out west, with the Hierophant," the same lass from earlier said. "They're driving back the Grey Legion."

The *princess*? He eyed the others, and though some eyes had been rolled at the title no one had apparently cared to contest it. Not even the few orcs in the crowd, the lot that tended to get touchiest where the Boss was involved. Dartwick wouldn't knife Catherine, mind you. Didn't have the stones, and she had the crown neatly lined up in a few years anyway. Her little charge

tonight had made a splash, though, and that devil wasn't ever going to get shoved back in the circle. All above his paygrade that, so he didn't spare more thought for it. He took his leave instead, taking to the rooftops instead of sticking down in the streets where the dead swarmed. It was a good city for that, built mostly in stone instead of wood, and there'd been plenty of slate for the roofs.

It was easy to find where sappers had blocked off the street in the middle, since they'd knocked down houses on both sides until the street reached a temple of the House of Light with a small belfry jutting out. It was through there that Robber passed, lingering beneath the bells so he could have a proper look at the battle below.

Almost immediately, he let out a whistling hiss through his teeth. Looked good, at first glance, but he'd been in a battle or two since the College. The eerie sun up above was keeping the Grey Legion bogged down and the centre of the Army of Callow's line had steadied, but he wasn't seeing a lot of holes in the ranks of the steel-clad dead and that was bad news. Meant once Ol' Bones broke this binding, and he would, it would start smelling like rout again. The flanks, which were all Fourth army, were being pressured as well. The Crab was spitting out dead by the hundreds through ramps docked against the gates and the ramparts, and the only reason the lines hadn't shattered was that the bastions and ramparts were good bottlenecks.

The trouble with bottlenecks was that Keter tended to throw constructs at them 'til they popped, and Robber wasn't seeing much that'd be able to handle them. If a few Named were to pop up, maybe, but with the entire city being squeeze tight at the moment there was no guarantee of guardian devils – or angels. Special Tribune Robber, for the first time in years, allowed himself to curse quietly in the stonetongue. At this rate, the battle was lost. To that he only knew one solution: he'd pick up what was left of his cohort and find the Boss.

—

The Black Queen was as a needle in a haystack, were the haystack aflame and swarming with soldiers. It should have been impossible to find her, for the shade left to guard over her would be hiding her from the enemies still seeking her death, but in truth it was merely improbable.

To Tariq Fleetfoot, that change of word made all the difference

The Adjutant was not swift on his crutches, but that did not matter when their steps were guided by something greater than they. Listening to his instincts and the whispers that went beyond them, the Grey Pilgrim led them down alleys and through broken shops, weaving through smoke and screams as the city began

to die around them. The western wall was going to fall, the Ophanim whispered. Soon. Time was running out. It was in a pleasure house they found the Queen of Callow, the establishment long empty and closed save through passages that the dead would not find easily. Not so for the Pilgrim, who led the Adjutant down them until they were intercepted by drow in the colours of the Losara Sigil.

From there it was not a long walk to the madam's room, where Akua Sahelian was zealously keeping watch over the unconscious body of Catherine Foundling. As always the shade's emotions were difficult to properly **Behold**, as if muted by night or smoke, but Tariq found both anguish and a shaded sort of pride there. As if she herself had done something worth lauding, though a feeling of... transgression? Yes, transgression was threaded into it. She also held sway over the drow, who cleared the room when she asked them to and left the three of them alone with the slumbering Black Queen. Tariq was somewhat amused to see that even in times of hardship she made a point of greeting the Adjutant formally and first before cursorily acknowledging his presence.

"And what is it that brings you here?" Akua Sahelian asked. "It will be some time before the way to the next safehouse is clear, we can afford to speak some."

"The Peregrine," the Adjutant growled, "claims he has a way to wake Catherine. A ruinous one."

Wariness, in this one, but also expectation. Tariq was perhaps not trusted, but at least trusted to deliver. The insult, though, he would not let pass quietly.

"You mistake me," the Grey Pilgrim said, tone sharp for all the calmness. "Am I some petty conjurer, to pay my debts in the blood of others? I am a servant of Mercy, now and in all things: I will visit no ruin on others I am not willing to visit on me and mine."

The orc studied him a moment, then inclined his head.

"You have my apology, then," Adjutant said.

It was sincerely meant, and so Tariq let it end at that.

"I can wake the Black Queen because the Ophanim will lend me their hand in the work," Tariq said. "And when she wakes, I am to offer her a bargain."

The shade studied him.

"Were they not willing to lend their help earlier?" Akua Sahelian asked.

Tariq did not answer, which he supposed was damning enough. The Ophanim would not be moved to lend their help to one of Below's, even one allied to them, were the consequences of refusing that help not calamitous. It was not simply in their nature to do so, to abet greater suffering to come for the sake of lesser suffering taking place. The greatest concession they could make was absence of action. Tariq had asked back then and they had refused, only for him to find his own skills with Light insufficient for the task. Even now, when they had conceded after he asked a boon of them, it ran against their nature to accept his request.

"Charming," the shade said, tone dripping with aristocratic disdain. "Still, better late than never I suppose."

The Adjutant cleared his throat.

"And what was is my presence required for, Peregrine?"

Tariq cocked an eyebrow. He had believed it obvious.

"Because you are the person Catherine Foundling loves most in the world," he said. "If I were the one to call her out of her slumber, I would be refused. You will not be."

Something golden bloomed inside the Adjutant, in the wake of his words. Love returned, but there were shades to it. Relief, guilty surprise, shame, vindication? For all that they were often shallow, the orc's emotions were among the most complex that the Grey Pilgrim had ever seen. The Adjutant nodded, face grown taut.

"What must I do?" he asked, his voice rough.

Before Tariq could answer, he was interrupted.

"She will lose nothing through this ritual you press on her?"

Akua Sahelian did not quite believe him, it seemed. She had not been raised to believe in fair dealings.

"It is not a service I render her to wake," Tariq plainly said.

"Speak the words, Pilgrim," the shade said, golden eyes gone hard.

"She will not be harmed by this," the Pilgrim flatly said.

The dark-skinned woman eyed him for a moment, then sighed and moved away. Frustration bloomed in her, regret and resignation warring. Heeding Tariq's instruction, the Adjutant took the hand of his mistress with his fingers of bone and held it. Eyes closed the orc began to breathe in and out evenly. The Ophanim murmured uncertainly in the Pilgrim's ears as he approached, but he reminded them of their promise. He laid hand on the Black Queen's

neck, grimacing at the sight of the fresh scar she'd earned tonight. That eye would not be returned to her, not if it had been taken by an aspect. *Enough distraction*, he chided himself. Turning his attention inwards, Tariq sunk into the Light.

He did not draw it into him, to be wielded or shaped, but instead immersed his own soul into the light of the Heavens made manifest. Earthly senses began to fade even as the voices of the Ophanim became clearer, louder. They guided his hands, patient teachers that they were, even as he shared a shard of the Light with the Black Queen's body. She was not entirely human, he saw with startlement. Differences had been made, set into the essence of her body. The work of the goddesses of theft and murder she worshipped, the old priest decided, for this seemed not dissimilar to the boon that kept the Mighty ageless: Catherine Foundling's lifespan had been stretched out, as if every day she had been born to live was to take a hundred instead to be spent. And there was more, a deeper shaping that he found only as the shard of Light found its way to what he sought.

The very soul of the Black Queen.

It was still the same mangled thing it had been since that first time he glimpsed it by campfire, scarred and cut and hacked away at. The difference was that it had been... facilitated towards Night. It had helped the stretching of the lifespan, the Ophanim spoke in their coldly ringing voices, but it had not been the purpose. Catherine Foundling could hold more Night than a mortal should, *absurdly* more. More than she would be able to wield, Tariq thought, which meant wielding had not been the purpose. A receptacle, the Ophanim said. A vessel. Not for possession, but for the hiding away of their power and godhead should it be threatened. It no longer seemed words of simple trust, when the Eldest Night had told him that had their chosen been awake the Dead King's trap would not have been a threat.

Tariq went deeper still, finding the great wisps of the Bestowal shaping itself around the unconscious woman. It tasted of authority, he thought, as if the commanding ring of her words had not told him that already. Of steel. And of something else, something that eluded his understanding. East, the Ophanim said. What would birth her Bestowal lay in the east, not this endless nightmare war. And it was a purpose bound to another, like bound stars, calling and casting away. *Is this what is to come?* The Ophanim could not tell. The future was clouded, darkened. And the Pilgrim's flicker of Light went deeper still, until it touched the sleeping mind of the queen. The consciousness swatted away the touch, as hard-bitten in the throes of dreams as it was when awake.

So Tariq left another to the work, simply bringing forth the presence of the Adjutant and the Black Queen he served. What was

spoken there between souls he did not watch, for it was not his place, but as the Grey Pilgrim emerged gasping from the Light he heard another gasping breath along with his. Catherine Foundling, helped into a sitting position on the bed by Akua Sahelian, was opening her eyes. Eye, now, he supposed. He watched the realization of that particular change sink in as she groped at her face. Her lips tightened, then she breathed out. Tariq was surprised to realize that he could sometimes glimpse the outermost edges of her soul now, of her emotions. The protection of the Crows had weakened.

"Fuck," the Queen of Callow cursed. "I got shot by the Hawk, didn't I?"

"Yes," Hakram Deadhand fondly rasped. "Even after all that talk about keeping an eye out."

"Hey now," Queen Catherine blearily muttered, "did I do hand jokes?"

"Yes," the Adjutant said.

"Constantly," Akua Sahelian agreed.

"It was one of the first things you said to me after your return from the Everdark," the Adjutant noted.

Tariq kept silent, letting her draw on the comfort of their company without spoiling it by reminding her of his presence, and she gathered herself with a sigh as the shade pressed a cushion under her back.

"That one's going to sting, and the Night feels like it's gone through a wringer," the Black Queen frowned. "Don't suppose you could bring me up to speed, Tariq?"

"We have," the Grey Pilgrim simply said, "lost the battle."

Disbelief, tempered by what he suspected was a reminder to herself about patience. It had that self-inflicted note to it.

"Breaches?" she asked.

"There have been," Tariq says. "And there will be more."

"That can be turned around," the Black Queen said. "Even if your Choir disagrees."

"The Crab has made an appearance," the Adjutant gravelled. "The Grey Legion breached the gates and the Fourth and Second routed until Vivienne rallied them."

That gave her pause, Tariq saw, though her soul was obscured to his sight.

"Your opinion?" she asked the orc.

"If we do not retreat," the Adjutant said, "we risk annihilation."

Tariq watched the shudder of fear and fury and recrimination go through her, taking no pleasure in it. He, too, understood what this night would cost them. What it had already cost them. The queen glanced at the shade, who shook her head. Her opinion was no different.

"I reserve the right to change my mind," the Black Queen coolly said, "but let's say I believe you. You didn't spend time and tricks in the middle of this nightmare to wake me up so we could have a pleasant chat, Pilgrim. What is it you want from me?"

She thought differently than the Black Knight did, Tariq noted. He tended to begin with larger concepts and then narrow in, while she instead went down winding but narrow paths. That way of silencing almost all of their mind in order to focus on the opposition, though, was eerily similar.

"There is something that can be done," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Something that will deny the Enemy its victory. But the price of it will be, as I have told the Adjutant, ruinous."

"To you," the Black Queen said, eyes narrowing.

And that is why half the world fears you, child, Tariq thought, not without fondness.

"Yes," he simply said.

"The price?"

"Blood and smoke."

She breathed out shallowly.

"A dear price," the Black Queen murmured. "And so now you would bargain."

She paused.

"Your prayer, it will end this?"

"As if it were written in the stars," Tariq smiled, amused at his own expense.

"What do you want for it?" she asked.

"Three boons," the Pilgrim said, "Once before, I entrusted you with the two I believe will be the future of my home."

"Those troublesome lordlings," she frowned.

Underneath it, though, he glimpsed a flicker of affection threaded with irritation. They had learned more from her than she knew, though she had never claimed them as students.

"See them through this war," Tariq quietly asked. "And when they take leave of you, see them off ready to face the trials that lay ahead."

She considered him for a moment, that sole eye cold and measuring. Slowly, she nodded. There was something of a commotion outside the room, but Tariq paid it no mind. Nothing could be more important than this single conversation.

"Make peace with the White Knight," Tariq asked. "That this civility may one day pass to all in service of Above and Bellow."

He glimpsed her soul the briefest moments, seeing it weigh... consequences, stories? Dozens of them in a moment, keeping and cutting and settling on an answer. The old priest found it as frightening as he did fascinating. The Queen of Callow nodded once more.

"Two boons," she said. "Your last?"

"The Ophanim will sing with me," the Grey Pilgrim said. "I alone do not have the strength. Yet the Dead King has brought with him one of the fortresses that moves, a Crab. These bear wards and enchantments, among them a great working that restricts the touch of angels on Creation."

"I do not have the strength to bring it down anymore," the Black Queen admitted. "Perhaps if Sve Noc were with me, but even so I'm not sure my body can take the strain. The poison left marks."

Tariq shook his head.

"They know where the magic was laid that fights them," the Pilgrim said. "In the belly of the best. I require of you someone that will journey there and destroy it."

She went still as stone.

"There will be no coming back from that," Catherine Foundling said.

"No," Tariq quietly agreed.

"You want me to send one of the *Woe*?" she hissed. "Fuck you, Peregrine. I'd rather roll the dice on fighting. If you really-"

Akua Sahelian gently laid a hand on her wrist. The queen paled, teeth clenching.

"No," she said.

"It would be just," the shade softly said. "Or close enough."

The Adjutant, tellingly, spoke not a word. His soul had measured deaths, and found this one the most acceptable.

"I said *no*, Akua," the Black Queen harshly repeated. "You don't get to just jump off a bridge and call it quits, that's not-"

"Well now," a voice drawled. "Looks like I came in at just the right time."

Tariq turned, brow raising when he saw a goblin covered in soot, blood and dust swagger in. A sapper, he recognized, and he'd even seen this one before. Special Tribune Robber, he believed? He was rather famous in the Army of Callow as one of the Black Queen's finest men.

"Robber, what are you doing here?" the Queen of Callow frowned.

"Volunteering," the goblin grinned. "Sound like a proper evening, it does. Raiding a Crab, destroying ancient magics, calling down the wrath of angels? Can't believe I almost missed it."

Yet he had not. Whose hand had it been, Tariq wondered: Above or Below's?

"Come off it," the Black Queen sharply said. "Your cohort-"

"Only thirty-two of us left," Robber said. "It's not even a company. But we'll do, Boss. For this, we'll do."

"The war's not over, Robber," she tried. "There's still battles-"

"That'll be more glorious than this?" the goblin laughed. "Doubt it. Wouldn't matter even if there were, Cat. This one's got our name written on it."

"Why are you all so *fucking eager* to get yourselves killed?" Catherine Foundling roared out, lights dimming in the room. "Robber, I swear on the Gods Below that-"

"It's settled, Boss," the goblin smiled, almost gently. "We're going. Even if you tie me up, you know I'll slip the bounds and go. It's done. The arrow's been loosed."

The anger went out of her like a flame guttering out. The glimpse of her soul that Tariq found had him looking away. He'd not seen such violent, exhausted grief in a long time. It was... not pleasant to behold.

"It doesn't have to be like this," the young woman said, voice raw.

"Only cowards live to fifteen, Cat," Special Tribune Robber said, smiling. "It's been coming a long time, tonight."

Tariq closed his eyes, knowing it had come to a close. The pieces were falling in place. One more, now, and it would begin.

—

The clouds of acidic smoke that the great undead dragon spewed out were so large they must have been visible from the other side of the city.

The mages would do what they could – the Rogue Sorcerer had gone to lead them – but the damage was already done. The Brabant conscripts, freshly returned back to the rampart, broke and ran again. The officers that would have been their backbone laid dead in a marsh to the east of Hainaut, where Klaus himself had ordered them burned. Panic was a vicious thing, in a battle, worse a killer than any sword, and tonight it bit deep at the men holding the western wall. Once the conscripts fled the fantassin reinforcements they'd been screening were left exposed, and as another wave of beorns came over the walls to protect the ladders being secured the fantassins began to waver as well. They were not cowards, that lot, but they were stuck between two strengthening enemy beachheads with no real way out.

The original order likely had been to clear the bastion the Archmage had hit earlier, as it was the easier flank of the two, but it all went sour when the dead began striking at their back as they fought. The dead in the bastion withdrew just enough that the fantassins would be able to flee down into the city, and flee they did. The last stretch of the western wall, to the north, was still in the hands of the Prince of Bayeux and holding strong. Even if they held, though, it would change nothing. All that Arsene Odon would achieve was preventing the dead from hitting the back of the Army of Callow by the rampart, with the rest of the wall in the hands of Keter they were free to push into the city itself.

Prince Klaus Papenheim knew better than to shy away from uncomfortable truths after swords left the sheath, so he did not flinch away from this one: the battle for Hainaut was lost. It was now his duty to act so that the nature of this defeat did not end up destroying the Principate and the rest of Calernia with it.

He ordered barricades raised to block most streets along the line of the fallen rampart, manned by soldiers of Hannover that would not hesitate to kill anyone trying to force their way, but left two large avenues free for the conscripts and mercenaries to feel down. He sent for Princess Mathilda, and so received his first blow of the night: the only answer brought back by his captain was a black-feathered arrow, sodden with blood. Pushing down the

grief – he still remembered her as a girl, close as sisters with his own – the Iron Prince forced himself to keep his mind on the battle. He sent the Neustrians to secure the gate into Twilight, and his most trusted captain to make sure that the Gigantes were out of the city before they could be killed and raised.

Word was sent out east to the Dominion informing them of the situation and warning that an orderly retreat was the only path left to them if the Grand Alliance did not want to turn Hainaut into the doom of the continent. Klaus sent word to General Bagram so that the Army of Callow might join the effort, learning that while the Second Army still held the Fourth was buckling on the walls. If they broke too early, the Prince of Hannover knew, then this would turn into a massacre. The surviving parts of the Fourth Army held the bastions on both sides of the gates that were preventing the dead from striking at Prince Arsene and the Dominion from behind. Bayeux would fold in mere moments should that happen, if they hadn't already, and the Levantines were already seeing redoubled assaults on their positions. They were at risk of breaking too, should they be flanked, and if they did break then the battle would grow beyond salvaging.

"We need to bolster the positions of the Fourth," the Prince of Hannover told his captains. "If we do not, this city takes us all."

"Horse won't cut it for holding a bastion," Captain Engels said. "And we can't move foot quickly enough, my prince, even if we can even move it at all. Callowan lines are bunched up, they can barely even move their own troops."

"We could cut through the Bayeux positions," Captain Abend suggested.

"If they rout while we cross, or even after, then we'll be trapped there," Captain Tietjen objected.

There was no easy answer, the Iron Prince thought, and the longer they dithered the fewer options they would have left. And yet he found himself at a loss. His army was already stretched too thin, and the Neustrians needed to keep the gate. Could the Firstborn be called on? They seemed to have rallied enough to aim fire at the undead scaling the pit sorcery had made in the heart of the city, but they had lost a step. Worse, General Rumena missing they had no leading officer: only a mass of bickering tribes which it might take too long to gather into cohesive reinforcements even if they were inclined to lend a hand. They would have to risk it, Klaus finally decided. What else was left?

The answer of the Gods came in the face of another weary old man in faded grey robes.

"Prince Klaus," the Grey Pilgrim tiredly smiled.

"Peregrine," the Prince of Hannover replied. "You bring word?"

"I bring death," the Pilgrim said. "Nothing more or less."

The old general softly laughed.

"Death is our sole birthright, Peregrine," Klaus Papenheim smiled. "It's why it matters to spend our lives well. It will be a good one I hope?"

"Among the finest," the Grey Pilgrim tiredly smiled, and told him the plan.

—

Between his height and the orc's crutches, they had about the same pace.

"Did you know," Robber idly said, "that you were the first person I ever spoke to, at the College?"

"Liar," Hakram snorted. "I heard you picked a fight with Yagin from Tiger Company while you were still waiting in line for dormitory assignments."

"It's really quite unpleasant how hard you are to lie to," Robber complained.

"It's not easy, you're just a naturally honest man," Hakram assured him.

Mortally offended, the goblin gasped and put a hand over his heart.

"Fighting words, greenskin," Robber said. "The honour of my deep and ancient house—"

"Your tribe is called the Rock Breakers," Hakram skeptically noted.

"Because even our newborn babes are mighty enough to split a boulder with a single punch," Robber lied.

Hakram looked him up and down, then cocked an eyebrow. He said nothing, which made it even worse.

"Don't think I won't stab a cripple," Robber warned. "We do it all the time, it's much easier than stabbing people who aren't cripples."

"Have I lately mentioned my deep respect for you culture?" Hakram gravelled.

Magnanimously, Robber only kicked his chin. Godsdamnit, the bloody thing was armoured. That prick.

"You'll be one of the last to die when the Great Goblin Conspiracy finally takes the world," Robber conceded.

"Merciful," Hakram praised. "You are in a fine mood indeed, Lord Robber of the House of Lesser Footrest."

The goblin preened, glorying in the way that he'd worked himself back up to Lesser Footrest last month. His was an ancient and honourable title. And when Hakram leaned over to slip something into his munitions bag, he was even in a good enough mood to pretend not to notice. They'd reached the end of the path, anyhow. The last of his cohort were gathered, Borer having just come back with a fresh loadout of munitions. Now all that was left was for the Lycaonese to open the dance. The two of them lingered in silence for a long moment.

"Anything you want Pickler told?" Hakram quietly asked.

"There's nothing to tell," he said. "I left her a letter, though. Make sure she gets it?"

His friend – his oldest friend, perhaps even his first friend – nodded.

"I won't say it's been an honour," Hakram smiled.

"Gods forbid," Robber grinned back, then hesitated.

He looked to the side, embarrassed.

"We had... we had times, didn't we?"

"The best," Hakram replied, voice hoarse.

They stayed like that for a longer while still, until the sound of horses nearing told them time had run out.

"Make sure Cat doesn't let it eat at her," Robber quietly said. "It's not about her, not really."

"I know," Hakram said.

They met eyes, the goblin and the orc, and clasped arms.

"Somewhere, somewhen," Robber grinned.

"We'll meet again," Hakram finished, smiling.

They let go of their arms and not another word was spoken.

—

"Strike hard and do not slow," Prince Klaus Papenheim said. "Stay with your captains. If you are split from your company..."

He paused, raising an eyebrow.

"Find a nice place to die," he suggested.

Laughter shook his riders. The jest was an old one, well-worn gallows humour of the kind his people tended to prefer.

"Our duty is not to be victorious," the Prince of Hannover said, "for there is no victory to be had there. We open the way for the handpicked sappers of the Black Queen, that they might destroy the enemy's sorcery and free the Pilgrim to strike down evil."

The answering cheers were hoarse, but they were wholeheartedly meant. There were less than a thousand of them left now, even after they'd taken southern horses to fill the ranks. The Prince of Hannover looked at them with old affection, that old soldierly lot that'd followed him through a hundred battles on a hundred fields. Not so young now, for he was long past his own youth, but though the faces had grown wrinkled and the hair had gone white the eyes remained iron.

"We've had battles," Klaus Papenheim said. "And we have kept the oaths we swore. I'll not preach to you what is at stake, sons and daughters of Hannover. Haven't we all heard that song a hundred times already?"

The world was always ending, one piece at a time. There was always a doom over the horizon, taking its first newborn steps even as you buried the last.

"Behind us is spring," the Iron Prince said. "Ahead of us is the Enemy. You are Lycaonese, so what more is there to say?"

Klaus Papenheim, Prince of Hannover, unsheathed his sword. A thousand riders did with him, the steel bright under the stars of the Twilight Ways. Before them the gates yawned open, revealing a city devoured by nightmares. Horns sounded, defiant in the gloom, and backs straightened.

"Forward," the Iron Prince shouted, and forward they went.

—

Tariq sat, not in a dignified stance as some straight-backed sage but instead like an old man lowering himself against the broken wall of a temple, his bones aching. He would not be found easily, he had been promised this. He sunk into the Light, as easily as taking breath, and let it fill him. The Ophanim, his old friends, were close. Yet they could not help him through the last step, not yet. All that was left to do was wait.

Wait and trust in the valour of others.

—

They plowed into the enemy ranks, smashing and hacking as they went. Through the flat grounds of the gatehouse, green flame licking at their sides as they rode through death and broken engines, through ghouls and skeletons and even a roaring beorn. The old banner of Hannover held high in the wind, the lone spearman on the wall and the old boast of the House of Papenheim beneath it. War cries resounding through the night as hooves thundered, Klaus Papenheim and his thousand rode up the ramps leading into the Crab. That city-monstrosity, laden with monsters and corpses it was pouring out into Hainaut. Undead and horsemen tumbled down below but they pierced through the dead and took the ramp, clearing it for the sappers to follow them. But a few of them, small creatures that they were, and so quick on their feet.

They would make it to the end, if the Iron Prince and his riders died loud enough.

Curses streaked at them in swarms, arrows and javelins flew, but tonight the Heavens were with the Lycaonese. The wind turned, the Crab shook, and onwards the riders went into the city. A thing of iron and bone, of stone and dead flesh, and the fumes it belched out billowed foul as the horsemen pressed through. Pikes came for them first, gathered hastily in a street, but Klaus Papenheim laughed and began to sing.

*"The moon rose, midnight eye
Serenaded by the owl's cry
In Hannover the arrows fly."*

Voices swelled his own as the refrain came and their riders fell into a wedge.

"Hold the wall, lest dawn fail."

They punched through, pikes skittering against heavy armour or finding enough purchase that horse and rider tumbled into the mass and broke the formation. The rider went on, down the street and towards the burning forges ahead.

*"No southern song for your ear
No pretty lass or merry cheer
For you only night and spear."*

Too few pikes, the second time, but the Enemy laid the ranks on thick. As if to make a rampart of bone and armour, a barricade of writhing dead. Skeletons raised swords and axes, put up shields and their ranks kept swelling. But it would take greater wheat than this, to dull their scythe.

"Hold the wall, lest dawn fail."

Screams as javelins and curses came at them from the sides, biting through even plate, but even as the riders died the ranks of the dead shuddered under the impact of a thousand heavy horse. It was in the hands of the Gods, for a moment, but even through the melee the Lycaonese pressed until there was only room ahead once more.

*"Come rats and king of dead
Legions dark, and darkly led
What is a grave if not a bed?"*

The forges were deeper, into the belly of the beast, and their fires burned bright as a noonday sun. It was a place precious to the Enemy this, and it mustered a worthy defence for the last hall barring entry to it. Undead by the hundred, and looming above them were monsters. Beorns and great snakes, even flocks of cacophonous buzzards. And above them all, the mightiest wyrm that the Prince of Hannover had ever seen. A hulking beast, large as a fortress and with blood-red eyes.

"Hold the wall," Prince Klaus shouted, "lest dawn fail."

It was to be their last, he could feel it in his bones. The wyrm spat out poisonous green flames and fumes, sweeping through the front ranks, but even the panicked and dying horses tumbled forward into the tightly packed ranks of the dead. Buzzards came down in swarms, sorcery lashed out with eerie screams, and the last riders of Hannover smashed into their enemies. They were too few, too tired, and still they pressed on. A spear killed Klaus' horse under him and he fell on his stump, screaming hoarsely, but he rose before he could be slain and fought on sword in hand. They sang still, but the voices were fewer. The charge spent.

*"Quell the tremor in your hand
Keep to no fear of the damned
They came ere, and yet we stand."*

One corpse after another, his arm was burning his face bleeding from half a dozen cuts. He'd taken a spear in the side, a wound that would kill him before long, but still Klaus Papenheim pushed through. And again and again and again, until a roar shook his bones and a gaping maw opened to reveal the flames igniting within. The Iron Prince struck with all his might, with all his rage and his sorrow and his pride, and with a great crack a fang broke.

"So we'll hold the wall," the Iron Prince murmured, "lest dawn fail."

The fire swallowed him whole, and the last though Klaus Papenheim ever had was for his niece.

—

It was an entire city trying to kill them, even the stones and the streets., and Robber could not remember the last time he'd had this much *fun*.

Tabler croaked it when something that liked looked like a massive bone scorpion speared her through the stomach with a stinger that was screaming, which was a very sporting heads up from Keter that their infiltration had been noticed. The dead were thousands they had nasty little critters, but what was that to a sapper of the Army of Callow? They were quicker, better at scaling walls and objectively prettier in the eyes of the Gods Above and Below.

"Mind you," Robber told his flock, "Borer does bring down our hallowed company's average in that regard."

"I apologize, sir," Captain Borer dutifully replied. "Shall I write myself up for distractingly ungainly looks again?"

"Eh," Robber mused, "we'll see how I feel about it tomorrow."

That had them all cracking up, of course, which got Wiggler a javelin in the throat but that was a cheap price for comedy of such quality. The Pilgrim had burned where they needed to go into their minds, though the old man had refused to entertain the Special Tribune's inquiry about whether being marked by angels in such a way could be considered theologically inappropriate workplace touching, so there'd be no getting lost. Brasser died blowing himself up so that a flock of buzzards wouldn't kill them as they crossed a makeshift ladder-bridge, but that was a sign they were making progress!

It was fairly dickish of the Dead King to begin setting fire to buildings so they wouldn't be able to cross the rooftops, in his professional opinion, but that was nothing that liberal use of sharpeners and a healthy disregard for personal safety couldn't fix. You absolutely *could* blow up a fire, if you had enough munitions at hand. They lost Racker to the beorn awaiting them on the other side of the explosion, though, which was a genuine loss since with her gone there was no one at hand that everybody else disliked the most among them.

Unfortunately, it seemed like the streets ahead were now swarming with dead and buzzards. Fortunately, there was a solution: they used demolition charges to blow through the layer of stone and bone beneath them, then slunk down a rope onto the lower level. They only had enough charges to do it once more, so naturally they immediately repeated their exploit. Grabber stayed behind just a little too long, though the greater tragedy was that Lilter's joke about 'grabbing the opportunity' was better than the one Robber had been mulling over about grab-bags.

The ran into devils when they got close to the ritual chamber, which was a nice change of pace. Not even the Praesi kind, these ones were like pulsing pustules of flesh whose proximity alone was enough to cause intense pain. Lilter blew herself up to make them a path, which had the secondary benefit of ensuring that Robber was once more without the contest the funniest of their little band. There were only seven of them left, by then, but they were nearly at the chamber. Trouble was that literal hellhounds were on the trails, by the barking and smell of sulphur.

You learned to recognize all sorts of stuff, if you spent enough summers in Ater.

"We'll hold," Captain Borer said, sword in one hand and sharper in the other. "Go ahead, Special Tribune."

Robber met his eyes, surprised even though he shouldn't have been.

"You were a treat," Robber finally said.

"Always thought you were a prick," Borer cheerfully replied. "Go die like a sapper, Rock Breaker."

He grinned back, scampering away before he could be caught up in the coming mess. He found the chamber below, just the way the Pilgrim had seared it into his mind. No more mages around, just a massive chamber of obsidian with carved runes everywhere. Gingerly he tried a foot first, and when it didn't burst into flame went further in. His own bag had been filled, from the start of this waltz, purely with goblinfire. And one more thing, he recalled late, that Hakram had slipped in. In the distance he heard the crack of sharpeners going off. Little time left.

It was a scroll, Robber found out. A fancy one, there was even a seal at the bottom. He scanned the contents, curious, and froze. *By my authority as Queen of Callow, I so raise Robber of the Rock Breaker tribe to the title of noble, under the aforementioned honour: Lord of the House of Lesser Footrest, to be held in perpetuity.* It was the royal seal below but there were fresher words, the ink a little smudged. *No matter where you end up, Catherine Foundling had written in that ugly scrawl of hers, you will be one of mine. Sooner or later, I will come to collect.* Screams, fighting. The devils were close.

Robber's throat closed as he traced the words with a trembling finger.

"The best," he whispered.

He struck the match, the parchment taking fire, and with a wide grin he plunged the burning scroll into the bag. He closed his

eyes, feeling the burst of fire washed over him, but it didn't hurt at all. He thought, somehow, that even in this deep place he was hearing something.

Robber died hearing the wind.

—

The sky cleared, and Tariq looked down from above.

All those who would be able to escape tonight had. There was no more call to delay. The Ophanim, the companions of his life, laid their hands on him. They were sad, grieving, but he smiled.

"It is a beautiful thing," Tariq Isbili said, "to die smiling."

Tariq of the Grey Pilgrim's Blood breathed out, the world breathing out with him, and let his blood sing out into the world. The oldest treasure of his line, the secret of the **Shine**. The pilgrim's star, his people called it, and they spoke truer than they knew. Every Isbili that ever lived had it coursing through their blood, the blessing of that star. It was a tie, and though Tariq could no more move the star than an ant could move a tower he was not alone.

The Grey Pilgrim pulled, and the Choir of Mercy pulled with him.

The warmth filled him, pleasant at first but soon burning. Searing. But he was in a place beyond pain, filled only with light, and so Tariq Isbili did not flinch. Not even as he felt the burn spread through the bloodline, through every last one of his kin. Through everyone with so much as drop of Isbili blood. And the Ophanim threaded their fingers through his, heaving even as his insides charred and his kin turned to ash, until at last the sky gave.

In the darkness above, a star went out.

The Grey Pilgrim opened his eyes, looking down at the city below and the hordes of the dead. And though he bore the weight of many griefs, in that moment it was not his many sins he thought of. It was a balcony in Alava that came to him, the pear trees beneath and the woman he had once loved. Perhaps, he thought, he might yet see her again.

Tariq Isbili saw streaks of white pierced through the night sky and died, smiling, as stars began to fall.

The Marquis de Pressed

For the first time in three years, I bawled like an infant. This... this hurt. Despite the fact that Robber had so many death flags that he could have spoken exclusively in semaphore, I was still expecting the little bastard to escape. And yet, each of them died in a way that fit them perfectly. Thank you, Errata, for giving them this final honor.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

Still crying while I write this.

mamm0nn

"Make peace with the White Knight," Tariq asked. "That this civility may one day pass to all in service of Above and Bellow."

I see that Tariq too can be a petty little prick at times, calling out Below to be nothing but haughty words shouted too loudly. Also:

Tariq: I sacrifice my whole bloodline!

Oraphim: You have children?

Tariq: I don't.

Oraphim: Then you're only sacrificing yours-

Tariq: I sacrifice my whole bloodline to increase the power of my sacrifice!

Sinead

I have no problem with the first part? Tariq was asking Cat to be careful around Hanno because of the crisis of faith he was dealing with at the time, butt he has resolved this (mostly) by setting forth to break the bridge. Tariq is essentially releasing her from that bind (as much as it would hold her) saying that now it's a time for action. Tariq's perspective with the quasi angelic insight is useful in this.

As for the blood sacrifice, yeah that's a tough one to swallow. If it was instead ripping the potential of Shine out of the Pilgrim's bloodline and breaking the Name, that would be different, but bloodline sacrifice (that isn't a request and call that only those that choose to answer die) is hella sketchy from a moral point of view, but still entirely within Mercy's wheelhouse.

I would honestly think that a reworking of Starfall to be a final request to the entirety of the Pilgrim's Blood that is willingly answered to be a better way to do it, since the idea of this arc is that all the deaths are gone to willingly, but that's just my take.

It does not fit well with a “kill a person and murder the universe” perspective though.

TeK

There are no pretty options. He killed his kin for a dream, this is his sin that allowed him to win.

Sinead

I agree that it works for Tariq’s character to murder people for “the greater good” similar to his use of the plague.

However, the scene also works as a sacrifice asked of the entire Pilgrim’s Blood to to sacrifice the Name of Grey Pilgrim. Simply because I suspect that those that would fully fall in the line of succession of the Name are also the sorts of people that would sacrifice themselves for this cause. It would be the Grey Pilgrim Name giving itself as a sacrifice to fuel the spell, rather than bearing witness of the sacrifice of others for a cause. There have been other barbs sent to those like Hye, the Wandering Bard, and Tariq about never being fully part of a group and not fully grasping those connections.

I hope that makes sense as more than just a “pretty option”. I was more thinking of something more transformative than that. Not a redemption in death but still a change in outlook.

TeK

Yes. Tariq death was an ugly one and pitiful. He went out once again sending his family to death [strong] without even being allowed to ask[/strong]. But, to be fair, you do not hang the survival of the world on the better nature of someone else.

[Adrian_V](#)

Its also in accordance with their national beliefs, blood carries honour and all but also duty, this is here is just an extension of it, although i bet that some do scape, mostly the too young and who really aren’t even in levant and basically don’t care for blood.

Morgan

My guess is that the Name is tied to the Accords, which unless Black succeeds in becoming Dread Emperor won’t be a proper thing. When Black rules Praes and can sign the Accords that binds the continent under them and allows for Cats new Name to finally

emerge. I'm still holding out for Headmistress in light of the school at Cardinal, but we'll see.

beleester

Having a choir of angels step in to settle a losing fight? If Black was here, he'd be *furious* with how this battle turned out.

AbraKadabra

Um, the DK used devils at the same time, so probably it is balanced.

Asterix

Let's hope Hakram threw a sharper in that bag, along with the scroll, and Robber died to the explosion. If he dies to goblinfire... Well, we know what that stuff is made from.

As awesome as Cat is, I don't think she can bring back a soul that's been eaten by a demon.

Matthew Wells

Goblinfire doesn't consume souls- Liesse was burned, but it still ended up the most haunted place in Callow.

SNTTz

Reading the sappers' last fight while listening to Sabaton's "Devil Dogs" is glorious.
RIP you magnificent bastards, may you nuke all Hells.

Josh

I really think this chapter would be enhanced with a minor POV of some of the pilgrim's kin doing something heroic before they burst into flames. I think we tend to focus on the named too much, especially when a huge group of people suddenly keel over.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the dominion made solely of the kin of each of the original named? So pilgrim's blood dying off is a pretty huge chunk of the dominion right? They deserve a heroic send off immortalizing their valor.

Hitogami

No, they are ruled by the kin of the original Named, but to my knowledge he is the last of his bloodline since he killed his nephew.

Josh

Gotcha. That makes more sense. I don't think he was the last though, otherwise I doubt there would even be a mention of a bloodline sacrifice cause there wouldn't be a bloodline.

Hitogami

Or maybe it's a bloodline sacrifice because he is the last? Maybe it's being seen as him sacrificing more than just his life.

Matthew Wells

He has cousins- one of them was ruling the Dominion in his place.

Morgenstern

And that note about everyone with even just a drop of ****the bloodline entire**** (not just Tariq's blood, but of every single one of his forebearers as well!) wasn't for nothing either. A great many Levantines, wherever they are on this whole world, just dropped dead with him.

Including but not restricted to the child(ren) he might have had with that lady from the balcony, after all. Everyone of his family, no matter if they were twelve times or more removed from him, by way of being some great-great-great-great-.... grandfather's brother's grand-nephew's grandchildren or whatever.

Everyone.

Daniel E

Call back! Conspiracy II – “It was the Matron who decided it. She walked into the cave, took one look at him and spat. You scheming old witches, can't you see he's heard the wind? she'd said. You're the Tower's now, boy. Go die in a gutter for the Empress.”

I'm glad Robber at least got a proper sendoff, which is more than can be said for Hune and Zombie 3. And finally, 'Gray Pilgrim used Heavenly Artillery. It's super effective!'

Sinead

I'd say Hune's send off wasn't bad, considering that she was personally guided to the afterlife by the Gods Below.

I personally think that Zombie the Third will have some form of reappearance. I don't think fae power dies that easily, let alone fae power that is allowed to learn some new tricks like Zombie was.

Besides, the only thing Cat is missing for her Odin aesthetic is a sweet horse.

[Adrian V](#)

I was going to post this as a response but i think is better as a new comment: what if part of the weakening of the drow is a way to balance the scales? Since if they ward the lake that basically seal away a front and gives them a safe heaven so to speak then weakening the drow front is the way of fate to balance the story.

Although i am not 100% sure how that will resolve itself (the Drow and Night situation) since it appears that while weakened they still remain strong enough to be considered a fighting force, it is telling that Klaus was more worried with they lack of organization than anything else (and aparently they were containing the gaping maw that was the lake?)

Daniel E

Consider that Hierophant mentioned the stronger of the Drow would likely retain their powers to a degree, but likely none of them are immortal anymore. Combined with what we learned here, Sve Noc squirreling away a not-insignificant chunk of their godhood in Catherine's soul, I'd say the Drow are still very much in the game.

Morgenstern

They couldn't squirrel anything away in Cat, though, this very chapter seems to indicate, because she was unconscious/half-dead and thus unavailable at the time. That's why the siphoning-off of power by the DK was effective to some degree. They only had less perfect vessels in the forms of Rumena and Ivah that they tried to cram into what they could. Those simply couldn't hold enough, though, because (unlike Cat) they were not made/changed/prepared for that.

Morgenstern

If they could have hidden in Cat, as they intended for such a case, they wouldn't have needed to allow Masego to Ruin their power to stop the DK from siphoning off even more.

beleester

Warding the lake closes the front for the Alliance, but I don't think it does any good for the drow. But they expected the drow to gain a lot of Night from fighting the Chain of Hunger, so they might be able to rebuild their losses over the long term?

Morgenstern

Night has been Ruined by Masego. It seems very likely there will be no rebuilding of power (the old way at least). No more harvesting via Night.

Sinead

I figure that Nemeshah had figured that Cat was a vessel for Sve Noc when he was implying that she was no longer mortal during the Prince's Graveyard.

I wonder if this is entirely Sve Noc's handiwork, or if Cat would always have the marks of having handled a godhood, especially since she surrendered it in the end.

I guess the latter option would make it Sve Noc taking advantage of something Cat was unaware of rather than them shaping Cat for their own purposes.

[Estelulu](#)

Wait, did everyone of the Pilgrim's Blood die?

Nguyen Hong Hai

Me think only those who are willing, sacrificing newborns seem really pushing it even for angels.

[Adrian_V](#)

I think only those that are either aware of the blood in them or carry themselves by the belief of the blood (as in that being of it has privileges and responsibilities, even if they rather just want the privileges)

Zach

I think you might be forgetting the time that Tariq killed his nephew.

The Choir of Mercy has no problem with virtually anything as long as it's the lesser evil.

Hitogami

Robber you beautiful bastard, I will be waiting for the day Cat comes to collect your soul from wherever it winds up. What a way to go!

TeK

You know, in a weird way, I do not mourn Robber that much, just like I also do not mourn Iron Prince. Their death was... Good. Gloryful. It was something that was always supposed to happen and it was a death they deserved. Robber died in a blaze of glory,

breaking down the wrath of Death itself. Apart from burning down Keter, there is really no better ending for him. Klaus always had death hounding him every step, so he went out the way of Papenheim: And Yet We Stand.

It is Tariq instead that I truly grieve, for his death was neither desired, nor gloryful. It was yet another sacrifice for a better world, and it was an ugly one at that. His entire family, murdered by him to spare a continent their fate. His last deed was not good it was instead a terrible burden of necessity.

And Gods forgive me, but he did not deserve that. He should've been left lying on the throne of Twilight, for at least there he had died without sacrificing anything else for the greater good.

Sinead

Honestly, the only reason I grieved a little bit for Robber at first was because I hadn't fully gotten the goblin lifespan in my head. Robber and Borer were old for male goblins.

There is that really good point earlier in this section of 3 old men ride to death which really brought that into perspective.

isioisi

I legitimately had to go have a little cry at Robber's glorious passing... I've not been this messed up over a fictional character in years. Thank you EE, you're a damn good writer and the love these characters have for each other shines like the pilgrims star.

Nicholas Koenig

Everyone has focused so much on what Tariq did, and trying to figure out what exactly he did, that we are ignoring something that strikes me as at least as important. How is the Dead King going to react to this?

I have never been clear on what his goals in this war are. He is definitely fighting the Intercessor/Wandering Bard. He seems to have some type of agenda regarding Catherine, although I can't figure out exactly what. My best guess is he wants her to ascend in some way. He seems to have been after something in his relationship with Triumphant and not gotten it because he helped Triumphant too much and he sees Catherine as a possible replacement to Triumphant. I don't think actually conquering Calnaria is high on his priority list.

The Dead King just had his main army trashed in trade for the destruction of the last Hero who was clearly of the old school. The war is looking like a draw at this point, both sides have

lost their main force. If the Dead King has Catherine heading in the direction he wants her I could see him offering peace at this point. He may well have gotten what he wanted out of the war.

edrey

Army related, Dk was driven back, in the story of the war, that is other thing

My theory is that the bard used that aspect of her to trick perspective, in that dinner with robber and pickler, so cat name is now linked to the east, like the fox song in the arsenal, so now is a story of malicia and cat, possible the Dk, Fk, the bard, black and akua. And the cherry on top is the drow and the Night. Way too difficult to predict the next arc. However, the attack to keter will happen just because the dwarfs wont let this opportunity disappear and the GA less. Not to mention cat need his defeat for the accords.

[TeK](#)

Well, here's play by play in my understanding. DK uses ET to create Procer which is a Non-Named country, something beyond the Good and Evil and established himself as it's nemesis. Fast forward a few centuries and DK uses Cat to create the Accords, which is an organisation with a potential to be beyond the Good and Evil and established himself as it's nemesis. Meanwhile we got WB acting as a mediator between Good and Evil, and seemingly an upholder of balance. She seems to be very intent on killing DK, even though her reasons can't be Heroic ones. My guess is, DK wants to go beyond the dichotomy of Good and Evil, to create an entirely new system, and therefore be beyond the influence of the Gods. Not unlike the Winter King.

Although Winter King analogy may as well be a reference to the "marriage" between Good and Evil.

aurikdomi

The Dead King through the massive working that ended with Masego stripped of his magic stole a piece of the WB and learned something with it, both what the intercessor wants and how to thwart her. That I think is his goal.

Abnaxis

Tariq: "Black Queen, I'm gonna need you to look after my chosen successors, since I'm not living through this."

Cat: "Sure, I got you."

Tariq: *Kills not only himself, but the entire ruling bloodline of the Dominion*

Cat: ...

Yeah, that first boon is going to be a lot more trouble than was initially planned on...

hoser2

Or a lot less trouble.

But seriously, the two leaders and the pilgrim's country must still exist or the bargain with Cat would not make sense.

Likewise, some number of relatives of the Peregrine must have died with him for the chapter to make sense.

Adrian

You're an author of a caliber that is hard to conceive.
Brilliant. Brilliant.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

A magnificent exit for a magnificent goblin.

Juneau

I got flooded on Christmas eve.

I didn't cry.

I spent Christmas day with 3 strangers, a friend and my wife.

Today I pulled up carpets and prepared to get rid of lots of stuff...

Sad, but fine.

Then I read this. I cried. Robber, may you rest in torment.

aran

Wow. Klaus, Robber AND Tariq in one chapter. Probably a whole bunch of others that will turn out to not have made it, too.

David

I can't really begin to say how much this story has consumed my life. I think I've read it through. Stopped following it for a few months, and then read it through again some 6 or 7 times now.

Please, whenever the tale of Cat finishes. Publish them in some medium I could purchase them in. I'd love to have these books on my shelves.

[TeK](#)

I'm your Venus. I'm your fire. Your desire.

[genericIntent](#)

It's... It's an interlude, and SO MUCH happened. I think I'll need to reread this chapter one or thrice. Excellent story craft.

shikkarasu

3:15 – Bestowal

"This is not a bargain, King of Winter, it's an oath," I hissed. "One day, we'll meet again. Not tomorrow, not next month, not for decades. After your game's played out. After I've learned to kill gods. On that day, I'll come to collect."

This is the 2nd time Cat has made this promise. 10 Denarii says the 3rd time makes it an Aspect.

Letouriste

This was beautiful. Really.

Took me 24h hours before i felt ready to comment. You are really good at that. Finishing character arcs, giving them a death fitting them.

Thanks EE

Cheerless Mirth

The fact that Cat didn't awake her Name during this battle was ridiculously surprising. I mean, yes, with how the battle turned out I do understand why not; her Name being related to authority was no secret and that didn't quite fit to this battle.

Especially since, as many others, I do believe it to be at least somewhat related to the Accords and/or Cardinal.

But still! The epic battle! The thing that no prophets could discern! And yet...well, what, we got gutted Night and three old men dying.

Don't get me wrong, they're important events, but not really on the scale I imagined. Especially since it would be epic if we saw Cat waking up at the perfect moment with her Name, looking at the scales of the battle and toppling over the table the scales are on.

Chapter 78: Keter's Due

*"The parity of light and darkness is a false perception.
Light is transgressive, an imposition on the natural*

*order, and so will always spend itself into nothingness.
Be as the dark and you will be beyond struggle, ever
returning when the flames die out."*

*– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely
attributed to the young Dead King*

The turn of the year had begun with a boy I'd thought I might save, and then a hard lesson remembered to me by the Dead King. That this was not a war as I had known wars before, that there would be no miracles or saving graces to this ugly, brutal, exhausting struggle to the death we were having. I thought of that night again, as I watched stars fall on the city of Hainaut, and the lesson echoed once more: sometimes we just lost.

Masego's spell was little more than a window between Twilight and Creation, but what it showed was... I knew the forces at work, but still the sight caused me in me a sort of primal awe. The meteors, shards of a broken star, were massive. The first that struck toppled half the city in a streak of dust and white flame, scouring it clean of life, but the rain did not end there. Again and again the capital and the valley around it were struck until there was nothing there but barren glass, and still in the distance stars fell. How much of Hainaut had been scoured in the span of a few moments, I wondered?

It'd not been undead alone that'd still been in the city when the star fell. The Fourth Army was gone, as were most of the Hannover men and the Prince of Bayeux's army. Almost all of the Alavan troops had been lost as well, since they'd served as the Dominion rearguard, and at least half the Firstborn with them. It had been a cruel defeat before the Pilgrim began his last hurrah, but after the star had struck the results could only be called disastrous. Not a single army in fighting shape had made it out of Hainaut except maybe the Neustrians, and they'd just lost their princess.

I couldn't even blame the Pilgrim for when he had begun to call down the wrath of the Heavens, he'd not had any choice. There would be no repeat of the sacrifices – my heart clenched, my nails dug into my palms – that had bought him that opening, and risking a longer wait might have made it all worthless. He'd done what he could and turned this into a disaster for both sides at least. The Dead King, for all that he was the victor of the field, did not have an army left in all of Hainaut. The meteors had seen to that. Much as I itched to blame Tariq for what I'd lost tonight, it would have rung hollow to try it when he'd died trying to save all of Calernia.

And he had, Gods forgive me. If we'd simply evacuated, fled back to our defensive lines, then the simple amount of corpses swelling Neshamah's ranks would have been enough to overwhelm us to the south after we retreated there to lick our wounds. And

once the Dead King pierced into Procer, got his hands on cities and teeming masses of refugees, then it was all over. The Peregrine had averted that doom for us all, and I held that truth close as I watched the pieces of a dead star rain down on Creation.

"Some of the Scourges will have made it out," Indrani quietly said. "The Hawk for sure, maybe the Prince of Bones as well."

"The Grey Legion's good as gone," I replied, forcefully calm. "That, at least, is a gain."

There had been few enough of those tonight that I would find the silver linings where I could.

"The Crab is destroyed as well," Masego noted. "Though it likely was in a practical sense even before the meteor struck it, given the amount of goblinfire burning within."

My fingers clenched. Blood dripped down from my palm onto the soft grass.

"It was a good way to go," Archer murmured. "They will sing songs of him, Catherine."

I would rather they didn't, I thought, so that I might hear him sing again instead. But I'd known deep down that Robber would find his worthy death on some battlefield or another. He'd been looking for years, trying ever starker odds against ever sharper foes. *You would have hated peace, I thought. Despised it to the bone.* A long silence trundled along, the only sound that of our steady breaths. My cheek clenched in frustration as I tried and failed to blink an eye I no longer had.

"It will end soon," Hierophant said. "The power is spent."

I nodded. The pale streaks were waning, growing rarer. Even the might of the Choir of Mercy anchored on the death of a great man was not a force without limit.

"Your officers want to speak with you," Indrani reminded me.

"They can wait," I said.

General Bagram was dead. Vivienne has saved his life from the Varlet only to die trying to rally the Fourth mere hours later. General Zola was now in overall command of my remaining soldiers, something eased by the hard truth that aside from the remains of the Second I had few of those left. Later I would speak to her, but for now I saw no point. Indrani brushed a hand against my arm, startling me as I'd not seen her coming. I had blind spots now, I reminded myself. I'd need to learn to compensate for them. I shook away the touch, even if it was meant

in comfort. Archer knew me well enough not to take it badly. She left me to the way I had always preferred to handle my grief: alone. Her footsteps were soft against the grass as she left.

Masego stayed, but his eyes were on the vista revealed by his spell. He'd always been the most accommodating of my friends when it came to sharing solitude. It made him the easiest to be around when grief was still raw.

The last streaks of light softly died, leaving behind only a darkened sky and one fewer star than there had been at the beginning of the night. Hainaut was a ruin. The city itself was shattered, blackened stone smooth as glass rising in jagged pillars that looked eerily like teeth. Smoke and ash were on the wind, swirling thick. The land around the capital was no less a ruin, the plains scoured down to burnt bedrock as far as the eye could see. Nothing would live here for decades, centuries even. Of the armies the dead there was not a trace left, not even of that behemoth Crab that had tipped the scales in the Dead King's favour at the end. It was all dust on the wind, hundreds of thousands of souls released back to whatever Gods they had kept to.

There was a terrible peace to it all, I thought. Masego turned towards me, raising an eyebrow in silent question. I nodded and he let the spell die. It ended in time for me to hear footsteps approaching, the cadence of them telling me who they were before I turned. That hobbling walk was Hakram on his crutches, while the still unnaturally smooth stride was Vivienne's – she had once walked rooftops as other women did streets, and the touch had never quite left her. Leaning against my staff, I watched them approach with apathy. Vivienne looked away when I met her gaze. Trying to avoid looking at my eye, I realized, and suddenly felt self-conscious. I would have brought down my hood, were it not too obvious a reaction.

"Catherine," Adjutant greeted me. "The starfall has ended?"

I cocked an eyebrow at the empty talk, gaze moving to Vivienne.

"What is it that you two need of me?" I plainly asked.

She grimaced, and this time did not flinch away from the sight of the gruesome scar I had instead of my left eye.

"You need to hold a war council," Vivienne said. "At least for Callow. General Zola's keeping it together, but she doesn't know where to go from here."

"It's obvious," I tiredly said. "We lost the battle but the Pilgrim salvaged us an opportunity with his death. If the White Knight succeeds to the north then we will escort the Gigantes to the shore and ward Hainaut from the dead. If he has lost, then we

retreat for the Cigelin Sisters and fortify what we can against the coming onslaught."

I did not doubt that even as we spoke the Dead King was marching troops through the bottom of the lakes to our north, trying to turn the setback into an opportunity. We'd destroyed the Twilight Gate here along with the rest of the city, but we still had pharos devices for mass-deployment of our remaining forces. Returning to Creation at the moment would be pointless, especially since the ruins were still hazardous and there was no water left to drink, so we would be staying in the Ways until the sun came up if not even longer. There'd be no point in leaving the Ways just to enter them anew when we marched either north or south.

"It might be obvious to you, Catherine, but not others," Hakram calmly said. "More than that, you must be seen. The Lycaonese lost both their rulers in the span of a single night. The Alamans are shamed and desperate, with only a destitute Princess Beatrice to calm them. The Dominion mourns the Grey Pilgrim without even a body to burn. The Firstborn huddle among themselves and speak to no one. And the Army of Callow broke tonight, for the first time since it was founded."

"You're needed, Catherine," Vivienne said. "The Black Queen is needed."

When fucking wasn't she? My fingers balled into a fist, blood sliding down the skin from where my nails had bit through skin. Hakram's eyes flicked there, though with his nose he would have smelled the red long before that.

"Enough," Masego said, voice grown hard. "If you have the voice to ask, use it settle the troubles you bring her instead."

I started in surprise, half-turning.

"Masego-" Vivienne began.

"She should be asleep, Vivienne," Hierophant said, eyes burning. "She insists on remaining awake, so she will, but do not mistake this for her being in a fit state. You ask too much."

I found myself both warmed and irritated.

"I can speak for myself, Zeze," I said.

"Then do so," Masego bluntly replied. "But I will not let this war drag you into the grave, Catherine. I have not forgotten what Aunt Sabah's death did to my family, and I will not allow Robber's death to bloom that sickly flower twice."

I might have taken issue with the tone if he'd not spoken the words that followed. I remembered it too, the brittle look in Black's eyes after Captain was killed. I had not loved Wekesa the Warlock while he lived, but I would not do the man's shade disservice by denying he had cared for Sabah just as deeply. That evening in the Free Cities had left scars on all the Calamities, even if some had been subtler than others. I would not blame Masego for dreading the only family he had left might come to the same end. I sighed, drawing their attention.

"There's nowhere for them to go," I said, gesturing at the Ways around us. "And it will take more than my carcass being paraded through a camp to fix this. I'll see to the Army of Callow later, but the rest can wait."

Masego beamed at me, which was comforting even though I knew this was probably the wrong decision. I was tired enough that I found it hard to care: there was only so much beating that this thrice-dead horse could take. I met Hakram's eyes and found surprise there, but he nodded. Vivienne was harder to read. Was she disappointed? If she was, I'd cope. The legend I'd set was not one I could live up to. If this campaign should have made anything painfully clear for all the world to see, it was that I didn't always have the answers. I'd pushed for this offensive from the start and even if I'd not been the only one to do so my influence had objectively been key. This catastrophe was on me, if it was on anyone at all.

Most the people I could have shared the blame with were dead.

"Leave me," I said. "I-"

My sentence went stillborn when I felt a shudder of indignation through my tenuous bond with the Night. Sve Noc were enraged, and though I found the shades of emotion difficult to parse I did pick up that this wasn't about the Firstborn. In the distance, two great crows took flight. Masego was not far behind them, wrested sorcery already opening anew the same window into Hainaut he had allowed to lapse. The spell was not as stable as the last time, the edges buzzing and the spell itself letting out trails of smoke here in Twilight, but what we saw could not be missed. Among the great fangs of black glass which were all that remained of the city of Hainaut, a great spell was stirring up a storm of ash.

It was not one of ours.

"Hierophant, what am I looking at?" I calmly asked.

Masego remained silent for a time, golden glass eyes darting back and forth as they parsed the glimmers of the spell that could be seen through the ash. Thick, curving cords of runes spinning in

cycles without making a sound, a dull but growing pale sphere at the heart of them.

"I am... unsure," Hierophant admitted.

The Crows plunged through the night sky in a precipitous glide, Andronike and Komana claiming my shoulders and sinking their sharp talons into the steel of my pauldrons. They hissed urgency at me and I raised my bloodied hand to clutch my staff.

"Whatever it is, we can't let it finish," I said. "I'll open us a gate, and-"

I glanced at Hakram and Vivienne, lips thinning. No more risks tonight.

"- you and I will go," I told Masego. "Archer too, if we can-"

This time it was someone else who cut in, and before either Adjutant or Vivienne could object too. I was pleased to see Archer striding towards us on the grass, but surprised to see her scarf was already pulled up and her bow strung. She'd been expecting trouble already.

"Cat," she said, "we have a problem."

"I'm aware," I replied, jutting a thumb towards the spell-window. She took a glance, then grimaced.

"Cat," she said, "we have two problems."

Fuck me, I thought. Hadn't this night been enough of a malediction already?

"I'm listening," I said.

"The Gigantes are gone," Archer said. "All of them. I think they went back into Creation."

I felt a moment of blind panic at the notion of Keter getting its hands on Gigantes spellsingers, Gods would even the Ways be safe anymore now that Tariq was dead – but the talons of the crows pricking at my skin drew me out of it. I breathed out.

"Hierophant, is this their work?" I asked.

"No," Masego immediately replied. "This is Trismegistan, Catherine. And I understand why it unsettled me. The elements I found familiar were of my work and Akua Sahelian's."

I blinked.

"The Dead King cribbed from your spellcraft?"

"I suspect," Hierophant softly replied, "that it was the other way around, Catherine. However unknowingly. It is not without reason that the very magic we practice bears the name of Trismegistus."

"Shit," Archer said. "This is *his* spellwork, isn't it? His actual hand weaving the spell, not some intermediary's."

Well, would you look at that. It *had* somehow gotten worse. There really wasn't any time to waste if Neshamah himself was making a play, so I stiffly swept my staff across the air and ripped open a gate down into Hainaut. A howling gale swept ash and smoke towards us and I glanced at Archer and Hierophant.

"You two, with me," I ordered, and went into the storm.

—

The winds slashed at us angrily, bludgeoning us with ash and sharp pieces of gravel.

With the Sisters themselves on my shoulders I could almost call on Night the way I'd been able to before it was ruined, but my body was weak. Aching and too close to collapse. Even with Komena banishing the sensation of exhaustion, I could feel a tingle at the edge of my senses warning me how close to unconsciousness I still teetered. The bubble of stillness I wove around us flicked in and out, becoming harder to maintain the higher up the slopes we went. It was Archer that guided us, pathfinding through the jutting blades of glassy stone with their sharp edges that dug into our boots. She took us through detours that saw the stone protect us from the wind, but even with all our haste it was frustratingly slow going.

I clutched the rope when it came down after Masego had finished climbing, passing mastery of the bubble to Andronike as I concentrated on hoisting myself up. My muscles burned even when Indrani came to stand at the ledge and began to pull me up, grunting with effort, but after an eternity of labour I was over that too-sharp edge and falling on my knees atop the stone. My bad leg was pulsing with agony, but it was dull and distant. The Sisters did not want me distracted. I had left my staff down there, beyond the bubble, but it still stood perfectly still as if untouched by the storm. I extended my hand and moments later it was slapping against my palm, the dried traces of my blood rubbing against my palm as I pulled myself up.

The crows returned to my shoulders, never having strayed far. They seemed wary of leaving us behind, my patronesses burned by what it had cost them to face the Dead King while I slept. Hierophant was standing at the edge of the stillness, black robes in disarray and those long tresses woven with silver trinkets swept to the side. He was looking out into the distance, standing

beneath two great fangs of stone crisscrossing as in the distance the Dead King's magic slowly revolved. Archer had found us the right place, I thought, sending her a thankful look. Decent shelter and a good vantage point, it was exactly what we needed.

I limped to Masego's side, not that he gave a visible sign he'd hear me coming.

"So?" I asked.

There was a tense silence.

"I believe," Hierophant murmured, "that he is opening a Greater Breach."

I screamed out the vilest curses I knew at the sky until my voice went hoarse. Archer came to stand by our side, silent as she warily eyed our surroundings.

"Can you Wrest it?" I asked.

"I have been trying," Hierophant conversationally said, "for fifty heartbeats now,"

His shoulders were trembling, I noticed only then. It was hard to see under the ash-dusted robes. And though he was not grimacing, there was a line to his mouth. Tension. I dared not speak another word, even if he'd not said the distraction would be harmful, instead listening as Komena whispered into my ear. I heard not a word but something greater, and my vision swam until I glimpsed a part of what the goddesses were seeing. Wills at war over the sorcery raging ahead of us, those slowly spinning circles of runes and the sphere within them. Like ink in water, Masego was trying to spread his will through the gargantuan amount of power but it was not enough.

There was too much water.

"His perspective is still too narrow," Andronike whispered into my ear, regretful. "He has not witnessed enough."

It was hard to deny the truth of that when it was before my eyes. Hierophant was failing and would fail. Did we have anything else that might destroy this? Night would not be enough, not when I was falling apart and the enemy's raw strength was so great. Did Archer have an arrow that would – no, that was thinking about this the wrong way. The Intercessor had mocked me, in the Arsenal, asked me where Neshamah's devils and ancient sorceries were. Well, they were here now. Why? More importantly, why now? But I'd already been given the answer to that, I belatedly realized, by an old man that was now a dead one. *He cannot use either*, Tariq Isbili had told me, speaking of devils and demons.

It would represent too steep an increase in strength on his side of the scales.

The Pilgrim had meant in the sense that if the Dead King used devils, then the heroes of the Grand Alliance would in turn get to call in angels as a superior counterstroke. Except we'd struck first, hadn't we? The Grey Pilgrim had died intertwined with the Choir of Mercy calling down his dead star, it was our side that'd broken the seal. *The story's not on our side*, I realized with dread. Even if Masego had proved to have the capacity to Wrest the spell, he still would have failed – the scales were tipped in Neshamah's favour for this to work, he had *earned* it. Fuck. And I couldn't believe it would be only the one gate either, it wasn't the Dead King's way.

"Can you see afar?" I asked Sve Noc. "Look for other gates like this, still forming."

"It will be difficult," Andronike cawed.

"But not impossible," Komena noted.

It would require enough of their attention that I'd be on my own, though, their minds brushing against mine made clear. Wouldn't matter, I decided, power wouldn't get us through this. They seemed inclined to agree, and on my shoulders the weight of them waned. As if much of them had gone elsewhere. The glimpses they had granted me ended too, but Masego had been about to be evicted – diluted into effective nothingness, more accurately, but the practical result was the same – from the spell, his aspect stuttering to a stop. He breathed out raggedly moments afterwards, body shivering. Indrani moved to help him up.

"You'll be fine?" I asked.

"I withdrew before it could be turned against me," Hierophant hoarsely replied, nodding. "But though defeated, I have learned some of his secrets. It was impossible not to, when my will was coursing through his work."

He coughed, as much out of exhaustion as the heavy and ash-laden air.

"It is imperfect," Hierophant croaked out. "Unlike the closed circle that Akua made of Liesse. Not only will Keter's Due spread, it was made *worse*. On purpose, I think."

My stomach dropped.

"How much worse, Masego?" I quietly asked.

The last time the Dead King had opened a Greater Breach, he'd blighted most of the Kingdom of the Dead doing it. It was the

reason the phenomenon was known as Keter's Due in the first place.

"I can't be sure," Masego admitted. "Perhaps as far as the defence line to the south?"

That was, I thought, perhaps nine tenths of Hainaut that he had described. Made into a howling wasteland by the spell ahead of us, those spinning circles whose rotations were beginning to quicken. My bloody hand left the staff and I looked down at it, feeling numb. This was... Tariq had *died* for this, and a blighted Hainaut with a permanent hellgate in the middle was what would be achieved? I grasped for a story that could turn this around, but what was there left? We had spent all our miracles, our strength, our last chances. We had bargained ourselves away until only a remnant's remnant remained, and still it had not been enough. The two of them looked at me, somehow expecting I would turn it around, but to my horror there was nothing.

My bag of tricks was empty.

"I-"

I swallowed. The words tasted like ash in my mouth but I forced them out anyway.

"I can't stop this," I quietly admitted. "I have nothing."

I looked away, afraid of what I might see on their faces at that admission. What I found, instead, was a tall shape standing alone in the winds. Down there, away from our shelter. Troublingly close to the spell. Indrani began to say something but I raised a hand to interrupt her. Was this the Dead King, inhabiting a favoured corpse and giving silent invitation by his presence? Talon sunk into my flesh once more, the Sisters returning from their spirit-journey at last.

"There are two more," Komena said.

"One close, to the west, and one far in the northwest," Andronike said.

The other two southern fronts. Cleves and Twilight's Pass. Neshamah did not just intend to win here: he was going to win everywhere and all at once. Not, not everywhere, I almost immediately corrected. That would have been a mistake, overreaching. Enough of an opening for the Heavens to put their fingers to the scale. He'd not touched the front against the Firstborn, trusting in his crippling of the Night and his ability to triumph in a battle of Evil against Evil.

"Catherine," Indrani said. "It's all right. Your armies are still in the Ways, all we lose is-"

"That's not a corpse," I softly said, sole eye still on the silhouette among the storm.

I glanced at my companions.

"Hierophant, can you shield the both of you?"

"I can," Masego slowly replied.

"Then do it now," I said, and walked over the ledge of our perch.

Magic bloomed behind me even as I fell, Hierophant weaving transparent shields as the ground hurried towards me. I barely drew on Night, instead letting the Crows slow my descent. They were uneasy, but I slipped through the storm and limped my way to the lone figure. It was even taller than I had thought. Almost thirty feet tall, his deep brown skin just as indifferent to the elements as the still-pristine white tunic the Gigantes wore. The giant cared not for my approach, and I saw no other of his kind around us.

"Can you end it?" I asked.

The screams of the storm drowned out my voice, but I trusted I would be heard regardless. The Gigante glanced down at me, his short neck bending unnaturally.

"We cannot," the giant said, voice even.

Hope I'd not quite allowed myself to feel died out.

"So what are you doing here?" I asked.

"I wait," the giant said. "I witness."

"Witness what?" I pressed.

"The end," the Gigante said, "and what will come after. Send away your followers, Queen of Callow. Soon the Young King's circle will close and they cannot withstand what will follow."

The spell was ending soon, then. He was warning me that Keter's Due would kill Archer and Hierophant if they stayed. Masego would know as much, and I suspected he would lead Indrani out whatever I said, but I wove a snake out of Night and sent it towards them bearing an order to retreat just in case. I could have gone and done it myself, but it felt like a mistake. My instincts were screaming at me that if I left, I would miss something important.

"There are other gates," I said.

"We know," the giant replied. "There, too, others will witness."

There was a pause.

"Prepare yourself," the giant said.

The world went still, for a terrible moment, and then the storm exploded outwards. Even with all the Night I could spare holding me down and the guidance of Sve Noc, I still fell down on one knee. The power was blinding, staggering, and I could feel it sink into the earth as well as the air. Whether it lasted for moments or hours I could not tell, my body and mind bitterly arguing what was true and false, but eventually the storm passed. It left behind only a perfect circle of runes hanging in the air, a perfect gate into some distant Hell.

A heartbeat passed, and nothing came out.

"What did you do?" I rasped out.

"It is called," the giant said, "the Riddle of the Lock."

My heartbeat quickened.

"It's a gate," I said. "Are you telling me your mages *locked* it?"

"Our singers are dead," the Gigante said. "I witness only the work they gave their lives for."

My fingers clenched as I remembered that while the Gigantes had sent people into Cleves there had been no bargain for the Pass, that – I stopped. But there *had* been, I realized. Clever Cordelia had spent the goodwill she had won executing the Red Axe a second time to move the Highest Assembly to apologize to the Titanomachy for the Seven Slayings. They'd sent people into the Pass to fortify the Morgentor. If the Gigantes had locked all three gates, perhaps the war was not yet lost.

"We are in their debt," I carefully said.

"Aid was promised," the giant said. "Aid was given."

I nodded.

"And how long will their gift last?" I asked.

"A year, a month and a day," the Gigante said.

In the distance, dawn began to break. The giant glanced at me again.

"I will return home the corpses of my companions," he said. "We will not meet again, Queen of Callow."

"Then take you leave with my thanks," I said, meaning every word. "Your people have given Calernia a chance."

Even if both Cleves and the Pass were blighted by the rituals too, we had been pulled back from the fall to the brink.

"We have given them time," the giant said. "What might yet fill it is in your hands."

And without another word he strode down into the restless ash, leaving me behind as he moved into the shrinking darkness. I stayed standing there for a long time, until even the Sisters left me. Dawn rose, slowly, and with it came shadows. My own found me before too long, her steps soft on the ashen ground. Her gaze followed my own, coming to rest on the Hellgate.

"It is oddly beautiful," Akua Sahelian said, "for such a terrible thing."

I didn't answer. The Severance, I thought, might destroy such a gate. If we were lucky, it might even be able to do it through the locking spell the Gigantes had laid so that we would not have to wait until it ended. If we used it, though, the sword would be spent. Perhaps not materially, but as a story: it would be diluted, no longer the blade fated to kill the King of Death. I went through every Named I knew, every trick and spell and use of Light, and found nothing that could be *relied* on. There were only two Greater Breaches on Calernia, one in the heart of Keter and the other bloomed in the shadow of the Doom of Liesse – but there was no Warlock to divert it, this time, and even that trick had not been a true solution. The gate itself still existed in the heartlands of my kingdom, even if it did not lead into them. It had not remained there for lack of trying otherwise on our part. One after another, the solutions fell away until one remained.

"We need diabolists," I said. "Hundreds of them, thousands."

Enough that every devil that came howling through those gates could be bound and dismissed, that a more permanent solution could be devised.

"There is only one realm in Calernia, Catherine, that is the home to so many of them," Akua said.

There was an expectant shiver in her voice, halfway between fear and desire. Praes. The Dread Empire. The first crucible of my life, the fires where I had been forged. I closed my eyes, letting the rising sun wash over me, and let the decision settle.

I was headed east.

[ErraticErrata](#)

Chapter's out early for Christmas, and as my gift to you lot I'll even throw in January's extra chapter (titled Grand, from Cordelia's POV and running parallel to this story arc).

Happy holidays to all of you!

1queenofblades1

Merry Christmas!!

[Liliet](#)

HAPPY FUCKING HOLIDAYS

THANKS BUT ALSO HOLY SHIT WHAT THE FUCK

John

That was a present and a half. Hope you are safe wherever you are and keep doing what you do

Frivolous

Thank you. Happy holidays to you, too, EE.

I wonder why the Alamans were shamed, as mentioned in this chapter. I can't see the logic in it.

Did Prince Arsene really deal in secret with Keter, as I had guessed, and then got found out, or was it something else I'm overlooking?

Also, I'm totally envying the Gigantes and their perpetually pristine white tunics. Must be nice not to ever need laundry.

I am surprised that Catherine didn't take the opportunity to sidle closer to the Gigante and peek underneath the tunic. I mean, she's very short. Why not take advantage of that for once and look?

Frivolous

Addendum: Just noticed now "with only a destitute Princess Beatrice to calm them"

Obviously this means that Prince Arsene must be dead, since he is absent.

[Liliet](#)

The Alamans forces – the conscripts, specifically – broke multiple times, and in a much less desperate context than the

Callowan army (which also was re-gathered before anyone else's forces were hit by the consequences of the rout)

TheCount

Happy Holydays!

[Estelulu](#)

Merry Christmas!

qcheshire

Gods above

[Burlyraven](#)

Yay early chapter(s)!

I totally forgot that the Dead King would get a chance to retaliate. Also looks like we'll have to wait to get confirmation on Vivienne's Name, but Cat's should be coming soon, by the same token.

therealgridlock

I don't think she gets one, and I have three pieces of logic to support my thesis.

1: no named may rule a kingdom. This rule of the liesse accords means that if Vivienne, chosen princess of Callow, gets a name, she must immediately pick someone else to rule. She may **refuse** a name, such as Cordelia Hasenbach did, but she cannot narratively come into one without malfeasance afoot.

2: Vivienne will rule Callow after the black queen. This is narratively set in stone, barring huge upsets, prepared for books in advance. Why throw away this storyline now?

3: she gave up a name already, to be **human** and she realized that while her friends improved themselves, she was not, and so the skill she displays now is mere remnants of training, and personal ability. It isn't superhuman, it isn't Named, it's just human excellence.

If we combine the narrative that Cat's chosen successor will almost definitely succeed Cat, and that no named can rule, then she doesn't get a name. If we include the idea that she is simply exemplifying human excellence, like Cordelia, such that it is possible to be great without being Named, the no-name narrative becomes stronger.

Ironically, she would carve a groove through fate that others could follow, except one without cheap tricks or superhuman reflexes, and instead only hard work.

gwennafran

Merry Christmas. This came right after i had opened my other gifts. :3

laguz24

Boost. <http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[*Liliet*](#)

bless u

Myradmir

Wow.

laguz24

Also, this is better than crack. Just, the, aargh, so perfect, in the writing. After reading and watching so many other shows that could just be better and you can see it. This is a breath of fresh air.

Burnsy

Well.

Fuck.

Merry Christmas ya'll

ByVectron!

I really can't express how thoroughly impressive the scope of this story is to me. Foundation, HGTtG, L0tR, GoT, The Expanse, and this saga will forever be part of my recommended reading list.

Really well done, EE.

Black Spiral Dancer

Foundation you mean Craddle (Unsouled)? If not, then which series? And what is HGTtg? The rest I agree.

Sykomantis

Probably the Foundation series by Asimov. Seconded on an explanation for HGTtG

Dathrax

Hitchhiker's Guide, right?

Kellandros

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

[Liliet](#)

I think I'll just post my liveblog here

““The parity of light and darkness is a false perception. Light is transgressive, an imposition on the natural order, and so will always spend itself into nothingness. Be as the dark and you will be beyond struggle, ever returning when the flames die out.”

– TRANSLATION OF THE KABBALIS BOOK OF DARKNESS, WIDELY ATTRIBUTED TO THE YOUNG DEAD KING”

this is actually a really interesting thought? in context of guide in particular, where Light is known for RESTORING the natural order. something something different layers something something it sorta worked for him but also no

“The turn of the year had begun with a boy I'd thought I might save, and then a hard lesson remembered to me by the Dead King.”
turn of the year, huh
guess she'd count from Foundling Day?

“Masego's spell was little more than a window between Twilight and Creation, but what it showed was... I knew the forces at work, but still the sight caused me in me a sort of primal awe. The meteors, shards of a broken star, were massive.”

OH WOW

I FIGURED IT WOULD BE MORE FIGURATIVE

“Again and again the capital and the valley around it were struck until there was nothing there but barren glass, and still in the distance stars fell. How much of Hainaut had been scoured in the span of a few moments, I wondered?”

OH BOY



on one hand, undead!

on the other hand, those villages DK left behind 😊

“It'd not been undead alone that'd still been in the city when the star fell. The Fourth Army was gone, as were most of the Hannover men and the Prince of Bayeux's army. Almost all of the Alavan troops had been lost as well, since they'd served as the Dominion rearguard, and at least half the Firstborn with them. It had been a cruel defeat before the Pilgrim began his last hurrah, but after the star had struck the results could only be called disastrous. Not a single army in fighting shape had made it out of Hainaut except maybe the Neustrians, and they'd just lost their princess.”

okay WOW
holy shit

"The Dead King, for all that he was the victor of the field, did not have an army left in all of Hainaut. The meteors had seen to that. Much as I itched to blame Tariq for what I'd lost tonight, it would have rung hollow to try it when he'd died trying to save all of Calernia.

And he had, Gods forgive me. If we'd simply evacuated, fled back to our defensive lines, then the simple amount of corpses swelling Neshamah's ranks would have been enough to overwhelm us to the south after we retreated there to lick our wounds. And once the Dead King pierced into Procer, got his hands on cities and teeming masses of refugees, then it was all over. The Peregrine had averted that doom for us all, and I held that truth close as I watched the pieces of a dead star rain down on Creation."

hahaha

yeah

this is fun

"Some of the Scourges will have made it out," Indrani quietly said. "The Hawk for sure, maybe the Prince of Bones as well."

"The Grey Legion's good as gone," I replied, forcefully calm. "That, at least, is a gain."

There had been few enough of those tonight that I would find silver linings where I could."

yeeep

"The Crab is destroyed as well," Masego noted. "Though it likely was in a practical sense even before the meteor struck it, given the amount of goblinfire burning within."

My fingers clenched. Blood dripped down from my palm onto the soft grass.

"It was a good way to go," Archer murmured. "They will sing songs of him, Catherine."

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

I DON'T THINK YOU THOUGHT THAT SENTIMENT THROUGH ALL THE WAY DRANI

I KNOW YOU'RE TRYING TO BE COMFORTING

I DON'T THINK IT'LL WORK WELL

"I would rather they didn't, I thought, so that I might hear him sing again instead. But I'd known deep down that Robber would find his worthy death on some battlefield or another. He'd been looking for years, trying ever starker odds against ever sharper foes. You would have hated peace, I thought. Despised it to the bone."

ok yeah fair 😡

"My cheek clenched in frustration as I tried and failed to blink an eye I no longer had."
ah yes that also happened
i love how that isnt even drama compared to the, uh,
approximately everything else

"General Bagram was dead. Vivienne has saved his life from the Varlet only him to die trying to rally the Fourth mere hours later."
OOF 😡

"Indrani brushed a hand against my arm, startling me as I'd not seen her coming. I had blind spots now, I reminded myself. I'd need to learn to compensate for them."
😊😊😊
~you always did, in a different sense~

"Masego stayed, but his eyes were on the vista revealed by his spell. He'd always been the most accommodating of my friends when it came to sharing solitude. It made him the easiest to be around when grief was still raw."
♥ ♥ ♥

"Nothing would live here for decades, centuries even."
UH OKAY THEN
WON'T LIE THIS IS NOT AN EFFECT I EXPECTED

"t ended in time for me to hear footsteps approaching, the cadence of them telling me who they were before I turned. That hobbling walk was Hakram on his crutches, while the still unnaturally smooth stride was Vivienne's – she had once walked rooftops as other women did streets, and the touch had never quite left her."
♥ ♥ ♥

"Vivienne looked away when I met her gaze. Trying to avoid looking at my eye, I realized, and suddenly felt self-conscious. I would have brought down my hood, were it not too obvious a reaction."
)=
but also ♥ ♥ ♥
i love both of them

"“Enough,” Masego said, voice grown hard. “If you have the voice to ask, use it settle the troubles you bring her instead.”
I started in surprise, half-turning.

"Masego-" Vivienne began.

"She should be asleep, Vivienne," Hierophant said, eyes burning. "She insists on remaining awake, so she will, but do not mistake this for her being in a fit state. You ask too much."

I found myself both warmed and irritated.

"I can speak for myself, Zeze," I said.

"Then do so," Masego bluntly replied. "But I will not let this war drag you into the grave, Catherine. I have not forgotten what Aunt Sabah's death did to my family, and I will not allow Robber's death to bloom that sickly flower twice.""

OH HOLY SHIT

DAMN

YOU SPEAK ZEZE

YOU TELL THEM

"Masego beamed at me, which was comforting even though I knew this was probably the wrong decision."

♥ ♥ ♥

"The legend I'd set was not one I could live up to. If this campaign should have made anything painfully clear for all the world to see, it was that I didn't always have the answers. I'd pushed for this offensive from the start and even if I'd not been the only one to do so my influence had objectively been key. This catastrophe was on me, if it was on anyone at all."

kadlfja;sldkfl'asldfjl;asdjf cat

what were alTERNATIVES

you KNOW THIS

"My sentence went stillborn when I felt a shudder of indignation through my tenuous bond with the Night. Sve Noc were enraged, and though I found the shades of emotion difficult to parse I did pick up that this wasn't about the Firstborn"

oh, what? 😊

"a great spell was stirring up a storm of ash.

It was not one of ours.

"Hierophant, what am I looking at?" I calmly asked.

Masego remained silent for a time, golden glass eyes darting back and forth as they parsed the glimmers of the spell that could be seen through the ash. Thick, curving cords of runes spinning in cycles without making a sound, a dull but growing pale sphere at the heart of them.

"I am... unsure," Hierophant admitted."

WHAT

WHAT NOW

ELVES, DWARVES, GNOMES

WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE

"Cat," she said, "we have a problem."

"I'm aware," I replied, jutting a thumb towards the spell-window.

She took a glance, then grimaced.

"Cat," she said, "we have two problems." "
beautiful

"I'm listening," I said.

"The Gigantes are gone," Archer said. "All of them. I think they went back into Creation." "

...that could actually account for this
maybe there arent two problems

"Hierophant, is this their work?" I asked.

"No," Masego immediately replied. "This is Trismegistan, Catherine. And I understand why it unsettled me. The elements I found familiar were of my work and Akua Sahelian's."

I blinked.

"The Dead King cribbed from your spellcraft?"

"I suspect," Hierophant softly replied, "that it was the other way around, Catherine. However unknowingly. It is not without reason that the very magic we practice bears the name of Trismegistus."

"Shit," Archer said. "This is his spellwork, isn't it? His actual hand weaving the spell, not some intermediary's." "
oh-kay the worst case scenario then

"With the Sisters themselves on my shoulders I could almost call on Night the way I'd been able to before it was ruined, but my body was weak. Aching and too close to collapse. Even with Komena banishing the sensation of exhaustion, I could feel a tingle at the edge of my senses warning me how close to unconsciousness I still teetered."

Hum.

So the crows can still empower HER, but probably not anything else they could previously do simultaneously with that.
That sure is an interesting position it leaves them in :3

"I had left my staff down there, beyond the bubble, but it still stood perfectly still as if untouched by the storm. I extended my hand and moments later it was slapping against my palm, the dried traces of my blood rubbing against my palm as I pulled myself up."

yeppp ♥

"The Pilgrim had meant in the sense that if the Dead King used devils, then the heroes of the Grand Alliance would in turn get to call in angels as a superior counterstroke. Except we'd struck

first, hadn't we? The Grey Pilgrim had died intertwined with the Choir of Mercy calling down his dead star, it was our side that'd broken the seal. The story's not on our side, I realized with dread. Even if Masego had proved to have the capacity to Wrest the spell, he still would have failed – the scales were tipped in Neshamah's favour for this to work, he had earned it. Fuck. And I couldn't believe it would be only the one gate either, it wasn't the Dead King's way.

"Can you see afar?" I asked Sve Noc. "Look for other gates like this, still forming.""

okay holy SHIT

0.0

"It is imperfect," Hierophant croaked out. "Unlike the closed circle that Akua made of Liesse. Not only will Keter's Due spread, it was made worse. On purpose, I think."

My stomach dropped.

"How much worse, Masego?" I quietly asked.

The last time the Dead King had opened a Greater Breach, he'd blighted most of the Kingdom of the Dead doing it. It was the reason the phenomenon was known as Keter's Due in the first place.

"I can't be sure," Masego admitted. "Perhaps as far as the defence line to the south?"

UH

"It is called," the giant said, "the Riddle of the Lock."

My heartbeat quickened.

"It's a gate," I said. "Are you telling me your mages locked it?"

"Our singers are dead," the Gigante said. "I witness only the work they gave their lives for."

My fingers clenched as I remembered that while the Gigantes had sent people into Cleves there had been no bargain for the Pass, that – I stopped. But there had been, I realized. Clever Cordelia had spent the goodwill she had won executing the Red Axe a second time to move the Highest Assembly to apologize to the Titanomachy for the Seven Slayings. They'd sent people into the Pass to fortify the Morgentor. If the Gigantes had locked all three gates, perhaps the war was not yet lost.

"We are in their debt," I carefully said.

"Aid was promised," the giant said. "Aid was given."

I nodded.

"And how long will their gift last?" I asked.

"A year, a month and a day," the Gigante said.

In the distance, dawn began to break. The giant glanced at me again.

"I will return home the corpses of my companions," he said. "We will not meet again, Queen of Callow.""

OKAY THEN

THAT IS CERTAINLY BETTER THAN IT WOULD HAVE BEEN OTHERWISE

BUT

WELL

YEAH

"Then take you leave with my thanks," I said, meaning every word. "Your people have given Calernia a chance."

Even if both Cleves and the Pass were blighted by the rituals too, we had been pulled back from the fall to the brink.

"We have given them time," the giant said. "What might yet fill it is in your hands.""

yeeeeeah

holy fucking everlonving shit

"Dawn rose, slowly, and with it came shadows. My own found me before too long, her steps soft on the ashen ground. Her gaze followed my own, coming to rest on the Hellgate."

I'd been wondering if she could help Masego but, like, decidedly NO lmao

"ne after another, the solutions fell away until one remained.

"We need diabolists," I said. "Hundreds of them, thousands."

Enough that every devil that came howling through those gates could be bound and dismissed, that a more permanent solution could be devised.

"There is only one realm in Calernia, Catherine, that is the home to so many of them," Akua said.

There was an expectant shiver in her voice, halfway between fear and desire. Praes. The Dread Empire. The first crucible of my life, the fires where I had been forged. I closed my eyes, letting the rising sun wash over me, and let the decision settle.

I was headed east."

well, this is not THE reason we called for her going east but this sure was called!

(mostly on the logic of "no her Name is coming soon also how the fuck would structure even work without going to Praes before DK is over")

[Adrian_V](#)

THANKS!!! Merry Christmas you too!!!

Now for the chapter, wow, the thing that most shocked me about the gigantes is that they call Nessy the YOUNG king, the implications are staggering. Maybe this will force the elves to actually do something? Although i think they once tried and it ended with the king losing his son right?

As for praes i wonder if DK had this pseudo planned, as an in case they do something this will at least force them to go to praes and dilute the story of me as their enemy kind of thing?

Christian Oaks

Good stuff

mavant

> after the star had struck the results could only be called disastrous

groan

Frivolous

Hah. Yes! A pun! A really BAD one, haha.

JJR

It's a pretty stellar one if you ask me.

Xinci

This was lovely ty. That exert from the book explains some things, goes with the themes too. Evil tends to have lasting remnants between the various iterations. Changes to the genes that can't be healed by miracles, or beast and monsters hunted by someone later. A fitting thing for the side of the argument who is less direct in their gifts and warier of directly investing. If your side is made of droplets in the tide that will drown Creation, then it makes sense to keep the waves churning.

I do wonder then if the DK actually learned from Akuas cycling or had already learned a similar technique if he uses it for other projects. As a principle, it seems quite useful for running the Serenity with almost no upkeep.

The Dk's show of story craft here was pretty exquisite, neatly almost won if it wasn't for the right people being in the right place.

bennett palmer

The dead king didn't nearly win, he did win. Think about what he lost, long term. He lost one crab, a few powerful revenants, the grey legion, and probably an unfinished bridge that was always bait to begin with. all this adds up to very little for him. Meanwhile, the grand alliance lost the grey pilgrim, along with a bunch of lesser heroes, had many armies crushed, had night crippled, catherine and the woe are leaving the front lines to chase down praes, and the gigantes' deal to help has been expended.

Cold Cyberia

"Young King" lol.

I think Kairos' 3rd secret, that Twilight Paths also lead to places not of Creation, will come to be used against the breaches. Maybe they could redirect them, sort of like what Warlock did? Maybe even use them to get to Serenity.

A bit surprised Akua didn't try anything when the breaches were being opened. She's the finest diabolist of her generation and she opened one up herself. It was a ripe opportunity for usurpation. Then again I'm not really sure to what extent she can interact with sorcery.

Alec

Perhaps the point is supposed to be to prove that even us readers believe in Cat's story too much, but it somehow still feels wrong that Cat could be shot by the Hawk like that when she specifically said to watch out for it. When the Dead King took the time to speak to Cat a word in a language he knows only she would understand. Cat's fall is clearly the shift that changed the story here. This ending to the Hainaut arc is tragic and moving and beautiful, but it is also unsettling and off in my mind. It feels like I have been sold the end to some other story.

Matthew Wells

Also, what happened to Guillaume?

The Fresh Prince

He died, but then he walked it off

ninegardens

I mean... I feel like "I've been sold the end to some other story" and "Unsettling" is... kind of appropriate for vs battle against the dead king.

The fact that it DOES feel wrong, the fact that he DOES beat them better than expected matches with the fact that he's just... way better than the previous enemies Cat has faced.

I know what you mean on the feelings, but I kinda like it.

Daniel E

I suspected in the previous chapter that the battle of Hainaut was shaping up to be a major victory for the Dead King. Recall that he has multiple Crabs, and most likely a significant reserve force in Keter as well, while the Grand Alliance has been effectively neutered. I'm starting to think that DK might actually survive this whole affair, shunted away in his personal Serenity, with the goal simply being to elevate Catherine to a position similar to his own; a story-driven demi god(ess), of sorts.

Sinead

However, if he becomes Sealed Evil in a Can, he might be doomed if he ever stepped out of Serenity, binding him to irrelevance. He won't even be a "hidden source of knowledge" since Cardinal will be a mage academy with Masego as a founding teacher. And while he isn't Nemeshah's equal yet, he is still a peer in terms of sorcery and his teachings along with every other contribution will build a resource far greater than what Nemeshah would easily provide.

Oshi

Which is probably what will happen to him. What you cannot defeat you bind. He'll forever be the evil in a can. It's a fitting ending that he will be bound forevermore to the very world he sought to dominate.

JJR

While not his first choice of fates, being sealed in his hell kingdom might be an acceptable alternative to death. Play the role of the ancient evil that fools try to summon for their own ends for a few centuries. They get to learn that evil is not a toy as they get pulled into hell, and Dead King gets to continue existing as there really isn't an opportunity for heroes to attack him.

It goes back to his quote at the start of the chapter. Her need only wait, the forces of light that sealed him will eventually spend themselves and the dark ages will return. Even if it takes 100 lifetimes.

Daniel E

'Evil In A Can' sounds like the kind of homemade chili that uses ghost peppers and leaves you pondering the fact that you might die sitting on a toilet.

ByVectron!

So, in a pattern of three, this is his victory. That leaves only a draw and a loss for him, unless we look at previous events for either of those.

agumentic

Still not how Patterns of Three work, and it wasn't even much of a victory, thanks to Gigantes. Only one side has an army after all was said and done, and it is the side that breathes.

Juff

Typo Thread:

caused me in me > caused in me
rain own > rain on
only him to die > only for him to die
armies the dead > armies of the dead
ended? > ended?"
use it settle > use it to settle
even tough > even though
l If this> If this
Most the people > Most of the people
no remained > not remained

Crash

what the fuck

standardtypo

Typos [standard]:

caused me in me -> caused in me
rain own -> rain
only him to die -> only for him to die
armies the dead -> armies of the dead
ended? -> ended?"
use it settle -> use it to settle
even tough -> even though
l If this -> If this
Most the people -> Most of the people
no remained -> not remained
Vivienne has -> Vivienne had
I would the find -> I would find
{dust on the wind} on -> in
{I found it hard to care:} : -> ;
{she warily eyes our surroundings} eyes -> eyed
{heartbeats now,"} , -> .
{Talon sunk into my flesh} Talon -> Talons
{Not, not everywhere} Not -> No

{Then take you leave} you -> your
{even if did not lead into them} if -> if it

standardtypo

(See the PGTE subreddit for a script that will automatically incorporate comments like this into the chapter so that you can read it without typos).

[boballab](#)

Time for Cat to finally climb the Tower.

Matthew Wells

Nah, she doesn't want it. She'll just murder Malicia and let Black sort things out from there.

[boballab](#)

It doesn't matter if she wants it, it is the Name she is moving into. The Peregrine basically all but told us that when he looked inside her and saw her budding Name dealing with authority and in the East. The authority in the East is the Dread Empress

Matthew Wells

First of all, Queen of Callow and Arbiter of Cardinal are both 'authorities of the east'. Second of all, Dread Empress literally cannot be claimed or moved into without having a legitimate claim to be currently ruling Praes, which is something she neither wants to do nor has the ability to do, even if she kills Malicia. Staying in the Tower would mean abandoning the War, the Accords, Callow, and Amadeus.

Trebar

No, not a chance. Her upcoming name isn't just "authority in the East"... she ACCIDENTALLY Spoke to Named as strong as the Grey Pilgrim. No way in Above or Below is the Empress a strong enough Name for that, nor does it have enough authority over the Pilgrim.

Big I

Obviously this has been a really bad day for our protagonists, but I couldn't help think that that bit at the end with giants was a victory of necessity and preparedness. If Cat hadn't sent the Red Axe to the Procerans the giants wouldn't have helped. I think that reinforces her Story about the need for hard choices and the people who make them.

Frivolous

It bothers me that Catherine was in the compelled by the Greater Breaches to go to Praes to get an army of diabolists to help control those Breaches.

You see, in the recent chapter, Lost & Found, Tariq saw that Catherine's coming Name would be birthed in the east, and by something in the east.

The causality thereof sounds crazy. Does it mean that this entire horror, the destruction of nearly all of Hainaut and all the deaths of armies and civilians, were caused by Catherine's Name?

Because that is what it sounds like to me, at least a little. Causality dictates that happens before gives rise to what happens after. Catherine's approaching Name started 2 years ago and came first. Therefore one could say that it gave rise to everything that happened after.

What do you think?

Also, I'm kinda disappointed in the Gigantes. They were enormously powerful, and yet the only agency they had in this battle was as cleanup. They gave their lives to be janitors to the mess, and not even permanent janitors. Just temporary ones.

I would have preferred it if they gave their lives to destroy the Crab and win the battle instead. But I must presume that they lacked the capacity to do so.

Still disappointed, though.

I kinda suspect they knew the Greater Breaches would happen. Their serendipitous deployment to the sites of those Breaches is very very suspicious.

Sir Nil

Someone had to do it. As meh as janitorial work is someone has to clean the nooks and crannies otherwise bacteria and fungus get everywhere and starts bothering people. Their act of janitorial work probably saved the entire world, arguably a lot better than taking down a single crab.

TeK

Janitorial work is more art than act.

[Liliet](#)

I think the casualty was more like, the Name was forming in anticipation of this inevitably happening.

Casualty of Name/Role events being fucky and relying on future knowledge is nothing new. Note how there was a whole bunch of

Squire claimants going to Summerholm at about the time Cat would be there – they'd have had to set out before she was the Squire at all.

Sinead

On the Squire claimants – I think they were heading there because Amadeus was heading there after Laure, not in response to Cat. Cat followed the same route by already being hitched to the Black knight wagon

I think the causality of this is that Keter always acting as the theoretical second partner in a deal (with the invite and all that) makes Nemeshah actively harder to deal with from a metaphysical perspective such that dealing with Praes was always the path forward, but Nemeshah blocked that path by swamping them with undead that were a more immediate threat. Binding Praes (and potentially the Golden Bloom) actually frees up more elements to deal with the Kingdom of the Dead.

I wonder if the end result is going to be the Drow sitting on the Kingdom of the Dead along with blighted territories acting as containment of both Nemeshah and the Chain of Hunger.

I could see the Gigantes predicting that Nemeshah would respond to any sufficient defeat with sorcery, and Nemeshah is famous for one feat of sorcery in particular, and planned accordingly.

TeK

One thing that slipped Cat's mind is that WB's comment about DK not using sorcery meant that he was not taking them as a threat...

Now, he does.

I do wonder though, if the Gigantes are spent, it means the shores are not protected. The Hainaut front is already mostly gone, how would they establish a new defensive line, if Cat also needs to take armies from it and into the Praes?

Also, I am reminded about what Bard said to William.

"They think they are special, but they are not, not really. Pattern does not discriminate between the shades, it only sees the black and white."

The Dead King takes on entire continent, the Good, the Evil and the Neutral, and still manages to hold his own. If the Pattern can be transcended once in Callow, it can be transcended again in Keter. He does not need to win, not really, he just needs to

become the other side. And the Pattern will act to preserve him forevermore.

On the side note, I except that long forgotten dusty Chekhov's gun about Forever King eyeing the borders of Empire and pondering war will finally pay off. Having recently reread the PGtE (yet again) I am reminded of the sheer scope of the forethought put into this book. So yeah, still wait for a payoff on the elves.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Damn, I forgot about the Forever King. If he got involved beyond sending a dozen Emerald Swords the situation in Praes would be even more messy. I'm not sure there's enough time for it but it would be cool to clean up the elves and reclaim the Golden Bloom.

[Liliet](#)

Shores can be held without the wards, they're a natural defensive line. Wards would have been better obviously but iirc plans for this offensive were already being made without the promise of the wards.

And... does Catherine need to take an army to Praes? Does she really? There are quite a few waiting for her there ready-made...



agumentic

They were – the offensive was approved in chapter 40, while Gigantes presented their offer in chapter 43.

And she really does. While there are people out there who she could ally with, there is no one who would just give her an army to command if she asks nicely. If she asks nicely while already having an army – probably the Third, since I suspect they went to hide in the Ways and so avoided most of the damage from the blast – well, that's an entirely different situation.

[Liliet](#)

TY!

And, well,

> there is no one who would just give her an army to command if she asks nicely.

Amadeus is still alive.

agumentic

Alive, but doesn't have an army to give.

[Liliet](#)

...except for all the ones that would go "hell yeah" at the slightest hint of muster from him? Like the Legions in Exile and the orc Clans?

agumentic

If he wanted to gather them for some nebulous plan of his, he could have already done so. He wouldn't even need to be present, just reach out. Since he opted to not do that, whatever Amadeus is doing doesn't need armies, and so he doesn't have armies to give.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but what *Cat* is doing needs armies. Are you saying Amadeus won't change plans to help deal with THREE GREATER BREACHES to his west? When Cat asks?

agumentic

Depends on the plans – who knows how changeable they are, and how fast? I don't think Cat can (or even wants to) rely on "My dad will get me an army" when she is on a strict time limit to get Praes in order. And even if he can, it's not like having more armies will make it harder to conquer Praes or it's necessary to leave every soldier that can hold a weapon behind for the fronts to hold out.

[Liliet](#)

Anyway I'll just point out that most of these armies will not fight *her* either way

TeK

Wait till my dad hears about this!

Tenthyr

Headed east, again, to forge the last Name she'll ever wear.

hue hue

Hear me out

hue hue

Hear me out. Take contratrition lake sword, chuck it at praes capital, let the choir kill everything

hue hue

contrition! Not contratrition

Silverking

Poor, poor Malicia.

Everything she has done has been in service to keeping foreign armies from marching on Praes. The loans to infighting Procer, the poisoned water scheme, the Greater Breach machine the alliance with the Dead King. All to make sure that attacking Praes is either not worth the cost or not top priority.

But now, through no fault of her own, she has found herself at the top of Cat's "things to deal with list." Life is simply unfair to a Dread Empress.

laguz24

It's unfair to lots of people.

ninegardens

Cat shows up

Cat: yo, Ally Bell's. gimme 500 of your top diabolists not to invade.

Malicia: Sure. Will that mean Maddie is pals with me again?

Cat: I dunno. Probably.

Malicia: Deal.

Cat proceeds to head up north to smash Keter using demons

Maddie and Malicia make up and become friends again

Hye and various elves kill each other, and the rest of creation doesn't need to think about them again

[sengachi](#)

Well.

Fuck.

panic

This is bullshit bordering on misery porn, and I do not care for it in the slightest.

Leblanc

It's actually just goofy i saw them losing this like 6 chapters ago not because of any foresight into the story I just know the Author can let Cat win anything so of course she lost honestly just boring.

slendyllovespie

Ok, don't know if anyone else had mentioned this, and I know the series is over; however, does anyone else think Cat is potentially following Odin's story?

She at least had the look down. Staff, 2 crows, 1 eye...

goliath1303

I sure hope you realized that the Story wasn't over after you posted this. Just in case though, you're sure gonna be happy when you see this comment lol. You still have a whole book to go!

Interlude: Flow

"If you are to win the most then you must win always, else you will find a hundred more knives pointed at your back for every victory. This is both the promise of imperial greatness and the fate of imperial death."

– Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

The fighting had broken out at midday and lasted until half a bell before nightfall.

Neither the Magisterium nor General Basilia had wanted to roll the dice by continuing the battle in the dark. Helikeans kataphraktoi harassed the retreating Spears of Stygia as they retreated, loosing arrows in the back of the phalanx, but after the day's losses those were but a drop in the bucket. It wasn't like the phalanx could break, either: the leather collar around the neck of every single slave soldier served as a reminder that the displeasure of their masters would be both swift and final. Magister Andras sent out crossbowmen to chase them away, but like mayflies the famous cataphracts of Helike simply danced away and found somewhere else to sting.

Magister Zoe Ixioni set down her glass of wine, having drunk as deep as she dared given the night still ahead of her. The viewing pavilion that had been raised for the members of the Magisterium that accompanied the Stygian army but would not be involved in the day's fighting – the majority of them – was rather luxurious and privately paid fund, a gesture of thanks from Magister Andras

and Magister Kyra after they were appointed to command of the Stygian army. The twins had sent most of their time in the Magisterium as part one of its the lesser parties, the Herons, but they were not fools or unskilled at games of power. They were making the most of the opportunity they'd been given.

"We hold the field," Magister Gorgion murmured, drawing her attention. "Is that not... worrying?"

The young man was prodigiously fat, which Zoe had once noted to run in his family, and though he was now the head of what remained of the Laskaris she had several times regretted bringing him into the fold. Though a steady ally – he was terrified of being assassinated should she withdraw her protection – he was also nervous and hesitant, requiring constant reassurance. Would that it had been his older brother that their mother had left in Stygia, when she went out on campaign. The older Laskaris would have been a more fitting partner than the dregs the White Knight's wrath had left Zoe to work with.

"It does not matter," Magister Zoe quietly said. "This, too, serves our purposes."

The ranks of the Magisterium, by tradition, could never number higher than ninety-nine. In practice actual membership usually fluctuated between seventy and ninety, only every rarely approaching that limit, but these days their ranks were rather more thinned. The White Knight and the Ashen Priestess had slain over a third of the Magisterium in a single day during Kairos' War, and though replacements had come forward further losses had since been suffered to war and intrigues. Considering those slain by heroes had been the finest war mages of Stygia, and a great majority of the Black Vines party that had effectively ruled since the Carrion Lord's intervention decades ago, the ensuing politics had been... fluid.

As a member in good standing of the Black Vines, Zoe had certainly felt the ground grow unsteady under her feet.

The coalition that'd succeeded at taking the reins and stacking the Courts and appointments had then promptly collapsed in the wake of the disastrous campaign into Procer, leaving as successor an even shakier alliance. The Ivory Tile party had widely been seen as the only rival to the Black Vines, before the last few years of war, but they'd lost too many of their prominent members to either heroes or defections. They'd survived long enough to be the tallest dwarf, however, and to burnish their reputation in this time of danger to Stygia they had allied with the only real military party left in the city: the Herons. Though the lesser of the two partners, the Herons had only been brought into the fold at the price of their leaders, the twins of the Sideris, being named commanders of all Stygian armies in the coming campaign.

Already there was talk of formalizing the alliance, of merging into a single greater party, and in Zoe's opinion there was sense in it. The Herons typically advocated that Magisters should train as generals instead of simply leaving such duties to slaves, while the Ivory Tile was the champion of the politics of Haides the Elder – that balance in the League must be maintained, at the price of war if necessary. There was compatibility in ideals, even in the long view, which made such a merging possible. And after the leaders of the Herons had today scored a draw against General Basilia, perhaps the finest commander to come out of the Free Cities this generation, they would now have the prestige to take such a step without simply being gobbled up by the Ivory Tiles.

It was near enough to decided who the rulers of Stygia would be in the coming decade, bar disaster. Magister Zoe Ixioni watched the corners of the pavilion, where other magisters were speaking to each other in low murmurs, and smiled at nervous young Gorgion.

"Aretha the Raven, who twice defeated a Helikean field army using mostly sailors and whores, once said that in the Free Cities a general has more to fear from victory than defeat," Zoe softly said. "Commit the words to memory, Magister Gorgion."

She rose to her feet gracefully and took her leave from the young man, refusing the serving slave that came to offer her a full glass of wine and instead leaving the pavilion entirely. There was another tent, close by, where one could relieve themselves in privacy and relative comfort. Zoe began to head there but slowed her steps as soon as she was out of sight and then stopped. Before long, the woman she'd been waiting for arrived. Magister Phryne's gaunt face was said to have been made this way by the strange magics she delighted in using, for she had once been a great beauty. Whatever the truth of that, Zoe had always found her appearance unsettling. Her politics, though, were almost painfully straightforward.

"The Pale Chariot will lend its support," Magister Phryne said, with remarkable bluntness.

Zoe nodded. She'd expected as much the moment it became clear that the Herons were headed for positions of influence. The Pale Chariot as a party boasted only a half dozen reclusive mages whose personal cause was the safeguarding and improvement of magical knowledge in Stygia, so they tended to be left outside of political calculations. Which meant relatively few people bothered to notice that the only appointments they every sought outside the Court of Arcane was a single seat in the Court of Trades, which they always fought hard for. It was meant, Zoe Ixioni had bothered to notice, to safeguard their common

interests in the steelworking industries whose profits happened to *pay* for all these costly experiments they liked to indulge in.

A detail of little import, unless you also knew that the leading Herons had strong investments in the very same trade and would not hesitate a moment to use their newfound prominence to stack the Court of Trades and award themselves all those lucrative contracts currently funding the Pale Chariot coffers.

"For which you have our gratitude," Magister Zoe said. "The Keepers?"

"You have ours," Magister Phryne said. "Amyntor Eliade is not affiliated with us."

No, Zoe thought, *but he does happen to be my cousin*. The magister offered a demure smile and nothing else, for over a decade of diplomacy had schooled her well in keeping her thoughts hidden.

All that was left, now, was to take the plunge.

—

Merchant Prince Mauricius did not have an office, not in the sense his predecessor did.

Though the Princely Palace was his since he had been elected to the ancient and respectable office he now held, the old merchant had bought enough servants on those grounds to know it was as a leaking sieve. Perhaps he would see to mending that, should the mood ever take him, but until then he saw absolutely no need to keep any private papers and affairs out of his manse. Instead, when he was not attending sessions of the Forty-Stole Court or giving audience in the palace he preferred to retreat to his favorite establishment – Sub Rosa, tucked away near the Irenian Plaza at the heart of power in the City of Bought and Sold. There the merchant prince sipped at his Yan Tei rice wine, imported from across the sea and served warm.

A fine delicacy, he decided, and an interesting experience. The latter was perhaps more important, to a man of his advanced age. Novelty often interested him more than simple luxuries. What point was there in being one of the wealthiest men alive, if he did not use that wealth to experience everything under the sun? This particular evening, however it was not simply for the service he had come to Sub Rosa. The obsessive secrecy of the establishment was what he had sought it out for, not the foreign drink, for the diplomats he was to meet were not of the sort that it was diplomatic to entertain these days. The Tower had few allies left, and if Mauricius was reading the currents to the south correctly it was soon to have even fewer.

When the servants finally ushered in two unremarkable young men, of dark hair and simple clothing, the merchant prince cocked an eyebrow.

"That is an impressive glamour," Mauricius greeted them.

He could almost see something around the edges giving it away, though, and held back a frown. He had begun to see much too well for a man his age, even one who had access to some of the finest enhancing rituals on Calernia. He was not certain whether or not to be pleased by the implication of that.

"Your compliment does us honour, Your Grace," a pleasant speaking voice replied. "This one humbly accepts the praise on behalf of his mistress."

The glamour fell, revealing a young man – though in a Praesi with golden eyes, as this one was, that semblance meant little – in fine red silks, dark of skin and finely formed. A Wasteland aristocrat, unlike the formal ambassador of the Tower in the city, and Dread Empress Malicia's personal envoy. The other figure remained cloaked and hooded, standing still as the envoy slid into the seat on the other side of the table. The young man had not waited for permission, Mauricius noted, for all that he was using that obsequious Praesi formal diplomatic language.

"You forget your courtesies," the Merchant Prince mildly said.

"This one was wary of waiting, Your Grace," the envoy pleasantly smiled. "For this one's mistress has grown uneasy of... long waits, in beautiful Mercantis."

It was said that the Dread Empress of Praes knew black arts that let her make a puppet of a body far away, Mauricius knew. There were a hundred rumours of the like about every one of the madmen who claimed the Tower, of course, but this one had been repeated across enough years that it had the ring of truth. Was one such body, then, under the cloak?

"Pull down your hood," Mauricius bluntly ordered.

The stranger obeyed, but it was not some dark-skinned homunculus that the Merchant Prince was gazing upon. It was, he found with a shiver, his own face. Immediately he reached for the rune carved onto the side of the table, which would-

"Freeze."

Mauricius froze. The face of the insolent youth with golden eyes was as a blank mask.

"I dislike handling such matters personally," Dread Empress Malicia calmly said. "But the free rein you have given the band

of Named in the city forces my hand. I congratulate you for that much, Mauricius."

The Merchant Prince fought, strained to break the spell.

"A Name?" the Dread Empress said, sounding surprised. "Or a claim, at least. Either way, it means that **Ruling** you is unfeasible in the long term. Which leaves me with only the less civilized path to take."

Mauricius tried to scream as the thing wearing his face eagerly came forward, and even let out a small hiss when it lunged forward with a lamprey-like mouth and tore out a chunk of his throat.

"I do apologize," Dread Empress Malicia conversationally said, "but my diabolists assure me that you must be devoured whilst living for the surface memories to be absorbed and the shape to become permanents. I would have had you poisoned beforehand otherwise, Mauricius."

Pain, Gods the *pain*.

"Farewell, Merchant Prince," the Dread Empress of Praes said. "May you choose your enemies more wisely in your next life."

—

When the Magisterium appointed generals, by ancient custom these hallowed individuals were bestowed with a whip.

The reason why was simple: by law, no freeborn Stygian could serve as a soldier. To hold a military command was to rule over slaves, for which the proper tool was not sword or spear but the simple whip. Magister Zoe Ixioni has served as a diplomatic envoy for the Magisterium for over a decade and served on the Court of Manners for two consecutive terms as the formal representative to League councils – which while without practical power, was a very prestigious position – so she was quite aware of how the rest of the Free Cities thought of Stygian armies. *The finest soldiers that were ever badly led*, Theodosius the Unconquered had famously called them.

It was true that the Magisterium tended to choose its appointed generals for their skill in magic or intrigue rather than more straightforward military skills, which the oldest of the slave-officers of the phalanx were expected to be able to discharge on behalf of their masters. By association, interest in military matters was seen as either eccentric or outright distasteful. It was slave-work not fit for freeborn Stygians, much less members of the Magisterium. It was one of the reasons why the Herons had been a minor party, never swelling beyond nine sitters in Zoe's lifetime. Now Andras and Kyra Sideris, the same twins leading the

party that had lingered in irrelevance for decades, were being welcome into the camp to raucous cheers.

Giving away all their weapons save the whips to serving slaves with great ceremony the twins took off their helmets and let the glorious black locks whip free. They were a handsome pair, nearing middle-age but still in the prime of their life and wearing their armour with an ease that hinted at the truth of the old stories saying they'd spent a few years in Proceran fantassin companies during the Great War. The Spears of Stygia that had fought and bled during the day were not granted the same welcome, simply allowed to file in through side gates so the wounded might be tended to and the irreparably crippled discreetly poisoned.

Zoe left the Sideris twins basking in their glory, instead considering the nature of what some Atalantian philosopher-priest had named the 'dilemma of the sword'. If authority came from the sword, then who could rule save soldiers? Like most claims out of Atalante, it was empty air when the priests claimed to have thought up the question: it had been at the heart of Stygia for centuries, a millennium almost. In the days after the fall of the great empire of Aenos Basileon, it was the eldest daughter of Aenia that had first risen to prominence. Ancient Stygia, under the patronage of the great cranes Retribution and Redress. The ruling polemarchs raised a great standing army and crushed the haphazard militias of their neighbours, forcing them to pay tribute, and for a time the Free Cities had been in Stygia's palm.

Until the army deposed a ruling polemarch and installed in her place a popular officer instead.

The aftermaths of the coup, which ultimately failed, broke the back of the Stygian Empire. Delos and Atalante regained their independence, the tribute system collapsed and it was made law that never again would a freeborn Stygian serve as a soldier. Slaves, owned by the council of leading sorcerer-nobles that had succeeded the polemarchs, would be the city's only warriors. Much time and thought was spent on how these Spears of Stygia would be kept under control, the methods crafted being wide and varied, but the most important of them was the collars. Enchanted leather bands that every slave-soldier would wear around their neck, which were linked to two greater artefacts: the Leashes. Through the Leashes, sorcerers could choke or kill a single soldier or a thousand with but a word.

This had solved the dilemma of the sword, some argued, but in truth it had simply moved around the pieces. It was barely a century before the first general tried to use the Leashes and command of the Spears of Stygia to take over the city by force, only stopped when the Magisterium instead choked every single soldiers in their own army to death by spell. Chastened and wary,

the Magisterium ruled that no appointed general would ever be allowed to hold the greater artifacts and created the position of Keepers of the Leashes. Two Magisters, never of the same party or kin by three degrees of the appointed general, would be charged by the Court of Honours to serve as guardians and wielders of the single most important artefacts in Stygia.

Over the years additional precautions and checks had been added to the nature of the position of Keepers, but the institution had largely functioned as intended.

"It is madness, you know."

Zoe glanced at the man at her side, eyes lingering on the noble lines of his face. Amyntor Eliade was a well-formed man, for all that his family had been disgraced when his eldest sister, a recently seated magister, had attempted to abolish slavery and destroy the Leashes. Nephele Eliade had so despised chains, it was said, that the Gods Above had granted her a Name for it. Zoe, who had once counted her as a friend as well as a cousin, knew better than to believe it simple hearsay. That bout of futility had destroyed Amyntor's chances at amounting to anything in this lifetime, but Zoe's cousin had decided to redeem the family name for future generations by seeking an appointment as one of the Keepers. He would, he had told the Magisterium in a passionate speech, dedicate his life to preserving what his sister had sought to destroy.

"The world has gone mad," Zoe replied. "We do what we must to weather the storm."

"It will threaten the very foundations of Stygia," Amyntor warned. "What is it that has so moved you to act, Zoe? You have always been cautions. It cannot be the would-be Tyrant, we have known hundreds, or even the alliance with the Tower – your own Black Vines were ardent partisans of it for decades."

Magister Zoe Ixioni thought of that stately hall where the First Prince of Procer had entertained the greats from all over Calernia, where powers had sparred and found victory or loss. She thought of what had followed in the wake of those days, the Peace of Salia with its Truce and Terms. *The world is changing*, she thought. There would be no returning to the old ways after this, no matter what some of her colleagues might delude themselves into believing.

"The tide rises, cousin," Zoe murmured. "We may either rise with it or drown."

And Zoe Ixioni had not spent decades climbing her way to power so that she could see it all collapse over her head. Amyntor sighed.

"So be it," he said. "I expect Nephele would have smiled of it, if nothing else."

Zoe was less certain, as Nephele Eliade had been surprisingly farsighted for all her moral naivete, but she knew better than to voice the thought. She parted from her cousin, meeting Magister Phryne's eyes as she passed the other woman and receiving a nod. It was done, then. Magister Zoe passed through the crowd of servants and magisters, both parting for her, and was received with wary eyes by the Sideris twins. They had come down from their great war chariot, but both lingered near it. The prestige of the gilded thing was impressive to those easily impressed, which these days was too many of the Magisterium.

"Magister Ixioni," Kyra Sideris greeted her, tone friendly in a way her eyes were not. "Do you come to offer congratulations?"

"I do," Zoe said. "Your conduct of the battle was exemplary. All of Stygia is in your debt."

Surprise from both twins, and the wariness thickened.

"You overpraise us," Andras Sideris carefully said.

"If so, that is fortunate," Magister Zoe replied, "for you are now both relieved from command."

There was a heartbeat of surprise, then Kyra began to laugh. Her brother did not, eyes darkening.

"Such a dismissal would require a vote of the Magisterium," Andras began, then froze.

All around them the Spears of Stygia began to stream in. Armed and ready, pushing the surprised magisters that had not been part of the conspiracy away from the edges of the forming circle.

"This is treason," Kyra hissed, and she raised her whip.

The enchantments laid on it found no purchase on the collars binding the slave-soldiers, for the sorcery of both Leashes had already been used to sever the control of all lesser artefacts in the camp on the slaves.

"Surrender," Zoe gently said. "While you still can."

"We are *winning*, Ixioni," Magister Andras urgently pressed. "Even now the Helikeans will be considering terms-"

"Terms have already been reached with General Basilia," the diplomat said. "We will, tomorrow, offer our formal surrender and submission in exchange for which we will be allowed to rule Stygia largely as we wish."

Some small cities taken by Nicae would be returned as well, which would serve as a useful sweetener for the people when they returned home.

"That treaty will be worth nothing, when Basilia next grows hungry," Andras scorned.

"It will be guaranteed by Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer," Zoe Ixioni smiled.

The utter startlement on their faces was a pleasure to behold. The Spears began to arrest members of the Ivory Tile and the Herons, the few magisters who'd sat the fence of the coup – for this was very much a coup – looking on nervously.

"You lie," Kyra Sideris accused. "She refused the Magisterium when we reached out, what could you possibly offer that would be worth her while?"

"The Magisterium," Zoe said, "will formally abolish slavery."

In name, at least. There would be no more slaves, but there would be a great many indentured servants – it would be easy enough to simply pay slaves less than their upkeep required and let that debt trickle down to their children as it did in the laws of Mercantis. It would maintain the old practices with a deniable veneer, not unlike the practices of Ashur. If there were some troubles, well, it would not be difficult to pass laws through the Court of Order that stripped debtors the rights reserved for free citizens of Stygia and further tilt the advantage away from the freed slaves.

"You'll die for this, Ixioni," Kyra Sideris raged, fingers tight around the whip. "I'll have my revenge, I swear it."

Magister Zoe considered that for a moment, then nodded and walked away.

"Kill them both," Zoe ordered a slave-officer as she passed him.

She did not stay to see it unfold, for she had a formal letter of surrender to draft.

—

It was as the White Knight had suspected: the Merry Balladeer's song did not simply reach ears, it reached souls directly.

In other circumstances that would have been a mere interesting fact, but Antigone had been taught the 'ways-of-seeing-the-world' – there was no word in any language knew that accurately translated the word in the tongue of the Gigantes – and that meant she could follow the resonance. The Balladeer's song, a cheerful ditty from Salamans about a priest and the three goats

outsmarting him, marked out every ensouled undead in hearing range for the Witch of the Woods to smash without needing line of sight. Two Revenants died before they even realized what was happening and with every Bind in a range of a mile crushed to dust the lesser dead were nothing more than a witless horde.

They had struck hard and struck fast, but there came a time where the dice had to be rolled anyhow. Only Antigone had the strength to destroy the bridge the dead were raising, but it would take her time to perform such a great working. That meant it was time for blades to talk. They found a hill with a single narrow path up and Hanno, tired of the elaborate schemes that seemed to plague the world, instead made it all simple: he and Rafaella held the path, the Stalwart Apostle saw to healing and the Balladeer sang. The White Knight raised his sword and shield, his missing fingers itching at the stumps, and let death come knocking as Antigone's spell swelled behind him.

It was the simplest kind of fight there could be: the dead came and they were funnelled up the path. And they kept coming, corpse after corpse. Revenants, eventually, but paltry things compared to the Scourges, and Hanno's sword bit deep. The Valiant Champion tossed away the born that tried them, crawling up the slope, and even as a great wyrm followed by flock of buzzards came down screaming on them the sorcery of the Witch of the Woods was unleashed. Hanno felt the Light coming, swift and clean in a way it had not been in too long, and even as in the distance a pulsing black sphere spun and began to swallow up the half-finished bridge he climbed the wyrm.

It ended with his sword going through the skull as Rafaella dragged an entire flock of buzzards into her domain, emerging bloodied and wounded but victorious even as Hanno crawled up the broken remains of the wyrm and came to stand atop the skull where his sword was still stuck up to the hilt. The Valiant Champion climbed up to his side, still bleeding even after the finest healing of the Stalwart Apostle. Some of the wounds would scar, not that Rafaella was likely to mind. The two of them stood together and watched hundreds of pounds of stones being sucked in by Antigone's great spell, ripping to pieces a great bridge of stone that must have been the better part of a mile long.

"We will have to sweep the other bank," the White Knight said. "Else they will be able to simply resume the work."

"Tomorrow," Rafaella grunted. "We fought good, but tired now. No wine here, very dread."

"Dreadful," Hanno absent-mindedly corrected.

"Not full," Rafaella reproached. "This the problem, Hanno."

He chuckled, the smile staying with him. It was an old game they were playing, but one he regarded fondly. The Valiant Champion was the sole survivor of the band he had led to defeat in the Free Cities, perhaps his oldest friend in the world after Antigone herself.

"Let's see to the others," he finally said. "We can retreat into Twilight afterwards, when-"

He froze, something flickering at the edge of his vision, and turned.

In the distance, far to the south where Hainaut lay, the night sky lit up with falling stars.

Sinead

Huh. Wasn't expecting Stygia to actually try and drag itself foreword. I guess that's the contrast between it and Mercantis in terms of who will drag themselves into the new Age, and who will be left behind.

Sinead

To be clear to any future comments, I realise that one can do really messed up things with debt slavery (look at Mercantis, or our own history), but I thought Stygia was going to be razed never to rise again. Instead, they are trying to adapt in what ever way they see as the path forward.

[sengachi](#)

I don't think they're trying to adapt at all. They're bending on a talking point so they can maintain the form and function of their slave empire. This isn't them adapting, it's them making use of a political trick so they don't have to adapt.

masterofbones

Unless the definition of "no slavery" is incredibly loose, the slaves will be allowed to go where they wish. If there is no encouragement for them to stay (like survivable wages), they will leave.

A mass exodus is inevitable if they refuse to change at all.

[sengachi](#)

It's right there in the text, the magisters will be holding them in debt bondage as legally bound indentured servants (in the real world that almost always comes with restricted movements), and will go so far as to strip rights from debtors if that doesn't achieve the desired result.

Cicero

It's clear that the magisters fully intend to make the freedom of the slaves a token charade, untrue in any meaningful sense.

And yet... words have power. Being told that they are not slaves has it's own power, that I suspect will be far harder for the magisters to control than they believe.

So while I would not call this liberation for the slaves of Stygia, I also think that is an important step on the path to that liberation. Perhaps securing this advancement is wiser than pushing further for more – since pushing for more likely will involve Stygia fighting to the death (and the death of all it's slaves) to try and survive.

jamesc9

If anyone may buy the debt of an indentured debtor, then they're positioned for something equivalent to the golem revolution in Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork.

DJ

I would be surprised if Cordelia doesn't have a plan for this, honestly. I think Stygia might end up biting off more than they can chew here.

Velrix

In the middle age the peasants were free. To serve their Lord, they were bound to their birth land and were the propriety of their lordship. They needed to pay to use tools and the land that they farmed, then they needed to pay the levy. Tax and war manpower. They were traded as common goods between Lords to expand their territory and found new villages, travel without permit was a crime. Oh but they were Free.

Abrakadabra

No, what you said is false. In most of europe, the peasants had the freedom to move wherever they wanted,

had their own rights, and they could become even completely free Man if they became citizens of a city (which was not easy) etc. There were places where this was not true, but mostly NOT IN THE MIDDLE AGES, but later. (Just like witch hunts, which were not the crime of the MIDDLE age but later AGES.)

Biianary

Bending on a talking point so they can maintain their slave empire is how the US did it (Watch the Netflix documentary "13th" if you don't believe my claim)

Sinead

I do believe you. The potential difference for me is that for our history, debt peonage was enforced internationally (with the various empires supporting each other in slapping all ceded territories with debt).

However here, this is a lesser polity doing the same thing, and with a lot of larger players who will scorn them.

It is progress, because it's bowing to external forces, not internal ones to make this change. The other nations will have noticed this.

Miley

They're severely underestimating Hasenbach if they think she won't know what they're up to.

[onedollargum](#)

It's a very practical guide to evil.

[308924810a](#)

If they could solve their damn problem with their army being incapable of being maintained to its fullest potential extent without taking control of the political system I'd count that as moving forwards. They might be able to conquer the Free Cities that way.

Though I guess making compromises on the appearance of their systems in order to make diplomatic gains possible is a step forwards, just not much of one without a coherent diplomatic plan.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, they're dragging themselves forward into where Mercantis has long been,

Sinead

True, but the leadership is also keeping an eye on the rising coalition and taking the path of being less aggravating as a form of survival. Whereas Mercantis thought to play both sides which had much bigger teeth than them.

So less overall social change, and more the fact that allowing external influence to bend policy like that is an interesting change that may see more rapid change in time, since this debt peonage isn't coming from a major power bloc as it has for our own history.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm, you're not wrong.

Eileen

As a wise man once said "It's not progressive if you're progressing to the place we already f*cking are genius"

[Liliet](#)

Eeeh it's still progressive-er than NOT DOING SO

AbraKadabra

Nah, it is copying. Which is in itself is a kind of slave mentality, in which you WHO copy others relagating yourself to an inferior status.

It May lead to progress, but it also can lead to becoming a sort of willing colony, which gives up its sovereignty willingly and is absorbed.

[Liliet](#)

> Nah, it is copying. Which is in itself is a kind of slave mentality

That is. Really. Not. In-theme. Here.

We're talking about people quitting being slavers.

AbraKadabra

You Just do not want to understand. A pity.

[Liliet](#)

Let's put it this way: "slave mentality" is not relevant to the question of abolishing slavery.

AbraKadabra

Oh, it is. It IS ALWAYS a relevant question.

jamesc9

I'm thinking about what humans are.

I'm thinking that we're the animals who tell failure stories around camp-fires.

I'm thinking that, if I could copy the good version of something, where someone else has already paid for all of the mistakes, then doing so is a very human plan, and also saves me from paying for a bunch of mistakes.

Abrakadabra

That is a good point.

Sir Nil

WK's meta gaming as well!

[doominator10](#)

I feel like I'm missing an interlude with a chapter title called Ebb. I know it's not that relevant to current events, but it's been mentioned together so much that it's ingrained in me now.

Matthew Wells

We already had it- a lot of people have been waiting for this chapter.

WuseMajor

It was a while back.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/07/17/interlude-ebb/>

[Adrian_V](#)

Like those 2 above already said, we already have it and this is the continuation so to speak, or in Mauricius case the other shoe dropping xD

[Burlyraven](#)

Damn, I was actually kind of digging the Merchant Prince. Definitely a scumbag, but the fun kind of scumbag.

And, oh, look, Stygia is following the example of the American South. Fun.

[Liliet](#)

I know about the abolition of serfdom in Russia instead, and it was also the same thing 😊

TeK

So, Soviet Stygia when? Between them and the Bellerophon the whole “Empire of Evil” is covered.

unrecovered

I like to think there are no direct parallels between real world and guide in that regard.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, right, like Procer is so much not HRE half it's territories are directly named after German princes.

[Liliet](#)

Bellerophon IS Soviet Stygia. We can move along to actually sane forms of government now.

[TeK](#)

Well, while Bellerophon is a take on communism (warped or otherwise), and founded by former Stygian slaves to boot, it's main theme is fighting the social system – not an economic one. Meanwhile, given how Stygian slaves are about to get screwed by “free market”, I expect they will blame not the tyranny of laws (for by law, they are free), but the tyranny of economics (which is no less strict).

[TeK](#)

Also your comment is an Offense Against People. The Glorious Republic of Bellerophon will remember that..

SNTTz

Bellorophon is the Reign of Terror France. Not every bloody revolution in history was a communist one.

[Liliet](#)

Quite possible!

It shares an unpleasant amount of similarity with USSR too, though.

asazernik

More like 1880-1917 Russia, where the underclass is technically free but as part of the same process as

emancipation is saddled with debt and contractual obligations that leave them deeply subservient to the same old masters.

Alex

Ah poor Hanno. One high moment of satisfaction, clarity, and purpose – then Meteor Rain brings him crashing back to reality.

He's always so composed, I wonder what his reaction will be at Tariq's death and the devastation he wasn't present to fight against.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm more concerned about the moral implications. Tariq has done something that could charitably be considered controversial. The White Knight is in the midst of an existential moral quandry, and the elder paragon of light just committed the most widespread familicide in history. I mean I'm sure the Doom of Liesse still boasts the higher numbers, and I do believe on the whole the Dominion will survive this, but this is a hell of a time for Hanno to be confronted with something that begs to be judged (by Hanno, not the White Knight. There's nobody to flip the coin for even if it still worked after all).

IDKWhoitis

Most of the human losses were soldiers and while there will be a political clusterfuck in the South, I don't think most people will begin to question what the Pilgrim did. Rather for Hanno, I'm worried about the implications that he is now alone, to chart the course of what Heroes will act and accept in the incoming Age of Order Cat has built. The responsibility will outright crush him, because like Cat, he won't be able to deal with a simple day ever again.

What we just watched was the last gasp of the Age of Wonders, with the Giants dead and gone, with the Pilgrim smashing the stars into the ground, and the last permissible/reliable usage of Angels for possibly ever.

Hanno got to enjoy one last simple fight, just holding his ground in the face of a howling horde. But the Dead King and Cat are much more dangerous and harder to fight against. The Dead King because he is a vicious bastard that will punish his every mistake with teeth and blood. Cat because she is cruel and so reasonable. There will be a hundred petty villains and every sin under the sun, but if anyone was going to eat the soul of Hanno, it will be one of the aforementioned greats.

He will have to steel himself now and go into the breach prepared (physically, morally, and spiritually), or he will be caught flatfooted against the incoming tide and be swept away.

Chris

"Life is a pain in the ass. You work hard, try to provide.. and then, for one minute, everything's good.... You have peace"

"This isn't that minute."

Gunslinger

I guess EE wanted to go into the new year without ever having to see Flow memes again

Juff

Typo Thread:

Helikeans kataphraktoi > Helikean kataphraktoi
privately paid fund (missing words?)
had sent most > had spent most
its the lesser > its lesser
every sought > ever sought
permanents > permanent
being welcome > being welcomed
single soldiers > single soldier
ounce > once
been cautions > been cautious
will allowed > will be allowed
debtors the > debtors of the
language knew > language he knew
single narrow > single narrow
the born that > the beorn that

standardtypo

Typos [standard]:

Helikeans kataphraktoi -> Helikean kataphraktoi
had sent most -> had spent most
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ounce -> once
been cautions -> been cautious
will allowed -> will be allowed
debtors the -> debtors of the
language knew -> language he knew

singe narrow -> single narrow
the born that -> the beorn that

standardtypo

Typos [standard]:
{near enough to decided} decided -> decide
{followed by flock of buzzards} by -> by a

Harrent

Hail Leviona, First Under the Flow.

RoflCat

That sounds like a joke about someone who got lake'd by one of Catherine's lakeomancy.

Matthew Wells

Well, as if being in Cat's sights wasn't bad enough, Malicia has lost all ability to scheme effectively. Seriously, shapeshifting imposter going up against the Mystery Solving Band? Next she'll be deploying sapient echidnas.

[Liliet](#)

askjflffd I know right
I actually forgot they were Mystery Solving Special starring Relentless Magistrate I just figured it was a bad plan against a five man band but ESPECIALLY AGAINST THIS ONE

[Adrian_V](#)

And with 2 named villain versed in plots (poisoner and royal magician) to add savyness? She just gifted them the story on a silver plate.

TeK

But, we now can have Scooby Doo-esque adventures in the Guide. I see this as an absolute win.

Crash

Gods, sapient echidnas WHEN? I need it now.

Malicia lost her cool a long time ago it seems, she's just been a bit slower about going the way of Tyrants it seems. Doomsday devices, absolute certainty that her plans will work and now Devil-based puppetry.

Insanenoodlyguy

She's in cornered beast mode. She's not completely lost her touch though, she just pulled a Black and aborted a name just before that would have become a problem for her. But yeah, the story is shaping now. The Girl from Callow is about to climb the tower, so Malicia is becoming the villain you remember in the story. On a certain meta level it's also part of the death throes of the Age of Wonders. Black, Cat, Akua, Abigail (Dread Empress Abdicant, who literally can't give the position away for no lack of trying), whomever sits on the throne next, it won't be how it's been up till this point and likely never will again. Malicia, in some ways more than Neshamah, is now the final champion of the ending age. Even when they know all hope is lost, those never go anyway but big and loud.

Shveiran

Though I agree with your expectations, I would phrase this not as Malicia losing her touch but as Malicia being once more proven unskilled at Story-fu. She is trying to salvage the political and economical pressure on the GA; that just happens to be the entirely wrong battle.

shikkarasu

I'm a little disappointed, since she got where she is by *not* repeating the mistakes of old Empresses. I've wanted to like Malicia since Book 1, and she terrified me at first, but now? Now I feel like Cat is just going to walk over and step on her. Like, not even invade Praes; just walk up the stairs with Zeze, Archer, and Nakamakua. Malicia has no Chancellor, no Calamities, and most of the High Lords would be eager to see the Tower change hands, even if Malicia has them under her thumb.

Shveiran

I didn't even think about that. Uh.
Thank you.

[Adrian_V](#)

First i thought Zoe's POV was a setup for a repeat to what happened to that Merchant prince but now i see they both saw what is coming but react differently: Mauricius thought he could game the odds and continue, basically unwilling to see an important change nor the size of the conflict and paid the price.

Zoe meanwhile sees it and realizes things have to change to survive, but doesn't see enough, it is ironic she considers Nephele naive when i think her brother is right, she would be laughing because she knows Stygia's days are counted at least as slavers. She mentioned merchantis but we saw that even Cat was

surprised about the “legal” slavery so it is not common knowledge, she probably knows because Stygia is the sole/biggest partner in it. What i mean is that the rest of Calernia won’t stand for it plus in these troubled times what better cause will a ruler need that to end slavery? even Praes is against it so any new tyrant is sure to ride the antislavery wave to use it.

And i think Malicia just made a mistake, she mentioned the painted knife band as the main reason she is doing this so obviously she is going to oppose it 1 way or another, this is just recipe for them to uncover her nefarious plot.

Liliet

I would say Nephele would laugh because she would know this is the first step. It can take a while, but the step has been taken.

It’s not the best case scenario she would have wanted, no. But she would still laugh.

(Also, can I just say I’m so so glad Nephele is back in the narrative for a bit? That we learned more about her and YES SHE’S FRIENDS WITH ZOE?)

Adrian_V

That is exactly what i meant, i think something was lost in the road inbetween my mind and my fingers xD, i mean that is ironic Zoe calls her naive when the naive one here is her thinking like that and that Nephele would laugh because she could see how this would develop from here on and where is going.

Someguy

Malicia should have just used [Rule] on the Merchant Prince

Shveiran

It was unreliable against a Named.

In fact, it was unreliable around Named too. I think that’s why she went at it this way rather than risk the Royal Conjurer or someone else figuring out he was being controlled and breaking the compulsion.

Earl of Purple

It’s not even that it’s unreliable upon a Name- it’s that the heavier-handed mind control is detectable, whereas simply bidding some to Stop or Shut Up isn’t- it’s one effect, then over. But another consideration is that the Name he was growing into was Merchant Prince- another ruler-

type Name, and Speaking requires authority. Malicia wouldn't have authority over the Merchant Prince, if he's a Named. Currently, her authority is that she's got a Name and he hasn't. He gets one, she loses that.

Geno

She explicitly says it wouldn't work for long.

ninegardens

I... can't help but think that Hanno's band won too easily. In the sense that... the committed enough power to the bridge that they won *easily* which means that they could (in theory) have committed less and still won....

And having that extra power back in H-town would have been *real* nice.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think so. DK attacked the weakest link – if they were weak enough for him to break, he wouldn't have made this easy for them. Either success was his win condition, and he estimated Hainaut the softer target – and it was a draw. If the bridge crew was weaker, well, they would not have had the kind of desperate reserves Hainaut had to throw at the fire to at least beat it down. That wouldn't have come to a draw.

No, this was the better arrangement.

TL;DR their opposition was not a constant – it was easy bc DK decided to not commit resources to try where he couldn't succeed. If they had been weaker they would have faced enough to beat them.

Sinead

Furthermore, they needed that bridge gone for any long term holding of that border. Witch of the Woods is one of the few engines of mass destruction available to do that (mobility was key), and thus the rest of the strategy is built around that.

Hanno and Rafella are single point defenses that may have helped shut down the Scourges, but if Hawk survived them, then the rest of the battle basically goes the same way (with perhaps Hanno taking Vivienne's place as a last charge, but with potentially less effect compared to the rising Princess (though there is a balance eith established Name versus nstionalistic pull that may make the difference here)

Side thought: is there a difference between the two?

So I don't think they swing the battle so much that Starfall would not be required. In fact Hanno superceding Vivienne might have had long term negative consequences between undermining Vivienne and influencing Arthur.

Liliet

Yeah Hanno wasn't going to do nearly as much good at Hainaut as here, either absolutely or proportionately (and proportionately tends to add to absolutely, in Guide – inverse ninja law and all).

sengachi

Hmm. I'm not so sure about that. Who could they have pulled back from the bridge that would have saved the day?

Not the Witch of the Woods. She would have been incredibly helpful at Hainaut, especially against the Crab, but without her power the bridge wasn't coming down.

Not the White Knight. Without him as a Band of Five lynchpin I really doubt the bridge would have gone down as easily. (He had to kill a freaking dragon during this operation, not many Named can do that). And while he would have been helpful in Hainaut, he would have served a similar role to Vivienne, and he doesn't bring any Crab-beating abilities to the table. Maybe he'd have taken out Hawk or stonewalled the Prince of Bones, but that's saving a few Named, not saving the battle.

Without the Valiant Champion they would have had one tank protecting the whole group, that's a non-starter. Without the Stalwart Apostle they'd have had no healing, which easily could have resulted in a party wipe. And neither could have fixed Hainaut.

The Merry Balladeer maybe could have stayed back and they'd have gotten the bridge down, just with more difficulty. But the Merry Balladeer, most especially of all of them, would not have saved Hainaut.

beleester

I would trade the Witch for another sorcerer (Rogue, maybe?), or even swap out the band entirely. There are ways to bring down a bridge other than sheer firepower, but there was basically no other way to bring down the Crab and sweep the walls of Hainaut but the Witch or someone of her caliber. And losing an entire army at Hainaut is much worse than losing a band of five at the bridge.

And not opening the can of angels at Hainaut means that the DK doesn't retaliate with demons, which means that the

Gigantes are alive to fortify the border instead of sacrificing themselves to seal the breach.

We have the benefit of hindsight, of course, and Cat's plan seemed solid at the time, but I do think they could have done better in theory.

Shveiran

Well, yes. In theory.

But honestly, the lychpin were the drow and Sve Noc, and the plans the DK made to deal with them.

I don't think Hanno or even the Witch could have really changed that without knowing it was coming.

I guess their addition to the roster could have changed things so that the Hawk didn't get a shot at Catherine, which, admittedly, might have changed a lot. The DK would either not have sprung his trap or found it insufficient if the FUN was awake and kicking. And even just not having lakeomancy deployed on the army could have changed things. But that really requires optimal deployment, and that means either hindsight or a hell of Providence.

beleester

True, nobody could have predicted the trap for the drow. But even that was pretty close – if Cat had been awake, Sve Noc could have used her as an escape route. It's plausible that a little more firepower would mean that either Cat has something else to throw at the Archmage or that the Hawk is too busy to get a shot at Cat.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm pretty sure the Witch would have faced off against Tumult, with similar results to the Red Flower Vales – meaning the city would still have been destroyed. And with the Witch on the field, he wouldn't have been deployed against the "weaker" Alliance players, so Akua wouldn't have gotten her shot at him first. Remember Cat's early insight: Everything DK had at Hainaut was ultimately disposable.

TeK

Nah, they won easily because with such an overwhelming defeat we're due some good news. If they spared less, they would've diluted the story. Besides, they couldn't risk DK not stacking everything on the victory in Hainaut. We know he did, but if Cat had a Practical Guide before her the Creation probably would be already under her control.

edrey

two things, a claimant for a name while that specific band is there in mercantis, it has to be the mercant, the six member of the band. also, wouldnt the augur notice mauritius death? she notice the death of ashur king after all. the second is Hanno, wasnt his personal problem a little too easy to solve or is just me? if he see hainut and the problem is back, it would be a mess

Liliet

The Merchant Prince would be the band's patron/antagonist/backdrop, a la Vetinari, not the sixth member.

Liliet

The Ashuran guy was an important ally that Agnes was most likely keeping an eye on specifically, while Mauricius is... not. Also, it's not unlikely Malicia decided on this scheme and executed it too quickly for Agnes to take notice – Amadeus's approach, improvisation beats her.

As for Hanno... yeah, that's a temporary fix. Maybe it'll be enough of a foundation for him to build up on when he's back (especially with Cat having made that pledge to Tariq, which is the reverse of her previous promise not to meddle).

edrey

It was not about preventing his death but the augur noticing his death and sending the band, after all if the augur look for mauricius fate and find nothing because is a devil now the answer is obvious unless its explained how to trick her vision.

Liliet

The band is already there...

edrey

but they hadnt reasons to attack the prince, now they have one. the point here is if the augur can find out.

caoimhinh

Hanno's problem was always a psychological one, so a change of mind solves it.

Contrary to Vivienne that had been eating at herself in depression and self-doubt for years until she lost her Name, Hanno was simply "tired of this shit" when it came to schemes and compromises needed as a political leader and pivotal figure in an international alliance.

Now he is back in simpler stuff, fighting the Enemy as a Hero and without having to think about stuff beyond how to win the

battle. Even Catherine felt invigorated when she was back in fighting rather than doing rulership, diplomatic, and political stuff. To the point of saying "it's good to be home" when there was an attack to the Arsenal requiring her to battle in person.

But unlike Catherine, Hanno does not excel in that kind of stuff. She hates it, but at least she is good at it.

Hanno is a cool counselor and a people person, but from the very beginning it was stated that he is neither talented in nor willing to learn the art of political schemes when it comes to nations and organizations.

Him acting like a proper White Knight (in his mind) for once rather than being in a room making hard choices and compromises, is like a breath of fresh air for Hanno.

beleester

I feel like this is sort of just avoiding his problems, though. The big problem he's been wrestling with for most of the book is that "I do not judge" is itself a judgement call – it means you're delegating your judgement to some other entity – the Seraphim, or a mundane legal system – and that system can be fallible, so what do you do when you think the verdict is unjust? You can't answer a moral dilemma with "Try not to think about it too much and do something else."

I suppose the breath of fresh air is a good thing, since he's been stuck on that for a long time and it's good to acknowledge that even if the law is imperfect it still gets a lot of obvious stuff right, but I don't think it resolves the dilemma in a satisfying way. And I think the ending underlines that – immediately after Hanno thinks "Yes, I'm doing what is right, in the right place," he sees something to make him ask "But what if I was somewhere else instead?"

[sengachi](#)

It's interesting to think about how all these pieces are setting up the next book.

We've got Malicia making moves in the Free Cities in direct opposition to some of the Truce's Named. Definitely a tie-in to Catherine (and Black) bringing the story to Praes and Malicia's court to get those much needed diabolists. It'll be interesting to see why Malicia is so interested in the Free Cities and how that's going to come up in negotiations/war.

We've got Stygia in the Free Cities making transparently bad faith deals with the Grand Alliance. Deal which Cordelia is either swallowing out of pragmatism, or actually going to take them to task for. So that's more maneuvering in the Free Cities, they're definitely going to be a focal point.

And then there's the White Knight. Effortlessly victorious in a straightforward Band of Five mission which during which his Name fit well and came easily. Now suddenly without his mentor, his friend, and his peer. Coming back to a sudden year+month+day ceasefire (well, "ceasefire", I'm sure the Dead King's not letting up his mundane undead assaults) during which the goal will be to bring the Dread Empire Praes on board with fighting the Dead King. His role (and Role) in the coming book is not at all certain or clear.

It'll be interesting to see how all these elements tie together.

Frivolous

I believe this move by Stygia to change sides and go over to the Alliance is the meaning of this quote in Extra Chapter: Grand:

"I was following far threads," Agnes said. "In the south. They grow clearer now, fates are precipitating."

This is the first time we've seen Stygian political parties mentioned, much less named, yes? Black Vines, Ivory Tiles, Herons, Pale Chariot.

I don't believe we've seen mention of the Court of Manners, the Court of Honours, the Court of Arcane, the Court of Trades, or the Court of Order, either.

I'm afraid Mauricius never stood a chance of resisting Malicia, not without foreknowledge. If he could have hidden from her, he might have lived, but once she got within Speaking range of him, he was doomed.

It's a pity. But she kept a secret her facility with Speaking through possessed intermediaries, and Mauricius doesn't seem like the kind of person to go delving deeply into Name lore and Aspects. Too materialistic.

Frivolous

Addendum: I really want to know if what Mauricius believed in Interlude: Ebb is still true or was ever true, that the Wasteland doesn't fear Catherine.

I suspect Cat is currently not in the top 5 threats to Malicia in Malicia's own estimation, but that's only because Cat was focused on Keter, not on Praes.

Those who are in the top 5 threats to Malicia probably include Amadeus + Ranger (not sure they can be treated as separate entities right now), First Prince Cordelia, Empress-claimant Sepulchral. Maybe High Lady Wither, who has to be aware that

Malicia's reign is faltering, and she was a goblin matron, with all that entails.

But not Cat. i don't think Malicia respects Catherine very much. Probably thinks of her the same way Scribe thinks of her and Akua thought of her: boorish and thuggish. Predictable.

Darkening

I mean, Malicia was pretty dismissive of her when Ime tried to warn her about Fey!Cat being crazy and ready to drop a lake on Ater at the slightest provocation. Should be interesting to see how Cat approaches it. Y'know, it's an interesting parallel that Cat is considered a prodigy at Speaking when that's Malicia's main weapon. I bet we're gonna see Malicia try to speak at Cat at some point and have her completely No-sell it or even turn it around and Speak at Malicia.

Liliet

Mauricius should have never let himself be put in that situation (a dark room NOT full of people loyal to him with crossbows trained on the Praesi dignitaries, etc)

Earl of Purple

Oh, man! The replacement of the Merchant Prince means we might get an interlude from the Relentless Magistrate's band, and that means more Poisoner. She really interests me, and I would love that.

Cold Cyberia

It doesn't feel like Hanno's internal conflict was resolved even though Light came to him more swiftly. Maybe it's because we didn't see much of his thoughts but the problem of whether to believe in the Tribunal, and what to do now that they're silent, is still very much present in the background.

It didn't look like a test of faith. Just a removal of complications until it was obvious what the right thing to do was. I'm still expecting him to go through some sort of tribulation anyway.

All that's left for Basilia is Delos, Penthes and Bellerophon. Delos was already somewhat aligned with them so perhaps making concessions would be good enough. Letting them set up the bureaucracy of her future Empire, possibly? Penthes will need to be taken by force and I'm honestly not sure about Bellerophon. I guess the People will vote on it?

Shveiran

Oh, I know what Bellerophon will do: keep being irrelevant.

AbraKadabra

Which still bugs me. Since they are so set against tyrants, why not against the dead King, WHO is the biggest of them all, and enslaves people even beyond death?

Sinead

I don't think there is a wrong choice to be had for Hanno. The battle was always going to be a multi-pronged attack that was going to be a roll of the dice if they would hold.

And that bridge _needed_ to go down.

To be honest, not having Hanno with his crisis of faith in the middle of all that is probably a good thing, since out of all the Heroes we have seen at that battle, Hanno might have been most vulnerable to despair. The others fought hard, but at least from all Named perspective, everyone was willing to roll the dice on actually uncertain odds. I don't know if Hanno would be willing to.

Plus, would Hanno have approved of "Blood and Smoke"?

As for the evolution of the Free Cities, I find it interesting the idea of fully integrating the Free City infrastructure like that. Such a vision is a good reason for the Free Cities not to have a stronger presence in the War against Death.

Though I suspect some form of failure if Cat's Bismark Forecast is actual foreshadowing.

superkeaton

Man, Black's outrage at the fortune of Heroes really makes its point clear, here. The Heroes get the easy work, while Cat's dealing with the Real Shit, costing her a personal friend, an eye, and the Pilgrim. Though likely the Dead King accounted for this, feeding them scraps while he deals with the main course.

beleester

Um, the Pilgrim **is** a hero. There were a lot of heroes at Hainaut, and not all of them survived.

And Black himself has probably the least grounds to complain, seeing as he's put dozens of heroes in an early grave over the years. The only reason heroes always win "in the end" is because we don't say the story is over until a hero wins. It's a trick of definitions, not a law of the universe.

Lord Haart

>The only reason heroes always win “in the end” is because we don’t say the story is over until a hero wins. It’s a trick of definitions, not a law of the universe.

Excellent point. Makes me think about the whole “godhead is a trick of perspective”, maybe this comes up more in the next book.

ChillyPepper

I think I can gander a wild guess at Malicia’s play. She will probably get a party to the tower just in time for Black ascendance, and probably forcing his hand into keeping the empire they all built somehow?

Wild guesses are my thing!

ChillyPepper

Also the music that went in my head when we flashed to Hanno.

laguz24

Ah, now does Hanno go back to Hainaut or does he decide to sweep the other bank? Even when you run from hard choices, they run right back to you.

Sinead

Hopefully he sweeps the shore, but I could see him arriving without completing the job being a thing to further add to his “crisis of Judgement”

[Adrian_V](#)

In case there is no chapter later or i just can’t read it: HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

Epilogue

“And so Maleficent the Second said: ‘If I must burn half the realm to save the rest, then kneel before the empress of ashes.’”

– Extract from the Scroll of Restoration, fortieth of the Secret Histories of Praes

The Vogue Archive did not sleep and tonight neither could Cordelia Hasenbach.

Numbly, she walked down the mostly empty hall past the great tables bearing maps of the realm she ruled and the smaller bureaus – where, at hours other than the middle of the night, some of the finest minds in Procer tended to its regions. There were a few mages of the Order of the Red Lion tucked away in corners, having retreated after greeting her and now again simply waiting to be of use, but aside from them the oft-crowded hall was quiet. Fewer than a dozen men and women were within it, sometimes reading through the odd reports that had come in the night but more often tidying up the numerous scrolls and reports that'd poured in during the day.

Cordelia made for the back of the hall, the raised dais where her handpicked analysts were charged with sifting through a sea of ink and parchment so that they might find the catastrophes on the Principate's horizon in time for them to be averted. The First Prince had chosen five such individuals, but at this hour there was only one awake and present: a woman of an age difficult to parse, rather dowdy in appearance and of generally unremarkable looks. The sole eye-catching part of the Forgetful Librarian's appearance was her oddly beautiful eyelashes, as if they had been borrowed from a more striking woman and set on this one's face.

She looked, Cordelia had come to realize, rather like the manifest ideal of someone's reclusive, scholarly aunt. It was an appearance that would invite dismissal from many, hiding the sharp mind and utter lack of morals of the Damned. The Librarian was an exceptionally talented woman as both a scholar and an advisor, the First Prince had learned, but she was best used as part of a larger council that would temper the ruthless pragmatism of the solutions she tended to propose. The other woman did not rise as Cordelia approached, remaining engrossed in a book as she cradled a steaming cup of chamomile.

It was a small slight the Damned liked to give, one of the little games she seemed unable to stop herself from playing even when there was no conceivable benefit for her to gain, but it had remained an irritant. Usually the First Prince took the time to consider whether a threshold had been reached where the other Proceran needed to be reminded of the hierarchy between them, but not tonight. The disrespect slid off her like water off a duck's back. It seemed such a small, petty thing to even spare thought for after the news she had received.

The First Prince of Procer instead slid into one of the seats she'd had brought here, exemplars of comfort given the long hours they would be used for, and leaned back. She closed her eyes, wondering if the Heavens would take pity on her and let her fall asleep instead of remaining like... this. Numb and exhausted,

feeling as if she was somehow too tired to sleep. There was a muted clap as the Forgetful Librarian closed her book – though not before placing a bookmark, the parts of Cordelia that never rested noted, which was interesting given that most Chosen and Damned seemed to have enhanced memory – and set it down, sipping with uncouth loudness at her chamomile.

The Librarian was Alamans and of good birth, meaning she was being unpleasant very much on purpose.

“Long night?” the Damned idly asked.

Cordelia did not answer for a very long time, yet she did not hear the book creak open.

“I have been told,” the First Prince finally said, “that no less than three Hellgates were opened across the breadth of Procer.”

And that was not why she grieved, for sorrow was a nation’s due but grief could only ever be personal, but it was an answer of enough gravity that it would obscure what was truly moving her. The Forgetful Librarian breathed in sharply but did not answer. Cordelia opened her eyes, finding herself being closely studied.

“All three were temporarily sealed,” she continued, “though at the cost of the lives of every Gigantes that came to our aid.”

The villainess hesitated, for though she was not a moral woman neither was she the manner of monster that bargained with devils for the lives of thousands.

“And Keter’s Due?” the Librarian asked.

In proper Proceran scholarship the phenomenon was known instead as ‘the desolation’, but since the Arsenal had begun to train wizards the Praesi terminology had seeped through. It could not be denied that Proceran sorcery had a rather religious turn to it, and as Cordelia understood it the ‘desolation’ was considered to be as much theological in nature as it was magical – a punishment by Above for the ruinous overreach of mortals. *What disgusting idea*, the Lycaonese thought. To punish thousands for the crimes of one, who would not even be moved by the sight of such cruelty regardless. The very definition of pointless suffering. No, Cordelia would take no issue with the use of ‘Keter’s Due’ at all.

“There are reports from both the Hierophant and the Grave Binder that suggest the effects of the Due were purposefully worsened,” the First Prince evenly said. “In each case, most of the surrounding region was blighted.”

The curse had flooded outwards. To the north the losses were acceptable, for Twilight’s Pass had already been bare rock while

the swaths of western Hannover and southern Rhenia that had been lost had been poor farmlands. In the case of Hainaut, where the blight was said to have spread down to a natural fortress named Lauzon's Hollow, the loss was one still to be felt: those lands had been in the hands of Keter for most of the war. In Cleves, however? The Hellgate had been opened at the fortress of Trifelin, where Rozala Malanza had won a great battle mere weeks before, and the Due slain a few thousand soldiers out in the open where there had been too few wards. That had been the least of the losses there in truth.

The blight had also swallowed most of the fine lands along the length candle road, snuffing out the principality's breadbasket.

That meant that Cleves would have to be fed by southern principalities, which were already buckling under the strain and rebellious besides. It meant dozens of thousand of refugees forced to flee south into lands grown increasingly hostile to them. It means that Procer would have to either beg for parts of the harvest of the Kingdom of Callow which it could not afford to buy – not with Merchant Prince Mauricius having clearly laid out there would be no more loans until some unacceptable conditions were met – or there would be starvation in the heartlands of the Principate. Hannover was ash and ruin, ruled by the dead. Of her own Rhenia no lands save the city-fortress itself remained, her own people huddling in the dark beyond those impassable defences while death roamed the countryside. Now Cleves and Hainaut as well were a ruin.

The armies that had been supposed to turn the war around, to push the dead back into the lakes, had delivered instead one of the bloodiest stalemates in the history of Calernia. And Cordelia's own uncle had died in some ill-fated last charge without the break between them ever having been mended, nothing but harsh words left to part on. She forced herself to breathe slowly and steadily, else she knew she would tear up. There were too many people looking. There were *always* too many people looking, and she could not afford to show weakness after having forced the hands of the Highest Assembly the way she had.

"Was Hainaut a defeat, then?" the Librarian quietly asked.

Cordelia Hasenbach allowed herself a bitter smile.

"The Black Queen won the field, though the field was but a smoking ruin and many died," the First Prince replied. "Among them the Grey Pilgrim. The White Knight broke the Dead King's great bridge in the north, so the campaign can still be settled in our favour."

She knew better than to name such an outcome a victory, however. Nearly half the Army of Callow was gone, the Lycaonese forces on the front mauled and leaderless and general casualties had been

atrocious for everyone save the Levantines. Who had not been spared, either, though in a different way. The Dominion was in uproar, as at least a few hundred of its Blood had died turning to ash without warning on the evening of the Battle of Hainaut. Cordelia's spies believed that everyone who could have a feasible claim to being an Isbili had died, around the time the Peregrine himself had died and brought down the pilgrim's star on Hainaut.

With the Holy Seljun dead, no legitimate successor in sight and all remaining major nobles up north fighting Keter the resulting chaos already promised to be crippling. Another nail in the Principate's overly burdened coffin, she thought, for the Dominion had been one of the last few nations with which Procer could trade to keep afloat: the coming tide of squabbles and 'honour wars' would strangle those routes soon enough.

"Trouble in Levant," the Forgetful Librarian frowned, tracing the rim of her cup with a finger. "I'm not so sure we can afford that – economically speaking, anyway. We will have to lean on Helike and her dependents to compensate."

"It will not be enough," Cordelia tiredly replied.

General Basilia, who was now quite openly mulling claiming the title of empress after having so long deferred taking up the queenship of Helike, had made great strides forward with precious little outside help. Cordelia herself had served mostly as a diplomatic broker in the matter of settling hostilities with Stygia, and now that Basilia had most of the western Free Cities under her and a sworn peace with Atalante her rise seemed difficult to stop. Luck was even on her side, as word was that Bellerophon had once more declared war on Penthes, belatedly seizing an opportunity to attack their old rival that the People had failed to recognize. It further tipped the balance in General Basilia's favour, though given the fluidity of wars in the League there was no certain outcome. Not that Cordelia expected the war to continue much longer.

Delos was too great a fortress to easily fall, but it would not stand alone against three cities and the priests of Atalante had no yearning to break a holy oath freshly sworn. It might not be that Basilia would hold all of the Free Cities, as the Republic of Bellerophon at least would fight to the death over submission, but it seemed likely that a tributary empire centred on Helike would be emerging from the aftermath of that war. Given that Basilia was friendly to the Grand Alliance and hostile to the Tower as well as eager for trade to resume, this seemed like a saving grace for Procer's ailing coffers. Except, of course, that General Basilia had spent two years ravaging the Free Cities with her wars.

Trading with a broken land not yet recovered from the last civil war that'd ravaged it was not going to be sufficiently profitable

in the immediate future, not when the only Free City whose coffers had swelled was Mercantis and it was hoarding the wealth. In a year, perhaps two, this could be the miracle that Cordelia needed should the nascent empire of Basilia not collapse.

The Principate of Procer did not have a year to spare, much less two.

"Shall I send for the others, then?" the Forgetful Librarian asked. "If there was ever a reason to wake them in the night, this would be it. I have refined my proposal for the invasion of Mercantis as a stopgap solution, besides, so it might be the time for Your Highness to genuinely consider it."

She still believed, it seemed, that there was room to maneuver. That there was still a game afoot.

"One year and twenty-eight days," Cordelia Hasenbach softly said. "That is how long we have before the seals on the Hellgates break."

And what could be done in so little time? Queen Catherine had left one of her foremost generals, Abigail the Fox, to handle matters in Hainaut with the returning White Knight and bluntly informed Cordelia that she saw only one solution: she was headed for east, for Praes. She would be taking the Marshal of Callow and the remains of the Second Army with her, as well as the reassembled First. A few Chosen and Damned as well, as she intended on settling the war for the Tower and returning west with mages in large enough numbers the Hellgates could be handled by Praesi magics. The Black Queen had not pretended that anything Cordelia could say might sway her from that decision, but the part that had truly cut had been the seemingly heartfelt condolences about Uncle Klaus.

It had seemed obscene to Cordelia that the Queen of Callow had spoken more to him than she had, this last year. That she... The First Prince mastered herself, evenly breathing. The east was beyond Cordelia's grasp, it was no longer her trouble. She would see to the west as much as she still could, to her last breath, even though she knew in the deepest of her heart that the outcome was already decided. Procer would fall because it was simply no longer capable of standing. If the war was not won soon it was going to break, and the war would not be won soon. In truth it might be that victory was no longer possible, Cordelia admitted to herself. Or that if it were achieved, the Principate Procer would not live to see that achievement.

And facing that brutal truth was part of her duty, to plan for it. So Cordelia Hasenbach's mind slowly stirred awake from the numbness, considering how any part of Procer might still be saved from the coming onslaught – how its *people* might be saved. And there was a darker duty still, one that she despised but must

consider anyway. Should the Enemy triumph, should it all come to the worst of all ends...

"Send for the others," the First Prince of Procer finally said, tone steady. "And for mage of the Red Lions as well, if you please."

The Forgetful Librarian slowly nodded, then rose to her feet to see it done. Cordelia would need to speak with a man she had hoped she would not see again before the war was at an end. Not out of distaste for him, but because of what she had sent him to guard: the ancient corpse that had once lain in the depths of Lake Artoise, and the weapon that had been made of it. For Cordelia was a Hasenbach, in the end.

If it came to it, she would do what she must: better that some of Calernia survive than none at all.

—

It was a delicate balance to maintain, to keep a civil war going without ever being at genuine risk of losing it.

Malicia liked to think of it as painting with her own blood, drawing on the famous turn of phrase by Maleficent the Second. Every success in guiding the war according to her design came at the expense of carving away a sliver from the pedestal of her perceived superior position, and should the game be kept going for too long – or defeats not of her own making be inflicted upon her – then she ran the risk of that pedestal truly being toppled. It had not come to pass, of course. The Dread Empress of Praes had begun to prepare for this conflict several months before the first sword was drawn, and she'd had contingencies in place regarding civil war for decades prior.

Agents seeded and left to grow, traitors and assassins and impostors. Bribes and blackmail, debts to call on and more highborn in the palm of her hand than anyone alive might suspect. High Lady Tasia Sahelian had seen through parts of the preparations, in olden days, but now Tasia was dead and Wolof ruled by a young man she had personally seen soulboxed. High Lord Sargon Sahelian was, amusingly enough, one of her most ardent partisans well beyond the influence she could truly exert on him. He had bloodied Wolof taking it from his aunt, so he now craved years under the protection of a greater power to rebuild his domain in peace.

And, for all that Abreha of Aksum – Sepulchral, as she now styled herself – remained breathing, east of the Wasaliti there was no greater power than Dread Empress Malicia. *So long as I do not slip*, Alaya reminded herself, studying the board before her. She'd always enjoyed shatranj, even when she had still been her father's daughter and not a prisoner in a golden gaol. It was a game of logic and sequence, of anticipating the movements of your

opponent, which had always appealed to her. Wekesa had enjoyed the occasional game with her when he'd visited Ater, the two of them spending more time playing and gossiping over their common companions over wine than attending to the matters of state Alaya had claimed the time for.

These days, though, Malicia played mostly against herself. The Dread Empress of Praes considered the lay of the pieces, the disarray of black and white that signaled the tail end of a match closely fought, and slid her last black mage down a diagonal. Soft footsteps told her that Ime had joined her without the need for the empress to look away from the board. This was not her bedchambers, simply a study, but her spymistress was one of the very few people who had access to the enchanted secret passage whose door opened behind her.

"Speak," Malicia said.

"Our people in Procer confirmed that Queen Catherine is headed for Praes," Ime said. "Already orders have been sent to Laure by the Black Queen to prepare the supplies for a campaign in the Wasteland."

Malicia cocked an eyebrow.

"They cannot afford one," the empress said.

The intricacies of the internal politics of the Grand Alliance aside, Alaya was speaking to the plain realities of hard coin. Callow was not flush with gold, having already spent most of the coin it had received for brokering a peace between the dwarves and the drow, and Procer was so beggared these days that it was often resorting to paying in goods rather than gold for the Callowan grain and cattle it so desperately needed. In practice, the Kingdom of Callow was simply not wealthy of enough to afford a war on a second front. It did not have the steel, the gold or the manpower to attempt such an enterprise. That had been part and parcel of Malicia's strategy to contain the Black Queen from the very start: make dealing with the Tower a choice between diplomacy and bankruptcy.

"They're pulling out the First and Second Army from Procer," Ime replied. "As for coin, Duchess Kegan was instructed to borrow from the northern barons if need be."

They'd have wealth tucked aside, Malicia reluctantly admitted in a mental calculation. The lands under the baronies of Harrow and Hedges had been only lightly touched by the Tenth Crusade and their rulers had made a tidy profit selling their goods to a beleaguered south during the reconstruction of Callow after Second Liesse. More than that, they would be willing to lend. The barons were not unaware that their adversarial relationship with Catherine Foundling had barred them from the Callowan halls of

power, so they would be eager to get a foot in – particularly if the debt was to be ultimately shouldered by the much more friendly Vivienne Dartwick.

No doubt a few handsome spare sons would be sent along with the coin, bearing hints that a newborn Callowan dynasty could do with an infusion of fresh noble blood. Malicia was not unfamiliar with the tactic, her hand having been sought with varying degrees of aggressiveness over decades. Organising particularly painful deaths for those who dared to insist too much had been one of the few instances in which Malicia had worked closely with the Scribe. Eudokia was no friend of hers, but the other woman had inherited that very Delosi penchant for meticulous punishment of the contemptible.

“Who will hold command?” Malicia asked, eyes still on the board.

She moved a pale knight, venturing deep behind an arrant line of pawns.

“Abigail the Fox has been left in command of the Third Army in Hainaut, so she’d dredging up Marshal Juniper herself,” Ime said, tone wary.

The empress was not so affected.

“She is a skilled tactician,” Malicia calmly said, “and a general to take seriously, but her reputation is exaggerated. Rozala Malanza would have beaten her decisively in Iserre if the Black Queen had not intervened at the last moment. Marshal Nim should be her match, if it comes to that.”

Given a decade perhaps the ‘Hellhound’ would fully grow into her talents, having been seasoned by the Uncivil Wars, but for now the experience of the commanders that had served since the Conquest was difficult to match for such a young woman. It would tell, particularly in treacherous grounds like those of the Wasteland. Still, Malicia did mourn that such a talent had been stolen away from the Empire. It had been a stroke of terrible luck, that General Istrid would die during Second Liesse and so leave her daughter adrift and her old legion easily led astray. Not the greatest misfortune to come out of that battle by any measure, but a misfortune nonetheless.

“She will be coming personally, Your Majesty,” Ime quietly said. “The Black Queen. And she pulled away two of her armies from the war on the dead, against our expectations. She is taking a much harder line than we believed she would.”

Her spymistress was not incorrect, Malicia thought as she moved a black tower near the centre of the board. The Dread Empress did not find it entirely surprising that after what the Callowans had quaintly named the ‘Night of Knives’ their queen would balk at a

diplomatic resolution of their disagreements, but she *had* expected that Cordelia Hasenbach would push for such an initiative. The burdens of the war should have rent Procer asunder by now and forced the First Prince to seek terms, even if behind the Black Queen's back, but out of Salia there was only silence. Scribe had seized the reins of the remaining eyes in Procer, which meant information trickled east only at a glacial pace. Alaya slid a white mage, taking a pawn.

"She cannot afford a battle with either the Tower or Abreha," Malicia said. "The ensuing casualties would make impossible an assault on Keter. It is posturing, Ime."

"She thinks us weak," Ime said.

"Which will make all the stronger an impression on her when it is revealed otherwise," Malicia said. "I have no intention of offering onerous terms to turn on the Dead King, the shock and an amenable bargain will see us through."

The priority would be dismantling the Grand Alliance as continental power. So long as Callow was leveraged to leave it after the war Alaya expected that old rivalries between it and Procer would resume, most likely through competing commercial interests, and it would be child's play to cause incidents at the border between Procer and the Dominion. Her plans had not all gone perfectly, of course. The matters down south had turned against her and she would admit that the Stygian coup had been a complete surprise, but General Basilia's victories brought opportunity with them. Sponsoring an eastern alliance within the Free Cities to rival the western Helikean bloc would check Grand Alliance influence in the region.

Already the Secretariat was willing to privately entertain her envoys, worried that Delos would be gobbled up by the victorious marauding general.

"Or she could try to enthrone another in your place," Ime murmured.

Alaya's fingers tightened around a black knight. Malicia cocked an amused eyebrow.

"He has no armies, little practical support and fewer allies than I have fingers," the Dread Empress of Praes said. "Amadeus has not returned to my side, but he has not raised a rebel flag beyond that unfortunate lapse at the Peace of Salia."

Reconciliation might still be possible, she left implied. And Amadeus was in Praes, that much had been confirmed, but her once Black Knight had not made many visible waves. He had not sought allies within the highborn, reached out to the self-proclaimed Dread Empress Sepulchral or even come out of the woodworks to

lead the deserter legions in the Green Stretch. The last in particular was a shame. It would have simplified things a great deal in some ways. Malicia was inclined to believe that Ranger had been an anchor around his neck, this time: for all that she was a fearsome force of violence, at the moment the half-elf was also being hunted by the Emerald Swords.

So long as she remained his companion, Amadeus could not come into the light without having those ten monsters coming for wherever he dwelled. Alaya released the knight, turning to meet her spymistress' eyes. Ime looked troubled, as she often was these days. She was growing old, for all that rituals still kept the worst ravages of time away, frailer in both body and mind than the bold woman she had been in their youth.

"You have concerns," Malicia said.

"In understand why we cultivated the perception of our weakness," Ime said. "So long as we were a genuine military concern for the Grand Alliance, I agree that we ran certain... risks."

Like Catherine Foundling gating in through the Twilight Ways and beginning to drown cities, driven to hard measures by the fear of the Grand Alliance buckling under a war being fought on two fronts. Much easier for Praes to be beset by civil strife, a threat still but only a distant one. Not urgent, an enemy that outright threatened the survival of Calernia. Not that Malicia herself did not genuinely believe that the Dead King had any real chance of winning, for Evil did not win wars, but then it was not her soldiers dying in droves. She had ensured that the Praesi civil war under her watch was to be largely bloodless, mostly fought through raids and maneuvering.

"Yet that perception may yet come back to haunt us," Ime continued. "She despises us, Malicia. She might refuse to deal with the Tower even if it's the safer path, so long as there is another path at all. Another credible candidate."

Malicia studied her spymistress. It was not assassination being alluded to here, of course. Ime had argued for it in the past but Alaya was still unwilling. Such an attempt would be laughably unlikely to succeed, besides, so long as he had Ranger by his side. Why even consider the option, with that in mind? No, it was a different sort of measure that Ime was arguing for. Alaya looked down at the board and rested a finger atop the black knight she had left behind, thinking for a moment. Sometimes childish dreams had to be let go of, she thought. Even when it was painful. There would be no returning to the way things used to be, and pretending otherwise was embracing the noose.

She tipped over the knight with a flick of her finger, the ebony piece clattering against the board.

"Your advice has merit," Dread Empress Malicia said. "Send for Marshal Nim."

Her spymistress watched her carefully.

"You'll do it, then?"

"Yes," the Dread Empress of Praes said. "I will recognize her as my Black Knight."

—

It was a pleasant night out, especially with a bottle of wine and stolen roasted chicken to gnaw on.

The hinterlands of Aksum seemed perpetually doomed to being set aflame, Amadeus of the Green Stretch mused, since a mere few decades after he'd torched them on his way to besieging the city the High Lord of Wolof was now doing the same. Young Sargon was also abducting people to fill up the city that his aunt had mutilated on her way out, however, which Amadeus found an interesting variation on the usual Praesi civil war. It was important to keep those things fresh, he felt, and Gods knew that the Dread Empire had a great deal of practice bleeding itself. The dark-haired man chewed on his second chicken leg thoughtfully, watching the smoke rising in the distance. Another village burned. They ought to get moving soon, he figured, else they would risk running into raiders.

Amadeus wasn't exactly afraid of the outcome that would ensue, but it wouldn't be subtle and that lack was a lot more dangerous than those raiders could ever hope to be.

He wasn't even halfway through the leg when he first glimpsed Hye coming up the path, noticing the splash of red blood on her sleeves when she got closer. Ah, fruitful talks then. She'd always been such a skilled diplomat, if one with a particularly narrow repertoire. He let himself drink in the sight of her for a moment, the long locks framing the high cheekbones and those clever dark brown eyes. Amadeus had seen her in everything but bare skin and moonlight to mail and cloak caked in filth, and even after all these years the faint note of wonder had yet to fade. The love of his life approached, taking a long look at him and narrowing her eyes.

"You ate both legs, you jackass," Hye Su, who some knew as the Ranger, noted.

"So I did," Amadeus, cheerfully replied. "You should have stolen your own chicken, if you wanted the choice cut."

Though he had once been known as some manner of knight, he'd never bothered with chivilary: to add insult to injury, he also

tossed the bones of the first leg he'd eaten at her and watched as she easily dodged. Her lips twitched, though.

"I should leave you hanging for this," Hye complained.

"You won't," Amadeus smiled. "You got to kill something, it always puts you in a chatty mood."

"I don't get *chatty*," Hye denied, deeply offended.

"Of course you don't," Amadeus pleasantly smiled.

He had to duck a chicken bone, but it was a victory in every way that mattered. Though huffing while she did, she dropped at his side and the both of them sat back against the tall milestone that some ancient High Lord of Aksum had raised on the hill near the road. Hye naturally helped herself to the rest of the chicken, producing a knife so she could pop the juicy but cooling pieces into her mouth, and the two of them sat closely together under the night sky.

"So I was talking with this fae," Hye said.

"As one does," Amadeus amiably agreed.

"He had this friend that knew a friend," Ranger mused. "And *they'd* heard that the Black Queen, out west, she's headed our way."

"To clarify," he said, "was this helpful rumour shared before or after you started stabbing him?"

"Eh," Hye said. "You know how it is with fairies. There's stabbing and then there's *stabbing*."

Sadly, Amadeus of the Green Stretch did know how it was with fairies. It was only marginally better than dealing with Wasteland highborn, something that had driven him to some fairly infamous bouts of stabbing over the years.

"Shouldn't be a long journey through the Ways," he said. "Two, three months at most."

"Sooner, if Indrani's guiding her," Hye said. "She's always been a natural at pathfinding."

Amadeus hummed, amused at the understated pride in her voice. Though Hye did not visibly play favorites among her pupils, she'd always favoured those who used bows slightly over the rest.

"It is time for us to surface, then," he said. "We need to get the last pieces in place before my own former pupil arrives."

Hye grinned, all teeth and malice, and he felt his heart skip a beat. Even now, after all these years... well, he was not as young as he'd once been, but she did not seem to mind so what did he care? If anything she seemed to like the grey in his hair, which he had not known he was worried about until he felt relieved she did. It had been some years since Amadeus had last felt insecure, even unknowingly, and he had found it almost refreshing.

"Finally," Ranger said. "I've been enjoying laying low, Amadeus, but sometimes you just need to bite down on something you know?"

"I do," he replied in a murmur. "And this is long overdue."

He looked east, where in the distance waited the gargantuan shape of the Tower jutting out from Ater, and he raised his half-empty bottle of wine in a toast. When was he to settle his accounts, if not the end times?

If the song refused to leave him, then he would *silence* it.

[ErraticErrata](#)

And on that note we end Book VI. I'll be taking a two month break between books, so the first chapter of Book VII will be coming out on the second of March.

To all of you who've stuck with me since the beginning and to the many new readers, I hope you enjoyed this book and that you'll enjoy the closing chapter of the series even more. Happy New Year, and see you in two months!

tithin

A satisfactory epilogue.

See you in two months for the last(?) book.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

In before EE splits the next book into two books again. 😊

caoimhinh

Better that than rushing up the closure of the saga.

Seven Books and One is a fine number, after all.

Sinead

I'd think that in a published order, book 4 would have to be re-worked into two books for "Seven and One", so EE probably aiming to wrap it up in 1 book.

Aerdor

Considering the number of chapters only, book 5 seems longer than book 4 (108 for book 4 against 127 for book 5). I personally think that the books 4 and 5 can stay as they are, but it is the books 1 et 2 that needs to be put together, because they are way smaller than the other books, and because end of book 1 doesn't really feel like the end of an arc to me.

If I'm right then EE needs to make 3 more books for "Seven and One". Not complaining if he does 😊

Dathrax

Oh my Gods Below! Is Amadeus of the Green Stretch going to topple the Tower?

[TheCelestialEquation](#)

Not without cat he isn't!

Mile

Cat's gonna climb it while Amadeus chops up the base. Then she'll be at the top and he'll get the last chop in and she'll have a flying fortress because of course the tower is gonna have that enchantment.

SpaceDorf

But due to the law of
Irony its the one that goes only up and down

stevenneiman

Due to your comment, It's now headcanon for me that Ficsit Incorporated exists in Creation, and the Engineer is Named. Hell, the game's tagline is a perfectly fitting Aspect lineup for her.

"Construct. Automate. Explore."

Relai

0000oooo! Need to catch up to the story XD, still at the end of book 5.

Unrecovered

Thanks for a great fantasy! Though I predict two more, one for the east and one for the north 😊

Frivolous

EE: Thank you for your work, all very entertaining.

Take care. I'll miss you.

TigerQuoll

And for the story as a whole (and the Principate-Dead-King Storyline in particular), it seems we're at that part. The night is darkest before the dawn part, aka the darkest hour part, everything is turned around but we can maybe see the beginning of the end of the tunnel part. We're nearing the climax now, at least because there is not many ways our stakes can get higher without changing a story that shines through its (admittedly very dark) comedy.

David McChesney

Appreciate your hard work! Wonderful to read.

Varil

I seem doomed to always reread this story just as it hits another yearly break. So good! I'm looking forward to the next book!

Shaerick 68

Thank you EE for such an amazing story. I've only been following it for about a year, but for some time now having a new chapter come out has been the highlight of my days. The wait for the next book will be miserable, but enjoy your much deserved break!

therealgridlock

I said I would be doing these when I finally caught up to the present, so here it is:

Typo Thread:

It seemed such a small, petty thing to eve spare thought for after the news she had received.

>Eve to ever

The Hellgate had been opened at the fortress of Trifelin, where Rozala Malanza had won a great battle mere weeks before, and the Due slain a few thousand soldiers out in the open where there had been too few wards.

>"Slain" to "had slain," or rewrite the sentence

The blight had also swallowed most of the fine lands along the length candle road, snuffing out the principality's breadbasket.

>"Length candle" makes no sense. If it is a proper name, perhaps capitalize it to denote that it is correct, otherwise "candle length road" makes more sense, or "long candle road"

It meant dozens of thousand of refugees forced to flee south into lands grown increasingly hostile to them.

>Thousand to thousands

Luck was even on her size, as word was that Bellerophon had

>Size to side

that she saw only one solution: she was headed for east, for Praes.

>"For east" to either "for the east" or just "headed east," for east isn't proper

Or that if it were achieved, the Principate Procer would not live to see that achievement.

>"The Principate Procer" to either "the Principate" or just "Procer" or possibly "the Principate of Procer," i suspect either the of was left out, or this is an artefact from being undecided over whether to say the Principate or Procer

"And for mage of the Red Lions as well, if you please."

>Mage to mages, or a mage, or magi, the plurality is insufficiently specified, but if it's singular, it would be "a mage," if it is plural, it would be mages or magi. Or if it is a specific mage, it needs to be specified.

In practice, the Kingdom of Callow was simply not wealthy of enough to afford a war on a second front.

>"Wealthy of enough" to "wealthy enough," or "Callow simply did not have enough wealth"

"Abigail the Fox has been left in command of the Third Army in Hainaut, so she'd dredging up Marshal Juniper herself," Ime said, tone wary.

>"She'd" to "she's"

The priority would be dismantling the Grand Alliance as continental power.

>"as continental power" to "as a continental power"

"In understand why we cultivated the perception of our weakness," Ime said.

>In to I

Amadeus had seen her in everything but bare skin and moonlight to mail and cloak caked in filth,

>I am almost 100% certain you meant "from" instead of "but"

I didn't mention a few other things that I found personally annoying to read, since they were a matter of editing preference and not actual incorrectness, and this is a typo thread and not an editing advice thread, but there you go.

TRUELIKEtheRIVER

oh fuck

[Eau Richards](#)

EE, I love this whole work and every character in it so I thank you for your dedication to this piece of art. That said, the two month break might just end up breaking my heart and soul. I hope everyone's have an amazing 2021

Alex Straughan

Dun Dun Dun

Sir Nil

Well time for some Tower crashing.

Sinead

Here me out:

The three factions of Praes are fighting over Tower raising, and are taking so long that Callow is coming in to overthrow them all.

Hakram's Tower Raising has taken on a life of its own.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Oh that is awesome. Guess Amadeus is going to test whether the Tower truly endures.

Also great timing with end of this book

Also gonna make an early prediction that this will be 8 books long.

Juff

Typo Thread:

eve spare > even spare
What disgusting idea > What a disgusting idea
Due slain > Due had slain
length candle (length of Candle road?)
which where > which were
It means that > It meant that
died turning > died, turning
Keter the > Keter, the
her form > her from
so she'd dredging > so she's dredging
as continental > as a continental
Already the Secretariat (extra space)
"In understand > "I understand
everything but (should this be "from")

beleester

>Alaya's fingers tightened around a black knight. Malicia
cocked an amused eyebrow.

Seems like Malicia is reacting to herself here. Should that be
Ime instead of Malicia?

Rando McRand

I noticed that as well, but interpreted it as the author
contrasting the reactions of Alaya, the lifelong friend and
companion of Amadeus, vs. Dread Empress Malicia, a woman who
cannot and will not embrace sentiment if it comes at the cost
of being able to control her empire

Frivolous

beleester: I think that is not a typo but a reflection of the
difference between the woman and the Empress.

Alaya misses Amadeus. The Dread Empress, on the other hand,
thinks little of Amadeus's chances.

Tarial

Wooooooooooooooooooooo !!!!!

Wonder what Cat is planning, she can't have that many body left
to bleed, even if "Callow interrupt a Praesi civil war" sounds
like the sort of story that would have happened at least once in
their 12 (?) centuries of existence.

Wonder if Amadeus is gonna destroy the Tower, seems like a
definitive way to silence a song, he ought to like the idea.

dadycool

Rebellious Callow striking against Praes? With the (maybe) installment of a more friendly ruler at around the same time, or at least one busy/uncaring, willing to cut them loose entirely, that sounds like a story with history. Also, Struggle is at the foundation of Cat's Life Story, so a half-broken Callow going up against a Praes that's far stronger than they thought immediately after their biggest failure/tragedy might not be the worst situation. Maybe she'll even take her Squire to visit a few lakefront properties?

Sinead

Nah, I don't think we'll see any installation of Praesi leadership. I think we'll see a complete disbanding of Praes into separate groups to have to develop a different system of working other than the Tower. But one where the orcs, ogres, and goblins have a better seat at the table than at the Declaration.

laguz24

I don't think simply destroying the tower will be enough to end the song. What he has to do is to get people to stop climbing. To be something more than a serpent forever eating it's own tail.

nick012000

Yeah. Just toppling the building isn't enough; it's happened multiple times before, and they always rebuilt it again, even taller than it was before, afterwards.

caoimhinh

Probably have to destroy the throne of the Empress that has endured since ancient times. It's the one thing in the whole Tower that remains unchanged, standing in the rubble each time the Tower is demolished.

TeK

The end times indeed. Procer is done, the League is done, Levant is done, Praes is about to be done. The only country that still remains in the shape of it's former self is Callow, amusingly enough.

The old order is gone, the new one is yet to come. I wonder.

If it will be truly worth it.

Hitogami

Callow has been repeatedly broken since the conquest and Cat's rise to power, they are actually just further down the path of recovery than the others.

laguz24

Also, malacia is violating the iron sharpens iron philosophy of the wasteland. If you go up against yourself or someone too much like you. You will never grow, it's time for the wasteland to learn that lesson.

Miley

I'd hope she realizes most people use stone to sharpen iron.

Hitogami

Finally an ending.

I'm honestly a bit dissatisfied with Black, he's been doing absolutely nothing and that bugs me. He'd said that he would take care if Praes and now here he is waiting for Cat to come over...

WuseMajor

Amadeus is incapable of doing nothing. The man ALWAYS has a plan and his section implies as much.

The fact that Malicia *doesn't know what it is,* should be fucking terrifying her, not causing her to assume he's just ...on vacation or whatever.

Crash

Malicia went over cliff on villainy a while back, she has lost perspective.

The fact she thinks she knows exactly how everything is going to play out here even as more and more wrenchs are thrown in her plans (some, she isn't even aware of because Scribe took out her eyes in the West) is confirmation enough of it. She's done.

[sengachi](#)

The implication seems to be that he and Ranger have been doing a *lot* that Malicia doesn't know about. We just have to wait and see what it was.

ruduen

Amadeus has been doing absolutely nothing on-screen. Off-screen, who knows what. Unlike all of the other preparation which we've seen and therefore have immediate narrative payoffs for, Black's had time to lay the groundwork for whatever large-

scale plot is appropriate. And as someone on the villainous side of things...

Combine that with the fact that Malicia seems more surface-level in terms of reading the narrative while Amadeus tends to go broader and see larger-scale consequences, and I'd say that we're due for a proper reveal when he finally comes out to play.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, I knew she lost the moment she assumed Amadeus wasn't doing much at the moment.

Mike E.

As Amadeus would say... "Mistake"

[irritantseraphim](#)

He isn't "doing nothing", he is preparing and planning. With Cat coming east, the situation is now at a point where he can truly come into action, instead of being the third or fourth or fifth wheel in a Praesi civil war.

DDSK

The book comes out on my birthday 🎂

Thx a lot man 🙏

[Burlyraven](#)

I shall endeavor to hold my breath for the next two months. This next book is promising to be almost optimistic with all of the powerups, redemptions, restorations, and revolutions on the horizon.

Also, honestly, Alaya is coming across as almost a cartoonishly villainous in this. Kinda refreshing, actually.

Insanenoodlyguy

The age of wonders died when a Tyrant let a Hierarch judge angels, but an age doesn't die all at once. It's still in it's death throes in many ways. As THE Evil nation, Praes is a huge part of that age, and so despite Amadeus working very hard to keep exactly this from happening, she's taking on the roll of that Villian in a last stand of not only herself but her empire's very way of life. Naturally the weight of that is making sure this is gonna be loud.

WuseMajor

Heh.

Alaya made the same mistake Cat did.

She tried to play things such that the other side would be forced to the negotiating table, but misjudged the situation, failing to realize that the negotiating table was never really an option.

You have incurred the Long Price, Alaya. And you'll be paying it sooner or later.

Also... I mean, you're right when you say that assassinating Amadeus was never really an option, but ...he's been in hiding with the most dangerous woman on the continent for over two years now and you don't actually know what he's planning.

This should fucking terrify you.

You, you of all people, know both what he's capable of and the fact that he's incapable of not planning something.

And he likes Cat better than you.

....Also, I get that you're hurting Cordy, but “*seemingly* heartfelt?” That was a needless jab and it displays that you still don't get her. That was genuine and she'd be hurt that you thought otherwise.

Oh. Huh.

Alaya doesn't know about the Hellgates. I bet that would change her math big time. It would mean that, at this point, Cat can't afford NOT to be in charge of Praes or allied to the leader of the nation, because only the collective knowledge and mages of Praes could even give her a chance at closing those things. And you've screwed yourself out of ever joining the alliance, so there's really only one option left, isn't there?

[sengachi](#)

Huh. To expand on your comment about the Hellgates leaving *no* option but for Cat to war on the Tower, I wonder if Nemesah did that on purpose?

He probably has a number of ways in which he could take advantage of the Grey Pilgrim's escalation opening, but he specifically chose *Hellgates*, the method which forcibly drags Praes into this mess kicking and screaming.

anon

Wasn't there a clause in whatever pact he made that said he couldn't invade Callow and Praes as long as Malicia was alive?

[sengachi](#)

Oh why there was. It was such a lovely clause crafted to ensure that Praes got to sit on the sidelines fat and happy while the Dead King fought the whole rest of Calernia.

Such a shame, such a **pity**, that Nemesah's actions would result in the Grand Alliance turning their eye on Praes and directing some attention there too. Really, it's just a **tragedy** that his Evil back-stabbing ally's "leave me out of this" clause doesn't also protect Malicia from Catherine deciding to attack her.

ninegardens

I mean... if Cat shows up and is like "Yo, we need you to join us in warring on the Dead King, otherwise we'll knife you" And Alaya be like "Sure; you want some mages? I got a couple legions of diabolists out back" Cat would be like "Your a bitch. Thanks. Let's get moving, times a wasting."

[sengachi](#)

I mean that's the outcome we'd all certainly hope for. But I wonder if that's even possible. Even if Malicia **did** agree to help.

After all, Malicia has been so extravagantly back-stabby and front-stabby and side-stabby that I'm not sure her agreement to help could be believed. Especially considering she started this. Any commitment by Malicia to contribute diabolists in the Grand Alliance's defense is almost literally unbelievable. To the point where accepting and potentially getting knifed might be considered a worse risk even than assaulting the Tower.

Like, even if there's only a 10% chance they assault Praes, dethrone Malicia, and come out of this with enough of an army and enough Praesi diabolists to stop the Dead King ... I might take those odds, **even if** Malicia was promising me she'd just capitulate and help out because this new move by the Dead King is too threatening. Because I'd rate those 10% odds as pretty comparable to the odds we'd survive accepting Malicia's "help".

mavant

Confirmed: Malicia' spirit animal is a porcupine.

Crash

beautiful.

[sengachi](#)

Ohhh, Malicia doesn't even realize that Amadeus lost the Black Knight mantle a while back, does she? That he's now Named only insofar as he's a Dread Emperor claimant.

.... orrrrrrr, I guess he's not looking to climb the Tower, but to topple it. Permanently.

Well. If there's a person in the world who has a shot at ending that story, it would be Amadeus, the blackguard who conquered Callow.

[irritantseraphim](#)

I agree with you that he is a Claimant to the throne of Praes, having that damn song (The Girl who climbed the Tower) in his head all the time.

And I guess that from the chapter part from his view, we can easily deduce that Maddie will not climb the tower and make his seat up there but that he will tear down that tower and grind the remains to dust and sever the ties of stories that make Praes erect it again. So that there will be no more Dread Empire.

Insanenoodlyguy

I wonder though, what kind of name he'll get for doing that. Cause doing something like this could still make you something, and he's already growing into a name...

[irritantseraphim](#)

Some twist on conqueror or destroyer. I doubt he will claim the throne. I think he would rather install someone who follows his interests.

WuseMajor

I dunno. The theory that he becomes Dread Emperor Benevolent is actually fairly compelling.

Lord Haart

I used to think so but honestly his actions in Procer say otherwise. He's a bit too personal in his feelings – I think he's very much in the role of Cat's father, regardless of how much he's willing to admit it.

Destroying the Tower to end the song might not just be about denying the Role to himself or Malicia. That Name seems to be a trap and I think he wants better for her.

Meanwhile, Cordelia is becoming Dread First Prince of the West and is gearing up a flying fortress of her very own. Her ends differ from Malicia's but they are increasingly the same creature.

They both represent real threats to the fire of life in Calernia, one like sulphur, one like water, and in the meantime Nessie is the darkness itself. But I think even he is aware that without light, dark is meaningless too.

Mental Mouse

Malicia knows, that's why she knows she can replace him. Presumably this is similar to when Amadeus raised the Squire to claimant status.

JJR

The tower has apparently been trying to serenade Amadeus with that song about climbing the tower for however many decades it's been. And he's about ask it to cut it out in a way that can only be done by packing the ground floor with goblinfire.

sengachi

Amadues, give his sappers orders post-victory: "I want other goblins to hear of what happened here and weep pitiful tears knowing they will never see such total and magnificent destruction, and I want the green to rise high enough into the sky that people stop thinking 'The Black Queen' when goblin fire comes up."

shimizubad

And then Cat throw the first vial of goblin fire

shimizubad

I would say Robber but unfortunately he's not with us anymore

egregiousmiscellany

I'm sure he's slinking around in the hells somewhere. He'll come out in a burst of hellfire to help when those breaches open back up.

Bighomer

Happy New Year all! Enjoy your break EE!

The Tower is so going down this book

Daniel E

So here's a thought: Can Ranger's Aspects be used on her own senses? Like, can she use Transcend on her tongue to experience a taste of chicken that no mortal could comprehend? Inquiring minds need to know.

Sinead

Yes. That is why she is so ***ing smug all the time.

She literally breathes different air than the rest of us.

[sengachi](#)

Maybe, maybe not, but I'll bet she can do it while cooking, for a similar experience.

mavant

What happened to Klaus's final letter to Cordelia?

mavant

Oops that was supposed to be a top level reply...

Daniel E

But since you're in this thread, the answer is 'Ranger ate it'.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I feel like Ime is a pretty good gauge on Cat's reputation in Praes and it leans towards: "don't fuck with, she'll murder your city". Imo the High Lords will fold like a stack of dominoes if it ever looks like she's winning.

As they say, better to be behind a Tyrant than before them.

Insanenoodlyguy

Unfortunately, Cat lost. A lot of people are going to assume that that's robbing her of her momentum and they are seeing her last desperate grab in the twilight of her time, because that's how the sort of role she's had would go if she was straightforward Prasei villiany. So she's gonna have to show them the hard way.

agumentic

She didn't, though. Even in this epilogue, you can see Cordelia saying "The Black Queen won the field". Sure, the field is a blasted wasteland that cost many men, but that's nothing new to villains – I feel like they in particular are more likely to concentrate on the "won" part. Certainly, the

epigraph says exactly that, and Maleficent II was one of the best rulers Praes had.

Insanenoodlyguy

A lot of people will not consider this a win, herself included.

imagesbe

The vast majority of people who don't consider it a win will consider it a draw, including herself. So even then she didn't actually lose.

ninegardens

So... something no one else seems to be mentioning here... Malicia's plan seems to be "Surrender to the GA terms in the most annoying way possible, so that DK is defeated, but the GA doesn't stab us later."

Maddie's plan seems to be "Welp, the end times are coming, so I might as well break the tower on my way out."

Uuuummmmm... one of these plans gives Cat **exactly** what she needs. The other is needlessly destructive and time consuming, and may well get a bunch of the needed diabolists killed.

Also, Maddies plan was literally "Chillin like a Villian until my daughter decides to ditch the war vs DK and come help out?"

Seriously?

Like... he couldn't even be bothered sending her a message to say "hey kid, I got an awesome plan for fixing Praes; just free up some time in your schedule and we are gonna have ourselves a great super fun revolution"

Wut?

It makes no sense that he wouldn't at least **communicate** what the hell was going on.

He had two entire years.

... I do like the explanation for why the civil war has been going so long though. That is hilarious, and totally in character, and a **very** smart move on Malicia's part.

Earl of Purple

That's not what he's been doing. He was waiting, I would guess, for a change in the status quo. For Malicia to slip or Sepulchral to do something big. Malicia had things too much in hand for that, however, as Amadeus probably should have realised. But those blasted Emerald Swords possibly hindered him a bit.

Mile

Amadeus doesn't seem like one who would wait. Setting up pieces for a dozen traps though, that sounds more likely.

Insanenoodlyguy

You misunderstand. What he's been doing is setting up dominoes. In several places Malicia things everything is okay, there's a great potential for it all to come tumbling down. Of course, a domino cascade can be stopped if you react fast enough and put a finger in the right place, or knock a few over sideways so the chains can't continue, so you don't just start it do it when somebody who wants to stop it is in the wrong place. Amadeus just found the right moment to start tipping.

Sinead

Considering that Amadeus championed a school of sorcery at Cardinal, I don't think he's looking at bleeding the diabolists like you are suggesting.

Meeble Moo

I'm so excited to see Praes again! Alaya and Amadeus are always exciting povs, although my heart is still breaking at how much has broken between them.

The one thing that bugs me is Alaya's plans. She knows Amadeus better than anyone except Hye or Scribe. He's been laying low for two years; she should know that he must have something in the works, and that whatever it is won't be small. But she's not taking anything of the sort into account, and that just ... doesn't mesh well with how sharp and perceptive Alaya always is. And while naming a new Black Knight is painful emotionally, since I still mourn for the old trust between Alaya and Amadeus, it's not momentous enough to match the forces that are converging on Praes.

Zach

The thing about the Black/Malicia relationship is that there hadn't really been much in the way of trust between them for a really long time – Black just convinced himself that things were still good, because he has a tendency to be irrational when it comes to family/loved ones.

The impression I get is that Malicia had basically been "broken" for a really long time (basically since whatever she experienced under the previous Dread Emperor) and Black was just in denial about it.

shikkarasu

I don't think she's broken, she just learned different lessons than Amadeus during the war. He learned that anything

Doomsday-adjacent is doomed to fail and take its orchestrator down with it. She learned that Evil does not win wars, and to wars must be discouraged.

If she really was broken by her past she would dwell on it more, but she canonically doesn't consider her past trauma more than once every few months/years. That is the behaviour of someone who has mastered their fear/pain, not bottled it up.

No, Malicia and Black just didn't see eye to eye, but he was willing to work within her Empire since she is a better Empress than he would have been Emperor. She just never told him about half her irons in the fire and overestimated his tolerance for her approach to **Rule**.

WuseMajor

In some ways, it's really funny that Malicia still thinks that, given that her army won the war with Callow and Cat has been winning every war she's been involved with, or at least pulling out a draw.

...No wait, not funny. Tragic, that's the word.

TheCount

Happy New Year!

Hope you can enjoy this two months, what with the general craziness of life nowadays.

Thank you for your great work!

Curious if Book VII will be the last or not, what with it focusing on the war on Praes AND the raid on Keter still a far away goal...

Also, we got to know there is only 10 Emerald Swords remaining.

And no sightings of the Wandering Bard...that worries me greatly.

Bakkasama

So, did one of Malicia's marshalls/general get the Black Knight name or did I get that wrong?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I thought what she meant was she'd try and recruit Cat by offering her the job. It's the kind of audacity one expects of Praesi, but Malicia has to know by now that it won't work. Your interpretation seems substantially likelier.

caoimhinh

Malicia is going to anoint Marshal Nim as her Black Knight. Which she is likely hoping will give her the Name, thus gaining a more powerful pawn. Nim is the one Marshal that always stayed in Praes, and if I remember correctly, she is an ogre.

shikkarasu

Two points that I am stoked for, Narratively.

- In chess the Knight is the only piece that can threaten the Queen without being threatened back. This makes it the only piece one *might* promote a Pawn to in place of a Queen.
- Maddie predicted in Decorum that Hanno would have a pattern of three with a Black Knight, just not himself.

smibd

I've been thinking that a lynchpin of Black's strategy will be to bring ogredom to the table. Since we were recently told that, 'ogres are never on anyone's side, because no-one is on ogre's side'. Destroying the Tower and bringing all Greenskin to a seat at the table in the New Praes will most definitely be in their interest. So I think if you're right, Malicia is gonna be Backstabbed big-time herself by her new Black Knight.

caoimhinh

Seems like Nim is a claimant for it, but still hasn't been able to get it.

Malicia is probably gonna try to strong-arm the process of Name acquisition by formally anointing her as the new Black Knight. Who knows if that's really gonna work.

One thing that I wonder about is that Malicia said that **ruling** is unfeasible on Named, a couple chapters ago when killing Mauricius. And Nim has been implied to be the Marshal of Praes on which Malicia had her claws deeper in, as she was the one Marshal that always stayed in Praes protecting Malicia. This new Name might be something that makes Nim... *rebellious*.

Frivolous

I believe Malicia doesn't know that Catherine's upcoming Name was sparked by the need to put the East in order, and she also doesn't know that the Name will finally finally manifest in the East.

Reason: All the above seems based on the assumption that Malicia can negotiate with Catherine. Catherine's Name won't be the kind that compromises. It will be the kind that rules.

Supporting quote: Scribe had seized the reins of the remaining eyes in Procer, which meant information trickled east only at a glacial pace.

Analysis: Malicia isn't getting much news from the war against Keter. She may not know about the Hellgates. She may not even know yet that Tariq and Klaus are dead.

Malicia also isn't talking much if at all with Neshamah. If she were, she wouldn't be depending on spies for intelligence.

In other news: I was surprised that the very slow civil war in Praes was Malicia's own doing. I thought it was Amadeus's doing.

I was also surprised that Nim became Black Knight sometime during the 2+ years since Amadeus lost it. First ogre of that Name, yes? First Ogre with a Name, too, as far as we know.

Amadeus and Hye seem awfully carefree for homeless people on the run. It implies that things are doing according to Amadeus's plans.

Also what was a faerie doing that Hye stumbled across one? Or did she just go into Arcadia to kill something for stress relief?

caoimhinh

Well, the only ones to know of the moment that sparked her nascent Name were Tariq and Hanno, on account of being the only two people present when it happened, and the only one to know that it would ultimately coalesce into form in the east was Tariq, and he only knew that by peering directly into her soul through the Ophanim.

And he died little afterward that same night.

There's simply no way for anyone in Calernia to know those pieces of information.

It doesn't seem like Nim became a Black Knight already, rather she seems to be a claimant for it, but apparently needs Malicia's help to get the Name. Malicia's official anointing of a Black Knight might strong-arm the process.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

There's been ogres with Names before. It's mentioned somewhere in the first book; they get Names even though there's far less of them than orcs.

I suspect the Wild Hunt will say hello during the eastern expedition, hence the fae.

nipi

Wonder if our clever little (former fae) fox will make an appearance

mavant

What happened to Klaus's final letter to Cordelia?

Shveiran

It was never written, as far as I know. It was mentioned only as something Klaus composed in his head but could never quite bring himself to put it to paper.

Though I certainly hope he actually did offscreen, me being a big softie and all that. It would be so awesome to see Cordelia read it.

Darkening

It's funny, the Dead King's whole schtick originally was that he wouldn't go to war unless he was simply the ally of another villain that would act as the Big Bad for story purposes so he could make some gains while the inevitable loss occurred to that villain instead. And look, here comes the day when Malicia gets to reap what she sowed playing Neshamah's patsy. Honestly, I'm really interested in how Malicia getting removed would affect the conflict against the Dead King on a meta level, once he no longer has that fig leaf to hide behind and he goes from secondary villain to Bigger Bad, at war with the entire continent. Will he stand down? Negotiate? Push on, confident he's won enough ground already to carry the day? I expect there'll be at least a token offer of negotiations. Really, when it comes down to it, Neshamah isn't what Cat's personal story revolves around, it's always been about Callow and Praes, which is why her name requiring her to go East makes a lot of sense. So really, for the story of PGtE, Cat resolving Callow/Praes and the dead king deciding to pack it in and go back to being the slumbering evil would kiiiind of work? I dunno. This war's been ruinous enough that I suspect Calernia would love a chance to get things in order without continuing to bleed an entire generation out in the north.

FableWright

Have you ever heard of the Long Price, son?

WuseMajor

Honestly, the Dead King has crossed enough lines here, that he's definitely become the Big Bad. Whatever happens at this

point, he's not going to get to just go back to being the slumbering evil.

[Styn](#)

Ive been reading this for years and never did a reread, two months is a great time to do so. Have a restful and deserved break!

ChillyPepper

Is... is Cat getting an Empress name...?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not if she can help it, but she's going up against Bard here.

FableWright

Have you ever heard of the Long Price, son?

FableWright

Whoops, new to wordpress accidentally responded to post rather than a comment. Shame I don't know how to edit or delete this.



Miley

Next time, in a Practical Guide to Evil.

Malicia: O Catherine Foundling, I declare thee my Blackest of Kniggits!

Cat, aside: (Is this an insult? I am already a queen! Very well then, 2 can play at this farce.)

Cat: Then as black knight, I declare praes is at war with the dead king! I require every single doabolist we have posthaste, to defend the portals he hath opened upon the lands O wish to claim and then give away to the Drow.

Malicia: wut.... (pikachuface)

Miley

Oy! Samshit! What's the idea changing I to O?

Anyway... who would have expected the new Drow nation may just become a part of the Empire? They do seem to have the mindset for it. Or maybe they'll be a nation in the north in lands that the empire claims to own but dares not enter, like the Golden Bloom north of Callow.

Miley

Oy! Kun-hee! What's the idea with autocorrect changing I to O?

Anyway... who would have expected the new Drow nation may just become a part of the Empire? They do seem to have the mindset for it. Or maybe they'll be a nation in the north in lands that the empire claims to own but dares not enter, like the Golden Bloom north of Callow.

Miley

Oh it was lag, not a filter... oops

aran

Wait, is Malicia intending to make Catherine Black Knight? Can she DO that?

Catherine already seems to be coming into a new name, she's the ruler/leader of two other nations, and she's basically planning to kill Malicia besides. The story for her to suddenly become Malicia's subordinate again just doesn't fit.

Necrologist

"“Your advice has merit,” Dread Empress Malicia said. “Send for Marshal Nim.”

Her spymistress watched her carefully.

“You’ll do it, then?”

“Yes,” the Dread Empress of Praes said. “I will recognize her as my Black Knight.””

She wouldn't need Nim to recognize Catherine as her black knight. She is recognizing her highest martial leader as her black knight. Nim.

Darkening

I believe the person referred to was the Marshal, not Cat.

Sirharixx

“on his way to besieging the city the High Lord of Wolof”

“in everything but bare skin and moonlight to mail and cloak caked in filth”

I think something went wrong in both of these sentences ?

ohJohN

This is how I read those sentences, with clarifying punctuation/fixes:

Shveiran

So much interesting stuff.

Personally I'm a bit miffed at the actual aftermath in Hainaut. I think there were a bit too many twists without proper foreshadowing, something that is extremely rare in these books. But the whole

CatherineIsSnipedEvenThoughSheKnewThereWasASniper-

DeadKingCapturesSveNoc-

PilgrimFamiliicidesTheIsbiliAndNukesEverything-

NeshamahOpensThreeHellgates-

TheTitansSacrificeThemselvesToStall-

OhNoesNowWeTotallyNeedDiabolists

sequence was... a bit of a stretch?

I don't know. It felt unsatisfying to me. I don't know if it is a problem of foreshadowing or something else, but it felt forced.

It leads to the set-up of Catherine finally returning to Praes – and it gifted us amazing scenes like Klaus and Robber's deaths or Vivienne steadying the frontlines – so I don't think the direction is wrong, but there is something in the execution that didn't sit right with me.

I think it's part me expecting Catherine to play a bigger role and instead seeing her put down hard by the Hawk without understanding why she didn't have contingencies or why they didn't work, and part me not being reminded often enough that the DK was sitting on the Nukes and waiting for an opportunity to bring them to bear.

I think it wouldn't be too hard to fix, but I do think it needs a few adjustments.

[TeK](#)

Agree on the whole Hainaut bit. The lack of proper foreshadowing was what took the sails out for me as well. The actual amount of twists is normal for the usual PGtE fight, let's be honest, it's on the level of Liesse and below the Graveyard, but damnably the most of twists came seemingly out of nowhere.

Like, what makes Hainaut so special it can trap a goddess? Dunno. Cat getting sniped is strange, given the kind of blows she shrugged off. I can hardly contain the irony of her getting shot with an arrow in the head after failing to wear helmet to battle. The Sisters going into a probable trap after THEIR SAFEGUARD HAD BEEN INCAPACITATED? Not the smartest move all

around, but it's never even acknowledged until after it blows in their face. Seems weird.

It just feels rushed. Not like GoT season 8, but comparable. That EE takes two month of rest rather than his usual one should be a hint. I begin to suspect he just wants this series to end. It's overdue.

ninegardens

I mean... a lot of this WAS foreshadowed.

The Titans closing hellgates was explicitly foretold by Augur. Sve Noc being vulnerable, and having difficulty fighting the DK has been mentioned before (What is it, "the basis of sorcery is to usurp")

The hellgates themselves were explicitly foreshadowed by Bard "Where are the demons cat?"

The sniping of Cat wasn't, but then again, "hawk is gonna snipe shit" explicitly was, so...

Shveiran

I agree, to an extent, but the thing is, there is a difference between establishing something is possible, and foreshadowing.

Foreshadowing is, ultimately, making a promise and following through. This orphan down on his luck is going to marry into riches, or maybe he'll realize the real riches were his friends all along, or maybe he'll reach for more than he can handle and it will end in tragedy. All these can be good stories; but a reader needs to be able to tell, subconsciously, which one he's reading. Only subconsciously, ideally.

Mind you, a lot of this comes down to feelings; if the last chapters felt good to you, more power to you!

Speaking personally, they didn't. It's not that I was surprised: I'm often surprised by the endings. "Cat becomes Fey Queen of Callow" was not how I expected the third book to end.

But that is not the point: the point is that, to me, the surprise didn't feel good because (again, to me) it felt like a very different story than the one I thought I was reading.

If that was just me, well, things are probably good as they are. But if others did, maybe the foreshadowing needs a little tweaking?

[ErraticErrata](#)

I took two months after the last book at well, there's a lot more to get in order for the later books of the series. And

I'll thank you not to make assumptions on my behalf, especially when they're wrong.

[TeK](#)

Well, I do apologize. It was very rude of me, and uncalled for.

[TeK](#)

That being said, I want to say that, despite my nitpicks above, I do consider this series to be a genuine masterpiece and personally rank it among the classics of fantasy. I am, frankly, in awe of your writing talent, and consider that, in time, you will be remembered by the humanity as a whole. So yeah, looking forward to your next work and all the best.

Victor

Mabe the situation can be interpreted as part of the death of the Age of Wonders?

The Pilgrim sacrifices himself as an attribute of the dying Age, forcing the inevitable outcome.

Rubies to piglets (thank you, Catherine!) he anticipated that Neshamah would be forced to quickly retaliate with something grand by his nature. It could have triggered:

- A “cleaning of the board” for new stories to emerge or to give the Above a proper backing later
- The Wandering Bard may be forced to act against Neshamah at last
- A releif for the Drow front

Cat had at last received her arrow. It was inevitable and Archer has warned her many times about the possibility of such a situation. Incapacitating Cat could have been also a way for Creation to save a large part of the Night (should she be awake during the Sve Noc capture – it could have been ripped out of her).

Also, as previous practice shows, Cat learns to turn her permanent wounds into something greater and more powerful later. An artefact (like a bastardised version of Masego's eye) could be crafted, etc.

From another point of view the situation looks like something tipped the scales during the battle, something that we do not know of yet. Like the Nerazim decided to act against Keter while Neshamah's attention was away. Something needs to destroy the other 9 Crabs in the narrative.

The chapter did leave a feeling like a punch in the gut though. Like a Story broken before it reached its culmination. If it is explained later – this could be another masterful stroke. The story may still be a total tragedy in the end with a morale

that in the end Death wins and no matter what you do – it will not be enough.

Sorry for my English – it is not my native language

Shveiran

Also, Ranger text is identical to Archer's.
I don't know how I feel about that.

I'm not sure what Malicia is hoping to achieve here.
Naming Mashal Nim her Black Knight gets her... a Named? But Cat has a team of Named, who have been honed by years of killing Revenants NO MATTER WHO SHE ACTUALLY BROUGHT. She has lorded over the Villains of the Grand Alliance because she is the toughest bitch among them. And she thinks a wet-behind-the-ears Black Knight is a challenge?
I mean, as an opponent to Juniper, sure, Nim is a threat. But he doesn't need a Name for that.

The whole sequence seems to suggest Malicia thinks this Naming is closing some avenues, but I don't see it.
How does the very murderable Marshal getting a Name change anything substantial?
Did someone spot her plan?

[TeK](#)

I think the Nim Knight is more of a statement, like posting a picture of you and another girl after you broke up with your ex. To close the window for reconciliation. And also close it for Black Knight to be able to claim his Name back. That is, assuming she knows he lost it, because it may very well be just establishing a claimant to weaken him.

[TeK](#)

More importantly though, this is an ogre getting classically Praesi Name. Ogres are very rarely Named to begin with, on par with orcs in that regard, and giving one a Name reserved for humans probably is another brick in the foundation of New Praes, along the Orc Imperial Governors and Goblin High Lady.

nipi

So is Black going to settle accounts with Malicia or or The Tower? Break the seat of power heroes failed to scratch?

nipi

Also waiting for Cat to bring the sentient tigers into the fold.

Matthew Wells

Bold of you to assume that Amadeus doesn't already have them ready to deploy through Arcadia.

TeK

But what they don't know is that they already secretly betrayed them to Malicia.

Matthew Wells

Well, they think it's Malicia. It's actually Traitorous in a wig again.

Hakram the Goat

"Seven Books and One "

That would be awesome. I can even picture the titles:

Book 7 – LongCat Makes Malicia Pay Long Prices

Book 8 – Dead King vs Grand Alliance 2: Electric Boogaloo

I'm really hoping Malicia gets her teeth kicked in by... everyone. I want the Woe to team up with Amadeus/Ranger to crush her and the Dead King to backstab her. I'm still pissed that she killed Ratface >:(. Small slights, long prices bee-yatch. And merking our tasty (according to Cat lol) talented treasurer ain't just no small slight.

Hell, I'm still mad about Nauk's death, though I'm not sure who to blame for that. The Summer Queen and Winter King maybe? I don't think Cat'll get another shot at them unfortunately, or if she would even take it if she got one.

Not too broken up about Nilin since he was a traitor though. Robber's death was glorious. He probably got the best ending out of all of Rat Company so far, though I doubt it can be beaten. He is, after all, the most honorable, honest, merciful goblin of the House of Lesser Footrest.

PinkUnik0rn

I am pretty sure the Dead King vs. Grand Alliance is somewhat finished. It is not about the ending, I am just pretty sure that conflict between Praes and Callow is the cornerstone of the whole series. There it started and there it will end. Im not saying that Dead King, Chain of Hunger or Golden Bloom are of the topic, but they will appear as a part of a larger scheme. I am personally betting on Malicia betraying Big Ol'Bones in one way or another, taking his power and becoming the Greatest Dread Empress, finally giving into the O.G. Dark Side. And Catherine will have to be the one to take her on. I bet my left testicle on this.

Frivolous

Amazing how fast January has gone, and now we're in the middle of Feb, with only a few more weeks to resumption of the Practical Guide to Evil.

I hope that EE is getting good rest and remains safe and well.

robber

(Quiet rhythmic sound of a blade sharpened by a practiced hand, then deftly sheathed; a creak of leather)
